The politics of literacy policy in the context of large scale education reform.

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Abstract

In this paper I will consider the lessons that can be learnt about literacy policy and its role in large scale education reform programmes, with particular reference to policy-making in England since the election of New Labour in 1997. New Labour's promise to the electorate in 1997 was that state–funded education could be fixed and turned into a high quality delivery system from which all would benefit. It could be fixed by direct intervention from politicians committed to overhauling the public sector and applying new principles which would see standards rise. So confident were politicians that a measurable rise in standards would follow that David Blunkett, when appointed Secretary of State for Education in New Labour's first term, promised that he would resign if 80% of children taking the standard attainment tests in literacy at age 11 did not gain Level 4 within the next 5 years. (In 1996, the percentage achieving Level 4 in reading was 57 %. In fact David Blunkett switched posts in government before the allotted time was up.) The National Literacy Strategy was the main vehicle for change, whilst the target for achievement in literacy became one of the most public and obvious measures of the government's success in reforming education.

Over the decade that followed New Labour's election, early optimism about what government could achieve has been tempered by the twists and turn of events, which saw the education performance data plateau just short of the government's targets, and the National Literacy Strategy morph into the Primary National Strategy as it gradually moved from the centre of the political action to a more peripheral position. Within government itself the National Literacy Strategy's progress has acted as an important catalyst for reflection on what works in public sector reform more generally and the challenges those running such programmes face. Some of those most deeply involved in this enterprise are now applying those lessons elsewhere (Dillon, 2007). This paper takes as its central points of analysis the evolution of literacy policy within the policy cycle which has seen New Labour alter its own thinking on how to achieve success in managing education reform. The paper reflects on the array of actors within government and beyond who have been involved in trying to make that policy work, or who may have acted as (dis)interested bystanders commenting from the sidelines. What are the lessons that can be learnt which might contribute to the development of literacy policy elsewhere?

Introduction.

Over the last decade or so education reform has become commonplace – it is part and parcel of what governments do. If they are not doing it themselves they worry about whether they should (OECD, 2008). Different national contexts present different opportunities to put reform into place and shape its details (Jones et al, 2008). There is no single recipe that governments follow, even if the discourses that act as a spur to reform are voiced in very similar terms. If the underlying grammar is constructed through talk of finance reform, governance reform, teacher reform, curriculum reform or even equity reform, as the World Bank lists them, (http://www1.worldbank.org/education/globaleducationreform/10.EquityReform/equity%20ref.htm), then these common elements do not lead to a single response. In many respects governments seem to learn how to do reform by taking the plunge themselves and committing to the act. This process has enabled those most directly engaged to draw lessons about the relative success or failure of what has been attempted (Hopkins, 2004; Levin, 2003; Luke, 2005; Stannard and Huxford, 2007; Barber, 2007). For others more directly involved in implementing policy at classroom level, there is often much less space to reflect, let alone influence the next turn of events. Teachers and pupils may have very little control over the reform process even as electorates may offer only an indirect mandate to politicians for taking one form of

action over another. The distance this creates within and between communities of practice has generated new forms of exchange in policy ideas in which consultants move from one venue to another offering new lines of approach to governments that can be taken up in different ways (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). This transfer of ideas may step ahead of or around the kinds of checks and balances that have conventionally operated in the academy and which have historically controlled how research evidence is collected and weighed and how the outcomes of particular interventions are assessed, evaluated and then disseminated as part of knowledge-building (Oakley, 2000; Moss and Huxford, 2007). Policy-driven education reform is indeed creating new kinds of applied knowledge geared to different stakeholders and the different kinds of risks they run (Gibbons et al, 1994).

To explore some of these issues, this paper will consider the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) and its evolution as a programme of reform for English primary schools over the length of the policy cycle. The paper will consider how NLS has contributed to ideas about how to manage change in the public sector and the repercussions this has had for the exchange of policy ideas elsewhere.

Methods
The paper draws on research conducted over a number of years with funding from the ESRC. An initial project focused on classroom level implementation of the National Literacy Strategy and collected data in two different local authorities, and four primary school classrooms [i]. Alongside classroom observation, the data consisted of interviews with different policy actors, including those charged with implementing the NLS at local level, classroom teachers and teaching assistants and children in the classrooms observed. These data are not the primary focus for this paper. A second project focused on the evolution of literacy policy between 1996-2004 and collected interviews with a range of actors involved in steering literacy policy from different vantage points [ii]. Many interviewees were operating within government agencies acting at arms length from government itself, each with their own distinct remit and responsibilities. Both projects collected a range of policy documents that instantiated key developments in the National Literacy Strategy, using interviews with practitioners and policy-makers to steer that selection. The second project also collected documents which captured the discursive development of the policy in the wider political sphere, including media coverage of key events, and reports on the reform process produced for and within government. Finally the second project also interviewed a range of academics who had either actively participated in the policy process, or had engaged with it in other ways, some from a supportive, others from a critical perspective. The interviews were supplemented by a survey of members of relevant learned societies. (Final reports of both projects are available on the ESRC website.) For the purposes of this paper analysis focuses on the evolution of policy at the centre as it was perceived by those most directly involved and in relation to the broader policy cycle of which it formed part.

