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## ***STANDARDS IN ENGLISH EDUCATION: AN ENDURING HISTORICAL ISSUE***

### ***La Calidad en la Educación Inglesa: una Cuestión Históricamente Recurrente***

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This article closely examines the development of education in England, taking special account of educational standards — of the official measurable kind, but also the perceived kind— in the various sectors of education. It argues that, today, and in the past, the ‘problems’ associated with education standards mostly relate to a ‘long tail’ of underperforming schools serving urban areas and attended by relatively underprivileged children. At the other end of the scale, it is suggested that England’s leading schools, both in the public and private sectors, remain the subject of admiration. The same remains true of England’s leading, and typically oldest, universities, which occupy a more privileged position than institutions chartered in the relatively recent past. The article presents a story of persistent unequal educational opportunities over time, which, worryingly, does not seem to be improving in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

**KEY WORDS:** Standards; Education Systems; England; Performance; Schools; Universities

## RESUMEN

Este artículo examina de cerca el desarrollo de la educación en Inglaterra teniendo especialmente en cuenta los estándares educativos —tanto en sus medidas oficiales como en sus valores percibidos— en los distintos sectores de la educación. Argumenta que, aún hoy, y en el pasado, los «problemas» asociados con los estándares educativos se relacionan principalmente con cierto número de escuelas con bajo rendimiento y ubicadas en áreas suburbanas a las que asisten alumnos desfavorecidos. En el otro extremo de la escala se sugiere que las escuelas líderes inglesas tanto en el sector público como en el privado se mantienen como objetos de admiración. En el mismo sentido le ocurre a las universidades inglesas más tradicionales que ocupan una posición mucho más privilegiada que otras instituciones establecidas en el pasado reciente. El artículo ofrece una panorámica de permanentes inequidad de las oportunidades educativas que, preocupantemente, no parece haber mejorado en la segunda década del s. xxi.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Estándares, Sistemas Educativos, Inglaterra, Resultados, Rendimientos, Escuelas, Universidades.

## INTRODUCTION

The question of whether English education standards are rising or falling has been debated by politicians, academics and the general public for decades. This is seemingly an area where everyone has opinions, often strong ones, supported by personal — and sometimes painful — reminiscences, experiences and anecdotes. Surveys and exercises to determine the movement of standards over time or between countries are normally undertaken in specific areas by skilled quantitative researchers. A large number of such studies are in the public domain, offering explanations and conclusions about changes in learners' skill levels, assessment approaches, institutional and country performances and so forth.

The typical training of the English historian of education is qualitative. Few historians have ventured into this field, though there are excellent policy studies covering the past 40 years by Clyde Chitty and others (CHITTY, 1989). Richard Aldrich's work has particularly shown that the historian's toolkit can offer something fresh to a landscape that is dominated by

methodological disagreements between statisticians and ideologically-laden political disputes (ALDRICH, 1996: 39-56). While historical contributions, including this one, are unlikely to settle arguments in this field, they are capable of explaining why the arguments continue.

The remainder of this article is divided into four sections. The next section offers an historical treatment of educational development in England. This is followed, in part two, by a discussion of how perceptions of a standards 'crisis' emerged and developed, particularly from the late 1960s and 1970s. The third section considers English education standards in a broader, international context, noting that the current UK government is determined to learn from, and emulate, the world's leading nations. Finally, four conclusions address issues of change and continuity over time, the nature of the data contributing to discussions in this field and the uncertain relationship between policy reforms and measurable education standards

## **1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION IN ENGLAND**

For centuries, access to formal education in England remained the privilege of the rich, with the churches offering some limited support for the masses. Cathedral schools emerged in the sixth and seventh centuries, followed by a wave of grammar schools and prestigious late-medieval foundations including Winchester College (founded 1382) and Eton College (1441). In the sixteenth century, grammar schools, linked to the Tudor monarchs, were established and, subsequently, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there followed an assortment of private foundations. Each of these schools were for boys and, although the term 'public school' is attached to Winchester, Eton and other leading private schools, it is crucial to understand that the meaning of this term is peculiarly English. The public schools of England are decidedly not 'public' in the generally understood sense of offering a cost-free education for ordinary children. These public schools are, in fact, an elite subset of fee-charging private schools. Elite institutions for girls began to emerge only in the nineteenth century, first in the guise of 'finishing schools', especially in London and Brighton. These emphasised the etiquette of manners, music, French and other accomplishments, rather than imparting high-level academic knowledge.

The first girls' schools to offer a curriculum to rival that of the boys' public schools were the North London Collegiate School (1850) and Cheltenham Ladies' College (1853). The first British universities, Oxford and Cambridge, were both medieval English institutions, but the next five to be founded — St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh and Trinity College, Dublin — were all located outside England. From the 1830s England began to catch up, with the foundation of Durham (1832) and London (1836) Universities, but no further institutions were added until more than half a century later.

In terms of compulsory schooling, England lagged behind Prussia, France and other leading countries which moved towards centralised elementary school systems from the late-eighteenth century. Before the 1870s elementary schools were mostly run by the churches — specifically by the Nonconformist British and Foreign School Society (BFSS, founded 1808) and the Church of England National Society (1811) — and by private individuals. In 1833, the Whig Party, forerunners of modern-day Liberal Democrats, made available the sum of £20,000 as a one-off payment, shared between the National Society and the BFSS for the construction of schools. Though the sum was modest, it was to set an important precedent as it evolved into an annual grant, but by the late 1860s it was clear that the policy of leaving the establishment of schools to the churches was failing. In some areas rival denominations each established schools, while in others there was no school at all. The 1870 Education Act for England and Wales sought to 'fill up the gaps' by establishing 'school boards', which, in turn, had a duty to establish and maintain 'board schools'. Some 5,000 additional elementary schools were established during the period 1870 to 1874 and the idea of compulsory school attendance began to gain credibility. This was enacted in 1880, but it was only after 1891, when elementary school fees were abolished, that school attendance statistics improved significantly.

