

‘New Labour, old school tie’¹: What is Education for?

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I have a vivid recollection of going into school the day after the 1997 general election. I cannot have had more than an hour's sleep – I had stayed up to gloat at every Tory defeat, to cheer at the map of the UK turning from blue to red. There was an atmosphere of euphoria in school, in the staffroom, in the classrooms – but it was euphoria at the defeat of the Conservatives after eighteen years, not at the prospect of a New Labour government in power. I believed that I had no illusions in the new government. I was wrong.

The tone was set by David Blunkett, New Labour's first secretary of state for education: no sooner had he taken office than he ‘named and shamed’ eighteen ‘failing’ schools across the country. The eighteen were, inevitably, schools serving working-class communities, schools, in today's parlance, facing challenging circumstances. What naming and shaming did was to signal that, in education as in other spheres of policy, New Labour was adopting a zero-tolerance approach: results were what counted – and there was to be no quarter given in the new government's dealings with ‘producer interest’ (or teachers, as we call them). It was the shape of things to come – the action of a government too busy to find out what was going on, happy to deal with complex problems by blaming and bullying. The soundbite was mightier than the strategic view. Or, in the mantra that dominated the first phase of New Labour's education policy, ‘standards not structures’ – as though standards were straightforward, separable from the structural inequality that was – and remains – the most conspicuous characteristic of the education system.

The standards agenda, by which I mean the relentless pressure on schools to achieve results, results which are defined by students' National Curriculum levels and GCSE and A-level grades, has continued to occupy a central position in schooling under New Labour. I want to spend some time exploring what this has meant in practice, and focusing attention on the high-stakes assessment regime that is the necessary concomitant of the government's emphasis on standards.

Viewed from the perspective of policy, it might indeed appear that the standards agenda has been displaced by other priorities – by *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003), by personalisation (Leadbeater 2004, Boston 2007), by a renewed interest in creativity or by the

new National Curriculum's emphasis on cross-curricular dimensions (healthy lifestyles, sustainability, community participation, and so on) and on 'personal, learning and thinking skills' (QCA 2008). In this account of New Labour's record, there have been two distinct (if overlapping) phases: in the first, there was centralised control, the National Strategies, the focus on 'standards not structures'; in the second, ameliorative phase, the accent was on creativity and diversity, and schools were reconceptualised as the vital hub at the centre of integrated social provision.

Viewed from the perspective of the classroom or the staffroom, however, the standards agenda has remained dominant, exerting a shaping influence on schools' priorities in the allocation of resources, of staffing, of time, and hence also on teachers' professional identities and students' subjectivities. In nearly all secondary schools, the force of the standards agenda can be judged by the effect of the modification of the single most important benchmark of success at 16-plus. From 2006 onwards, the widely reported measure, students' attainment of five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C, was 'toughened' (DfES 2005: 6) by the stipulation that these GCSEs had to include English and Maths. It is worth drawing attention to the words of the White Paper that introduced this change. The chapter within which the proposal is made was entitled 'A sharp accountability framework, which makes sure that we offer the best to young people' and the declared intention was to 'incentivise focus on the basics' (DfES 2005:86). It sounds less like an invitation to let a thousand flowers bloom than the production targets for the next Five Year Plan.

This single shift in reporting arrangements has had at least as much impact on secondary schooling as all of the policy initiatives that have appeared to offer a broader, more inclusive perspective on the processes of schooling. Alongside Science, English and Maths had formed the core of the National Curriculum since its inception in the 1988 Education Reform Act; other disciplines, though given statutory recognition, had been somewhat marginalised as the foundation subjects – and the two-tier curriculum was reinforced by the fact that only the core subjects were policed through the SATs tests. What the 2005 White Paper and the subsequent changes to GCSE league tables did was massively to augment the importance of English and Maths results for the reputation of each school as a whole. What has happened since 2006 is that there has been a tendency for English and Maths to be allocated more curriculum time, more resources, more staff; what has also happened is that English and Maths teachers' performance, as measured by results, has been subjected to ever more unremitting scrutiny.

The 2005 White Paper also continued the reconfiguration of core subjects that has been a feature of their fate under New Labour. The focus on English as literacy, Maths as numeracy, both as ‘the basics’, reiterates the emphases of the National Strategies:

2.11. At age 16, the most widely recognised measure of success for schools is how many of their students achieve level 2 (5 A*-C grades in GCSE and equivalent qualifications). We will change this measure to prioritise English and Maths at level 2. The new measure in the Tables will be the number of students achieving Diploma standard – ie 5 A*-C grades (or equivalent) including English and Maths. This measure will incentivise schools to make sure that young people have the functional skills, as well as the breadth of learning, needed to study until 19 (DfES 2005: 89-90).