Policy as a vehicle for knowledge transfer
One of the dominant conceptions underpinning the current round of public sector reform is that policy can and should act as a mechanism for transferring appropriate knowledge from one place to another. Sometimes known as the rational/ linear model, the assumption is that the act of transferring the right knowledge to the right

place will change what people do and thereby ensure different outcomes (Taylor et al, 1997). From a policy-making perspective, the main focus rests with which policy content should be chosen and how it can be delivered in a manner that ensures it is "correctly" used. Audit and accountability tools play their part in achieving this end (Earl et al, 2003). Depending on the precise programme of reform, politicians may take direct responsibility for choosing the policy content (as in England); they may sub-contract this responsibility to those they directly appoint to make the selection for them (as in various states in Australia and Canada); or they may employ a series of policy levers to guide, enforce, incentivise as well as restrict the choices of knowledge content they expect others to make (as at federal level in the USA, or, with a much less punitive set of policy tools, in Scotland).

Politicians' choices are most often justified by appeals to "what works". In the UK, New Labour politicians used this phrase quite specifically to contrast their own decisions with others' reliance on ideology or dogma.

> "This Government has given a clear commitment that we will be guided not by dogma but by an open-minded approach to understanding what works and why. This is central to our agenda for modernising government: using information and knowledge much more effectively and creatively at the heart of policy-making and policy delivery." Blunkett, 2002 quoted in Wells (2007)

Staking out the territory in this way helps establish a contrast between the kinds of choices this generation of politicians will make and those that have gone before. It also contrasts the ideology-free criteria upon which governments will act with the (self) interests of professional groups whose allegiances to particular methods or founding principles could be cast as too factional, too narrow and also unreliable. The failures of such groups can be amply demonstrated by the (inadequate) performance outcomes from the education system. In England at least this kind of discursive re-positioning has been very important in creating room for government to act.

What works for politicians is cast as a pragmatic choice. It is whatever will transform practice by being taken from here to there. The guarantee lies with what happens next, and in particular with the impact on performance data once such a transfer of knowledge has taken place. Within the academy questions about what works look rather different. They depend upon fine judgements about the depth of evidence that can support one view rather than another even as the criteria used to make such assessments will vary according to different foundational research traditions. Questions about what works lead into questions about why. Rather than acting as distractions from the main task of solving immediate practical dilemmas, this actually plays a fundamental part in knowledge building. For instance, Connelly et al (2009) compared the skills and competencies of children taught in Scotland using a phonics first approach with children taught in New Zealand using a non-phonics text-based approach. Using a common set of testing procedures which tried to capture a range of skills appropriate to each method on a sample matched for their reading level, they were able to demonstrate that children took different routes towards becoming skilled readers depending on the method to which they were exposed. Yet would such differences wash out or persist in shaping later fluency? In line with research evidence collected elsewhere, those exposed to phonics first certainly acquired decoding skills more swiftly and were faster at deciphering non-words, but those

exposed to the text-based approach demonstrated faster reading of whole texts without sacrificing accurate comprehension. Why should this be so? By exploring these differences, this research is helping theorise how children really learn to read and what is at stake in taking one route to achieve that end rather than another (Connelly et al, 2009). The academy knowledge builds in precisely this way.

By contrast, policy-makers may be little interested in why x works. Rather they will use the available evidence base to decide which course of action to pursue now. One answer can substitute for another, or be rescinded later, depending upon the interests of those concerned (Earl et al, 2003). There is no single route that has been consistently followed. Thus in various parts of the world literacy policy content has included mandatory phonics first approaches, as in California; structured literacy teaching programmes like Success for All, adopted at one point in New York City; supplementary programmes tailored quite specifically to struggling readers such as Reading Recovery; or developmental and assessment-based programmes for literacy teachers such as First Steps, developed in-house in Western Australia and later sold on to other settings. The robustness of the decision to select x versus y is not so much assured in advance as tested by what happens next. The way performance indicators shift post the point of knowledge transfer becomes the crucial marker of policy success or failure and the key means of knowing after the policy has been put in place what really works. For New Labour this reliance on public performance indicators generated some of the most important challenges they were to face over the policy cycle.

Target-setting as a means of managing policy
If policy-makers rely on the transfer of existing knowledge from one place to another as the main mechanism for improving system performance, then another key policy ingredient is ensuring that the available knowledge is properly used so that the desired outcomes can be achieved. This often means setting performance targets which children, teachers and schools are expected to reach. In their account of the development of NLS, Stannard and Huxford (2007), two of the Strategy's chief architects, describe the original 80 per cent target introduced with the Strategy as "an intelligent and evidence-based expectation which challenged and supported schools to arrive at a sustainable level of improvement.". In this sense, the target is designed as a spur to action, rather than being an assured outcome. Holding individual schools to account for the progress they make towards the target becomes an important means of keeping everyone on board for the job of implementing policy.

Later in the policy cycle the government would raise this target to 85% of children gaining Level 4 and use analysis of the performance data to argue the political necessity of so doing in these terms:

> Achieving Level 4 at the end of primary school improves a child's prospects at secondary school and their future life chances. 70 per cent of pupils who achieve Level 4 at Key Stage 2 go on to get five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C. Of those who did not achieve Level 4 in 1997, just 12 per cent achieved five GCSEs at grades A*-C last summer. (DfES, 2003, quoted in Stannard and Huxford, 2007)

Later still, this higher target would be diluted to an aspiration that government would continue to hold, but which individual schools would no longer be required to meet. Such adjustments reflect the profile of the Strategy in public discourse. Commenting on the revised target of 85%, Stannard and Huxford say "From a moral standpoint, the new target was justified, and it was politically difficult to respond to the criticism that 20 per cent or even 15 percent of children may not be expected to reach the standard.". This last point highlights how such publicly-declared targets link to and help manage public expectations about what the education service ought to deliver. Expectations have changed. Thirty years ago the outcomes of the education system in the UK were predicated on a differential distribution of capabilities and achievements with the main examination at 16 geared to success for 30% of the cohort. This was compatible with the then desired goal of producing a relatively small educational elite who would continue on to further qualifications. Similar results now would be regarded as less than satisfactory and indeed secondary schools in the UK are consistently exhorted to do better.

