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Margaret Thatcher's UK School Reforms - Aims, Impact, and Legacy

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Las reformas escolares de Margaret Thatcher en el Reino Unido: objetivos, impacto y legado

Resumen

Pocas veces los cambios en la educación financiada por el Estado en el Reino Unido (UK) han sido tan significativos o duraderos como durante el período 1970 - 1990, bajo la dirección de la Secretaria de Educación, y entonces Primera Ministra, Margaret Thatcher. Este artículo establecerá el lugar de Thatcher en la línea de tiempo de la educación financiada por el Estado del Reino Unido, antes de discutir los principales cambios en la política educativa y la práctica de la enseñanza durante el mandato de Thatcher, incluyendo el complejo contexto socioeconómico, cultural y político de estos cambios. De especial interés es la Ley de Educación de 1988, y el legado que ha tenido en las escuelas y la educación del Reino Unido.

Palabras clave: Margaret Thatcher, escuelas, política educativa, reformas, neoliberal.

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Abstract

Rarely have changes to state funded education in the United Kingdom (UK) been as significant or lasting as during the 1970 - 1990 period, under the direction of Education Secretary, and then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. This article will establish Thatcher's place in the timeline of UK state funded education before discussing the major changes to educational policy and teaching practice during the Thatcher premiership, including the complex socio-economic, cultural, and political context of these changes. Of particular interest is the 1988 Education Act and the legacy this has had on UK schools and education.

Keywords: Margaret Thatcher, schools, educational policy, reforms, neoliberal.

Margaret Thatcher was one of the most influential politicians of the late-twentieth century, rising to prominence as UK Secretary of State for Education and Science in Edward Heath's Conservative government (1970 - 1974). After consecutive losses under Heath, Thatcher became party leader in 1975 and led the Conservatives to victory in the 1979 election. She remained in power until 1990, becoming the longest serving Prime Minister of that century. Margaret Thatcher, and her legacy, remains a controversial issue in the UK and internationally, both criticised and admired for many of her policies, including her far-reaching educational reforms (Ball, 2013).

UK State Schools Prior to Thatcher

To understand how the Thatcher era changed schools in the UK, we must review the evolution of the state school system prior to her premiership. The groundwork was set with the Elementary Education Act (1870) which mandated primary school attendance, with state-funding relieving parents of the costs and responsibility of their children's education (McCulloch, 2020). This separation reflected the attitudes of Victorian education policy makers—most parents had not been formally educated and were considered to lack understanding of the importance of education to the country in the industrial era (Hooper, 2016).

Like many reforms at that time, these policies were informed by the efforts and advocacy of interest groups including industry leaders who championed mass education to provide a skilled workforce to maintain the UK's dominant position in global manufacturing (prefiguring to an extent the rationale for many of the Thatcher's educational reforms a century later). The Elementary Education Act (1870) established elected school boards to build and manage new 'board schools' (as opposed to the then standard 'voluntary schools' run mainly by religious denominations). In doing so, the Act widened access in previously neglected areas and ensured all children had at least the option of primary education (subject to their parents' wishes). The Act laid the groundwork for later Victorian educational policy including compulsory schooling between the ages of 5 and 10 years (Elementary Education Act, 1880), and the abolishment of school

fees ([Elementary Education Act, 1891](#)), at which point the cost of education to be taken up by the state ([McCulloch, 2020](#)).

It was only in the mid-twentieth century, however, as societal views and values shifted that state funded education, and its implementation, became subject to any national and political consensus. Towards the end of the second world war (with victory anticipated), Education Minister Richard ('Rab') Butler highlighted education as a critical issue that the government needed to address in post-war rebuilding. The Education Act (1944) established state education as a partnership, based on a shared vision, between central government and local authorities, teachers, and educational professionals. The dual system of board and voluntary schools was replaced with a standardised system of education administered by local authorities. It was proposed that pupils were split by 'selection by aptitude' based on their performance in a national test (the '11-plus') before entering secondary education- either into new grammar schools which focused on academic subjects, technical schools which focused on the more applied or scientific areas of curriculum, and secondary modern schools where students would be trained in practical skills for 'less skilled jobs' and 'home management' ([Burt, 1959](#)). With this tripartite system, it was hoped that students would be given the best opportunities based on their aptitude and ability regardless of their background.

