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ABSTRACT

Although education in England is dominated by the rhetoric of "standards," this paper attempts to show that the overall shape and drive of English education reform has remained largely consistent. The annually published School Performance Tables continue to be assigned a special place in the reforms, as a means to and as an index of raising standards. Behind the New Labour talk of social justice and inclusivity lies a reality of increasing inequality and social exclusion. The reforms instituted under the previous Conservative government are retained and actually given a sharper edge. This paper explores how current reforms are translating into new and increasingly divisive practices at the school level. In particular, it draws on ethnographic data at a single comprehensive school in London. An "A-to-C economy," driven by the relative market value of high grade examination passes, has come to shape priorities in the schools. Strategies have been adopted to raise the percentage of students attaining five higher grade passes in external examinations, so that for certain students a "D-to-C conversion" is sought through mobilization of a particular understanding of ability and the identification of underachievers. A sort of educational triage is acting systematically to neglect some students while directing additional resources to those deemed most likely to benefit. The case study of one particular secondary school shows a school operating in a responsive mode, trying to piece together a range of practices in an attempt to succeed within the Government's definition of standards. Many young people have been predicted to be underachievers, and they are fulfilling these predictions. The developments at the school level are threatening deeper and more extensive inequalities of opportunity and outcome between groups of students in relation to "ability," social class, gender, and ethnic origin. The school illustrates an approach in which students likely to achieve the five passing grades receive much attention, and those considered unlikely to "survive" the educational requirements are essentially abandoned. (Contains 2 figures and 48 references.) (SLD)

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'Raising Standards' & Deepening Inequality

selection, league tables and reform in multiethnic secondary schools

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INTRODUCTION

> 'To those who say where is Labour's passion for social justice, I say education is social justice. Education is liberty. Education is opportunity.'
> Tony Blair *(speaking shortly before the General Election that returned him as leader of the first Labour Government for eighteen years).*[1]

> 'Performance tables help focus debate on standards. Parents need the tables to inform their decisions about their children's future; Local Education Authorities and schools, to focus their attention on areas where action is needed.'
> Estelle Morris, Labour Education Minister
> *(speaking eight weeks after the General Election)*

Education in England is currently dominated by the rhetoric of 'standards'. Originally the preserve of the New Right and successive Conservative Governments, the slogan has been colonized by the re-styled centrist *New* Labour Party. Speaking as the first Labour Education Secretary for almost two decades, for example, David Blunkett was quick to proclaim that 'Standards not structures are now the prime concern' (Blunkett 1997). In understanding the context for contemporary education reform in England it is worth considering this statement a little further: the Government's confidence in the relative unimportance of structures (both of educational systems and society itself) indicates clearly an acceptance of a paradigm that views communities, schools, teachers and students as participants in a common enterprise in which all have the opportunity to succeed. This perspective also finds expression in the assumption that 'raising standards' will benefit everyone, or at least all those willing to invest the necessary time and effort to succeed. Much has been made, for example, of the Government's 'zero tolerance of underperformance' (Labour Party 1997: 7), presented publicly as a having high expectations for all, a bold refusal to write-off people simply because of their social circumstances. The aim may be laudable, but in practice the result has been to construct a tyranny of standards: all schools must strive continually for more and more success; judged by traditional, biased and elitist criteria; where those who fail to measure up must look to themselves for the cause.

As we will show, despite the change from Conservative to Labour administrations, and some superficial changes in policy, the overall shape and drive of English education reform has remained largely consistent. The annually published *school performance tables*, for example, continue to be assigned a special place in the reforms, as both a means to, and an index of, raising standards. And yet, behind New Labour's talk of social justice and inclusivity lies a reality of increasing inequality and social exclusion, where Conservative reforms are not only retained, but given a sharper (even more disciplinary) edge.[2] In this paper we seek to understand how current reforms are translating into new, and increasingly divisive practices at the school level. In particular we draw on ethnographic data gathered in a single London Comprehensive school.[3]

Widespread reforms of public school systems, in the UK, USA and elsewhere, have spurred educationists increasingly to focus on the complex interrelations between the various contexts of policy production and educational practice. It has become clear that old models of policy as a unidirectional, linear and rational process cannot be sustained (Ball 1990; 1994; Whitty, Edwards and Gewirtz 1993). Education policy and practice are complexly and contingently interrelated at the classroom, school, state and global levels (Apple 1996). There is heated debate as to the precise nature of the interaction between different aspects of the processes that make, remake and reshape education policy but the need to understand school-level developments within a wider policy and societal frame has never been more clear (Whitty 1997).

Our paper adds to this growing body of sociological work by examining the consequences of market-oriented reforms as they are experienced and remade in a single school. The case of Taylor Comprehensive (a pseudonym) offers an opportunity to explore in detail the complex and conflicting demands faced by teachers and school managers in a situation that they experience as increasingly hostile to the 'comprehensive' (i.e. inclusive and progressive) ideal that informs their understanding of the school's ethos.[4]

Our study indicates that the multiple constraints acting upon schools do not have any automatic consequences — their outcomes are neither certain nor uncontested. Nevertheless, in the struggle to survive the education market, to 'drive up standards' and improve 'effectiveness', the losers (among students) are those traditionally denied equality of opportunity (on the basis of their ascribed 'ability', social class, ethnic and gendered identities). The relationship between national reforms and school processes is not simple, but it is vitally important.