And schools have been duly incentivised – though possibly rather more towards ensuring the basics than in attending to the need for breadth of study. The impact has been felt most heavily in those schools – inevitably, schools serving the most deprived communities – over which has fallen the shadow of the National Challenge, the government’s latest scheme to lever up standards. It would be hard to imagine a more manifestly unfair metric: like the economics of the Micawber household, school accountability has become a simple binary. Less than thirty per cent of sixteen-year-olds achieving five A-C grades (including English and Maths) spells misery (and the recruitment of staff and students becomes more difficult); more than thirty per cent, happiness.

The policy has been effective. The number of schools below the threshold has been greatly reduced. Dig a little deeper, though, and the triumph becomes more problematic. Within the National Challenge schools, intervention programmes have been put in place to ensure that the target is reached. Resources of time, materials and staffing are redirected from other subjects and other year groups towards GCSE English and Maths classes – particularly those where students hover around the C/D borderline. And, as headteachers in National Challenge schools acknowledge (Tobin 2009), the effect has been to distort the curriculum and to divert attention away from longer-term, more educationally justifiable, aims in pursuit of the short-term imperative, to hit the target of 30 per cent.

This tendency towards narrow functionalism shows no signs of abating. The impending changes to the GCSE syllabuses are likely to lead to a (further) marginalisation of literature, at least for the many, and an increasingly bifurcated version of English. For some, it will mean dual certification, English Literature and English Language (the latter presented as a more rigorous, linguistics-oriented course, explicitly marketed as a preparation for English Language A level). For others – both the high achievers whose disciplinary diet contains large helpings of Science, say, and also those students who may be deemed not up to

the demands of canon and clause analysis, there will be English. This latter version of English, though a unified course and thus in some ways more akin to what GCSE English has been since its inception, is also the course where the emphasis on functional English is likely to be most pronounced. In this, as in so many areas of government, New Labour reveal themselves as the heirs of Tory policy. Each change that has been forced on English GCSE since its beginnings in the 1980s has tended to undermine its capacity to function as a universalist qualification, meeting the needs of all, or very nearly all, fourteen- to sixteen-year-olds across the country. First came the attack on 100 per cent coursework, then the imposition of tiering, then the narrowing of textual horizons as students' reading became bounded, to a greater or lesser extent, by the exam boards' anthologies. Now the legacy of New Labour in relation to English in the last phase of statutory education is the creation of two distinct routes, two versions of English. There are, of course, echoes in all of this of a much older dispensation. The new twin-track secondary English begins to look rather a lot like the two Englishes of past times: on the one hand, the basic skills of secondary modern English; on the other hand, grammar school Language and Literature, academic rigour and canonical literature.

New Labour's emphasis on functional skills has a significance far beyond the details of the English curriculum. From its very beginnings, New Labour has been reluctant, to put it mildly, to engage in any sort of debate about what education is for. For the Blair and Brown governments, it has been a self-evident truth that better education (itself, for them, an entirely unproblematic term) was the determinant of economic wellbeing, both individual and social. Hence Blair's three priorities: education, education, education – a soundbite all the more effective because it promised something different from two decades of Tory underfunding and neglect, without actually specifying what kind of education, organised in whose interests, might be envisaged. Hence, too, Blunkett's dismissal as 'LSE silliness' the research that suggested that the positive correlation between higher levels of education and economic progress was much less robust than New Labour assumed. Peter Robinson's careful analysis of international data indicated that there was no correlation, once a society had achieved universal basic schooling, between national investment in education and economic development (Robinson 1997, 1998). Such findings were simply too inconvenient for a government whose whole approach was to conceive of education as a measurable, marketable commodity.²

The effect of high-stakes assessment in distorting and impeding education has a history, more or less as long as the history of state education itself – that is, of the public

provision of schooling. In 1911, Edmond Holmes, an HMI who had resigned from the Inspectorate in disgust at his colleagues' lack of understanding of classroom experience, wrote a wonderful little book entitled *What is and what might be?* The first half of the book, a searing analysis of the failings of the school system in which Holmes had worked, speaks directly to us across the intervening century. Holmes describes a system in which teachers spoon-feed their pupils, a system in which there is precious little room for genuine learning to take place:

Why is the teacher so ready to do everything (or nearly everything) for the children whom he professes to educate? One obvious answer to this question is that for a third of a century (1862-1895) the 'Education Department' did everything (or nearly everything) for him. For a third of a century 'My Lords' required their inspectors to examine every child in every elementary school in England on a syllabus which was binding on all schools alike. In doing this, they put a bit into the mouth of the teacher and drove him, at their pleasure, in this direction and that. And what they did to him they compelled him to do to the child (Holmes 1911:7).

