

**Thatcherism: A Centralized and Standardized Education**

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**Abstract**

The present article deals with the major reforms that Margaret Thatcher undertook as regards education policies in Britain through a number of Acts and schemes and consisted in changing the nation's schools system from a public service into a market. These reforms were to affect not only the school curriculum but also local education authorities and teachers. Thatcher's government was determined to weaken the role of the LEAs by reducing their responsibility and control, and offering parents much larger role in the running of schools instead. The result of these policies was The 1988 Education Reform Act, which introduced the National Curriculum and the key stages of compulsory education with a focus on improving standards.

**Key words:** reforms – education – Curriculum – school - government

**Résumé**

Le présent article porte sur les grandes réformes que Margaret Thatcher a entrepris en matière de politiques éducatives en Grande-Bretagne grâce à un certain nombre d'actes et de schémas et ont consisté à changer le système scolaire national d'un service public à une entreprise économique (marché). Ces réformes affectaient non seulement le programme scolaire, mais aussi les autorités scolaires locales et les enseignants. Le gouvernement de Thatcher était déterminé à affaiblir le rôle des autorités scolaires locales en réduisant leurs responsabilités et leur contrôle et en offrant aux parents un rôle beaucoup plus important dans le fonctionnement des écoles. Le résultat de ces politiques était la Loi de 1988 sur la réforme de l'éducation, qui a introduit le programme d'études national et les étapes clés de l'enseignement obligatoire axé sur l'amélioration des normes.

**Mots clés :** réformes - éducation - Curriculum - école - gouvernement

**المخلص**

يتناول هذا المقال الإصلاحات الرئيسية التي قامت بها مارغريت تاتشر فيما يتعلق بسياسات التعليم في بريطانيا من خلال عدد من القوانين والمخططات، وتضمن تغيير نظام المدارس في البلاد من خدمة عمومية إلى مؤسسة اقتصادية (سوق). وكان من شأن هذه الإصلاحات أن تؤثر ليس فقط على المناهج الدراسية ولكن أيضا على سلطات التعليم المحلية والمعلمين. كانت حكومة تاتشر مصممة على إضعاف دور السلطات التعليمية المحلية عن طريق الحد من مسؤولياتها ومراقبتها، وتزويد الآباء بدور أكبر بكثير في إدارة المدارس بدلا من ذلك. وكانت نتيجة هذه السياسات قانون إصلاح التعليم لعام 1988 الذي أدخل المناهج الوطنية والمراحل الأساسية للتعليم الإلزامي مع التركيز على تحسين المعايير.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإصلاحات - التعليم - المناهج - المدرسة - الحكومة

## Introduction

After Margaret Thatcher returned to office as Prime Minister in 1979, she brought economic and social policies evolved into a political philosophy known as Thatcherism. It was a system of political thought including economic and social, principles. Thatcher resisted the power of trade unions, cut direct taxes, and privatized numerous nationalized industries. Her policies aimed at directing the British economy to a more market oriented economy and thus, making government intervention in economy less needed.<sup>1</sup>

Thatcher's neo-liberalism<sup>2</sup> influenced not only the domain of commerce and industry, but also public services. Therefore, the two-fold aims of Margaret Thatcher's education policies in the 1980s were to change the nation's schools system from a public service into a market, with a handover of power from local authorities to central government.

Accordingly, the Neo-liberals opted for much reduced State control over education and for the expansion of private schools by proposing a variety of curricula to meet different parental tastes. The Neo-Conservative support for a centralized National Curriculum could be perceived as consolidating state control and reducing the range of parental preference.

## Thatcher and Education Reforms

The Education Act of 1979 was the first legislative measure to be taken by Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party. Under the leadership of Mark Carlisle as first Education Secretary, it repealed Labour's Act of 1976 and gave to LEAs the right to select pupils for secondary education at the age of eleven. Under this Act, Local Authorities were requested to put greater emphasis on parental choice in the allocation of school places despite the suggestion that, in practice, this requirement had only restricted practical effects.

The Education Act of 1980 introduced an *Assisted Places Scheme*, which supported pupils who passed an entrance examination. Such scheme was designed for pupils who had restricted funds to be educated at private schools, enable the more able pupils to improve their talents than would be possible in the state sector of education. The 1980 Education Act stipulates:

*"For the purpose of enabling pupils who might otherwise not be able to do so to benefit from education at independent schools, the Secretary of State shall establish and operate a scheme whereby-*

*(a) participating schools remit fees that would otherwise be chargeable in respect of pupils selected for assisted places under the scheme; and*

*(b) the Secretary of State reimburses the schools for the fees that are remitted."*<sup>3</sup>

This policy reflected a Conservative belief that state schools were often unable of developing the talents of the most gifted pupils and, therefore, provided a state support to the private education sector, which the Conservatives desired to support.