Drawing on our ethnographic study of a London secondary school, subsequent sections of this paper examine how an *'A-to-C economy'*, driven by the relative market value of high grade exam passes, has come to shape priorities in the school. We consider the strategies that have been adopted to respond to these priorities, designed and implemented with the principal objective of raising the percentage of students attaining *five* higher grade passes in external examinations: a direct reflection of the key criterion used in annually published school 'league tables'. For certain students a grade *'D-to-C conversion'* is sought through the mobilization of a particular understanding of *'ability'* and the subsequent identification of '*under*-achievers'. It is our contention that, like medics on a battlefield, teachers are increasingly seeking to identify those individuals who will benefit most from access to limited resources. On a battlefield, *triage* is the name used to describe attempts to direct attention to those casualties who might survive (with help), leaving other (less hopeful) cases to die: in school, *educational triage* is acting systematically to neglect certain students, while directing additional resources to those deemed most likely to benefit (in terms of the externally judged standards). These strategies privilege particular groups of students, marked by social class, gender and 'race'. Before examining the school-based data, however, it is necessary briefly to outline the national reforms that dictate the wider context for the study.

THE REFORM OF COMPULSORY SCHOOLING

During eighteen years of Conservative Government the English education system underwent extensive and multiple reforms that have changed the structure, funding and content of public education.[5] Central to these changes has been the imposition of a market model, in which schools are framed as providers who must compete (against other schools) for students. This marketization of the education system has been achieved through a series of related measures: the following are among the most important.

> ***Devolved funding:*** the so-called 'Local Management of Schools' (LMS) removed the vast majority of schools' budgets from the control of the Local Education Authority (LEA). These devolved budgets are calculated according to a governmentally approved common funding formula (based overwhelmingly on the number of students on the school roll). The more students a school has, therefore, the greater its budget. In practice, however, there is evidence that schools do not simply seek to maximize total numbers, but increasingly to be wary of students whose needs might make unusual or 'excessive' demands on school budgets; such as those with special learning needs, minority students for whom English is an additional language and homeless students whose parent(s)/carers have no stable shelter (Bowe, Ball & Gold 1992; Troyna 1995; Power, Whitty & Youdell 1995).

Parental Choice: within the education market place, parents are represented as consumers who are free to choose between schools. Both major political parties now enshrine 'choice' as a key part of their rhetoric. In reality, however, parents have a right to express their *preference* for a certain school but have no guarantee of access. There is strong evidence to suggest that local choice markets operate in ways that reflect and reinforce existing social class differences (cf. Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe 1995; Reay & Ball 1997).

Diversity: the market model requires that consumer-parents have a choice between different products: not only between different state funded schools, but between privately funded schools and new types of school: the latter introduced explicitly to promote diversity of provision and choice by challenging (undermining) local comprehensive provision. For example, City Technology Colleges (CTCs) and Grant Maintained (GM) schools have been established to operate independently of the local state. Although CTCs and GM schools have differing histories and ideologies (Whitty 1992) both typically enjoy disproportionately high levels of resourcing and, in the final stage of Tory administration, were promised greater freedom to select students by ability at the point of entry (DfEE 1996). Although the Labour government are opposed, in principle, to selection at the point of entry, they have refused to remove such powers where already granted. Rather, a ballot of local parents is envisaged before selection at entry can be removed.

Curricular Control: a statutory 'National Curriculum' has been introduced for state schools. The nature and content of the National Curriculum is centrally controlled. It is audited through school inspections, carried out by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), and the use of standardized tests (known as SATs) for students at the end of designated 'key stages' in their schooling; at ages 7, 11, and 14. Both the content and scale of the National Curriculum has already undergone review and revision. Most significantly, the statutory element was 'slimmed-down' in the mid-1990s, but still dictates approximately 80 per cent of timetable allocation in secondary schools (Dearing 1994). Additionally, the architect of the changes personally recommended that 'the bulk of the time released' by the move should be used for additional work in 'the basics' already central to the statutory element (Dearing 1994: 7).

The content and nature of the curriculum is overseen by the Qualifications and Curriculum Agency (QCA) headed by Dr Nicholas Tate, a leading advocate of using the curriculum to foster a 'common culture'. Tate's curricular prescriptions reflect a deeply ideological and partial view of Britain as a largely homogeneous Christian nation with a proud civilizing history based on its colonial exploits (Tate 1996a & b; see also Gillborn 1997a). Although the statutory curricular elements allow some space for teachers to introduce their own material (including anti-racist and anti-sexist studies should they wish), the National Curriculum has been attacked for a general failure to engage with issues of cultural diversity and economic exclusion (cf. Runnymede Trust 1993).

Standards: as we have noted, the call to 'raise standards' has been adopted by both main political parties. In practice, policy makers equate 'standards' with *measurable outcomes in externally examined tests*: Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs), for 7, 11 and 14 year olds, and the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) for 16 year olds (at the end of their compulsory schooling). Students can be entered for GCSEs in numerous separate subjects: their results act as a major selection device in their attempts to enter the labour market and/or further and higher education. Perhaps most importantly, however,

aggregate measures of GCSE performance (for every school and LEA in the country) are published nationally and used widely to infer the *quality* of education provided in a school and/or LEA (see below).

Accountability/surveillance: According to the market model, the rational consumer-parent, who chooses between schools competing in the market place, must be aided by information on the relative quality of the products available. Since 1992 Conservative administrations have used this as the rationale for the annual publication of *'performance tables'* listing various 'measures' individually for all secondary schools in England. In 1997 tables were published for the first time detailing results for eleven year olds in primary schools: described by the then Secretary of State for Education as 'the biggest public information campaign since the Second World War' (DfEE 1997a).

