Chapter 4

Whose improvement? Whose schools?

> *The achievement of the highest socioeconomic groups is very similar in different countries, but the achievement of the lowest groups is radically different. The highest achieving countries have the smallest spread. The way to raise standards overall is to concentrate on raising the achievement of the poorest sections of society.*

(Professor Jürgen Baumert, director of the Max Planck Institute of Educational Research, Berlin, following analysis of the PISA study)

School improvement does not take place in a vacuum. The internal development of schools relates to wider social and economic change. The purpose of schooling, its funding and governance, is defined in terms of a variety of economic and social goals. Students come from and return to a wider environment.

It is understandable that much of the early school improvement literature chose to concentrate on the internal change process, but this now seems profoundly limiting. A few historical examples might illustrate the importance of a contextual understanding of improvement.

Educational change depends on perceptions of wider social needs. In a divided and hierarchical society, the most powerful class in a society has a powerful influence; at the very least, it can set the outer limits for change. The dominant class's need to safeguard its position of power often conflicts with the need for technical development.

In Britain, writers on school improvement and effectiveness have generally fought shy of relating educational change to wider social and political change. In the few books which appear to promise a more historical understanding, the explanations tend to be apolitical. Thus the 1988 Education Reform Act might be explained in terms of a demand for better value for money following the economic recession of the 1970s (without saying which sections of society were making that demand) but

- Hannah Moore launched her literacy campaign during a period of great political reaction. (The Duke of Wellington was fighting the remnants of the French Revolution in Europe, and breaking the Luddite risings at home.) She determined to teach the poor how to *read*, i.e. religious tracts advocating political restraint and obedience, but refused to allow them to learn to *write* in case they chose to express their grievances and organise politically.

- Universal full-time schooling after 1870 was intended to provide basic literacy and numeracy skills but also to domesticate the children of the industrial working class and keep them in order. Voting rights had just been extended, so a form of elementary schooling was introduced which would socialise the poor into subservience. The government cynically declared 'We need to educate our masters'.

- The adult education system in nineteenth century industrial towns was begun by skilled workers. They opened Mechanics Institutes, run by workers themselves, with lectures on science and technology, history and politics. Local industrialists and church ministers rushed to sponsor them and take them over, reducing the curriculum to scientific and technical matters.

- Throughout the Victorian period, girls were taught sewing and cooking in preparation for their role as housewives and domestic servants – even in areas where most women worked in textile mills. For most of the 20th Century, practical teaching for boys was based on the slavish reproduction of set designs determined by the teacher. Until the Design and Technology reform, archaic wood- and metalwork were taught; this was dysfunctional in terms of current industrial needs but helped to socialise future workers by inculcating order and obedience.

with no reference to the Thatcherite political reaction and its dramatic effect on education. At that time, the Conservative government, as part of a broad attack on trade unions and other centres of resistance, abolished the Inner London Education Authority – a pioneering body that had led the way in educational development by helping teachers design a more relevant curriculum and improve teaching, as well as focusing on social justice and equality. Throughout England and Wales, local councils' powers were reduced so that they could no longer allocate extra support to schools in most need. Headteachers were offered a limited form of autonomy, the hidden price being subjection to a centrally imposed curriculum and assessment, and control through league tables and inspections. Parents became consumers and teachers were to be turned into obedient transmitters of inert knowledge.

School Improvement grew up in this environment, offering explanations which largely overlooked curriculum, pedagogy and equity, and fighting shy of political explanation. It now needs courage to reinsert itself into the political narrative, and to warn against government policies which are undermining the basis of improvements so far achieved.

The comprehensive school reform

The escalating attack by New Labour politicians on the very principle of comprehensive schools is a matter of central importance for school improvement. In just over a year, policy has shifted rapidly: first, a leading government press officer releases a soundbyte denigrating 'bog standard' comprehensives; then the education minister outlines her five new categories of secondary school, an entire caste system of 'comprehensives' (or should we call them 'post-comprehensives'?); and finally the Prime Minister speaks about the supposed failure of the comprehensive system.

The same government which has kept curriculum in a straightjacket and imposed on primary schools a uniform method of teaching literacy, now has the nerve to promote its 'post-comprehensive' hierarchy under the slogan of 'diversity'. They deny that this is a return to a selective system, but cannot explain how they will prevent it. The specialist schools are allowed to select a proportion of pupils – a percentage which will undoubtedly grow. How exactly will the 'specialist schools' and 'advanced specialist schools' divine a ten-year-old's potential in business or Chinese? In truth, it will simply open up new routes for some parents to use their influence and cultural capital to negotiate advantage for their children.