In time, the efforts of some urban school boards to provide post-elementary education for the working classes pointed to the need for further legislation. The Education Act of 1902 replaced the 2,500 school boards with 328 local education authorities (LEAs), which were permitted develop a new kind of grammar school, enlarged in social composition by offering scholarships to children from lower middle— and upper working-class backgrounds if they passed an '11-plus' examination. In the higher education sector, too, the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries witnessed

important expansion. A range of ‘civic colleges’ linked to local industries emerged first, which later evolved into the ‘redbrick’ universities of northern and central England. Demands for further social reforms intensified during the First World War, after which the school-leaving age was raised from 12 to 14. From the 1920s an education reform movement was apparent, promoting play-centred early years education and distinguishing between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ education, with children transferring from the first type of school to the second at age 11.

After the initial disruption to the education service at the start of the Second World War, the Board of Education was, by 1940-41, preparing plans for post-war ‘educational reconstruction’. Distinct ‘primary’, ‘secondary’ and ‘further’ phases were instituted by the 1944 Education Act, which abolished fees in state schools and lessened the influence of wealth upon educational opportunity. In line with the dominant thinking of the inter-war years, a differentiated secondary system was created, composed of grammar schools for pupils who passed the 11-plus — typically the top 20 to 25 per cent of the age cohort in each LEA — and secondary modern schools for the remainder. In a small number of localities secondary technical schools were also created. Official discourses of the period spoke of a ‘parity of esteem’ between grammar, technical and secondary modern schools, but the reality was quite different. Grammar schools were relatively better equipped, staffed by graduates and offered pupils more opportunities to take Ordinary and Advanced level public examinations (‘O’ and ‘A’ levels) at ages 16 and 18. As it became ever clearer that the future direction of children’s lives rested upon their performance in the 11-plus, the secondary modern schools — originally intended to have a practical rather than academic focus — increasingly began to imitate grammar schools. Around the same time, doubts emerged about the accuracy of 11-plus testing. At a time when early indications seemed to show that experimental, non-selective comprehensive schools were operating successfully, research suggested that many ‘late developers’ were not realising their full potential in secondary modern schools. A Labour government requested LEAs to reorganise their secondary schools along comprehensive lines in 1965, but progress was often hampered by inadequate building stock and other factors. Compromises invariably necessitated ‘interim’ semi-comprehensive arrangements, the phased

abolition of the 11-plus and amalgamations that created unsatisfactory split-site comprehensive schools (KERCKHOFF et al, 1996).

From the 1960s politicians and commentators commonly viewed education, for the first time, as an investment in the welfare state, rather than simply a cost upon it. The higher education sector underwent expansion and diversification in four rapid stages. First, in the decade after 1945, several university colleges obtained full university status. Second, following the 1963 Robbins Report, colleges of advanced technology become universities. Third, a group of newly-built campus universities were developed on the edge of towns and cities. Finally, vocationally-oriented polytechnics offered a different kind of degree course from 1966, with students frequently undertaking placements in manufacturing or business settings. In the area of primary schooling this period witnessed a greater emphasis on practical work and play-centred learning. The Plowden Report, *Children and Their Primary Schools*, was child-centred in outlook, observing, for example, that ‘Children’s own interests direct their attention to many fields of knowledge and the teacher is alert to provide materials, books or experience for the development of their ideas’ (CENTRAL ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR EDUCATION, 1967: 106).

Following the general election victory of the Conservative Party in 1970, LEAs were no longer expected to develop comprehensive reorganisation plans, though most with schemes under development decided to proceed. In areas where the Secretary of State or religious authorities permitted selective schools to continue, or where private schools operated, the ‘comprehensiveness’ of comprehensive schools was particularly questionable. A wave of enforced mergers between grammar and secondary modern schools underpinned the statistical success of the comprehensive school movement, but the press and media became increasingly doubtful about the merits of comprehensive schooling as the national economic outlook worsened. This reached a nadir during the Labour government’s 1978-79 ‘winter of discontent’.

During the period 1979 to 1997, the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major completed a radical overhaul of education. Education was now brought to the marketplace and ministers, including the Prime Minister, were increasingly influenced by individuals

and ‘think tanks’ associated with the political right, rather than trusting the advice of civil servants, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Schools (HMI), academics or teachers. Parents were to be treated as consumers of education, entitled to more information about their children’s schooling and, as far as possible, empowered to make choices between schools. In 1986 a programme for city technology colleges (CTCs) was announced, to be funded mostly by businesses and partly by central government. These schools, the first of which opened in 1988, were to be independent of LEA control and could select pupils on the basis of ‘aptitude’. Right-wing thinkers now began to variously envisage a future in which all state schools would be privatised and LEAs abolished. Supporters of comprehensive schools condemned the re-introduction of selection, while their opponents hoped it would mark the revival of grammar schools. In the event, none of these scenarios was realised. Private sector interest in sponsoring CTCs proved very limited and just 15 were established in the five years to 1993, but the drive for stronger central control of education continued.