The measures for secondary schools include the percentage of final year students entered for GCSEs and various indications of their exam outcomes. No attempt is made to allow for differences in schools' social compositions nor levels of resourcing: state-funded comprehensives (working with diverse communities and meeting a range of special educational needs) are listed alongside private, elite institutions that select all or part of their student body according to previous test results. Consequently, the long established association between socio-economic status and educational attainment is free to distort the figures without control.

Since their inception the performance tables have been commonly referred to as *'league tables'*. This betrays their main purpose and function. According to the rhetoric of the marketplace, the tables are meant to provide 'objective' indicators of quality so that parent-consumers can discriminate between competing institutions: in practice, they provide crude and misleading data as the basis for the hierarchical ranking of individual schools and LEAs across the country. The dominant 'benchmark' is the proportion of students attaining GCSE 'higher grade passes' (grades A*, A, B and C) in at least five separate subjects — historically this level was once significant as a cut-off point for entry to the professions and higher education. Each year the Government has added new indicators to the lists but the most-frequently cited measure (by press, politicians and practitioners alike) is the proportion of students reaching the 'five A-to-C' barrier. See, for example, figure 1.[6] Note in particular that schools are arranged in league order, according to the proportion of students who achieved at least five higher grade GCSE passes. Note also that the top three places are taken by independent (i.e. private) schools that operate a selective admissions policy: the bottom four places are taken by Comprehensive schools, funded by the local state, and practising no form of selection on admissions.

Figure 1 about here

A measure of the significance accorded to the performance table data is the annual ranking of 'best' and 'worst' schools, again produced on a national basis by most daily newspapers. In figure 2, for example, note that the dominant criterion is again the proportion of students attaining at least five higher grade passes.

Figure 2 about here

New Labour and the Conservative Reforms

The Labour administration elected in May 1997 has been quick to continue the recent history of placing education at the centre of government policy initiatives. Just 67 days after its election, the new Government's first *White Paper* (a detailed statement of policy intent) took education as its theme and proclaimed a commitment to *'Excellence in Schools'* (DfEE 1997b). The title captures something of the current nature of Labour education policy, with the unashamed concern for 'excellence' echoing the popular authoritarianism of Thatcherite politics.

The most immediate sign of change is the new Government's rejection of the market as an effective and just means of allocating opportunity and rewards: New Labour do not parade the market as the natural and best solution to every and all social problems. There is a readiness to accept that inequality is a real and important aspect of contemporary Britain: witness, for example, the opening sentence of the White Paper, which proclaimed 'the Government's core commitment to equality of opportunity and high standards for all' (Foreword by the Secretary of State, DfEE 1997b, p. 3). Modest though this is, the implication that inequality of opportunity exists and its elimination is a legitimate policy objective, marks a clear contrast with the 'equiphobia' (Myers 1990 in Troyna 1993: 45) of Conservative administrations, which deliberately equated 'equality' with uniformity and mediocrity (cf. Gillborn 1995: 32). Although this shift in tone is welcome, it is wholly inadequate as a response to the succession of Conservative reforms. Labour do not see 'the market' as a panacea, and yet they have embraced almost all the reforms that were enacted in its name. Beneath superficial statements little of substance has changed; indeed, even the language of education reform has remained largely intact. The obsession with 'market forces' is virtually the only significant casualty in the discourse of 'blame and shame' established by the Conservatives and now mouthed by Labour politicians and their advisors: 'choice', 'diversity' and, above all, 'standards' continue to be the watchwords of English education policy. More worrying still, not only have the key words remained, but so too have the very mechanisms and structures that gave them such retrogressive force. As we have noted, for example, 'standards' have increasingly been judged in relation to the school and Local Education Authority performance statistics enshrined in the annually published performance tables. Not only have Labour retained the tables, and every 'measure' within them, they have added their own new elements:

> 'This year secondary tables will include for the first time measures of how schools have improved. They will show the proportion of pupils who, on reaching school leaving age, achieved at least five higher grade GCSEs in the last four years. This school improvement index will be presented in easy-to-understand bar charts so parents can see how well a school is improving — or whether its results have been falling back.'
> Estelle Morris, Labour Education Minister. *25 June 1997*

In this way, Labour's version of the school league tables further valorises the traditional (and somewhat exclusive) 'benchmark' criteria of five or more high grade GCSE passes (which has only ever been attained by a minority of the age group). Worse still, the so-called 'school improvement index' (by focusing on each school's recent record) finally enshrines overtly what had previously been implicit, that is, that no matter how well a school 'performs', the league tables (in tandem with the other reforms) require continual gains year-upon-year. In this context schools are in competition not only with each other, but with themselves.

Before we move from the domain of national policy debates to the micro-world of a school, we wish to add two more elements to our account of the current policy context in England. The first concerns the dominant conception of responsibility within the English system (responsibility

for success and failure) and reflects a growing *New Puritanism* in Labour thinking. Despite Labour's superficial concern with inequalities of opportunity, it's policy programme is founded upon a belief, ultimately, in the individual responsibility of schools, teachers, students and parents. Parents, for example, are positioned as 'partners' in the rhetoric, but it is a partnership dictated by Government and reflecting deep-seated notions of working class and ethnic minority cultural deficit (cf. Gillborn 1997b; Vincent & Tomlinson 1997).