Advocates of school improvement cannot cut themselves off from this political debate. It would be hypocritical to speak of raising expectations and transforming school culture while systems are created which will condemn an underclass of children to an underclass of schools. Concerns for the internal processes of school development cannot be divorced from an interest in structural reform.

The comprehensive system in Britain has been enormously successful in raising achievement. It has opened up to the majority of children an education previously reserved for a few. In 1960, 20% of children were selected for grammar schools, and 16% of 16-year-olds passed five O-levels. In 2000, in a system which was still mainly comprehensive, 50% achieved the equivalent five GCSEs at A*-C grades. In 1970, 47%

left school with no qualifications; now only a few percent do so (Tomlinson 2002). In Scotland, where all state secondary schools are comprehensive, recent research shows that middle class children (defined as having fathers in professional occupations and parents who stayed at school to age 17 or beyond) gain equally good exam results in state schools as in independent schools (Paterson 2002).

If the comprehensive system is a failure, the 2000 PISA study certainly doesn't show it. PISA is the first major international study to survey children of an identical age, rather than those taught together within a particular school year group. (Previous studies such as TIMSS were distorted by countries such as Germany where large numbers of lower-achieving pupils are kept behind to repeat a class, or countries where large numbers placed in special schools were not included in the survey.) In PISA, Britain's 15-year-olds scored high in all three assessed subjects, literacy, mathematics and science. In fact, almost all the high-achieving countries have comprehensive systems to at least age 15, and in some of the highest, internal divisions such as streaming and setting are illegal. The overall pattern is for higher achieving countries to have a low spread of attainment. (The unusual feature, in Britain's case, is the wide spread of attainment, which ,as in the USA, can be attributed to the extent of poverty.)

In Germany, by contrast, a system with three tiers of secondary school has proved disastrous. (Comprehensive schools exist in parts of Germany, but usually alongside and in competition with the other schools, rather than including all pupils in a town. There is, in addition, also a fourth layer, the special schools.) Germany had at least expected that children attending the Gymnasium (the highest level, or grammar school) would achieve very highly, even if many in the Hauptschule (the lowest level, or secondary modern) were struggling. In fact, at both ends of the scale, Germany's results are a cause for alarm: there are few high achievers, and large numbers stuck at the margins of literacy.

The detailed German research on PISA, conducted by the prestigious Max Planck Institute in Berlin, shows the connections between low achievement, social discrimination and the selective system. Children from manual worker backgrounds, and especially those with both parents born outside Germany, are most likely to attend the lowest level of school. Even when the researchers controlled for literacy, they found that children with similar attainment but from professional families were three times as likely to attend the top-tier Gymnasium or grammar school. Half the children with both parents born outside of Germany (and in most cases, the children had spent all their school years inside

Germany) attend the low-tier Hauptschule or secondary modern, compared with a quarter of the whole student population.

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8.8% of German fifteen-year-olds reached the highest level, 5, in the literacy tests. The figures for New Zealand, Finland, Australia, Canada and Britain were between 15% and 20%.

10% of German pupils did not reach level 1, compared with an OECD average of 6%. In Korea, it was below 2%, in Finland and Canada about 3%, and below 5% in Britain. Only Brazil, Mexico, Latvia and Luxembourg scored lower than Germany.

23% of German pupils did not reach level 2, compared with 10% in Japan, Ireland and Canada and fewer still in Finland and Korea. (Baumert and Schümer 2002)

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Selling our future

As well as increasing selection, the New Labour government have an agenda of privatisation for England. Every innovation seems tied to a significant handover of education to private financial interests –from education action zones to school buildings, individual schools to entire education authorities.

This is, of course, part of a global agenda across all public services. In Bolivia, popular protests were needed to stop the introduction of a law which would have forbidden people even to collect water on their own roofs rather than buying it from a private supplier. In 12,000 American schools, the pupils are forced to watch Channel One news and adverts every day (Klein 2000:90). How long before British schools are persuaded to hand over their captive audience?

Richard Hatcher (2001:63) lists some of the activities of the 'edubusiness' sector in Britain:

- school inspections (an industry worth over £100 million a year)
- the Private Finance Initiative (now re-branded Public Private Partnership) which hands over not just the construction but the running of school buildings)
- supply teachers
- professional development
- compulsory competitive tendering for school meals and maintenance
- local education authorities
- and finally, schools themselves.

The business world has been given a direct influence in the development of schooling, particularly in the inner cities, through the Education Action Zones, through direct ownership of 'city academies' or by sponsoring specialist schools. Educational development is increasingly being defined as a source of profit rather than public benefit.