The Education Reform Act of 1988 was a lengthy and wide-ranging piece of legislation, specifying a ten-subject national curriculum and reducing LEA powers in a variety of ways. Provision was made for schools to ‘opt out’ of LEA control and become ‘grant maintained’ (GM), with direct funding from the Treasury. CTCs also featured prominently in the future blueprint for secondary schooling. A further set of provisions related to higher and further education, paving the way for polytechnics and colleges of education to become universities. Though the GM school initiative won early enthusiasm from schools wishing to remove themselves from LEA control, the initial impetus slowed as schools and teachers became overwhelmed by National Curriculum and assessment overload, resulting in large-scale boycotts of testing and a scaling down of the subject content and tests. John Major, who succeeded Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in November 1990, was a more consensual figure, but the pace of educational reforms perpetuated difficult relations with the teacher unions. Major’s first Education Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, was forthright in his objections to Plowden-style progressive practices in primary schools and to the ‘trendy theory’ of teacher educators. His successor, John Patten, became deeply unpopular with teachers for offering financial inducements to schools contemplating to ‘opting out’ of LEA control and for creating the part-

privatised Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) to replace HMI. The first Ofsted Chief Inspector, Chris Woodhead, was a divisive figure, whose public and partisan criticisms of progressive teaching methods and incompetent teachers — including in a pamphlet for a think tank (WOODHEAD, 1995)— offended many. Following a national boycott of primary school tests in 1993, Patten was forced to set up an inquiry which further reduced the content of the National Curriculum and streamlined testing arrangements.

By the mid-1990s many educationists had become transfixed by the youthful leader of the ‘New Labour’ Party, Tony Blair. Addressing the 1996 Labour Party conference, Blair famously proclaimed: ‘Ask me my three priorities for Government and I tell you: education, education and education’ (reported in *Guardian*, 5 October 1996: 8). On 1 May 1997 Blair and his Party swept to an overwhelming general election victory. In line with manifesto pledges, opted out schools lost their GM status as funding responsibilities were restored to LEAs. But schools wishing to retain a strong measure of independence were permitted to become ‘foundation schools’, rather than LEA-controlled ‘community schools’. Seeking to address educational disadvantage, additional Treasury resources facilitated a reduction in infant school class sizes and economically-deprived LEAs secured extra resources through the ‘Education Action Zones’ and ‘Excellence in Cities’ programmes. Having originally opposed CTCs, GM and specialist schools on the grounds that this would re-introduce ‘selection by the back door’, New Labour was, by 1997, enthusiastic about increasing parental choice and encouraging diversity in secondary education. Pupil setting and ‘fast-tracking’ were preferred to mixed-ability teaching, and selection by ‘aptitude’, though not by ‘ability’, was encouraged. To some, this implied that the remaining 166 English secondary grammar schools (which selected wholly on the basis of ability) would be closed or become more inclusive, but Tony Blair made clear that his priorities lay with raising the performance of weak schools. As for the grammar schools, he explained that ‘as long as the parents want them, they will stay’ (quoted in CROOK, POWER and WHITTY, 1999: 20).

Emphasising the policy of diversity in secondary schooling, the first and second Blair governments offered active support for the continuation and expansion of faith schools, while secondary schools were encouraged to

adopt a ‘specialist’ designation. The popularity of this policy exceeded expectations: by 2006 more than 80 per cent of English secondary schools had identified a specialism. The term ‘comprehensive’ — which had long been the subject of multiple understandings — was increasingly seen as a redundant historical term describing an unsuccessful experiment. In 2002 Blair declared that ‘We need to move to the post-comprehensive era, where schools keep the comprehensive principle of equality of opportunity but where we open up the system to new and different ways of education, built round the needs of the individual child’ (*The Times*, 2 October 2002: 10). This heralded a drive for more ‘personalisation’ in the classroom and an ‘Every Child Matters’ strategy. The secondary school sector was further diversified by the announcement of a ‘city academies’ programme. Hailed as ‘independent state schools’, funded directly by central government with support from external sponsors, three initial academies opened in 2002. A very strong wave of designations in the final years of the Labour government, under the premiership of Blair’s successor, Gordon Brown, saw the figure rise from 46 in 2006 to 268 in 2010, with a small number of these offering an ‘all-through’ education from ages three to 18.

The range of post-compulsory education and training programmes diversified under Labour, with a revival of apprenticeships and other programmes within an overall framework of ‘National Qualifications’. The number of higher education institutions continued to increase, with ‘new’ universities — some of which had evolved out of nineteenth-century foundations — typically pioneering innovative work-based foundation degrees and accelerated undergraduate programmes. The differences, rather than similarities, between universities became ever clearer between 1997 and 2010. An elite group of ‘world-class’ English research universities, with significant enrolment from overseas students, consolidated their position at the top of a hierarchy that was now authenticated by various national and international league tables. At the bottom of this hierarchy was an assortment of teaching-led institutions, mostly recruiting local students, while the remaining majority of universities sought, to various degrees, to balance research and teaching activities.

Private sector involvement in state education advanced notably during Labour’s 13 years in office. The trend towards contracting out such services as school cleaning and school meals, which had begun during the Thatcher

and Major administrations, grew apace. Consultants of various kinds were approached to offer staff training, plan new infrastructures, advise on the use of space in buildings and restructure institutions. The most high-profile public-private initiative of the Labour government was the 'Building Schools for the Future' (BSF) programme. This aimed to rebuild or refurbish all 3,500 secondary schools in England over a 15-year period, with LEAs establishing public-private partnerships to work with architectural practices, construction companies and information and communications technologies (ICT) suppliers. BSF was immediately cancelled by the incoming coalition government in 2010.