The second, and related theme, concerns a paradigm of school change and education reform that is highly technicist, sociologically naive and, in its consequences, deeply regressive. One of Labour's first innovations in Government was to establish within the Department for Education and Employment a unit that would play a vital role in developing and implementing its policy: the *'School Standards and Effectiveness Unit'*. Again, the title is significant: the inevitable repetition of 'standards' further evidences the continuity with Conservative discourse, but the second part of the couplet is equally important. The Unit's head, Professor Michael Barber, is a leading English writer on 'School Effectiveness', a prominent and growing school of work that has attracted considerable controversy. In particular, many sociological critics have attacked the naive basis of many school effectiveness studies, which seek to identify (recipe-style) the elements that predispose a school towards being more or less 'effective'. School effectiveness research is built on the assumption that it is possible, statistically, to reveal the 'value added' by an institution by controlling for differences in student population, resourcing and so on. In response, it has been argued that such work sanitises racism, sexism, poverty and disablist practices by regarding them as '"noise" — as "outside" background factors' that can be isolated statistically and then 'stripped away so that the researcher can concentrate on the important domain of school factors' (Angus 1993: 341). Barber's unquestioning belief in such an approach can be gleaned from the following quotation, taken from an article entitled, *'Why simply tackling poverty is not enough':*

> '20 years' worth of research evidence ... shows incontrovertibly that while, of course, social factors are important, school can and does make a difference. ... Not only have they [school effectiveness researchers] demonstrated how much difference school makes (enough, in some cases, to be the deciding factor in relation to success and failure in future life) but also what the characteristics of the more successful schools are ...
>
> The challenge for education policy is clear. Now we know what makes a good school, a good department and a good teacher, how do we create the conditions which will make it happen in every school and classroom in the country?' (Barber 1997: 17)

The aim is worthy, but such an unreflective and uncritical reading of the current literature is clearly implicated in a line of analysis that pays lip-service to 'social factors', then proceeds to behave as if such things are really little more than excuses for incompetence (by schools/teachers), lack of effort (by students) and/or bad parenting (by carers and communities). Such perspectives, perhaps unwittingly, come to embody what Michael Apple and Christopher Zenk call 'a *pathological* analysis' (1996: 69), that is, identifying the reasons for exclusion and inequality within the very people who suffer the inequalities.

Despite a change in Government, therefore, the overall shape of English education reform remains much the same. A constellation of separate, but related, measures have produced a particular and negative situation where the drive to 'raise standards' has set up a series of interlocking constraints acting upon schools, teachers and students. In the remainder of this paper we seek to explore how such developments are translating into increased processes of selection and social exclusion at the school level.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF REFORM: the national picture

Overall measures of examination success would seem, initially, to support Conservative claims that the reforms have shown tangible improvements in educational standards: between 1988 and 1997 the proportion of 16 year olds attaining at least five higher grade GCSE passes rose from around 30 per cent to just over 45 per cent (an increase by around half as many again). Indeed, the annual performance tables have reported a national increase in the proportion of students reaching this benchmark level in every year of publication. However, there is increasing quantitative evidence to suggest that these gains have not been shared equally among the student population.

In a review article focusing on examination performance between 1992 and 1995, Geraldine Hackett (1995) noted that in a significant number of LEAs an increase in the proportion of students reaching five or more higher grade passes had been accompanied by an increase in the proportion ending their compulsory schooling with *no* pass grades (at any level).[7] Similarly, there are signs that students in the lowest achieving part of the performance spectrum have shared least in the overall increases (Doe 1995). The gap between schools performing around the top and bottom quartile point has also increased.[8]

A recent review of more than a decade's research on the achievements of ethnic minority students in England also highlighted causes for concern. Although definitive national statistics are not available, a survey of LEAs (covering more than half the minority population) revealed that in some areas the gap has widened between the average performance of the ethnic groups that historically have performed at the highest and lowest rates locally (Gillborn & Gipps 1996: 21-23). In many cases the highest and lowest performing groups are white students and their Black (African Caribbean) peers respectively.[9] The situation is especially serious for Black young people: in Birmingham in 1995, for example, twice the proportion of white students achieved five higher grade passes compared with their African Caribbean peers (Gillborn & Gipps 1996: 33).

Taken together, therefore, these data suggest that beneath the superficial gains indicated by a year-on-year improvement against the benchmark criterion (five A-to-C passes) in some areas there has been a widening of inequality; between students, schools and, in some cases, ethnic groups*. Building on detailed qualitative research in a London Comprehensive School, the rest of this paper examines the school-based process that might explain such developments.

AT THE CHALK FACE: the reforms in one secondary school

'A school now lives or dies on its results.' (Pastoral Head of Year)

In this section of the paper we explore how the demand to 'raise standards' (embedded in Governmental education policy) has been experienced and responded to at the level of school policy and practice. In doing this, we draw on data from one co-educational, multi-ethnic, London secondary school which we call Taylor Comprehensive.[10] Taking such a case study approach allows us to tease out the multiple perspectives that teaching staff hold concerning these demands and highlights the ways in which competing and contradictory perspectives, and subsequent responses, are negotiated, glossed over, or left in contradiction. We are left with a picture of a school operating in responsive mode, desperately suturing together a range of practices in an attempt to 'succeed' within the definition of 'standards' laid down by Government. Furthermore, we begin to identify which sectors of the school population are reaping the benefits of this drive for and which are being 'de-selected'.

The A-to-C Economy

We have already shown how higher grade (A*- to-C grade) GCSE passes have become the dominant criterion for measuring success/failure in the English educational system. Our argument is that these developments have created an *A-to-C economy* in schools where 'the bottom line' is judged in relation to how many higher grade passes are achieved and, more specifically, what proportion of students meet the benchmark level of at least *five* such passes.[11] The economic metaphor is especially fitting: it encapsulates how participants, both teachers and students, experience the current situation (as competition); how they talk about it (where grades are the 'currency' of education); and how high are the stakes (survival for the school/access to education and labour markets for young people). The A-to-C economy has been accepted, although not necessarily embraced, by many key members of staff at Taylor, most prominently by the Headteacher and the Deputy Headteacher responsible for the curriculum.