Often privatisation begins in the context of perceived 'failure' and spreads from there. Education authorities in some of the poorest cities were inspected and subsequently privatised. The Public Private Partnership began by rebuilding decaying schools, but now an education minister is proposing to hand over every secondary school building in England into private ownership. How long before the landlord begins to determine what is taught under his roof?

There has been virtual silence from school improvement experts on this issue. Fortunately, other writers have been more critical. They see the commodification of schooling as affecting the way its goals are being redefined, through a language of 'profitability, productivity, efficiency, value-addedness, and value-for-money or best-value' (Mahoney and Hextall 2000:72).

> The balance has shifted from schools for the betterment of society through a more educated citizenry, to how best to control education by making it do its economic work through greater emphasis on vocationalism. (ibid:32, quoting Smyth and Dow)

Characteristically, the very word *accountability* is a commercial metaphor.

Ironically, the consequent narrowing of focus can lead to forms of learning which do not match future commercial needs. According to the European Round Table of Industrialists (1994), employees are facing increasingly complex demands:

- in a theoretical sense, to understand complex relationships
- in a technical sense, to deal with program-controlled working tools
- in a social sense, to cooperate in teams
- in an organizational sense, to be able to cope with a spectrum of organizational, executive and evaluative tasks
- in an emotional sense, to identify with work and develop personal work-related motivation.

There appears to be a contradiction between capitalism's requirement for higher skills and its need for social control: on the one hand, it calls for qualities such as initiative and cooperation, but on the other, it would be subversive to go too far in that direction.

> *Forces of resistance*
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> - Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (1998) argue that teachers must connect up with the wider community in a discussion of worthwhile educational goals and methods.
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> - Some education systems have sustained a different sense of purpose. Until defeated in the wave of xenophobia after September 11 2001, progressive education ministers in Denmark pursued a democratic vision for education.
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> - There are strong voices of opposition and widespread attempts to develop alternatives in the United States. Extensive research refuting government policy appears in *Phi Delta Kappan* and the teachers' cooperative *Rethinking Schools* publishes powerful counter-arguments to privatisation, as well as reports of radical curriculum developments and different models of school. (www.pdkintl.org/kappan; www.rethinkingschools.org)
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> - Forces of resistance in Britain include teacher unions; subject associations such as NATE (National Association of Teachers of English); political organisations such as the Socialist Alliance in England and the Scottish Socialist Party; the Campaign for State Education and other alliances campaigning against the destruction of comprehensive education. There is a clear basis and need for a broad campaigning alliance.

The 'market' of school choice

The education market serves not only to redefine educational aims, but also to determine educational distribution. The Thatcher government emphasised parental choice, even to the extent of forcing some schools to admit more children than they had room for. This led to increased social and academic division between schools (Woods and Levacic 2002) as local pecking-orders developed, with the stigmatisation of teachers and pupils in unfavourably positioned schools. The attainment gap in England and Wales has risen.

School mix is an important factor. Whereas more advantaged children may do well in almost any environment, their absence from some schools can make a big difference to the education of others (see Thrupp 1999). Not only are better educated parents not involved in campaigning for improved resources, the cultural capital passed on in their families does not enter the common pool of intelligence.

In many cities, parental choice works in reverse: schools are choosing parents. Many nominally comprehensive schools interview parents as

well as children – a system which may be more discriminatory than selection by exam. It has also led to racial segregation through white flight when parents drive their children to mainly white suburban or faith schools.

In the more competitive areas, children begin to feel they have failed if they can't get into the 'better' schools (Rudduck 2001:21). There has been a huge increase in private tutoring in the attempt to secure higher test scores at the time of transfer, and middle-class mothers are investing enormous effort into securing advantage (Reay 2002). Children are quickly learning the dishonesty of self-marketing. A 12-year-old boy in a high-prestige London 'comprehensive' explained to me how he had passed the interview by claiming to read books or do homework when he arrived home from primary school; his friends who openly admitted going out to play football were rejected.

For other schools, the downward spiral is almost impossible to control, especially those which are surrounded by higher achieving schools e.g. schools with sixth forms, church schools and specialist schools. If a less prestigious school has vacant places, it must admit pupils who are subsequently excluded by the surrounding schools. The exclusion process may be underhand, as unscrupulous heads suggest to parents that it would be wiser to take their troublesome adolescents elsewhere rather than risk being expelled.

Forces of resistance
- Tim Brighouse, as Director of Education in Birmingham, was able to sustain inter-school cooperation and minimise the tendency to compete. Innovative curriculum activities run by the University of the First Age and the Children's University brought together a mix of schools.