Policy-maker's extensive use of performance indicators and their prominence in political debate speak to the specific domain they occupy and the different responsibilities that come with that terrain, including public accountability. The decisions that policy-makers take are in that sense calculated risks. Successful policy-making means making the right decisions at the right time, and continuing to do so over the policy cycle as events unfurl on the ground. The analysis of the National Literacy Strategy in this paper focuses precisely on the political challenges that policy-makers in England faced over the policy cycle and how these helped shape what they have learnt from the process of undertaking the reform.

Managing policy adaptation over the longer term: trajectories and cycles
In a review of a variety of large-scale reform programmes and their potential sustainability, Earl et al (2003, p11) comment, "It is quite clear from the trajectory of these reforms that nothing is stable and that any reform will evolve and adapt as a result of the context and conditions that surround it." They highlight how difficult it is to steer reforms towards a successful conclusion over the policy cycle.

Policy sociology uses the concept of the policy cycle to draw attention to the ways in which policy develops over time and across a range of contexts, involving different actors whose intentions and purposes may vary (Bowe, Ball and Gold, 1992; Moss and Huxford, 2007; Taylor, 1997). The assumption is that policies will inevitably be re-shaped through social interaction as they move from one context to another. By focusing on policy change in the particular local contexts in which policy is enacted, analysis highlights the space for individual agency and acts as a corrective to top-down formulations of policy delivery which presume that the intentions of policy-makers, represented through policy content, will remain intact regardless of context and always could and therefore should translate into faithful implementation.

Like policy sociology, research on school effectiveness and improvement also presumes that policy is subject to adaptation. Yet whereas policy sociologists analyse local adaptations in order to study the relationship between macro and micro structural effects, researchers working from a school improvement and effectiveness perspective focus on adaptations at the local level in order to improve policy design and implementation. By formulating principled understandings of how this stage in

the policy cycle can be positively managed, these researchers argue that outcomes can be enhanced rather than diminished (Earl et al, 2003; Datnow et al, 2002; Fullan, 1993). Fullan, for instance, highlights the importance of fostering local ownership of policy and argues that investing in local communities of practice is a key ingredient in taking policies forward. Earl et al argue that strong central control at the start of the policy cycle needs to give way to greater local autonomy later on. They also caution that too much adaptation may lead to a loss of policy coherence and identity, but too much control will prevent the necessary development. These various ideas encourage continued investment in a policy's success over the medium to long-term. They have also made the on-going management of policy part of the political agenda. In England, policy features embedded in NLS that enable this kind of hands-on management of the policy from within the political domain include: fast feedback loops that enable the centre to monitor progress at local level as the policy unfolds; decision-making cycles which encourage adjustment and further innovation; sufficient resources to sustain investment; and an infrastructure which retains control over the direction of policy at the local level (Moss, 2004; Earl et al, 2003).

As policymakers' ambitions for the scale and duration of reform have expanded, so too the management of reform programmes has become increasingly complex. The very scale of current attempts at education system reform means that policies seldom come singly (Ball, 2008). As policies have diversified and multiplied so it becomes harder to track the development of any one policy in isolation. Rather for the purposes of this paper the policy cycle can be thought of as the changing relations between the various factors which influence policy development over time and across contexts (Howard, 2005).

Analysing NLS in context: one strand in a patchwork of education reform
There are political risks to undertaking large scale education reform. Early confidence in the enterprise rests on the assumption that the system can do better and that this does not require new knowledge so much as more efficient systems for management and delivery of what is already known. Analysis of system-wide performance data undertaken by the school improvement and effectiveness movement support this view. They point to evidence of good practice in the current system and maintain that if it is already possible somewhere, then it can be replicated in other settings. Thus Michael Barber, one of the lead policy-makers responsible for rolling out the NLS at national scale in England, identified targets of achievement for English schools by drawing on comparative analysis of literacy attainment in other countries.

> "Our assumption, based on a review of the international research, is that about 80 per cent of children will achieve those standards simply as a result of being taught well by teachers who know, understand and are able to use proven best practice. A further 15 per cent have a good chance of meeting the standards if, in addition, they receive extra small-group tuition should they fall behind their peers. The remaining five per cent are likely to need one-to-one tuition from time to time, preferably early in their school careers (ie before age eight). Some of these will prove able to meet the standards: for a very small percentage we do not yet have the knowledge or the capacity to enable them to meet the standards but, for sure, we won't give up trying." Barber, 2000

The content of the literacy curriculum and the specification for its delivery defined within NLS are in many respects just such an amalgam of "proven best practice" (Beard, 1999). From this point of view NLS could be thought of as a sustained course of professional development for teachers, imparting core skills in teaching reading and writing which would bring all teachers up to the level of the best. At the same time the management tools embedded within the design allowed for close monitoring of progress towards the expected performance targets so that potential problems in implementation could be identified and addressed. Policymakers were therefore able to continue to adjust policy as it rolled out. Indeed, this flexibility in its design has been one of the defining characteristics of NLS. Through its combination of different approaches to teaching reading and writing and its refusal to align with any single paradigm or a more narrowly focused approach policy makers were able to continue to pick and mix from across that range as the policy developed (Moss, 2004). Earl et al (2003) described NLS as a particularly successful example of a policy that could adapt without losing its integrity. Yet now 10 years on the capacity of the policy to deliver large-scale reform of the kind originally envisaged has been severely tested. Not least because, despite the confident predictions, the policy has never fully succeeded in meeting the performance targets that were set.