The main provisions of the Act were that School governing bodies were to contain at least two parents. Parents had the right to school choice as well as the right to appeal if they did not get the schools they had chosen. There were also other rules concerning school attendance, and required the creation of new schools and the closing of existing ones. Local authorities could establish nursery schools.<sup>4</sup>

In 1981, Keith Joseph was appointed as the second Education Secretary of Thatcher's government, which was, in fact, an indication towards school reform. He started the reparation for the General Certificate of Secondary Education GCSEs, and the establishment of a national curriculum in England and Wales. Such appointment meant confrontation of the 'education establishment': the teachers and their unions, the training institutions, national and local inspectors and advisors. There would be action on three fronts: the curriculum, the teachers and the LEAs.

<sup>1</sup> Eric J. Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism: Making of the Contemporary World*, 2nd Edition, Routledge, 2004, p.17

<sup>2</sup> An approach to economics and social studies in which control of economic factors is shifted from the public sector to the private sector. Drawing upon principles of neoclassical economics, neoliberalism suggests that governments reduce deficit spending, limit subsidies, reform tax law to broaden the tax base, remove fixed exchange rates, open up markets to trade by limiting protectionism, privatize state-run businesses, allow private property and back deregulation.  
<http://www.investopedia.com/terms/n/neoliberalism.asp>

<sup>3</sup> *Education Act 1980, Chapter 20*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office 1980, p.18

<sup>4</sup> Janet McKenzie, *Changing Education: A Sociology of Education Since 1944*, Prentice Hall, 2001, p. 241-42

## 1. School Curriculum

In 1976, the MP Jim Callaghan initiated the 'Great Debate', which was, in fact, one-sided on the nature and aims of education. However, in 1978, The School Curriculum was issued, in which it had been decided to set forth the approach to the school curriculum. LEAs were likely to structure policies for the school curriculum that would go with the government's suggested approach.

On October 1st 1981, The DES issued Circular 6/81 requesting, in the light of the advice contained in *The School Curriculum*, each local education authority should

- a) reconsider its policy for the school curriculum in its region, as well as its preparations for making such policy known to all concerned;
- b) reconsider the extent of consistency of current provision in the schools with that policy; and
- c) plan, within the available resources, future developments accordingly.<sup>5</sup>

Taking such actions, LEAs should refer to governors of schools, teachers and other concerned. However, On December 8th 1983, Circular 8/83 requested each LEA to provide:

(a) a report on the progress which has been made in drawing up a policy for the curriculum in its primary and secondary schools ..

(b) a description of the roles played in the processes of drawing up the policy by heads and other teachers, governors, parents and other interested parties in the local community;

(c) a brief statement of the ways in which the policy is being given or will be given practical effect in the schools ...

(d) a summary, giving examples where appropriate, of the steps being taken and planned by the authority to seek to ensure that the curriculum is planned as a whole ...

(e) a summary of the steps being taken and planned by the authority to ensure that the curriculum is appropriately related to what happens outside school, and includes sufficient applied and practical work, particularly in mathematics ... and science;

(f) a statement of how far the resources available to the authority ... are enabling it to give effect to its policy for the curriculum. (DES 1983 para.5)<sup>6</sup>

To help schools and LEAs formulating curriculum policies, HMI issued a number of publications, among which *A Framework for the School Curriculum* (HMI 1980), *A View of the Curriculum* and *The Curriculum from 5 to 16* (1985). These HMI documents held progressive attitude and thus, led the government to publish *The National Curriculum 5-16* in July 1987.

## 2. Teachers' Training

By the beginning of the 1980s, when the Conservative government announced its first policy intervention in the initial training of teachers, the preparation of teachers took place in universities and colleges of education. Hence, potential schoolteachers were likely to experience a range of training courses, depending on the institution they attended. There was criticism of the teacher training departments, from the trainees and from the schools themselves, of the diffidence of the courses from the realities of the schools. These deficiencies were rooted from the separation of institutions of teacher training from the schools, and their independence or 'autonomy' in deciding the content and organization of training courses and qualifications.<sup>7</sup>

The direction of government policy was contained in the White Paper of 1983, *Teaching Quality* (DES, 1983). Starting training courses for teachers would lead to better quality of training. In support of this intention, Circular 3/84 was issued in 1984 (DES, 1984). This established the *Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education* (CATE) with the responsibility to supervise teacher education in England and Wales in support of the Secretary for State for Education. The changes implemented involved the requirement for teacher trainers to undertake recent and relevant teaching experience in schools, the setting of the length of teacher training courses

<sup>5</sup> Department of Education and Science, Circular 8/81, *The School Curriculum*, London: 1981, §5

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>7</sup> Bill Bailey & Jocelyn Robson, *Changing Teachers: A Critical Review of Recent Policies Affecting the Professional Training and Qualifications of Teachers in Schools, Colleges and Universities in England*, Journal of Vocational Education & Training, 54:3, 325-342, 2002, p. 327

and the number of weeks trainees had to spend in schools.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. The Local Authorities

The Thatcher governments, within the framework of 'Thatcherism' and neoliberalism approaches, aimed to reduce the power of local government, an area in which they found much resistance to their policies. This was apparent in the abolition of the *Greater London Council* (GLC) and Metropolitan County Councils. The government wished to abolish LEAs by encouraging schools to 'opt out' and receive subsidy directly from central government.<sup>9</sup>

Again, in May 1986, Kenneth Baker replaced Keith Joseph as Education Secretary in Thatcher's second government. Among Baker's first tasks was to handle the enactment of two education Acts. The first was the 1986 Education Act, which concerned certain further education grants and the pooling of expenditure by local authorities. The second, dealt with composition and powers of governing bodies, freedom of speech and sex education.