In an internally circulated document[12] the Headteacher identifies the school's main task as follows:

> '[to] prepare pupils for the demands of the GCSE. All else at KS4 [Key Stage 4, i.e. the last two years of compulsory schooling] is subordinate to this supreme and unavoidable constraint.' (Headteacher)

The description of the GCSE as a 'constraint' could be taken to suggest that the Headteacher does not wholly subscribe to its 'supremacy'. Nevertheless, it is one that is perceived as 'unavoidable' and as such must be engaged with and responded to. Consequently, the Headteacher asserts that:

> 'the best thing that we can do for our pupils is to strive to get the greatest possible proportion achieving that five high-grade benchmark.' (Headteacher)

In this way the externally-defined criterion upon which the school will be judged (in the league tables) has come to be seen as the criterion by which the school itself should be measuring its worth to its students. Higher pass grades, therefore, have become everything to the school — *this is the A-to-C economy.*

A blanket acceptance of the A-to-C economy, however, is not reflected across all members of the senior management team (SMT), which comprises the Head and two Deputies. Most notable in her resistance to this economy is the Deputy Headteacher responsible for pastoral care (i.e. the social, as opposed to academic, aspect of education). She rejects it due to what she sees as an inherent bias and argues for a (re)definition of 'success' which is far wider reaching:

> 'Success for some children can look to other people as minimal but everyone achieves success at different levels. So we don't emphasize or try to say — and it makes me so cross when I do hear people saying it — the emphasis on A-to-C. I mean, I'm not onto mine with the emphasis on getting GCSE A-to-C. But let's face it, there are a lot of children — and we are a fully comprehensive school — who work their hearts out and just will never reach a C. But for them an F is an achievement, an E is an achievement, for some a G is an achievement. So there's this risk of — because of the whole publicity as well surrounding the five A-to-Cs — the importance of five A-to-Cs. It's keeping the balance right along the way, that keeping people's self esteem and self concept, it's important to keep those high.' (Pastoral Deputy Headteacher)

It is interesting to note that this broader definition of success (extended to include lower GCSE grades D-to-G) is coupled with a concern for students' 'self esteem and self concept': concerns that we might expect to be expressed by the SMT representative with responsibility for pastoral care. However, such dissent (from what is often portrayed as a 'realist' or 'pragmatist' acceptance of the A-to-C economy) is not shared amongst other members of staff with a pastoral responsibility. One Head of Year, who has a pastoral responsibility for all students in a particular age grade (and who works to the Pastoral Deputy), certainly does not echo her views. When speaking of success he reflects the positions held by the Headteacher and Curricular Deputy Headteacher:

> 'The most important one is the number of kids getting five As-to-Cs (...) So a school has to be seen to have above the national average in those areas.' (Head of Year 9)

The dissenting voice of the Pastoral Deputy, therefore, has limited support within the school and, as we examine further in the next section, enjoys little influence.

The Curriculum and the A-to-C Economy

The demands of the A-to-C economy are such that the school is now re-examining issues that were previously taken-for-granted. In Taylor Comprehensive, for example, a review was recently completed that questioned the size and scope of the curriculum available to students in the final two years of their compulsory education (known as Key Stage 4). A group of senior teachers produced a number of possibilities for change, from which the Headteacher eventually made a unilateral choice. The *most significant change made to the Key Stage 4 curriculum was a reduction in the standard number of GCSEs available for study* (from 11.5 to 10 GCSEs per student). This decrease is described by the Headteacher as 'lightening the present load', implying that the interests of, an ostensibly homogenous, student population are being foregrounded. However, on closer inspection this claim becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. The service that such a decision offers the school, in terms of facilitating the A-to-C economy, seems more obvious. Furthermore, the extent to which 'lightening the load' actually benefits a differentiated student population is open to question.

The way this decision serves the school, in terms of the demand for higher grade passes, becomes evident in the Headteachers 'pragmatist' justification of the move: which he expresses in terms of 'managing' a curriculum that will reap the desired examination outcomes:

> 'As the GCSE is the recognised 16-plus qualification there has to be a balance between the most desirable broad curriculum and that which is manageable in a finite working week in the light of the demands of the examinations.' (Headteacher)

The reduction in GCSEs per student allows a reallocation of timetable shares, thereby affording individual curricular areas greater levels of contact-time with students (in which to better prepare them for examination). The simultaneous impact upon students can be understood in two, competing ways: first, as a reduction in the number of subjects *demanding* students' study time (thereby improving the chance of 'success' in the remaining subjects) and/or, second, as a reduction in the total number of GCSEs in which students have the *opportunity* for 'success'. These competing understandings of the impact upon students will be returned to shortly. First, however, we explore the ways in which this reallocation of timetable shares was enacted.

Shares of the newly released teaching time were not spread evenly across all curricular areas. Rather, particular curricular areas were favoured. Government rhetoric (both before and after the switch from Conservative to Labour administrations) places special weight on the

importance of *'the basics'* and success in the so-called 'core' National Curriculum subjects (English, mathematics and science). Additionally, there is a strong belief among staff in Taylor Comprehensive that OFSTED (the national school inspectorate) place special emphasis on the proportion of students attaining higher grade passes in the 'core' subjects. Consequently, it is these subjects that have been targeted for increased allocation of timetable shares in the school. The Headteacher outlines the purposes of this approach stating that 'the national benchmark for GCSE achievement is five A*-C grades, but within this, performance at English language and maths is key'. While the head goes on to acknowledge that the core subjects 'do not feature [separately] in the published league tables' he asserts that 'increasing the time allotted to these three subjects must be one of our strategies for improving their results', a strategy that 'should benefit our results in the GCSE and in any alternative examinations the pupils might take in these subjects' (Headteacher).