Initial analysis of the NLS was much more optimistic. Analysis of performance outcomes for the cohort exposed to the smaller scale intervention, the National Literacy Project that had acted as an immediate precursor to NLS, showed statistically significant gains (Machin and McNally, 2004). Confidence in the efficacy of the policy seemed borne out by the early performance data which showed a steady rise. In 2000, on the basis of the available evidence, Barber was able to confidently predict that the target would be met by 2002. Even when it first became clear that that momentum was becoming harder to sustain it was not an immediate problem. The Strategy was well protected through strong political patronage – as a high profile flagship initiative directly endorsed by the then secretary of state it was too important to abandon. Even when some of the key personnel moved on within government, the central policy team still seemed well placed to steer the policy on. Indeed as a by-product of being contracted out from the civil service to the not-for-profit company, CfBT, they were assured continuity in management and support for the policy over the contract's length. With more new things still to do in terms of strengthening the policy, the team were still confident that the target would be reached. New data came on board that seemed to justify the optimism (PISA. 2003) whilst a re-structuring of the policy into a Primary National Strategy (PNS) promised to harmonise various potentially competing initiatives within the primary sector under one management structure, offering greater policy coherence. Yet despite these efforts the performance data continued to plateau.

The interviews that form the main empirical data for this paper were conducted at a point (2004/5) in the policy cycle when the NLS, now nesting within the PNS found itself under increasing pressure. Although the policy itself still acted as the main mechanism for improving pupil performance in literacy a re-tendering process had seen the responsibility for policy-delivery transferred over to Capita, a private sector firm with a variety of diverse interests in public sector work, by no means all in education. A significant number of the original policy team chose to move on to other employment rather than transfer to Capita. Not so long after, a particular combination of events in the policy cycle led to the then Secretary of State for Education calling

for a review of the teaching of reading in the early years. In effect, decisions over what should happen next in this key arena of literacy policy were taken out of the hands of the NLS management team. This was the first time they had lost control over the political agenda since the programme's inception (Moss, 2007; Rose, 2005). The outcome of the review led to the introduction of a phonics first programme to the early years classes in primary schools (Rose, 2006). Although much of the NLS curriculum framework and the policy infrastructure survive at the time of writing, along with the original targets, the NLS as an organisation no longer holds the central position in reforming primary education that it once did.

The immediate combination of events that produced this outcome included: favourable press coverage of a phonics first programme that had run in one area of Scotland (Ellis, 2007); the opportunity for an opposition MP to select the subject of inquiry for the parliamentary select committee in education; and his choice of the Teaching Children to Read as the topic. But this combination of events gained its political significance because of its timing within the longer policy cycle (Moss, 2007). Over the policy cycle, where once the annual publication of results from standard attainments tests in literacy confirmed the success of the policy in raising standards, now they began to highlight the Strategy's failure to deliver. Headlines such as **Primary schools miss test targets** and **Fall in primary writing standards** demonstrate this all too publicly. NLS could be failed on two counts: the fact that neither the original nor the revised targets the government set for pupil performance at Key Stage 1 and 2 had yet been fully met (though see Stannard and Huxford (2007) for a fuller discussion on this issue.); and the fact that the rate of increase in performance had stalled (The fastest increase in performance was in the first three years of the Strategy). These facts run counter to two founding suppositions underlying public sector reform – that given good management and the correct input it is possible to have uniform quality in whatever field; and that education is no different in this respect and indeed urgently needs to achieve this end. The success of the Strategy in raising attainment to the levels that it had had been overtaken in public perception by its perceived failings. As a flagship programme of public sector reform this perception has the potential to bring into question the government's ability to manage well and deliver what it promised to the electorate. Of course, the extent to which this perception gathers speed depends on what else is happening to similar targets and expectations in other areas of public sector reform.

Taking sides in debate over NLS
The interviews that form the basis of this analysis were conducted at a point in the policy cycle when the Strategy's comparative failings were beginning to outweigh its comparative successes in public discourse. Interviewees included policy-makers in a range of government departments and agencies. Some of them had had direct responsibility for literacy policy within NLS, whilst others worked for what might be regarded as competitor organisations within government, agencies that held different responsibilities and from those vantage points had the potential to offer alternative forms of advice over how literacy policy should develop. Interviewees also included members of the research community with interests in literacy and/or education policy. Some of these had been consulted over the NLS and its implementation, some were neutral bystanders, others were keen critics of the policy. Finally, some of those within policy or practitioner communities who had most directly advocated the adoption of a phonics first programme, both at the point when the NLS was adopted

and at later points in the policy cycle, were also interviewed. Whilst in retrospect these interviews happened at a key tipping point in the policy's development, at the time that was not immediately obvious. Interviews invited respondents to identify and reflect on key policy documents and their evolution; and to consider the ideal and actual relationship between policy and research in the light of their experience.