## **2. THE 'CRISIS' IN EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS**

The earliest worries about education standards stemmed not from a belief that children were underachieving, but, rather, that they were over-educated. The sombre economic and political climate prevailing after the Crimean War (1854-56) caused politicians to query whether public expenditure on education was delivering the expected benefits. The 1861 report of the Newcastle Commission demanded 'sound and cheap' education. Schools, it was suggested, were teaching content that went far beyond the needs of working-class children. Similarly, it was reported that over-elaborate teacher training arrangements gave prominence to superfluous knowledge: elementary school teachers were developing an exaggerated sense of self-importance. This kind of reasoning lay behind the decision, in 1862, to promulgate the Revised Code, essentially an elementary curriculum based around the '3 Rs' —reading, [w]riting and [a]rithmetic— which would be relatively cheap to deliver and administer. To monitor the new arrangements, it was decided to send school inspectors into every school once a year to test pupils in their reading and arithmetic skills. The grants awarded to the National Society and the BFSS were now to be linked to the performance of the children in these tests: schools in which pupils performed well could earn relatively larger grants than those where pupil performance was less strong. This, in turn, impacted upon the working conditions of teachers: those working in schools where the grant was reduced following an HMI visit experienced impediments to career progression, salary reductions or dismissal. Data gathered from the Revised Code era, which ended in the

1890s, tells us a good deal about pupil performance in the late-nineteenth century (ALDRICH, 2000: 39-56), but various cautions apply to the contexts, validity and reliability of this material.

From around 1900 there was a drive for 'national efficiency' and the beginnings of a meritocratic movement. This allowed a proportion of bright working-class children to proceed with a scholarship to grammar schools and sit public examinations. But paternal, anti-materialist and anti-industrial attachments held back the development of technological and higher education (WIENER, 1981) and, during the First World War Viscount Haldane pointed to Germany's far superior record of training chemists (*Hansard*, House of Lords vol. 22, col. 667, 12 July 1916). An endemic complacency about the British position in the world was still evident in 1930, when the German academic, Wilhelm Dibelius noted that some of the 'new' English universities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were academically superior to Oxford and Cambridge in certain subjects, but that their associations with urban capitalism meant that their highest qualifications were regarded as inferior to an Oxford BA, 'which bears no mark of coal dust and the fumes of brewing vats' (DIBELIUS, 1930: 440).

Interest in child-centred methods of teaching, including the Montessori system, was ignited by Edmond Holmes' 1911 text, *What Is and What Might Be* (1911). Holmes was a former Chief Inspector for elementary education and his enthusiasm for progressive practice was shared by some of the next generation of HMIs. From 1945 'learning by doing' and creative primary classroom activities were officially encouraged, but this was not universally welcomed by those who expected primary schools to focus on the '3 Rs' to equip pupils for the 11-plus examination. In 1948 one LEA education officer referred to 'a growing volume of complaint from the secondary schools of the increasing illiteracy of their new pupils'. An inquiry was set up, which concluded that progressive primary school methods often misunderstood, but they were not lowering standards (RICHARDS, 2001: 17).

Very gradually, between the 1950s and 1970s, confidence in education standards was tested by conflicting evidence and, finally, allegations of a 'crisis'. In 1953 it was the view of A.F. Watts of the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) that standards in British schools had always been higher than elsewhere in the world (*The Times*, 17 March 1953: 5), but

a Ministry of Education report of the following year drew attention to the 38 per cent of grammar school pupils — predominantly girls — who either failed to complete ‘O’ levels or passed in no more than two subjects (MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, 1954; SPENCER, 2009: 180). Where disappointing performance was observed, there was a tendency throughout the late 1950s and 1960s to attribute this to unequal opportunities, rather than to teaching quality.

This was to change in the late 1960s, as critics of the Labour government’s drive for comprehensive education decried the wanton destruction of grammar schools. The progressive tone of the 1967 Plowden Report also met with objections in some quarters, as did the significant expansion and diversification of higher education. The sense of a crisis in English education standards was inadvertently initiated by a 1968 *Daily Mirror*-sponsored publication, *Crisis in the Classroom* (SMART, 1968). The crisis in the book’s title related to financial underfunding and misdirected spending, but two of the chapters suggested a crisis of confidence in the actual work of schools. The first of these, by a leading literacy expert, questioned suggestions of an improvement in pupil reading standards over the previous 20 years (GARDNER, 1968: 18-30; OPENSHAW and SOLER, 2007: 146). The other, by Rhodes Boyson, head teacher of a London boys’ comprehensive school, cast doubt on the effectiveness of large comprehensives to deliver strong public examination results (BOYSON, 1968: 54-65).

A variety of university student protests and occupations of the period prompted traditionalists to conclude that declining education standards were not confined to state schools. The eminent Oxford historian, A.L. Rowse, wrote in 1970 that ‘university expansion has already gone too far, and far too fast’ (*The Times*, letter, 19 May 1970: 9). It was a view shared by some of the contributors — mostly associated with the political right — to the early ‘Black Papers’, edited by two academics (COX and DYSON, 1969a; 1969b; 1970). In the second Black Paper, the leading educational psychologist, Sir Cyril Burt, concluded that ‘Judged by tests applied and standardized in 1913-14, the average attainments in reading, spelling, mechanical and problem arithmetic are now appreciably lower than they were 55 years ago’ (BURT, 1969: 23). By contrast, a Department of Education and Science (DES) report, *Learning to Read*, challenged Burt’s pessimism: it was stated that children’s reading standards had risen considerably since 1948 (DES 1970; *Guardian*, 24 August

1970). In the years after his death, in 1971, the integrity of Burt's research came into question, but the growing sense of alarm about state schools set out in Boyson's *The Crisis in Education* (BOYSON, 1975). The author was, by this time, a Conservative Member of Parliament and co-editor of the fourth Black Paper (COX and BOYSON, 1975).