This is not a case of the demands of the league tables *competing* with the demands for such grades in the core subjects. Rather, it is a strategy that aims to fulfil these two demands *simultaneously* by making them synonymous. This aim is clearly expressed by the Curricular Deputy:

> 'There's a benchmark, it's not part of the league tables but there's a benchmark that OFSTED use about the percentages of kids who get the three — Maths, Science, and English (...) My argument is that if — I mean all our kids do double English and Double Science — and in fact if they get English Language, Lit, Maths and Double Science they've got their five A-to-Cs. And really we should be concentrating on that.'
> (Curricular Deputy Headteacher)

As such, the 'balance' of a 'desirable broad curriculum' becomes subordinate to the demands of public and bureaucratic performance indicators, namely, the A-to-C economy as fulfilled through the core subjects.

The costs and benefits of this reduction in the curriculum for students is of particular interest. The Headteacher presents this school level change as instigated by the Government, through its official review of the National Curriculum (Dearing 1994). He suggests that it will effect students differentially on the basis of 'ability' and, specifically, that the 'more able' will remain unscathed: 'One can be sure that any narrowing of the curriculum now seen across the country's secondary schools will leave the more able largely unaffected. It will be the less able whose school experience will suffer' (Headteacher). Yet this projection is contested at the school level; at public meetings, parents' evenings and by letter, it has been the parents of the students defined as 'more able' who have expressed concerns about the reduction:

> 'There's been a lot of feedback from parents, especially of very able kids, saying they're disappointed that choice has been limited and that kids have had to make, you know, a choice (...) They'd have liked, I think, to have the extra subject choice really.'
> (Head of Year 9)

It is unclear on what basis the Headteacher predicts which 'type' of student will be negatively effected by this change. The objective of the school is explicit — to share a greater amount of time amongst a smaller number of subjects. As we show in greater detail below, the dominant understanding of 'ability' in the school is as a relatively fixed and generalizable individual capacity that varies considerably between students (and social groups). One interpretation of this view of differential abilities is such that it should be the *'less able'* students who benefit most from this

reduction in terms of examination outcome. For example, a Head of Faculty states that the curricular review 'quite rightly questioned the issues of pupil workload and the resulting stress'. She suggests that 'the kids were doing too many GCSEs, they were overloaded, cutting the number of GCSEs is designed to get more kids to the [five A-to-C] threshold.' If the curricular review is intended to increase the percentage of students attaining five higher grade passes, then it is clear that, within the school's understanding of 'ability', it is not the '*most able*' students (who are already attaining these grades) who are being targeted.

The school's understanding of fixed and differentiated abilities, therefore, *infers* that it is the 'less able' who will be the key beneficiaries of a reduction in GCSEs: this is explicit in discussions concerning a proposition to shrink the curriculum still further for the 'less able'.[13] While the Headteacher asserts that there should be 'no watered down or "sink" courses reserved for the less able', he immediately goes on to explore exactly this possibility:

> 'A suggestion aimed at raising the achievement of less able pupils was that they should be given double time in key subjects. Such a measure would surely raise the attainment of some of these pupils, but at the expense of significantly narrowing their curriculum unless some subjects were studied as short courses in order to release time. It is arguable that such a step would not break from the principle of the common curriculum as all areas of experience would be included albeit with different time shares. (...) This is a development which may yet be considered.' (Headteacher)

While such a further shrinking of the curriculum has not yet been implemented, the implications of this possibility have already been raised by some teachers. One Head of Faculty has specific concerns about the predicted nature of such a move, particularly in relation to *which* 'key' subjects students would study:

> 'There is an argument to take the least able and teach them five subjects — there would be much bigger problems over elite and popular subjects, and equity of access to the curriculum. Which five subjects would it be? English, Maths and Science.
> [With sarcasm] That would be an exciting curricular option!' (Head of Faculty)

Furthermore, while shrinking the curriculum of these students has yet to become part of official school policy, it is already part of *unofficial* practice within the school:

> 'there have been kids for whom the curriculum has become so inaccessible, through various reasons, that in order to get them to concentrate on say five subjects we might say — I wouldn't say to a kid "you mustn't come in on Monday morning", they would have to be in on Monday morning but they would be doing something, you know, they would be working with me, or (...) we'd have special arrangements for them — but at the end of the day realistically, if they don't come in on Monday morning ...
> (...) this school has a policy that it's not done until after December in year 11. A kid is not officially withdrawn from exams until after the mocks exams in year 11. I think unofficially it still happens (...) There have been cases where we've done that, I have to say, unofficially.' (Head of Year 9)

While the official reasons for shrinking a student's curriculum can be 'various', therefore, it is interesting to note that the number of remaining examination subjects is again identified as *five* —

conveniently retaining the possibility of the student attaining the benchmark of five higher grade passes (and thereby contributing to the school's overall performance in the league tables).