Interviewees talked about the NLS in very different terms. This in part depended on their position within either policy or academic networks and their involvement in the design of NLS. These seemed to influence how they read the documentation that constituted the policy, both the originals that launched it (The National Framework document (DfEE, 1998) including the Literacy Hour, and the searchlights model); and the successor documents that have accrued as the policy has developed (Grammar for Writing (DfEE, 2000); Excellence and Enjoyment (DfES, 2003); Watching and Learning 3 (Earl et al, 2002). Some described the NLS as a means of managing educational reform and would sum up its distinctiveness using phrases such as "Standards and accountability."; or "Support in relation to need." These expressions most commonly occurred in interviews with policy makers with a background in school effectiveness and improvement. Others described NLS as a means of raising pupil standards through improving teacher quality, or as a new form of literacy pedagogy. Those who were particularly critical talked about it as an illegitimate intervention, an unwarranted experiment, lacking in sufficient evidence or theoretical justification to justify its imposition.

Interviewees often reflected on the relative success or failure of the NLS. As one might expect, those who spoke of comparative failure were not those who had exercised most control over literacy policy, or at least they had not exercised most control over its development at what they perceived to be its key points. (Some policy makers linked their perception of policy failure to losing key battles for influence early on.) By contrast, those who had exercised most direct control over the policy from within NLS spoke about it differently. Although they recognised that the policy had not delivered everything they might once have hoped, they did see it as successful, transformative, unique in its influence, and with the capacity to have a substantial impact both on education and policy-making generally as well as on individual schools. Some spoke of this as an achievement in the past rather than currently, though their concerns were less with the progress made than the directions that the policy was now being taken in.

Lessons from the NLS: Competing explanations for comparative failure
Those who focused in on NLS' comparative failures explained its lack of success in the following terms:

- That it had followed the wrong recipe – either for literacy pedagogy or for managing change
- That there were too little good quality data or too many gaps in the available knowledge/expertise to meet the immediate demands (This argument was most likely to be made by policy makers.)
- The difficulty of exerting influence –the right people had not got into the right place at the right time
- The exigencies of the political process - events in the political sphere distracted attention or distorted actions

These kinds of complaints leave intact the political expectation that more could have been done, if only xyz had happened. They presuppose that there is a right recipe, that it could have been taken up but that, for whatever reason, the evidence for it had been overlooked or even wilfully ignored. Yet it is also possible to draw a different conclusion. Would anyone else really have managed to do any better? Could the appropriate gaps in knowledge or expertise have been fully identified in advance? Do we indeed yet accurately know what they are? Are the comparative successes or failures of the policy really to do with the particular route followed? Or has NLS helped establish that large scale system improvement is inevitably an imperfect process?

Look again at the standardised test results and in many respects NLS's achievements mirror those achieved elsewhere, whatever the particular approach adopted. Linn (2000) in a review of a large number of reform programmes in the USA demonstrated that regardless of their approach, each of them pretty much delivered what the NLS achieved, in pretty much the same time frame. After early gains, they also stalled at roughly the same level of performance. Under these circumstances it would be foolish to imagine that there is a magic bullet waiting out there, a foolproof set of conditions, or pedagogic method, a crucial missing element which could bring things round the corner to match expectations of uniformly high performance.

This paper is dismissing the wrong recipe charge. This is not the same as saying that some things could not have been done better. My own personal list includes: either not starting with or withdrawing much more quickly the official planning sheet that had accompanied the Strategy's dissemination to schools and which committed teachers to organising a five day sequence of tasks, differentiated according to ability and each designed to be completed in the 20 minute section of the hour committed to independent work; encouraging writing tasks that could be undertaken at children's own speed over the length of the week, with free reading time provided for those who finished early (Moss, 2004); and allowing schools to identify locally where there were gaps in their provision which needed strengthening, rather than mandating "system patches" from the centre that everyone was expected to follow. But hindsight is a wonderful thing. Moreover there is no certainty that any of these would have made the crucial difference to how the programme as a whole performed. Rather than subscribe to the "if only" myth about the Strategy, this paper turns now to other more important issues that require attention and which surface more clearly in the insiders' tales of success.

Lessons from the NLS: Policy in its political context
Those most directly involved in NLS were more likely to account for its success in terms of a series of challenges that had been met and resolved. Although they were of course keen to defend the recipe they had applied, whether in terms of pedagogic repertoire or transformational process, they also focused much more closely on the policy's evolution, and why and how it had changed. One of the hallmarks of the Strategy insider was the way in which they described the process as "learning as you go". This conception of policymaking appears in the public vocabulary of Michael Barber, one of the policy's chief architects, who often characterised NLS as "the learning strategy" and used similar phrases to distinguish his own approach to implementing reform (Barber, 1996). From this perspective, the certainty in the

system that gave politicians the confidence to back its implementation at national level was the certainty that the Strategy management team had the capacity to rise to the challenge of any problems they might face and devise appropriate solutions. This is policy-making as serial problem solving, an approach outlined by Barber in the book he later wrote about his role at the heart of government after he had moved on from directly managing reform in education (Barber, 2007a). In interviewees' accounts, the success of the policy depended at least as much on this capacity for problem-solving as on having started in the right place.