- Government plans are challenged whenever ministers speak to public audiences and trade union conferences. The impossible stress of defending the indefensible was conceivably a factor behind the sudden resignation of education minister Estelle Morris. It was noticeable that proposals to privatise all secondary school buildings and for low-paid classroom assistants to teach whole classes had to be announced by her junior colleagues.

- Privatisation is angering all public-service unions, and some union conferences have responded by withdrawing financial support from the Labour Party.

All of this has a direct impact on educational achievement. The creation of an underclass of schools for an underclass of children is likely to create a trough of low achievement which no degree of pressure by the accountability police will remedy.

'Dividing the sheep from the goats'

I have never understood this phrase, since goats are clearly more intelligent and independent. Maybe it is because the sheep are more marketable commodities and easier to herd. In present-day educational jargon, it is easier to 'add value' to a sheep.

Internally, schools are being driven to identify those animals which will fatten up best. The pressures of league tables, official accountability measures and high-stakes testing lead them to give special attention to pupils who are just below a key threshold (e.g. grade C or level 4).

Schools across Britain are facing increased pressure to stream and set. Although research in Britain and the USA is somewhat contradictory, and it is impossible to eliminate interference from a host of other variables, they have been fairly consistent in showing no overall rise in attainment through internal divisions. (For summaries, see for example Ireson and Hallam 2001 for Britain, or Gamoran's research in the USA and internationally).

- Results in the upper sets may rise, but results in lower sets generally go down, and the attainment gap tends to grow

- Placement in a lower set - often influenced by social or behavioural factors as well as previous attainment - leads to lower self-esteem and to the growth of anti-school attitudes

- Schools tend to allocate more experienced or successful teachers to choose to the higher sets.

- Teachers' attitudes are affected by their understanding of a class's rank position, thus exacerbating polarisation. In the so-called Pygmalion studies, teachers were incorrectly told that some groups were more intelligent than others; this resulted in more challenging teaching and better results (Rosenthal and Jacobsen 1968)

- In primary schools, ability grouping within classes from an early age leads to a gender polarisation, concentrating boys in the lowest groups. This may result from developmental factors such as the physical inability to produce neat handwriting. They develop an early self-image as low achievers. Recent research has shown that teachers choose

- to work directly with higher achieving groups of girls, whilst assigning classroom assistants to lower-attaining groups of boys (Kutnick 2002)

- Teachers' perceptions of 'ability' are often distorted by social prejudice (see Douglas and Barker-Lunn, as far back as 1964 and 1970). Early labelling and segregation soon becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of low expectations for working-class and ethnic minority children.

There is international evidence that lower groups tend to have more restricted curricula, often including a tedious diet of decontextualised exercises. A major evaluation of *Title 1* (US federal funding for lower-achieving pupils) showed that pupils with lower reading scores were given only basic remedial work which did not help them 'develop the ability to analyze and communicate complex ideas' (National Assessment of Title 1 1998). Consequently, 'many students in Title 1 programs fall farther and farther behind as greater emphasis is placed on comprehension skills, problem-solving and reasoning' for other pupils as they get older. Instead of allowing them to catch up, this form of remediation causes them to fall further and further behind (see also BASRC 1999).

Internal divisions give strong messages to children about their personal value and 'ability'. They quickly internalise the implicit labelling, however well concealed. In official advice on school improvement, it is remarkable that the identification of 'high expectations' as a factor in raising achievement is somehow kept separate from an appreciation of the cultural impact of internal segregation.

Some alternatives

The Accelerated School network, alongside intensive work on basic literacy skills, believes in high expectations for every student, and providing each student with powerful learning experiences that stress complex and engaging activities, relevant content and active discovery of curriculum objectives. Lessons are designed to be authentic, interactive, learner-centred, inclusive and connect between subjects.

With the right organisation and more challenging student-centred learning, higher achievers can excel in mixed groups. The Köln-Holweide comprehensive school in Germany emphasises co-operation and mutual help in mixed ability groups; it has achieved particularly good achievement for the brightest students. Co-ooperation is encouraged; if a student has a problem, he is expected first of all to seek help within his table group. (Sergiovanni 1994: 49-50; www.essentialschools.org)

In some circumstances, there may be tactical benefits from ability grouping for particular purposes, though this needs to be carefully monitored alongside the impact on other classes. High achieving pupils sometimes need opportunities to work together as well as in mixed groups. Grove Primary School, Birmingham, has an accelerated mathematics class for older pupils; in this inclusive inner-city school where all children enjoy high respect and morale, a few children from each class come together for challenging mathematics activities, even gaining good GCSE grades at age 11 (five years early). The children clearly enjoy the experience, there is no hint of cramming but many opportunities to bounce ideas off one another and to set each other problems (Wrigley 2000:82).