Despite these largely positive changes to state education, modern educators often criticise the tripartite system, citing many flaws including the lack of uniformity between schools. Local education authorities were autonomous to a large degree. School headteachers set their own curriculum meaning the quality and depth of education varied from school to school. Issues with funding and availability of teachers, furthermore, meant very few technical schools were opened. In practice, the Education Act (1944) established a two-tier system with grammar schools for the academically gifted (effectively the socio-economically advantaged) and secondary modern schools for the others ([McVicar, 1990](#)). These issues were exasperated by public perceptions of grammar schools' superiority, and secondary moderns gained reputations as being inferior or substandard schools- the concept of 'inclusive grammar schools' has been described as an oxymoron ([O'Farrell, 2016](#)). It has been argued that the 1944 Education ACT did not in fact introduce a new era of fairness and opportunity, but

rather “entrenched divisiveness based on stratifying provision of education for different social classes” (Johnson, 1989). This failure to account for public perceptions of the tripartite (effectively bipartite) system contributed to its replacement by the comprehensive system with a new ‘entitlement curriculum’ which taught pupils without selection (DES, 1965).

Margaret Thatcher, UK Education Secretary 1970 - 1974

Long before she became Prime Minister in 1979, Margaret Thatcher was involved in shaping Conservative party education policy. In 1970, as the Education Secretary in Heath’s newly elected Conservative government, Thatcher overturned the mandate for all schools to be absorbed within the comprehensive system, allowing some grammar schools to remain even today. However, despite this instinctive attachment to the selection-by-aptitude system and belief in its benefits (informed by her personal experience as a proud grammar school pupil who gained a place at Oxford University), Thatcher is credited with the creation of more comprehensive schools than under any other Education Secretary in UK history (Wilby, 2013). She oversaw an increase in the proportion of comprehensive pupils from under one-third to nearly two-thirds of the secondary school population, as well as raising the school leaving age to 16 years in 1973 (Stepney, 2013). Despite this record, her impact during this period is better remembered for the infamous ‘milk snatcher’ measure abolishing free provision of milk in primary schools (Cordon, 2016). This change, now thought to be driven under pressure from the Treasury, made Thatcher a polarising figure, especially in less affluent areas of the UK, contributing to the harsh reputation that earned her the sobriquet ‘the iron lady’ after her ‘Britain Awake’ speech (Thatcher, 1976).

James Callaghan- The Ruskin Speech 1976

The post-war political and social consensus that educational professionals, informed by local, regional, and national contexts, were best equipped to develop and deliver school curricula was progressively eroded during the 1970s. Driven by an emerging political view that questioned whether UK education was fit-for-purpose, it was the Labour party leader

and then Prime Minister James Callaghan who articulated these worries in a keynote speech to the Department of Education and Science (DES) at Ruskin College in Oxford (Bateson, 1997). Callaghan highlighted his government's concerns around levels of literacy and numeracy in primary schools, and whether secondary schools were capable of equipping pupils for work (given most did not enter higher education), key to addressing economic challenges and improving life opportunities across the population. Senior DES officials accepted the implied need to re-align school curricula to the country's social and economic priorities. The direct influence of Callaghan's 'Ruskin Speech', and consequent Labour government White Papers on education in the late 1970s, on subsequent educational reform is uncertain (Bateson, 1997; Chitty, 1998). It does appear to be the case, regardless, that reconfiguring the education system to be instrumental in training pupils to meet the country's needs rather than developing individuals' potentials became the dominant driver of education policy during the late 1970s, underpinning the reforms introduced by the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher after she was elected as Prime Minister in 1979 (Phillips & Harper-Jones, 2002).

Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister 1979 – 1990

Margaret Thatcher's government's reforms during the 1980s, culminating in Education Secretary Kenneth Baker's Education Reform Act (DES, 1988), resulted in a fundamental overhaul of post-war educational structures. Furthermore, these reforms marked a major philosophical change to educational provision in the UK, consistent with (and informed by) market-led, neoliberal ideology in other advanced industrialised economies, particularly the United States (Guthrie & Pierce, 1990; Hursh, 2007). The Education Reform Act introduced, for the first time, a UK 'national curriculum' that focused on the 'core' subjects of mathematics, science, and English, which it was argued would give pupils the broader and more rounded skillset and knowledgebase needed for employment (Whitty, 1989). The inclusion of standardised assessments at the end of each 'key stage' (including in the early years of primary schools) to benchmark schools was intended to make education more publicly accountable. These measures underpinned the strategy of harnessing market forces to drive improvements

in school performance and hence better education for all pupils- as was the case a century earlier, it was argued that such reforms were needed to position the UK to thrive within an increasingly globalised economy (Bonal, 2003).