The kinds of problems that were identified and addressed within NLS are represented in the list of supplementary materials and initiatives that have gone into schools since the original policy launch (See for instance, Stannard and Huxford, 2007, pp 134; and153-4). These in part reflect the kind of programme adjustments that Datnow et al (2002) refer to as "building the plane while it's flying", and which they argue are hallmarks of good programme design. For Datnow et al., these kinds of adjustments are not a sign of lack of foresight on behalf of programme designers but of their receptiveness to the specific needs of the contexts in which programmes unfold, revealed by monitoring data post programme implementation. Some of the adaptations within NLS clearly fall within this category. For instance, phonics was one of the first areas where the team realised that additional support would be required to ensure high quality teaching in the early years. The PiPs materials were designed to meet this need (See also Moss and Huxford, 2007). This kind of adjustment is driven by feedback from implementation at the classroom level. But initiatives could also derive from changes in the political sphere. *Excellence and Enjoyment,* a government position document which gave a new steer to the direction and management of literacy policy in the primary school is closely associated with the arrival of Charles Clarke as Secretary of State for Education (DfES, 2003). At a key point in the policy cycle he backed adjusting the policy in this particular direction, when other choices might have been made.

Ministers build their reputations by having new programmes to announce which can demonstrate that they are driving forward the process of reform. To stand still is not really an option. One ex secretary of state for education, interviewed for this research, commented:

> [The Department] is asked to take initiatives because government gets criticized if it looks as though it's running out of steam, and it is true that the big issues like education get turned to by the prime minister's office if they need initiatives. And it is difficult to say please go away we've had enough initiatives to last us a life time. ….. I was mindful and I presume my successors are mindful, that you can't win on this, if you allow bedding down to take place, it looks as though you've run out of steam and you're not a very effective secretary of state and minister of team, and nobody wants to be remembered for that.

There are constraints as well as opportunities which run with the high level of political support that the NLS garnered. Part of what interviewees described were the changes in the political context that led to different policy outcomes. These reflected issues that went well beyond the question of how well NLS was bedding down through classroom implementation.

In their public reflections on the Strategy both Stannard and Huxford (2007) and Barber (2006) draw attention to this changing landscape. Stannard and Huxford (2007) divide the evolution of NLS into three different periods, each characterised by different levels of political support and different relations between key players within the policy domain. They call these: **Policy implementation**, 1997/8; **securing the strategy**, 1999-2001; and **devolving the strategy**, 2002 – 2007. Barber interviewed in 2006 (Mead, 2006) was less precise on how the time periods divide and also used a different terminology to sum up each phase: **standards and accountability,** 1997 to 1999**; collaboration and capacity-building** (he gave no precise timings for this phase)**;** and **market-based or quasi-market reform,** 2001-5. He listed under the heading, **collaboration and capacity-building,** items that fall beyond the policy remit of the NLS, including "improving teachers' pay, creating opportunities for schools to collaborate, … building capacity in the system". By contrast, Stannard and Huxford's description of NLS's policy trajectory follows the normative sequence that the school improvement and effectiveness movement would advocate: from a highly prescriptive and centralised phase of policy implementation, when fidelity is key, to a looser relationship between centre and periphery able to sustain "the ideal of autonomous schools" (Stannard and Huxford, 2007, p142). They also question whether the final move in the sequence was wise, or simply resulted in a loss of focus on core literacy skills in the classroom at a point in the process of implementation when this was still necessary. Perhaps this is their version of "if only ….".

Michael Barber's delineation of the third stage as "quasi-market reform" and the longer time period given to this stage indicate a different set of reference points.

> "Between 2001 and 2005 what Blair increasingly hankered after was a way of improving the education system that didn't need to be constantly driven by government. He wanted to develop self-sustaining, self-improving systems, and that led him to look into how to change not just the standards and the quality of teaching, but the structures and incentives. Essentially it's about creating different forms of a quasi-market in public services, exploiting the power of choice, competition, transparency and incentives, and that's really where the education debate is going now." (in Mead, 2006)

This maps onto a wider analysis of the trajectory of public sector reform undertaken within government and published as a discussion document by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit in 2006 (Piatt et al, 2006). This was intended as a major stock-taking exercise amongst policymakers at the start of New Labour's third term. In part the document demonstrates the government's disenchantment with top-down performance management, their initial tool of choice for achieving system reform:

> "though it will have a continuing role, reliance on these top down pressures alone to drive public service improvements may now have largely run its course. … [They] have therefore increasingly been complemented by horizontal drivers (of competition and contestability), [and] bottom up drivers (of user choice and voice)" (Piatt et al, 2006)

The new mix of policy levers the document called for were reflected in some of the key decisions Tony Blair took in relation to education before he stepped down as

prime minister, including finding a larger role for the private sector. The evidence base that policymakers are reflecting on here is not detailed observation of the classroom and the quality of teaching and learning that followed from the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy, though NLS was certainly referenced in the document, as was the decision to change to a phonics first approach in the early years (See Moss, 2007). Rather they are broad brush judgements about how well public service reforms are seen to be doing, linked to the political need to meet the rising expectations of an increasingly informed and sceptical public. The political problem was described in these terms:

> "as real incomes have grown, so people's expectations of public services have risen. People are accustomed to much greater choice and control over their lives. Higher educational standards mean they are better equipped to exercise choice, less likely to accept government advice without question and less likely to allow others to make choices on their behalf." (Piatt et al, 2006)

In essence this document shows policymakers knowledge-building through reflecting on the job they have done, where it has gone well and where it has proved more difficult to claim success. By 2007 and the other side of his involvement with this review, Barber had revised the analysis he gave in interview in 2006, extending the scope of his argument to large scale public service reform in any national context. He now identifies three contrasting paradigms for reform which he describes as: "Command and Control• Devolution and Transparency• Quasi-markets•"

> "The three paradigms provide a toolkit for governments to recognize how to reform and when, and what each choice requires of them and their organizations." (Barber, 2007b)

These are the basic methods that policymakers can choose between, and he describes their attendant risks and dangers as well as possible rewards. The paper is designed to guide decision-making at this level. The three paradigms are not inevitable stages in a necessary sequence in which one must always follow after another, rather each gains its strength from being applied under the appropriate conditions. The policymakers' skill lies in selecting the right tool at the appropriate time. All options remain on the table and can be combined in various ways. There is not a single recipe.