Two further events of 1975 made it a critical year for the discussion of education standards. First, in February, the Bullock Committee inquiry into the teaching of reading and English concluded that there had been a slight decline in the reading standards of 11-year-olds during the 1960s, while those for 15-year-olds had remained static after steady rises in the previous decade. Bullock's conclusion that this evidence was 'not greatly disturbing' was not shared by popular newspapers of the time (DES, 1975: 25-6; OPENSHAW and SOLER, 2007: 152). The second episode occurred in the autumn of 1975, when the William Tyndale Junior School, in north London, found itself in the national media spotlight. The school's deputy head teacher, with support from the head, had embarked upon a radical experiment which removed distinctions between 'work' and 'play' during the school day, anticipating that this would make the school more humane and democratic. A different picture, pointing to out-of-control primary school progressivism and even anarchy was painted by disillusioned staff members and parents. A subsequent public inquiry found the school's teaching to be neither 'efficient' nor 'suitable to the requirements' of the children (ILEA, 1976: 283; DAVIS, 2002). Around the same time, newspaper reports and television documentaries fuelled perceptions that standards of literacy and numeracy were falling, that discipline in schools was too lax and that child-centred teaching methods were widespread and ineffective.

In 1976 Department of Education and Science (DES) officials prepared a confidential briefing paper for the new Prime Minister, James Callaghan. This frankly acknowledged the absence of public confidence in child-centred teaching methods in some primary schools, the tendency of some comprehensive schools to be too easy-going and demanding, the concerns of employers about school leavers' command of the '3 Rs', and worries about pupil behaviour and school discipline (CHITTY, 1989: 74-81). In October of the same year Callaghan made a much-anticipated speech on education at Ruskin College, Oxford, in which he called for a simpler set of educational purposes, namely 'basic literacy, basic numeracy, the understanding of how

to live and work together, respect for others, respect for the individual' (CALLAGHAN, 1976: 332-33). He floated the idea of a 'basic' or 'core' curriculum for schools, with English and mathematics at its heart. The speech was followed by a series of consultative meetings in late 1976 and early 1977, leading to a Green Paper, *Education in Schools*, which looked to LEAs to review school curricula, especially in respect of multiculturalism, children with special educational needs and differentiation in lesson planning. Expectations were set out that the newly-formed Assessment and Performance Unit (APU) would monitor the work of schools and their pupils. On the general question of standards, the Green Paper asserted that 'It is simply untrue that there has been a general decline', continuing thus:

Critics who argue on these lines often make false comparisons, for instance with some non-existent educational Golden Age, or matching today's school leavers against those of a generation ago without allowing for the fact that a far larger proportion of boys and girls now stay on into the sixth form. Recent studies have shown clearly that today's schoolchildren read better than those of thirty years ago. Far more children, over a wider range of ability, study a modern language or science than did a generation ago. Many more take, and pass, public examinations. Many more go on to full-time higher education. (DES, 1977a: 2)

Over the next two years official documents provided case study examples of 'good schools' (DES, 1977b), queried the heavy use of mixed-ability teaching in comprehensive schools (DES, 1978a), raised concerns about the structure of the teaching day in primary schools (DES, 1978b) and reported survey evidence of recent secondary education trends (DES, 1979). Notwithstanding this activity, the Conservative Party, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, attacked Labour's record on education standards and a memorable Conservative poster of the 1979 general election campaign declared that 'Education Isn't Working'.

Despite specifically promising to promote higher standards of education, this theme was initially overlooked during Margaret Thatcher's first term as Prime Minister. A turning point arrived when the 1982 Cockcroft Report on mathematics teaching concluded that 'there are at present many pupils who are being offered mathematics courses which are not suited to their needs and many teachers of mathematics who lack suitable qualifications' (DES, 1982:

243). This was a trigger for a stronger government approach to teacher education quality and standards. A White Paper heralded an overhaul of teacher training arrangements, with lengthier school teaching practice periods and a requirement for trainers to demonstrate 'recent and relevant experience' (DES, 1983). Sir Keith Joseph, Education Secretary from 1981 to 1986, was troubled by the grades being attained by pupils in public examinations, though he conceded that 'we cannot say precisely what we mean' by standards (JOSEPH, 1984: 139). A further White Paper was sharply critical of standards in state schools, stating that these 'are neither as good as they can be nor as good as they need to be for the world of the twenty-first century' (DES, 1985: 2). With a general election campaign imminent, Education Secretary Kenneth Baker revealed in April 1987 that there would be a 'national core curriculum', accompanied by pupil tests at ages seven, 11 and 14 (*Guardian*, 8 April 1987: 1). After being returned to office, Baker's 1988 Education Act, with its overarching theme of raising standards, became law just at a point when a report concluded that, after steady improvements during the early 1980s, the four principal benchmark measures for school leavers' qualifications had remained static for three years (*Guardian*, 26 July 1988: 18).

During the construction of the National Curriculum, in 1988-89, various controversies erupted. The history working group became entangled in discussions of 'skills' versus 'content', political pressure was applied to the English group, demanding attention to 'standard English', spelling, punctuation and grammar, while the mathematics group was populated by a mixture of progressive-minded and fiercely traditional educationists. Falling into the latter category, Professor Sig Prais, of the right-leaning National Institute for Economic and Social Research, pressed, before resigning, for children's mental arithmetic to be prioritised and for electronic calculators to be prohibited before the age of 16 (GRAHAM, 1996: 143). Together with Dr John Marks of the National Council for Educational Standards, Prais was to become one of the leading critics of education standards over the next decade, as he regularly drew attention to the UK's poor record in technical and vocational education, as well as in mathematics and technology, when judged alongside other European nations (PRAIS, 1991). Marks condemned the climate of opposition to testing, led by the teacher unions, which had forced a reduction in the number and complexity of primary school tests. He

also criticised past failures to gather the necessary data to judge the success of comprehensive schools and the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), which had replaced the 'O' level and Certificate of Secondary Education examinations in 1986 (MARKS, 1991a; 1991b). With the support of Margaret Thatcher's successor as Prime Minister, John Major, Marks was one of several traditionally-minded figures appointed to official advisory bodies in the early 1990s.