In Heywood Community School in Greater Manchester, only a handful of pupils ever gained good grades. Along with many other morale-boosting measures, a 'target group' was set up, with additional tutorial support from a popular teacher who accompanied the class from subject to subject. The tradition of low achievement was broken, and within four years, the proportion achieving five or more upper grades at GCSE had risen sixfold, to 47%. This could not have happened, however, if a whole raft of other changes had not taken place to make all children in the school feel valued.

A key factor behind the insistence on more ability grouping is the pressure for whole-class teaching, despite growing understanding internationally of methods of within-class differentiation. In its turn, this relates to the difficulties which arise from a pattern of secondary education in which subject specialists see each class for too short a time, and see too many children during the week to meet their various needs. A number of different models exist to create greater stability between a number of pupils and a section of the teaching staff, with less emphasis on subject specialism.

Some alternatives
Falinge Park High School, Rochdale, allocates a class teacher to each class of 11-12 year olds for around 40% of their timetable to cover a range of subjects such as English, humanities and PSE and to serve as form tutor. Teachers work as a team to complement each others' specialist knowledge. The class teachers liaise with primary schools and other subject teachers, and respond to emotional and learning differences (Wrigley 2000:90).

The Coalition of Essential Schools (USA) divides schools into smaller units on the principle that no teacher can reasonably be expected to teach more than 80 different pupils in any year. Although British examples are scarce, the 'mini-school' or 'school within school' concept could provide a better means of raising standards for all pupils than the divisive path of current government policy.
(See chapter 9 for further examples)

Education and poverty

There is a high correlation between low achievement and poverty. This is a particularly serious problem in Britain, due to the high and chronic levels of child poverty.

Countries differ in the response they make to this. At its most extreme, in the USA, much less money is spent on schools in the poorest districts. School districts are often very small, so that more affluent suburbs don't have to subsidise the education of the poor in the inner city.

> A few American students are now attending 'public' schools that are funded at $15,000 or more per student per year, whereas other American students (who are stuck in poor communities within niggardly states) must make do with $3,000 or less per year in public school funding. (Biddle 1997)

A concern for school improvement has to include a willingness to campaign politically as well as to develop 'capacity' within schools.

Firstly, to campaign for much higher levels of spending for areas of deprivation. Funding is rigidly allocated according to formula in England, but education authorities in Scotland can choose to increase spending according to need. In England, the Excellence Fund has enabled some money to be targeted on inner cities, but is often focused on the relatively well off.

The 'gifted and talented' programme provides mainly for those with proven talents in music and drama, i.e. those with prior experience and tuition outside school. HMI (2001b) point out the difficulty of identifying children with a potential. A more equitable programme would be based less on the notion of identifying a few individuals with talents, and more on providing opportunities for lots of children to develop new talents.

Secondly, there is the wider political fight against poverty. Children cannot focus on school when their families and neighbours are dogged by

material anxieties. Some children clearly show greater resilience but this often depends on the right type of support. High and enduring unemployment levels have the most devastating impact on the morale of adolescents, who have fewer career role models and see little prospect of escape.

> The City of Glasgow now provides free fruit in schools to improve children's diet, and schools can use public funding to provide breakfasts. The Child Poverty Action Group, Scottish Socialist Party and other organisations recently joined forces to campaign for free and healthy school meals for all children – to improve levels of general health, to counter the high levels of poverty and overcome the stigma of the free meals queue. The resolution secured nearly a third of the votes in the Scottish Parliament, and will be tried again next year. During the campaign, it was discovered that two of the highest achieving countries Finland and Sweden already do this.

Finally, the strategies and cultures of relatively successful schools in poor areas needs far greater study, and in particular the connections between the schools and the local situation. Such schools have often been able to develop new ways of relating to the experiences of their local communities. Often the first change is highly symbolic – raising the expectations of the entire community. Many deeper changes follow, but these imaginative first steps become symbols of determination that new opportunities can be created in the most troubled areas, as visible signals of new hope.

> *The first steps in turning a school are often imaginative and potent symbols of new hope:*
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> - An ugly chimney dominating the entrance to Heywood Community Schools was painted with a mural of the statue of liberty
> - A conservatory was built onto the front of Blakeston Community School, Stockton-on-Tees, so that parents could meet staff in relaxed surroundings.