Holmes identifies the effects of a centralised curriculum, enforced through testing and through inspection. Within such a system, there is no space for creativity, no space for dialogue, no space to explore and exploit the interests and experiences that the learners bring with them. Schooling is a transmission process, driven by fear. What is also significant about Holmes's account, though, is that he is writing sixteen years after the ending of the system of payment by results. What Holmes understood, because he had seen the evidence in the elementary schools he had visited across the country, was that the pernicious effects of such systems of control lived on even after the systems themselves had been abandoned.

Within this system, Holmes identified the crucial effect of assessment:

How did the belief that a formal examination is a worthy end for teacher and child to aim at, and an adequate test of success in teaching and in learning, come to establish itself in this country? And not in this country only, but in the whole Western world? In every Western country that is progressive and 'up to date' ... the examination system controls education, and in doing so arrests the self-development of the child, and therefore strangles his inward growth.

What is the explanation of this significant fact? The Western belief in the efficacy of examinations is a symptom of a widespread and deep-seated tendency – the tendency to judge according to the appearance of things, to attach supreme importance to visible 'results', to measure inward worth by outward standards, to estimate progress in terms of what the 'world' reveres as 'success' (Holmes 1911: 8-9).

Holmes was describing an education system in which the tail of assessment wagged the dog of learning. As the Cambridge Primary Review has noted recently (Alexander 2010:208),

this is also a salient feature of the current system, a system sustained and nurtured for the past thirteen years by New Labour.

Because of the centrality of high-stakes assessment in this system, I want to spend a little time exploring five aspects or strands of the way in which we have come to think about assessment. In calling these strands myths, I am suggesting two things. First, that they are powerful and deeply embedded in our society's assumptions about assessment: they have become, in other words, common sense. Second, that they are, in important ways, untrue and unhelpful, obstacles that make it harder for us to arrive at more accurate and adequate understandings of assessment. I should make it clear, too, that what I mean by assessment here is not formative assessment or assessment for learning – a range of pedagogical practices and interventions that do not seem to me to be separable from teaching and learning – but rather the regimes of high-stakes, summative assessment that figure so prominently in the landscape of schooling in this country.

Myth 1: learning is linear

Since the imposition, twenty years ago, of the National Curriculum and its attendant levels and level descriptors, it has become increasingly hard to challenge the assumption that learning happens in predictable, identifiable and incremental stages. Increasingly, too, the levels of the National Curriculum are broken down into sub-levels, in an attempt to describe ever more precisely the progress that learners have made – and also to set ever more precise targets for their future progress. The levels ascribed to individuals are then aggregated to produce school-wide, local authority-wide and national data on children's learning. The attainment of literacy or of numeracy becomes inextricably associated with achieving a level four before the end of primary education, while press and politicians are quick to make headlines with the assumption that those who have not been awarded a level four are therefore illiterate, innumerate.

The problem with all of this is, fundamentally, that it is not true. At best, the National Curriculum level descriptors are an attempt to describe what progression in a subject might look like. But learning itself is a much messier, more complicated business than the linear scale of levels or GCSE grades would suggest. What happens day by day in the classroom depends on factors other than the learners' existing or target levels: it depends on their interests and experiences beyond school, and whether they are enabled to make connections between these interests and experiences and the school curriculum. It depends on the learners' motivation. Even within subjects, such as mathematics, where learning seems to be

more easily accommodated to the paradigm of linear progression, learners' understanding of, say, number – of arithmetic operations and concepts – can be at a markedly different stage of development from their understanding of shape, space and measure – of geometry – or of questions of probability. Within subjects such as English, where development more obviously involves social and emotional aspects and orientations as well as intellectual processes, and where learners' development as speakers and listeners does not bear any simple or constant relation to their development as readers and writers, it is far from clear that the attempt to place their progress at a single point on a single linear scale is either meaningful or educationally justifiable.