In common with Marks, whose 'widely respected work' he defended, Major held strong personal views about 'wrong turns' taken in the past. As part of an extended private correspondence with the former leader of the National Union of Teachers, which came to the attention of the media, Major outlined his belief that 'the problem of low standards stems in large part from the nature of the comprehensive system which the Labour Party ushered in in the 1960s, and from the intellectual climate underpinning it that has tended to stress equality of outcome at the expense of equality of opportunity' (reported in *The Times*, 29 June 1992: 1; SIMON and CHITTY, 1993: 129). At the 1992 Conservative Party Conference, to the delight of his audience, the Prime Minister stated that:

When it comes to education, my critics say 'I'm 'old-fashioned'. Old-fashioned? Reading and writing? Spelling and sums? Great literature — and standard English grammar? Old-fashioned? Tests and tables? British history? A proper grounding in science? Discipline and self-respect? Old-fashioned?

Influenced by *Teachers Mistaught* (LAWLOR, 1990), published by another 'think tank', the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS), Major went on to call for teacher training reforms to emphasise 'basic subject teaching' at the expense of 'courses in the theory of education', for primary teachers to learn how to 'teach children to read, not waste their time on the politics of gender, race and class' and he condemned standards in 'those inner cities', where 'Isaac Newton would not have learned to count, and William Wordsworth would never have learned to write' (quoted in SIMON and CHITTY, 1993: 144). At the same meeting, Major's Education Secretary, John Patten, criticised 'the 1960s theorists' who had influenced those who now believed that 'children shouldn't be taught the alphabet'. Patten reaffirmed his recent commitment that 14-year-olds should read and be tested on a Shakespeare play and promised to restore public confidence in the

GCSE examination, intimating that there should be more regulation of the various examination boards which specified syllabuses and set questions (SIMON and CHITTY, 1993: 146-47).

John Patten's frontline political career was terminated by Sir Ron Dearing's scaling back of the National Curriculum and testing in 1993-94 and, in the final two years of Major's government, the school standards agenda deliberately emphasised issues that would appeal to teachers, including stronger disciplinary measures to control unruly pupils. New discourses identified teachers themselves as the principal agents for school improvement and underlined the benefits of whole-school self-evaluation and Ofsted inspection evidence. Outside Whitehall, however, influential forces perpetuated a more provocative attack on education standards. *All Must Have Prizes*, a best-selling book by Melanie Phillips, the broadsheet newspaper columnist (PHILLIPS, 1996), condemned various English educationists, past and present, while the Campaign for Real Education became nationally prominent by consistently questioning every new educational initiative. Data pointing to improvements in public examination results in the 1990s were greeted not as confirmation of improved teaching, but rather of a lowering of assessment standards and grade thresholds. Lone voices suggesting that examination questions were, in certain instances, more difficult than in the past (BURGHES et al, 1994), tended to be overlooked. Meanwhile, the CPS published stinging critiques of pupils' reading and spelling standards (CHEW, 1996; TURNER and BURKARD, 1996) and strongly promoted the phonics approach to teaching primary-age children to read (BURKARD, 1999). It was under its auspices, in 2000, that John Marks published an extended historical attack on education standards (2000).

One early message of Tony Blair's first New Labour government, after 1997, was that, in education, it was 'standards' and not 'structures', that mattered most. Symbolically, to support David Blunkett, the new Secretary of State for Education and Employment, a Minister for School Standards, Stephen Byers, was appointed. Byers immediately declared a 'zero tolerance' approach to school underperformance. An urgent departmental report on the 281 'failing' English schools was followed, just days later, by a list of the country's worst 18 schools, afflicted variously, according to Ofsted inspection data, by poor test and examination results, pupil indiscipline, truancy and

poor teaching (*DfEE News*, 94/97, 8 May 1997; *The Times*, 21 May 1997: 6). This ‘naming and shaming’ approach was balanced by ‘naming and acclaiming’ the most improved schools.

Blair and Blunkett had experienced pressure from the teacher unions to dismiss Chris Woodhead as Ofsted’s Chief Inspector, but not only was he retained on an increased salary, his remit was extended to cover new areas, including the inspection of childcare service, post-16 institutions and LEAs. Exemplifying New Labour’s determination to include a broad range of opinions within its ‘big tent’, Woodhead was appointed to jointly head a Standards Task Force alongside Professor Tim Brighouse, Chief Education Officer for Birmingham, who had previously condemned Ofsted’s ‘reign of terror’ (*Guardian*, 15 January 1997: 6). Predictably, the two men disagreed on almost every matter and Brighouse resigned to focus on his work in Birmingham (*Independent*, 18 March 1999: 5). Woodhead stepped down as Chief Inspector one year later and, as a newspaper columnist and author (WOODHEAD, 2002), he became a fierce critic of Labour education policy. As well as the Standards Task Force, a Standards and Effectiveness Unit was established, headed by Professor Michael Barber. Barber was the principal author of *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997), which formed the basis of the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act.