> "the acute reality is that the need to transform the way governments work requires experimentation. The imperative to deliver better services at an affordable cost can no longer be ignored." (Ibid)

Escaping the policymaker's domain: looking at the logic of implementation from the context of policy implementation
Part of what has happened over New Labour's term of office is that the business of policymaking and good governance has become highly visible and open to transparent theorisation on the part of those involved. This is a global phenomenon. Much of this guidance on policymaking is now publicly accessible via the web. Whether in the UK on government websites; or via multi-national organisations such as the OECD, or via private sector organisations who sell advice to governments engaged in the process of reform, such as McKinsey's, it is possible to find and track the migration of ideas about what constitutes good governance and public sector reform and how it can best

be achieved. Yet this is indeed "steering at a distance" (Kickert, 2005) The voices drawn on in this discussion are those who have been most closely involved in decision-making within government and who act at some distance from the services they manage. The experience of those involved at the front line are striking in their absence. No more so than in the PMSU document where the elegant model representing "dimensions of a self-improving system for schools" (Chart 4.2, Piatt et al 2006) denotes the workforce as simply on the receiving end of a variety of external pressures that can be used to drive change: top down performance management of schools; market incentives to increase efficiency and quality of service; parents and pupils shaping schools; and capability and capacity. The last comes in a poor fourth and consists of a list of potential inputs, rather than the knowledge of reform that the workforce might now be able to muster.

National reform programmes driven from the centre, as in the UK, are bound to create these kinds of distances and dislocations. From many policymakers' point of view change simply would not happen without them. Indeed, they argue that change in the USA has been notoriously harder to engineer precisely because of the very different relations between players built into the federal and district governance structures and the difficulty of therefore exerting the same amount of pressure or control (Barber, 2008). These distances and dislocations have of course not gone unremarked by those who find themselves "locked out" of the discussion in one way or another. But they do not lead to the same kind of theorisation. For instance, the ins and outs of the political process often became part of the subject matter discussed in interviews with those who had had any involvement with policy. But in the case of almost all of the academics, these kinds of details were presented as anecdotes rather than as substantive issues in their own right. They explained on a personal level how trying it was to get involved, or indeed why the particular interviewee had given up and backed off. Such stories were regarded as in large part peripheral to the subject of the interview as a whole and were not directly transformed into a means of analysing or theorising policy implementation or enactment. Interviewees' investments in the particular area of knowledge they counted as their own – linguistics or psychological or socio-cultural approaches to literacy – precluded such analysis.

There is a real need to bring the larger scale shifts and flows in political thinking back into analysis of policy implementation at the local level (Ball, 2008). This can be done by tracking their tangled relationship over the policy cycle. This means taking a longer time frame and a broader canvas than can be mapped by following a single trajectory of one part of the policy. Yet it is possible to read the traces of the bigger shifts in policy thinking in the smaller picture of literacy policy as it was recalled by my interviewees. In the stories told about the policy landscape, three distinct periods in literacy policy emerge, each of which end with a policy document that changes the direction of policy travel. These periods are:

- Phase 1 – Inception (1996/8) This phase encompasses the publication of Michael Barber's *The Learning Game*, his first blueprint for education system reform; the point at which the National Literacy Project (NLP) was commissioned by the then Conservative Secretary of State for Education; New Labour's adoption of NLP as the cornerstone of its reform programme for schools; their election to power and the scaling up of NLP to the NLS; and the first year in which NLS rolled into schools. At the time, Barber summed

up this approach to reform as:*"Standards, accountability, and support" (Barber, 1996).* He also described this phase as "informed prescription" (Barber, 2002) and it provides an example of what he would later still term *"Command and control".* The key policy document was *The NLS: Framework for Teaching.* (DfEE, 1998)

- Phase 2 - Implementation and adaptation I (1998/2003) This phase encompasses the development of the policy over its first five years; the first turnover in Ministers in the Education Department; a change in key personnel and the NLS move to CfBT; the first signs of the plateau and the first attempts to address this; the move from NLS to PNS. Barber in 2006 recalls this phase in the policy cycle as *"Collaboration and capacity building",* thus signalling a move away from top-down performance management. This phase culminated in the publication of *Excellence and Enjoyment*: *A Strategy for Primary Schools.* (DfES, 2003)
- Phase 3 - Implementation and adaptation II (2004/6) This phase encompasses the increasing marginalisation of NLS within education policy as it is superseded by other policy initiatives; moves on to being managed by Capita; and gives way to the Rose Review. Barber described this phase in the policy cycle as *"Quasi markets" (Barber, 2006).* This phase culminated in the publication of the *Independent review of the teaching of early reading. Final Report.* (Rose, 2006)

This brings into the frame the various factors which contributed to the confidence with which the NLS began and the conditions which weakened it as recalled by interviewees.