To suggest this now seems wildly unorthodox – but it is precisely the point that was made by HM Inspectorate three decades ago:

For English is not a linear or sequential subject in the way that a modern language or Mathematics is. English language and literature teaching must allow for different levels and types of response from different individuals even where the group is reasonably homogenous. Moreover, in English, a shared experience and the development of a wide range of individual responses are perfectly compatible, and the very width of the response which mixed ability grouping facilitates can be turned to the advantage of those involved. As for the experience to be shared, happily it is often the finest literature, that which has the strongest human appeal, which will make the deepest impression on pupils of all abilities and allow them to meet on common ground (DES 1978:95).

What has happened in the intervening years is that there has been a bad case of reification, more infectious and far more damaging than swine flu: levels that were, at most, ways of gesturing broadly at progression have been transformed under the pressure of particular forms of accountability (more on this later) into things, as if levels had the same solidity and materiality as, say, a child's shoe size. So one encounters with wearying regularity children who announce that they 'are' a level six, or a level three (the former with pride verging on smugness, the latter with an air of resignation, a meek acceptance that literacy, or even learning, is not really their thing). Even more worryingly, the reification process has affected the way that teachers talk about their pupils – so 'she's a level five' or 'he's a level four' are now not so much shorthand expressions, standing for more complicated pictures of a learner's development, as bald statements of fact.

Myth 2: learning is context-independent

The idea that learning happens in a vacuum, as it were, and hence that learning can be measured in isolation from the context in which it happened, is closely linked to the myth of

linearity (see above). It is another aspect of the same reductive approach to learning, an approach that seeks to isolate sub-skills and then assess whether the sub-skill has been acquired without any reference to the contexts in which such skills might be used and developed. Once again, it is an attempt to sidestep the messy contingencies of real learning, substituting in its place the thin abstractions of the easily transmitted and easily measured.

Always and everywhere, classrooms are populated by real people with particular histories, experiences, cultures. Learning involves these people interacting with each other and with particular materials – with particular problems, particular texts, particular resources. The learning that happens in and through such textual encounters cannot be adequately captured without paying close attention to the shaping influence of these contingent circumstances.

Myth 3: learning is individual

Of all the five myths of assessment, the one that is most deeply implicated in the history of schooling is the assumption that learning is the property of an individual, that learning happens inside a single learner's head. It is a myth that is nurtured by and helps to sustain the sense of self that is central to bourgeois culture and values. Plagiarism, the Manichean other of intellectual property, is the cardinal sin within the religion of schooling precisely because it entails a transgression of this article of faith, learning as the property of the individual.

With glorious circularity, we know that learning is individual because the assessment regimes constantly demonstrate that this is the case. Assessment, predicated on the commonsense assumption that learning happens in an individual's head, proceeds to provide opportunities for the individual to demonstrate this learning, in circumstances – such as the exam hall – where normal human interactions are absolutely forbidden, and then offers conclusive proof of the validity of the procedure by arriving at differential assessments for different individuals: to one a level five, to another a grade A, and so on.

It is in such routines of assessment that the role of education as a sorting mechanism becomes most obvious. Assessment separates sheep from goats, high-fliers from also-rans, leaders of men from hewers of wood. It underpins the notion of meritocracy and it sustains the illusion that social justice can be achieved through social mobility.

The myth of the isolated individual, the learner as examination candidate, filters out all that we know about the reality of distributed learning, all we know about learners as irreducibly social beings, situated in history and in culture.

Myth 4: the assessment of learning is objective and reliable

The dominant discourses of schooling are based on the myth of reliable assessment. In the creation of this myth, one of the things that happens is that assessment processes assume a kind of autonomy, independent of human agency.

But assessment is always a social practice. It always involves the exercise of judgement. It is always conducted for specific purposes by particular people. Only in the most trivial cases is assessment merely a matter of measuring. And, as the Cambridge Primary Review has argued, reliability comes at a cost: the more reliable a test, the less information it can provide about the breadth of a child's learning and development. There is, in other words, an inverse relation between reliability and validity (Alexander 2010:320-1).

Myth 5: high stakes assessment is vital for accountability

Parents need assessment so that they can understand how their children are developing and how well their school is performing (Brooks & Tough 2006:4).