In the school's curriculum review, therefore, we see the acknowledgement of the crucial importance of five higher grade passes, particularly if these can be comprised of core subjects: *the reduction in the number of GCSEs available to each student is an explicit attempt to improve performance within the terms of the A-to-C economy*. Taken together, these goals and strategies indicate the extent to which higher grade passes *in excess* of the crucial benchmark of five per student become superfluous to requirements within the terms of the league tables. Whether the parents of 'able' students (who may have attained higher grade passes in all of the subjects available prior to the review) will be satisfied with this reduction remains to be seen. Early responses have been critical but have not forced a retreat: more serious problems would be posed should any parents decide to withdraw such students from the school roll. Clearly, the 'most able' students are a vital resource to the school, but as the curricular review and its aftermath demonstrate, they can be seen to place demands upon the school that are at odds with, that is *in excess* of, the demands of Government and the educational bureaucracy. Earlier we introduced the notion of *triage* as a means of conceptualizing how Taylor Comprehensive is responding to the discourse of 'standards' and the disciplinary mechanisms involved in school league tables and related educational reforms. Here we see the first element of educational triage: resource allocations are managed so that additional attention is limited once it is clear that someone will be all right. It may be painful, but the situation is worse for those designated as beyond hope.

The school is trying tacitly to negotiate a settlement with 'able' students (and their parents): persuading them that less stress and more time in each subject will produce better grades. As the following sections demonstrate, however, 'able' students (thought to be well on the way to attaining a clutch of higher grade passes) are not the constituency receiving most attention within the new realities of the A-to-C economy and the educational triage it promotes.

'Under-achievers' and the D-to-C conversion

The school's curriculum review (outlined above) encompasses all students during the last two years of compulsory schooling (KS4). Additionally, however, Taylor Comprehensive has also adopted specific interventions that target particular groups of students.

Schools face a series of interconnected demands within, and beyond, the A-to-C economy. It is clear at this point that the central goal of the school has become to maximize the proportion of its students attaining five higher grade GCSE passes. However, there is no stable target quota at which to aim. As we have already noted, schools are expected to live up to a series of ongoing and inter-related demands: year-on-year improvement in the percentage of students attaining higher grade passes; attainment of higher grade passes equal to, or in excess of, the national average; and an ever improving league table position in relation to other schools in the LEA. As such, it is all but impossible for the examination results of any given school to be 'good enough' — a school might only be credited with having fully attained to its maximum potential if 100 per cent of its students perform to the benchmark of five higher grade passes — a target attainment level approximately twice the current national average.

In response to these ongoing demands, Taylor Comprehensive attempts to identify individual students, at the cusp of Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 (aged 13 to 14) and throughout the course of Key Stage 4, who are *currently expected* to attain D grade GCSE passes but who are *also* considered potential candidates to achieve one grade higher — the all important grade C. In this way, the school seeks to identify candidates for what we might call a *'D-to-C conversion'*.

Identifying 'ability' and 'under'-achievement: gender, class & 'race'

The school works with an overarching understanding of 'ability' as fixed, generalized and predictable. For these purposes the school identifies 'ability' in the first instance by tests administered shortly prior to entry (at age 11). On the basis of these tests, students are allocated to one of three 'ability bands', with band 1 being the highest.[14] According to the model, a school with a representative ('comprehensive') intake, which this school seeks and generally achieves, will have a population comprised of 25 per cent band 1 students, 50 per cent band 2 students, and 25 per cent band 3 students. No precise relationship between 'ability', banding on entry to school, SATs levels, tests results, ongoing classroom and homework performance, and potential GCSE outcomes is offered by the school. However, when teachers talk about 'under-achieving' students, it is clear that ideas about several indicators are in play simultaneously. For example, notions of 'ability' and gender interact in important ways and the precise consequences for different groups of students is not always as clear as first described by senior teachers. The Headteacher suggests that under-achievement is found most commonly amongst *boys* from *band 2*:

> 'severely under-achieving is something we have seen among pupils of all levels of ability, our biggest concentration of such problems being among boys who entered the school in [ability band] 2.' (Headteacher)

Turning to the description of 'under-achievers' offered by one Head of Year, however, we see a somewhat different picture of which students might be allocated to this group. *Boys* are once again focused upon, but issues of *social class* and *'race'* are also brought into play. The notion of boys' under-achievement is given authority and validity through recourse to national examination patterns and prominent coverage in the popular media (e.g. Woodhead 1996).[15] However, the ways in which ability and identity categories are drawn in and out of the frame indicate a sense of contradiction and confusion. In the following quotation, for example, the teacher switches continually between class and ethnic categories:

> 'And boys generally are under achieving. White middle class boys. (...) And black Afro-Caribbean boys. I think there's been a fair amount of energy put into the problem, you know the challenge of black middle class, um, black Afro-Caribbean boys, but I think white working class boys have been kind of a little bit left behind. (...) I am very aware that boys do under-achieve (...) of those 23 boys [whose carers did not attend parents' evening] they're nearly all under-achievers, they're nearly all middle, um, working class white boys, I think there were two Afro-Caribbean boys in that group. The rest were white working class boys with poor attendance whose parents we very rarely see, for whatever reasons.' (Head of Year 9)

As can be seen from the above statement, the *gender* of under-achievers remains stable while their *'race'* and *social class* is shifting. The class background of under-achieving white boys is frequently identified as being middle class and then changed (corrected?) to working class. In addition, a racialized understanding of social class also appears to be expressed. The social class of white boys, while unstable, is continually expressed. However, the social class of African Caribbean boys is all but absent — 'Blackness' appears to act as an homogenous identifier which does not require further elaboration (or one in which social class is understood as self-evident)(cf. Mac an Ghaill 1989). Ultimately it seems that African Caribbean boys are assumed to be uniformly classed: it is only in the case of white students that social class emerges as a key axis of differentiation in the teachers' eyes.