### 4. Vocational Education

The Conservative government received criticisms at the local authorities when the *Technical and Vocational Education Initiative* (TVEI) was launched as a model scheme from 1983. LEAs were not allowed to participate. As an alternative, it was managed by the *Department of Employment's Manpower Services Commission* (MSC). It was an attempt to promote diversity in the curriculum for 14 to 18-year-olds within the secondary schools that might be especially suited to the non-academic majority of pupils.

However, the initiative attracted strong criticism from educational groups on the basis that it would encourage greater divisions in the comprehensive schools.<sup>10</sup> As the TVEI became established in the schools, these initial worries began to diminish until a fresh initiative sought to create a new class of secondary schools, *City Technology Colleges* (CTCs). The CTCs, announced by Kenneth Baker as Secretary of State for Education in 1986, would be new secondary schools that were outside the influence of LEAs, designed specifically to offer a 'new choice of school' with a strong technological element in the curriculum.<sup>11</sup>

The impact of the CTCs proved to be transitory and limited, especially because of difficulties of funding and the logistics of founding a new type of secondary school. More important was the overall thrust of government policy that they came to symbolize, away from a single model of secondary school and towards a greater emphasis on 'choice' and 'competition' between a diverse sort of schools. This tendency continued under the general provisions of the Education Reform Act of 1988.

### 5. The Education Act, 1986 (No. 2)

The second Education Act of 1986 applied the suggestions set out in the 1985 White Paper *Better Schools*, which were summarized in the DES *Better Schools: A Summary*. It further reduced the importance of the LEAs and put the emphasis on the Department and the schools. Governors were to be given more responsibility for the curriculum, discipline and staffing. The head was to have a central role - chosen for specific responsibilities including the 'determination and organisation of the secular curriculum'. The head had the power to exclude pupils. The Act also introduced the concept of educational law to involve lawyers in education for the first time.

The Act's main provisions were:

- maintained schools were required to have a governing body
- the structure of governing bodies was reformed
- schools were to be grouped under one governing body in certain situations

<sup>8</sup> Bill Bailey & Jocelyn Robson, *Ibid.*,

<sup>9</sup> Stewart Morris, *The Social Structure of Modern Britain, Did the Thatcher governments change Britain?*, Paper 14, Christ's College, p.4

<sup>10</sup> G. McCulloch, 'History and Policy: The Politics of the TVEI', in D. Gleeson (ed.) *TVEI and Secondary Education*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1987, pp. 13-37.

<sup>11</sup> G. McCulloch, 'City technology colleges: an old choice of school?', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 1989, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 30-43.

- every LEA were to have a written statement of its curriculum policy
- parents must be provided with information about the school's curriculum
- Discipline was the head's responsibility
- new rules were imposed as regards pupil exclusions, reinstatement, and appeals governors were to be provided with financial information relating to the school LEAs by LEAs
- governors had the task to were to hold an annual parents' meeting and produce an annual report
- no political indoctrination in schools was to be tolerated
- corporal punishment was abolished in maintained schools
- provision was made for the appraisal of teachers
- governors were required to supply information to the secretary of state
- LEAs were required to provide training for governors.<sup>12</sup>

## 6. The Education Reform Act, 1988

The Education Reform Act of 1988, known as the "Baker Act", represented the most important piece of legislation since 1944 for British education. It was introduced by Secretary of State Kenneth Baker. Its main objectives were the implementation of the National Curriculum, the establishment of grant-maintained schools financed by the central government and the transfer of powers from LEAs to the Education Secretary. Moreover, the Act delegated almost the whole responsibility for the school budget from LEAs to school governing bodies.

According to the 1988 Act, the curriculum of every school should include the "basic curriculum" consisting of the religious education and the "National Curriculum". The Act designated English, science and mathematics as the "core subjects" taught to all pupils. History, geography, technology, music, art, physical education and alternatively one foreign language were specified as the "other foundation subjects".

The Act set down certain provisions related to the admission and evaluation of pupils. Furthermore, it established four "Key Stages" based on the age of pupils. The first stage was defined from the compulsory school age to the age of seven, the second from 8 to 11, the third stage from the age of 12 to 14 and the fourth key stage was designated for pupils between 15 and 16 years old. By the end of each key stage, children were required to take a test, known as "SAT" (Standard Assessment Task)

In addition, the Education Reform Act founded three councils, known as the "National Curriculum Council", the "Curriculum Council for Wales" and the "School Examinations and Assessment Council".<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

In the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher's education policies were to change the nation's schools system from a public service into a market, and to transfer power from local authorities to central government. The reforms decided on, called for a return to educational differentiation and improved vocational training, mainly financed by British industry. The outcome was The 1988 Education Reform Act, which introduced the National Curriculum and the key stages of compulsory education focusing on raising standards.

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<sup>12</sup>*Education (No. 2) Act 1986, Chapter 61*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1980

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