Following the example of some East Asian countries, a series of ambitious five-year education targets were published in 1998, setting stiff challenges, not only for learners, schools, colleges and universities, but also for employees and employers (DfEE, 1998). Adult learners became entitled to a range of cost-free programmes in literacy, numeracy and ICT after a worrying report advised that one in five British adults had difficulties with basic literacy, while one in four were largely innumerate (MOSER, 1999). Foremost among the targets was the expectation that, by 2002, 75 per cent of 11-year-olds should reach ‘level four’ in mathematics tests, while 80 per cent should reach this in English, advancing from the respective 1996 baseline figures of 55 per cent and 57 per cent (*The Times*, 14 May 1997: 11). To facilitate progress towards reaching these targets, a daily ‘literacy hour’ and ‘numeracy hour’ became statutory in primary schools, with a focus on whole-class teaching, phonics and grammar. With data indicating that girls were, for the first time, outperforming boys at every stage of schooling, a range of further initiatives sought to improve boys’ engagement with learning.

While some of Labour's education targets had been met and exceeded by 2002, it took longer to achieve others, including the literacy and numeracy targets for primary-school children. A few were quietly ignored and others fell off the agenda. In spite of all the New Labour focus on standards, in 2010 some of the predominant discourses about the failings of English education were similar to those in 1997 and, indeed, to the mid-1970s. Rising levels of passes in public examinations at ages 16 and 18 and notable improvements in the English and mathematics level four performance of 11-year-olds — which reached 81 per cent for English and 80 per cent for mathematics in 2010 — seemed, on the surface, to indicate progress. But this was balanced by new worries about the disparities of pupil performance by gender, the endurance of low participation rates in post-compulsory education and training and the difficulties faced by universities in making offers to ever-larger numbers of applicants having, or predicted to attain, the highest-possible public examination grades.

In the university sector, increasingly elaborate performance tables engendered new requirements to promote fair access for applicants from both the state and private school sectors and a report — so far overlooked — called for the replacement of the peculiarly British system of degree classifications with a more transparent one, based on assessment outcome transcripts (BURGESS GROUP FINAL REPORT, 2007). Between 1997 and 2010 perceptions of elitism in the 'top' universities were increasingly rivalled by anxieties about standards in less-prestigious institutions. High student dropout statistics and concerns about course quality continue to undermine the reputation of some of the universities which were most active in widening the participation of the student base.

### **3. INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS COMPARISONS: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**

The outcome of the May 2010 general election was so close that the complexion of the new government did not become clear for several days. Unable to muster enough support from other political parties, Gordon Brown eventually resigned as Prime Minister and a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government was formed under the leadership of Prime Minister

David Cameron. The economic condition of Britain in 2010 was extremely fragile after the global economic crisis and the previous government's decision to commit many hundreds of billions of pounds from the Treasury to rescue failing banks. The present context for public services, including education, remains extremely challenging.

Outlining the future direction of education policy, a White Paper of November 2010 was prefaced by Prime Minister Cameron and his deputy, Nick Clegg, with some stark facts:

In the most recent OECD PISA survey in 2006 we fell from 4th in the world in the 2000 survey to 14th in science, 7th to 17th in literacy, and 8th to 24th in mathematics. The only way we can catch up, and have the world-class schools our children deserve, is by learning the lessons of other countries' success. (DfE, 2010: 3)

Just a few days later, a further tumble in the rankings for England was reported, based on the 2009 PISA exercise. With alarm, various newspapers and bloggers seized upon the latest tables, which revealed England to be in 16<sup>th</sup> position for science, 25<sup>th</sup> for reading and 27<sup>th</sup> for mathematics. While the statistics showed no actual deterioration in English pupils' performance since 2006, there was considerable disgruntlement among commentators that 15-year-olds from such countries as Iceland, Liechtenstein and Poland were surpassing their English counterpart. Various explanations of the crisis were offered: it was suggested that the near doubling of education expenditure under Labour, between 2000 and 2009, had been squandered, that high proportions of children from immigrant families with English as their second language were lowering overall levels of performance, that teenagers were spending too much time online and no longer reading books, and that domestic forms of assessment were less demanding of 15-year-olds than the PISA tests ('Coffee House' blog, *Spectator* magazine, 7 December 2010; *The Sun*, 8 December 2010: 6; *Daily Mail*, 8 December 2010: 1). Beyond the immediate headlines and panics, a more sober explanation would appear to be that England's performance levels were unchanged since 2006, but that other countries improved faster. Among the eight new entrants since the last tables were compiled, Shanghai-China, Hong Kong-China and Singapore appear to offer shining examples of higher-performing school systems than England (*The Times*, 8 December 2010: 19).

In the ongoing debates about education standards, Messrs Cameron and Clegg have written that ‘what really matters is how we’re doing compared with our international competitors’ (DfE, 2010: 3). Accordingly, there is now a strong official determination to emulate such countries as South Korea and Finland, which recruit teachers only from the top five to ten per cent of graduates. A particular hope is that further proposed training reforms will make a teaching career more attractive to graduates holding first-class honours degrees from leading British universities: only two per cent of this cohort currently enters the profession.

Policy borrowing of this kind is not at all new: in the nineteenth century commentators noted how Britain lagged behind France, Prussia and the United States in establishing and extending state education. From the end of the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, Germany’s strong universities and parallel academic and vocational school systems were jealously admired and, in the post-1945 period, the Japanese ‘economic miracle’ was attributed to its excellent schools. Later, in the 1990s, close observation of education in ‘Asian tiger’ countries, including Korea, Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan, informed the trend towards centralisation, target setting and whole-class teaching.