Phase 1. Part of the success here is told in terms of the decisive intervention in literacy policy made by New Labour in 1997. In effect, by making both literacy and numeracy policies central to their electoral platform they trounce Tory plans to let state education whither on the vine. Part of New Labour's success is in seizing the initiative back from Ofsted, who under Woodhead's leadership were creating all kinds of trouble for government by finger-pointing at perceived failures in education rather than trying to fix them. Adopting a National Literacy Strategy stands as bold and decisive political action. It hits all the right buttons for a Labour government – winning back support for public services on the grounds that they can deliver on quality; with most support going to those communities with fewest resources and highest needs; and promising equality of outcome. The decision to go country-wide at that point, to get into the business of large-scale education reform, is vindicated by the early successes; early evaluations; and the amount those in charge of the Strategy learn, the resource and energy they put into problem-solving the difficulties that arose, and tackling them. At this point nothing disrupts that certainty.

Phase 2. This sees the movement from the success of capturing the policy space to the process of rolling out the programme country wide. This inevitably leads on to a variety of unexpected problems of implementation, their recognition and solution building. (In Rumsfeld talk this would mean dealing with "the known unknowns".) Success in dealing with problems as they emerge reinforces the importance of committing to "learning as you go", building intelligent systems of plan, act, revise, review; and having the resources to tackle the unforeseen. This phase also sees the limits to what can be driven from the centre beginning to surface and the emergence

of the dilemmas associated with "tight v loose" control over programme design. Whilst in the early days the Strategy was assured of strong political support, vindicated by early gains in results, as the plateau emerges the political wind begins to change. The fact that the Strategy is being conducted on a very public stage matters at this point. As time goes on, and ministers move in and out of the Education Department, the Strategy begins to experience the limits of patronage. There is the loss of key personnel; the difficulty of keeping going when the Strategy itself is no longer centre stage and when schools being asked to do other things too. During this period this change in conditions is expressed in the morph of the NLS into the Primary National Strategy (PNS). The changes to the policy's fortunes take place within this broader political context, which itself is generating yet more policy in education – *Every Child Matters*, (HM Treasury, 2003) to name but one other strand.

Phase 3. As the plateau continues, Government itself begins to adjust to the risks associated with command and control. The PMSU document (Piatt et al, 2006) signals this. This adjustment leads to new ways of abnegating more responsibility to others, so that government no longer carries the can for the limits in service improvement. This includes advocating more use of the private sector and greater use of contractual responsibilities, so if the contractor can't meet the target they lose the contract or incur penalties. Ministers begin to speak of acting as purchasers not providers in policy reform. In this environment support for the NLS itself weakens. Ministers no longer want to so firmly embrace something which promises uncertain future returns (This is told as a loss of interest/ personnel/ and or direct lines of support.). All of this shows dramatically in the response to The Select Committee review of early reading and the sequence of events which lead to the introduction of phonics first programmes in the early years of literacy teaching via the Rose Review. This revision to the programme gains no support from the processes of internal policy data monitoring and review, as staff from both Ofsted and NLS make clear in their submissions to the inquiry. Increasingly the story of the fortunes of the NLS becomes a story about politics - not pedagogy or methodologies for teaching literacy or methodologies for engineering organisational change.

The stories told by those most directly involved in trying to make the NLS work are as much about the difficulties of managing up as of managing down. The longer the policy cycle dragged on, the more difficult it became to influence thinking above, and the less easy it became to gain the space to do what might be required further down. There is no clear or untrammelled space in which to act.

Closing the political gap
For better or worse the political context for such a programme of large scale education reform cannot be written out of the story. You only get to attempt this kind of endeavour with political backing. But political backing comes at a price. The chronology matters as it highlights important aspects of the political context for reform, and the changing terrain that any approach would have to grapple with. It also moves debate on from "if only" thinking – if only this, that or the other hadn't got in the way. To achieve substantially different outcomes, the academy needs to know what the price of political involvement is both in the English context and elsewhere. We are not clear enough on that at the moment, precisely because the focus always seems to rest on the policy itself and its internal structures or content, and not on the political environment it operates within.

There is a difference between research conducted within the confines of the academy or professional practice and policy acted out in the public domain. As the business of fixing literacy moves onto the public stage it meets new constraints. What lessons can we draw for large-scale reform by writing the political difficulties the strategy got into back into the account? Here are some I would put forward:

- Standardisation of delivery round any one single method yields the pattern of results seen in the NLS
- The mantra "pressure and support" works if there are clear and self-evident answers to well-specified problems. But what seems most relevant at the centre may not match what is required in particular local contexts.
- Effective top-down performance management is time-limited and should incorporate clear handover and exit strategies. Responsibility for determining the balance between change and continuity needs to be shared more equally between professionals and other stakeholders.
- There are real and substantial distorting effects from tying professional practice too closely into the interests of the political sphere
- Successive policy innovation on short timescales leads to increasingly idiosyncratic policy choices at the centre and minimises the chances of meaningful reform.

We seem to have reached a point in the policy cycle when policymakers increasingly seek to disengage themselves from the disappointments that come from pursuing large-scale education reform by passing the responsibilities they once took to themselves over to the private sector or looking to maintain momentum by shopping around for yet more new ideas. This keeps the pace of reform unchanged at a time when we really need more close-focused and settled scrutiny of the particular challenges that local settings face.

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