The argument here is not over whether schools should be accountable – of course they should – but over the role of testing in achieving accountability. The quotation above is from a pamphlet that takes as its starting-point the recognition that there is a problem with the current assessment regime, yet its authors have succumbed to the myth that testing provides accountability. It doesn't. The whole machinery of National Curriculum levels and sub-levels does not make it easier for parents and carers to find out about their children's progress; it is a barrier in the way of communication between teachers and parents, a professionalist jargon impenetrable to most lay people. The myth that national assessment frameworks introduced accountability ignores the fact that other forms of accountability, in the form of parents' evenings and school reports, existed long before the National Curriculum. To make this statement is not to claim that such systems of accountability were perfect – they were not – but the imposition of high-stakes testing has done nothing to address their shortcomings. Once more, the evidence collected by the Cambridge Primary Review is salient here. Parents and carers want to know, among other things, whether their children are happy (Alexander 2010:316). And there is not, as yet, a National Curriculum level for happiness.

There is also a massive problem in conflating, as Brooks and Tough have done, the assessment of individual learners and the judgement of the effectiveness of teachers, schools or local authorities. Most obviously, using aggregated test data as an accountability measure

tends to leave much that is relevant out of the account: it ignores the particular contexts of schools and their communities, and it ignores all the other aspects of a school's work that lie beyond the preparation of pupils for high-stakes tests. Worse than this, such accountability measures always and inevitably distort schools' and teachers' priorities, encouraging an exclusive focus on the curricular areas that are to be tested, on those aspects of a subject that are to be tested (reading and writing rather than speaking and listening, say), on the students who lie at the threshold of success (the 3a/4c pupils, the C/D borderlines, and so on).

I want to return briefly to Edmond Holmes's picture of schooling a hundred years ago. Two aspects of this picture seem salient to me – and horribly contemporary. First, education has become a commodity: children and their learning are reduced to test scores, mere units of analysis. The process is epitomised by the new meaning of the verb, *to level*: this is the process that teachers are engaged in, the reduction of each child to a single number, a point on a scale; it is a process that flattens and renders invisible all that is distinctive, all that is interesting, about real learners. Second, what the system values – and demands – of all its participants, teachers and pupils alike, is compliance – neither originality nor creativity, neither judgement nor responsiveness to individual circumstance, neither questioning nor imagination, but mere mechanical compliance.

For us, as for Edmond Holmes, the task is not just to see what is but to begin to envisage, and work towards, what might be. There have been times during the period of the New Labour government when the question of what education is for has been raised, sharply and publicly. It happened in the findings of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry:

If racism is to be eliminated from our society there must be a co-ordinated effort to prevent its growth. This need goes well beyond the Police Services. The need for training of police officers in addressing racism and valuing cultural diversity is plain. Improved understanding and attitudes will certainly help to prevent racism in the future, as will improved procedures in terms of recording and investigating racist incidents. Just as important, and perhaps more so, will be similar efforts needed from other agencies, particularly in the field of education. As we have indicated, the issue of education may not at first sight sit clearly within our terms of reference. Yet we cannot but conclude that to seek to address the well-founded concerns of minority communities simply by addressing the racism current and visible in the Police Services without addressing the educational system would be futile. The evidence we heard and read forces us to the conclusion that our education system must face up to the problems, real and potential, which exist. We therefore make a number of Recommendations aimed at encouraging schools to address the identified problems (Macpherson 1999: 46.34).

Confronted with the facts that the five youths who murdered Stephen Lawrence had been through the education system in this country and that the police officers who were collectively responsible for an institutionally racist policing system, Macpherson and his colleagues concluded, reasonably enough, that the education system itself needed to address racism directly.

It is worth pausing to consider what the impact on education would have been if Macpherson had been taken seriously, if schools had been expected to ‘address the well-founded concerns of minority communities.’ What kind of cultural and pedagogic project would have been required to achieve this? What kinds of knowledge would figure in the curriculum? Whose histories, whose experiences? What reconfiguration of the relation between schools and the communities that they serve, and what reconfiguration of the relation between teachers and students within the schools? There is not space here even to sketch out answers to these questions, but it is worth emphasising both that another version of schooling is possible and that, long before New Labour came to power, schools in London (and elsewhere) had worked strenuously towards an understanding of what anti-racist education might look like in practice (see, for example, Evers and Richmond 1982, Miller 1983, ALTARF 1984, and, more recently, Richardson 2005, Yandell 2008).³ These histories, too, were ignored or traduced by the New Labour standard(s)-bearers from Barber (1996) onwards.