As Thatcher's neoliberal approach to education replaced the previously dominant social model, administrative power over schooling was centralised with the DES taking control from the local education authorities. Thatcher aimed to transform educational provision into a consumer market, empowering parents to the school their co choose the school that their child attends. This was furthered with the introduction of league tables, based on school results in the standardised assessments, which were later taken up by the new Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in 1992, only two years after Thatcher's resignation (DES, 1992).

Thatcher's Reforms- an Educational Paradox

These Conservative government educational reforms have been considered paradoxical by contemporary and subsequent commentators. For example, in a Guardian newspaper article published just after Thatcher's death in 2013, Peter Wilby (education correspondent) discussed the impact of her reforms, noting that although her overarching political ethos was informed by an unquestioning belief in the efficacy of the market and the moral imperative to roll back the frontiers of the state, her governments amassed tighter central control over education and educational institutions than had ever existed before in the UK (Wilby, 2013). Schools were no longer to be trusted to teachers, educationalists, and local authorities but rather from the mid-1980s were to be the province of central government. The content of the curriculum and even the teaching methods became politically driven and contested. Wilby (2013) noted that fundamental pedagogical debates and decisions about whether children should learn "knowledge or skills, facts or understanding, rules or critical thinking are thrashed out in Whitehall, Westminster and the media, not in school staffrooms". Structural reforms such as the imposition of business practices and tools such as performance management were often couched by the government as modernisation to provide value-for-money and so raise standards. These essentially reassigned the role of schools as instruments to

improve international economic competitiveness, and (it is argued) subordinated teachers and educational professionals, and schools and local education authorities, to political and ideological agendas driven by central government (Braun et al., 2010).

Broader Context of Thatcher's Reforms

To understand the impact of the Thatcher's reforms and the 1988 Education Reform Act, it is important to consider the socio-cultural and political context of the time. Schools were not the only institutions subjugated to the neoliberal agenda of the Thatcher governments. The 1980s were a time of huge social change in the UK, catalysed by policies directed to establishing an 'enterprise culture'. This too is paradoxical for a government so avowed to reducing the reach of the state, or as Boyle (1988) articulated, "acting as if founding any kind of culture were a proper task for government".

The Thatcher era included broad and far-reaching changes in UK society aligned to the belief in the supremacy of market forces and consumer choice (BBC News, 2013). Thatcher (1981) stated that "economics is the method" by which she would "change the soul" of the British people. She drove through major pieces of legislation that fundamentally changed UK society- including reforming trade union law and limiting employment protection and collective pay bargaining, maintaining punitively high interest rates to fight inflation (and accepting mass unemployment as a corollary), privatising and deregulating essential services such as the railways and power suppliers, and permitting the sale of council houses to tenants (Ball, 2013). Income inequality was an inevitable consequence of this programme- between 1979 and 1990, the average household income among the wealthiest tenth of the population rose by nearly 50%, while that of the poorest rose by less than 5% (Dilnot & Stark, 1986).

Educational reform was not restricted to schools but extended to higher education with a similar free-market ideology informing measures intended to increase transparency and accountability together with a shift of university funding from direct public grants (Wilby, 2013). The societal changes of the 1980s and 1990s, and the pathways opened by changes to secondary education, were anticipated to allow more people from all backgrounds to

access higher education. Of the many policies regarding her ‘university revolution’, the introduction of full tuition fees for international students had the most surprising results (Williams, 1984). At the time, many feared this would alienate overseas student, pushing them away from UK universities, but the opposite happened – international student numbers continued to grow, and provided a major stream of revenue, one that universities still rely on today (Grove, 2008). In doing this, Thatcher ‘marketised’ higher education on a global scale, pushing institutions to justify their costs and government support by attracting additional income.