As well as looking to other countries for inspiration to raise standards at home, the current coalition government is also looking to the past. Interviewed shortly before the 2010 general election, Michael Gove, at that time the Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, revealed his traditional tastes and forewarned that the National Curriculum would be re-written if his Party came to power:

Most parents would rather their children had a traditional education, with children sitting in rows, learning the kings and queens of England, the great works of literature, proper mental arithmetic, algebra by the age of 11, modern foreign languages. That’s the best training of the mind and that’s how children will be able to compete. (Quoted in *The Times*, 6 March 2010: 38)

At the time of writing a review of the National Curriculum is underway and the watershed age of 14 has already been acknowledged as the starting point for clearer academic and vocational pathways, though with the stipulation

that all students should demonstrate breadth in their studies to age 16. At present, the extensive menu of options means that, in some secondary schools, pupils abandon the humanities subjects, modern languages and sciences *en route* to their GCSEs. In a clear assault on perceived ‘soft subjects’, plans are in hand for the award of an ‘English Baccalaureate’ to students achieving GCSE passes in mathematics, English, at least two science subjects, a foreign language and either history or geography. In other moves suggesting a return to traditionalism, terminal examinations are to feature more prominently, at the expense of modular programmes with coursework completed by pupils at home. Once again, pupil behaviour is at the forefront of English education policy, with further disciplinary powers expected to be granted to teachers, whose numbers are planned to be swelled by recruits from the armed forces, with a view to raising standards of classroom control.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Four conclusions are offered below.

The first is that, while interest in the standards of English education has been an enduring issue for at least 150 years, the thrust of educational effort before the late 1960s focused on the improvement of access and opportunities for learners. It was later, in the era of the Black Papers and Ruskin speech, that discourses about educational standards —then perceived to be declining— and the performance of learners, teachers and institutions became dominant. The extent of data with potential to contribute to the discussion of standards proliferated from the 1990s, accompanying a drive for more openness and accountability in education. Largely thanks to the Internet, parents became able to make informed school choice preferences for their children —and teachers could decide whether to apply for positions in another school— based on ‘league table’ information and online Ofsted reports. Prospective university students could choose courses on the basis of rankings for institutional and course quality and even post-course employment statistics.

A second conclusion is that there is an absence of suitable data to end some of the most contentious disputes in English education, such as the benefits of comprehensive schools or the robustness of public examinations.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and there is good reason to regret the decision to abolish the APU in the late 1980s. At the same time, however, it seems important to acknowledge the considerable methodological difficulties arising from comparisons of standards over time (ALDRICH, 1996: 40-57; ALDRICH, 2000) and between countries (McLEAN, 1992). Even where data are rich and plentiful over a valid time series, such as the survey evidence of children's reading standards since 1948, expert analyses have resulted in diametrically opposed conclusions. The controversies over whether English education standards are rising or falling look set to continue, but agreement usually settles on the point that current standards are not high enough.

The third conclusion is that, while concerns about standards in education are frequently presented in terms of a national crisis affecting the whole country, this misrepresents the true position. In fact, as such annual publications as *The Good Schools Guide* and *The Times Good University Guide* confirm, England's leading schools in both the private and state sectors are thriving, as are its top universities. In the 2010 QS world university rankings, Cambridge University surpassed Harvard to head the list, which includes 30 British universities in the top 200 (*Sunday Times*, 12 September 2010: 4). Notwithstanding the constant changes and reforms in English education, some of the continuities over time are compelling. Described in the Clarendon Commission report of 1864 as 'the chief nurseries of our statesmen' (quoted in WIENER, 1981: 17), the leading nine public schools of that year have continued to exercise this function, also establishing themselves as schools of choice for the British and overseas royal families. David Cameron, the current Prime Minister, his deputy, Nick Clegg, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, were each educated at a 'Clarendon nine' school (respectively Eton College, Westminster School and St Paul's School) and, as one leading journalist has recently noted, half the ministers in the coalition government and one third of all Members of Parliament attended a fee-paying school, in contrast to the overall UK figure of seven per cent (NEIL, 2011). It is important to note that there are also many excellent state schools with strong records of pupil achievement and post-school university enrolment. However, parental applications to send children to these successful schools — which tend to be colonised by the middle classes — often far exceed the number of available places. Echoing the words of the leading Socialist thinker, R. H. Tawney, 35 years earlier, who observed

that ‘the hereditary curse of English education has been its organisation along the lines of social class’ (TAWNEY, 1931: 142), Tony Blair commented that ‘We have lived too long with a system good for the few but not for the majority’ (BLAIR, 1996), while David Blunkett noted that ‘the pattern of excellence at the top, and chronic under-performance at the bottom, persists’ (quoted in *Independent*, 28 February 1996: 1). In 2011, England continues to have one of the most unequal education systems in the world. Private school pupils are three and a half times more likely than the economically poorest pupils to attain five top GCSE passes including English and mathematics; by age 18, they are over 22 times more likely to enter a highly selective university and 55 times more likely to gain a place at Oxford or Cambridge University (SUTTON TRUST, 2010: 5).

Finally, it may be concluded that the relationship between government effort to raise education standards and actual outcomes is elusive. Although Britain played a leading part in the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its reputation as the ‘workshop of the world’ owed very little to state support for public education. Conversely, an influential publication co-authored by Sir Michael Barber, former Head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit, and now working for a leading global consultancy business, was at a loss to explain why half a century of English education reforms produced no measurable improvement in primary school standards of literacy and numeracy between 1948 and 1996 (BARBER and MOURSHED, 2007: 10). With suggestions that the first decade of the twenty-first century also saw English education standards remain static, and not improve, current and future politicians’ promises of a panacea should be treated with caution.

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