Recently considerable public attention has been paid to critiques of New Labour’s education programme that take it as a given that such changes as were advocated by the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry were actually implemented. In his widely-publicised *Wasted: why education isn't educating* (2009), Frank Furedi attacks Alan Johnson, who as Secretary of State for Education had suggested that there might be a connection between school students’ study of the slave trade and their understanding of multicultural Britain today. In Furedi’s terms, such a proposition undermines the integrity of the academic discipline of the study of history. The goal of social inclusion is directly counterposed to ‘providing an intellectually challenging education’ (2009:139), and is somehow construed as inauthentic because it is policy of social engineering, without ‘organic relation to community life’ (2009: 121). Furedi argues that the task of the educator – and indeed of adults more generally – is to ‘assume responsibility for the world as it is and pass on its cultural and intellectual legacy to young people’ (2009:49).

I want to take issue with Furedi's position on grounds that are at once political, semiotic and pedagogic. I'm not at all sure what it means to criticise a set of policies for their failure to maintain an organic relation to community life. Gramsci's (1978) dissection of the notion of common sense is relevant here: part of the task of education is to give learners access to ways of understanding the world that are not available through common sense. Were Galileo or Einstein guilty of failing to pass on the cultural and intellectual legacy that they had inherited? And if common sense notions of the shape of the earth, or of the space-time continuum, are susceptible to challenge, why should common sense notions of 'race', gender, sexual orientation or disability not be interrogated within the curriculum? It is not at all clear which community life can be taken as standing, for Furedi, in a normative relation to educational practice: is it the community life of Bradford or Bath, of Hackney or Harrogate? Furedi's conception of what is entailed in education as the transmission of knowledge is based on a woefully inadequate theory of the sign: it is as if signs, like Furedi's academic subjects, existed in some sort of Platonic realm, rather than being made and remade constantly in particular places by particular people with particular histories and interests. And it is this inadequate theory of the sign that produces an equally inadequate theory of pedagogy. Furedi criticises what he sees as the fashionable focus on learners and learning on the grounds that it diverts attention away from teaching and away from the central importance of disciplinary knowledge. In taking this position, he aligns himself with the long-standing critics of progressive education, Sheila Lawlor, Caroline Cox and Anthony O'Hear, whose claim, made vociferously since the 1980s, has been that all teachers need is a knowledge and love of their subject (see, for example, O'Hear 1988, Hillgate Group 1989, Lawlor 1990).

But, as Susie Thomas (2009) has argued in a recent edition of this journal, Macpherson's recommendations were not translated into policy, let alone into practice. It is entirely consistent with New Labour's approach through its period in power that the one recommendation that was implemented, through the Race Relations Amendment Act (1999), was the collection of data on ethnic minority achievement. After all, this fitted in neatly with the standards agenda – and it didn't involve asking hard questions about whether there might be more to education than functional English, or how many eleven-year-olds were proud possessors of a level four. More generally, where steps have been taken to promote wider objectives such as social inclusion, they have been accommodated within the managerialist framework of the standards agenda: accountability has become a matter of accounting, ticking boxes, demonstrating to Ofsted and the other organs of surveillance that the right toolkit has been used, the appropriate targets have been met. The effect of all of this, quite

apart from the increase in bureaucratic workload, has been to make schools responsible for a raft of social policy initiatives while they continue to be held to account for their performance against the superordinate category of narrowly-defined measures of pupil attainment – and all of this in an education system which has become more and more fragmented and competitive.⁴

The fate of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry recommendations leads me on to a wider point about New Labour's record on education, which is that it cannot be seen in isolation from the rest of its policies. The 'well-founded concerns of minority communities' are not restricted to the arena of domestic policy. The most economical way of gesturing at this wider context might be to refer to the guidance provided by the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills to support universities in the task, now a legal duty, of identifying and combating violent extremism. The DIUS pamphlet warns of the seductive power of the terrorists' 'single narrative':

The narrative draws on a number of concerns – some of which may be quite widely shared by Muslims and non-Muslims [*sic*] alike. These include perceived injustices (e.g. Palestine); opposition to military intervention (e.g. in Iraq or Afghanistan); local perceptions of discrimination (e.g. a view that stop and search rules are not operated fairly); and concerns about globalisation (e.g. perceived as an imposition of 'Western' values) [DIUS 2007: 20].