Thatcher's Educational Reforms- Controversies

Many of Thatcher's policies were popular at the time- consistent with a more optimistic and forward-looking social philosophy, finally leaving the post-war ‘welfare state’ that had supported the national recovery during the 1950s and 1960s (Albertson & Stepney, 2020). This made the concept of a ‘consumer market’ in education (and in other services) more attractive as people began to adopt a more competitive outlook. In education, this meant parents aspiring for their children to get the best education they could, one that would prepare them for the increasingly competitive job market. Parents could choose between schools, something which appealed to a Conservative base; as Thatcher put it during her (in)famous ‘no such thing as society’ interview, when “individuals and families have more power and more choice, they have greater opportunities to succeed” (Thatcher, 1987). Furthermore, Thatcher's educational reforms, it was asserted, would provide all children, particularly those from poorer families, a pathway to opportunities, including higher education and skilled jobs that the UK post-industrial economy needed.

Within this consumer-driven environment, schools tried to implement measures to improve their assessment and exam results. Consequently, as Walford (2002) argues, schools were encouraged to focus on their educational ‘product’ and results, especially their national examination pass rates. As the purpose of schools shifted towards improving pupil performance rather than supporting their educational and social development, pupils were encouraged and directed towards those subjects in

which they might attain the best test results rather than those they found most interesting and enjoyable (Harris & Haydn, 2012).

These ‘consumer choice’ initiatives were not as egalitarian as hoped, however. Parents were encouraged to select their children’s school, but realistically it was the more advantaged families living in areas with multiple schooling options or the wealth to move into other catchment areas who were best positioned to benefit (Millband, 1991). Furthermore, this new system relied on parents having the skills to interpret and make informed judgements about the various sources with information on these schools, which would be challenging for many less-advantaged parents of the time. Adding to this was the massive increase in income inequality associated with the 1979 - 1990 period, spurred on by Conservative tax cuts for the wealthy and reductions in financial support available to poorer communities and low-income families (Ball, 2013; Blanchflower & Freeman, 1993). Teachers and their trade unions opposed these and related reforms including the Teacher’s Pay and Conditions Act (1986), linking their remuneration to the quality of their teaching and pupils’ test attainment- this resulted in widespread teachers’ strikes that disrupted millions of students’ learning.

Conclusion- Legacy

The lasting effects of the major reforms of the Thatcher governments of the 1980s are difficult to over-state; from the housing boom (and bust) to the marginalisation of the trade unions and decimation of traditional industries (and their communities), and the replacement of a UK manufacturing base with a financial services-driven economy (Ball, 2013).

While the structural reforms to schools remain intact, however, it is much debated and remains uncertain whether her educational policies and the direction of travel that she set for subsequent governments during the 1990s had the effects that were anticipated. Specifically, Thatcher’s educational reforms were supposed to widen access and opportunities and narrow attainment gaps, but there is little evidence that this has occurred (Millar, 2018). The introduction of ‘market forces’ was supposed to promote innovation and increase efficiency in the UK education sector by allowing parents and pupils to choose schools based on factors including performance (and for schools to compete for pupils). This ranking approach inevitably led

to the establishment of local school hierarchies, and consequently widened attainment gaps across communities, exacerbated by schools being incentivised to compete rather than collaborate, so discouraging any mutually beneficial co-operation (Adnett & Davies, 2000). More recently, Fiona Millar (2016) opined in the Guardian newspaper that “schools’ hierarchy is as powerful as ever”, and that “parental ‘choice’ in education has created the worst of all worlds”. Popular schools have not as the market ideologues would have hoped, expanded to accommodate more pupils, and less in-demand schools have not been closed. Rather, the education market driven by a “complex interaction between choice, admissions practices, house price and performance measures has led to segregation typified by schools with radically different profiles from their local communities” (Millar, 2018).

This assessment highlights once more the paradox of Thatcher’s school reforms programme. Her stated aim was to enhance quality, diversity, parental choice, autonomy, and accountability, rearticulated in 1992 as “a new framework for schools” by John Major, her successor as Conservative Prime Minister (DfE, 1992). Rather, many of Thatcher’s reforms were centralising rather than liberating, offering an illusion of choice to most parents who remained constrained by the societal (and financial, geographical, and cultural) factors that Thatcher did not consider sufficiently (Miliband, 1991).

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