The pamphlet goes on to suggest that the narrative's 'potency as propaganda is based on its propensity to weave fact with subjective opinion and emotion to seek to occupy a moral and religious high-ground' (*ibid.*). Dare one suggest that the real potency of this narrative lies not in the mixing of fact and opinion (after all, which narrative does not do that?) but in the shameful record of New Labour's foreign policy? Not everyone who marched against the invasion of Iraq, who opposes the occupation of Afghanistan, who is outraged by the treatment of the Palestinian people, becomes a suicide bomber – and there are hard questions to ask about the process whereby someone comes to believe that acts of individual violence are the best means at their disposal to achieve political change. But that does not alter the fact that the British state over the past thirteen years has acted as terrorism's best recruiting officer. There is a terrible irony in the way that a government pamphlet can simultaneously acknowledge the real, material basis of widespread anger against the British state and fail to entertain, even for a moment, the notion that an appropriate response to this situation would be to address the underlying causes of this anger.

What we have, instead, is the familiar routine of blaming the victim. In place of any commitment to social justice, let alone to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry's demand for anti-

racist education, New Labour's response to the 2001 riots in a number of northern towns and cities and to the 2005 London bombings has been to promote the cause of social cohesion. And what social cohesion entails is codification in policy of the liberal establishment's rather illiberal attitude to dissenting voices. Social cohesion is to be achieved, it would appear, by exerting pressure on the Other to conform to (white) British norms and values. The same government pamphlet from which I quoted earlier contains the following statement:

Educational institutions must ensure equality of opportunity for all, increase participation and promote interaction between different groups. Breaking down segregation is a key part of the role of institutions to ensure students get a full university experience (DIUS 2007: 8).

How might this instruction be operationalised? Will steps be taken to ensure mass participation in beagling? Or will there be some sort of exchange arrangement between Christ Church, Oxford, and Finsbury Park mosque? Whose (non-) participation in which kinds of activity is seen as a problem?

The point is, of course, that what is to be understood in such edicts is that it is the separateness of the Other that is the problem. After all, the New Labour government has done precious little to break down structural inequalities in the whole education system, from school through to university. Schooling has become more stratified under this government: existing private and grammar schools have continued without significant challenge, faith schools have been vigorously supported, and academies and trust schools flourish; within schools, setting pupils by ability has become *de rigueur*. (And – as if to turn John Major's joke, quoted in the title to this essay, into reality – school uniform is now equally fashionable: imposed to produce brand identity, conformity, the denial of difference and the appeal to the values of nostalgia – it's hard to square this detail with Furedi's version of New Labour's policy on schooling.) Within higher education, though there have been increases in the number of students there has been no attempt to address the huge disparities in resources between universities, while spiralling tuition fees have created a massive burden of debt for new graduates while also further commodifying education.

A recent government report highlighted the enduring fact of inequality in the UK – inequality that exists between men and women, between different ethnic groups, between social class groups, between those living in disadvantaged and other areas – and that is more extreme in this country than in most other developed nations. The report, coming after thirteen years of New Labour government, makes depressing reading:

Many of the differences ... cumulate across the life cycle, especially those related to people's socio-economic background. We see this before children enter school,

through the school years, through entry into the labour market, and on to retirement, wealth and resources for retirement, and mortality rates in later life. Economic advantage and disadvantage reinforce themselves across the life cycle, and often on to the next generation. By implication, policy interventions to counter this are needed at each life cycle stage (Hills et al. 2010: 386).

I have argued elsewhere (Yandell 2009) that social mobility is no substitute for social justice. What this report demonstrates is that social mobility is itself a chimera, since inequality reproduces itself throughout the life cycle. At this moment in history, when education, like the rest of the public sector, prepares for swingeing cuts in spending, the report stands as a damning indictment of New Labour's education policy. The history of the past thirteen years resides not only in such official documents, but also in the memory of lived events. I want to finish with one such memory, a moment from 2004, and the story of my own children's primary school.

Built in the early 1950s, the school occupied a site, backing onto a reservoir, that was, for an urban primary school, relatively large. The two-storey building was in urgent need of regeneration: it had taken a sustained campaign to persuade the local authority that something needed to be done about the shocking state of the toilet. But there was, at least, playground space. The school had, for the past half century, served its local, predominantly working-class, community, and had served it well. In the fifties, this community had been largely Jewish; by the 1990s, it had become as diverse as London itself, with children whose families had roots in the Caribbean and Latin America, West Africa, South and East Asia, Turkey and Eastern Europe. Both my children had thrived there, learning and growing in confidence, arguing, fighting, playing, making friends.

And then, in my daughter's last year, the news came that the school was faced with closure. Initially, we dismissed the rumours. The school had no difficulty in recruiting pupils. It had not failed Ofsted. What possible reason could there be for shutting it down?

The plan, we found out, was to close our school and replace it with a shiny new Academy, to provide for fifteen hundred children between the ages of three and nineteen. At a consultation meeting with the architects who had been employed to draw up plans for the new building, parents made the point that what was a large site for a primary school with about 450 pupils was really not big enough for over three times that many students. The existing school – our school – had been careful to ensure that there were different play areas for the nursery children and for the older ones. How would the new Academy manage the needs of three-year-olds and nineteen-year-olds within such a cramped space? The answer

was breathtakingly simple: the children would play on the roof. (And, to ensure that this really was manageable, playtimes would be staggered, so that some could cavort above while others continued with their studies below.)

The moment I want to describe was a meeting, after the end of the school day, a meeting that parents had asked for, with the sponsor of the proposed Academy. A small group of parents was huddled in the headteacher's office, where we were to meet the headmistress of an independent girls' school from a much more affluent North London suburb. She arrived as if on a royal progress; when prompted, she revealed that her invitation to our little corner of Hackney had come in a phone call from Downing Street itself. Who better to take an interest in the development of a cutting-edge new all-through school than someone who already had leadership of just such an institution? So what of the school over which she presided?

Set in the stunning grounds of the former palace of the Duke of Chandos, where George Frederick Handel was composer-in-residence, North London Collegiate is unique among London schools in providing a first class academic education in an inspirational setting, including state-of-the-art facilities and acres of playing fields and gardens (North London Collegiate School Prospectus).

The acres are amply represented in the images that adorn the prospectus. The chasm between what was offered to the fee-paying students of her own school and what was envisaged as appropriate for Hackney children was unbridgeable, as clear an instance as one could hope to find of schooling's role in the reproduction of structural inequality in our society. But that was not what struck me most forcibly in our meeting with the headmistress. What did – and it was magnificent in its grim comedy – was her slowly dawning recognition that we, the Hackney parents, were not grateful. She had come expecting us to salivate at the prospect of a few crumbs from the banquet of private education, to marvel at the entry of so dazzling a figure into our benighted lives, to thank our lucky stars that some dew from the rolling acres might rub off on our children. Instead, churlishly we demanded to know what she thought she could contribute to education in Hackney.

Whether it was our ingratitude that frightened her off, I do not know. But the Academy plans went no further, the primary school still stands, and a small local victory – a victory for local democracy and for a vision of education that is older and more honourable than New Labour – was won. In the hard times that have been, and the harder times that are to come, such local struggles matter greatly, both in themselves and in the opportunities they provide for us to peer above compliance and commodification, look steadfastly at the landscape riven by inequality and ask, again, what schooling is for.

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¹ The phrase was a gibe made by John Major, the last Tory Prime Minister, against Tony Blair, then leader of the opposition (Brown 1996). Though not as important as his role in the attack on 100% coursework, it was Major's only funny joke, and hence deserves a place in history.

² Another demonstration of the flaw in New Labour's economistic approach to education was provided recently by Warwick Mansell (2010). The government has long argued the need for higher levels of educational attainment on the grounds that there would be an ever-diminishing supply of low-skilled jobs. Mansell draws attention to the fact that the report on which this argument has been based made no such claim: on the contrary, it suggested that the *demand* for low-skilled jobs would remain more or less constant; what would diminish was the *supply* of workers without any qualifications. The implication of this is clear: education policy is not so easily reducible to the needs of the economy.

³ It is important to recognise that these references are merely a shorthand, a way of gesturing at larger histories of practice that have not always been thoroughly documented, let alone theorised.

⁴ The new inspection framework (Ofsted 2010) has made matters worse. It demands that inspectors view pupil attainment in a school primarily against national benchmarks (thus paying no attention to local circumstances or intake). This measure of decontextualised performance against national standards then constrains the overall judgement of a school's effectiveness, so that schools formerly judged "good" are now regularly being consigned to the category of "satisfactory."