The situation becomes increasing complex (and revealing) when teachers are invited to give concrete examples of these general patterns of experience. The movement from the general to the particular can reveal processes of which the teacher may be only partially aware: in this case, the Head of Year offers an example of an individual boy from year 9 who has been identified as under-achieving. While it was not claimed that this boy was necessarily representative of all under-achievers, it is interesting to note that the example concerns *a white, middle class boy from ability band 1*, who is deemed to be performing to the level of ability band 2 and therefore under-achieving in relation to the school's expectation of a band 1 student:

> 'It's a bit subjective really. But it means, for instance, in science, say, that he's coming up to taking science SATs and they're undergoing science assessments which, potentially, they could be at level 6 if they're at the very top, level 6 or level 5 in science. I would expect this boy to be somewhere in level 5 or 6 because he's intellectually, you know, one of the top echelon. He's actually performing at below 4. So I picked that up from his science reports. Now if that's happening across the board then, and I know it is because I've looked at his books. So I know, as an English teacher, what a year 9 student achieving level 5, say, which is the higher end of the National Curriculum, what he should be writing and the kind of level of his writing and the level of his oral work. And that boy is not producing it, in terms of effort, it's just not going down on paper, and I think it is mainly effort.' (Head of Year 9)

This example provides us with an insight into the conceptual frameworks within which the school is operating. In terms of 'ability', we can see that attaining a particular test result in year 6 (aged 10 or 11) leads to an ability band 1 classification in year 7 (when the student enters Taylor Comprehensive aged 11). Subsequently, particular SATs levels are expected in year 9 (when the student is aged 13 or 14). These test results are compared against professional judgements concerning the standard of school work expected from students in 'the top echelon'. Such students are assumed to be capable of attaining A*-to-C grades in GCSE examinations. Hence, while this ability band 1 boy is *under*-achieving (in relation to teachers' expectations for his ability band), a peer classified as ability band 2 performing *to the same level* in their SATs would be deemed to be achieving appropriately to their potential (that is, *not* under-achieving). The initial judgement of ability in year 6, therefore, is taken to be an accurate indicator of overall academic potential. The year 6 tests, and their subsequent institutionalization in different ability bands, are an important factor in relation to the nature and extent of support that students' receive subsequently. *The system assumes, therefore, that the year 6 tests accurately measure 'ability' as a fixed and generalized characteristic*: fixed insofar as a student deemed 'above average' in year 6 should always be 'above average'; and generalizable in that the year 6 tests are assumed to demonstrate ability across all subjects. This view of 'ability', its measurement and consequences is especially worrying in view of the historic use of IQ tests as a means of institutionalizing racism via supposedly 'fair' and 'scientific' means (cf. Gould 1981; Kamin 1974; Lee & Slaughter-Defoe 1995). Such tests typically produce skewed results such that Black — and most other ethnic minority — populations appear somewhat less 'gifted'. When we analysed the distribution of students across Taylor's most commonly used 'ability' test ('Verbal Reasoning'), we found that in comparison with their white peers, Black students were much less likely to be categorized in the top ability band.[16] This means that, despite lower average attainments, Black students' performance is likely more often to be read as in line with their lesser 'ability'; consequently, as we have already shown, when teachers give examples of students most likely to benefit from additional support, it is white students, not their Black counterparts, who are proposed. This is a particularly cruel irony in view of the destructive force of the 'under-achiever' label that has been traditionally

attached to Black students in Britain (cf. Gillborn & Gipps 1996; Reay & Mirza 1997; Troyna 1984). In this way, the school's interpretation and application of its chosen 'ability' test may act further to institutionalise racism in terms of teacher expectations.

It should also be noted that while the Headteacher asserts that under-achievers are primarily band 2 boys, and the Head of Year appears to have the intention of suggesting that they are primarily white working class boys, the student in the proffered example is a white, middle class boy from ability band 1. In the particular instance that the teacher chooses to use as an exemplar, therefore, strategies to achieve D-to-C conversions are reworked from an imagined target-clientele of working class students in ability band 2, and refocused (via the particular definition of under-achievement) to highlight a middle class student in band 1. While the ability and class nature of the clientele may have shifted upward, however, the ethnic and gendered character of the target group remain stable: white boys.

The racial and social class dimensions of 'under-achievement' (as defined by the school) go largely remarked and unexplained by teachers: however, its gendered nature *is* discussed. Extending the student deficit code to families, one Head of Year suggests the existence of a connection between boys' under-achievement and parental interest — a connection that might be read as simultaneously indicating that these boys are positioned as being working class — and uses this once again to absolve the school of any active role in student failure by asserting 'there's a strong link between parental interest and boys'. Furthermore, when there is an acknowledgement that the school, or at least the education system more generally, might be culpable in boys' under-achievement, this is related not to current school level practice but to earlier curricular changes that are said to have disadvantaged boys:

> 'there's a lot of research that says that, you know, the curriculum has moved in the 70s and 80s when there was that whole feeling that girls needed to, we needed to address the curriculum in comprehensive schools for girls. And then they did skew it slightly then. (...) But, the curriculum is now perhaps more girl biased, I don't know, I don't.'
> (Head of Year 9)

It is interesting that in this teachers' commentary on curricular change the pre- and post- National Curriculum eras are conflated, with pre-National Curriculum practices presented as continuing to impact within the very curricular reorganization that was, at least in part, designed to undo those changes associated with the 'progressivist' project (cf. Ball 1994). This teacher lends validity to his claim that the current curriculum favours girls through reference to 'a lot of research' in contrast to the 'feeling' which led to the earlier moves to enhance girls' access to the curriculum. Juxtaposing the researched based 'facts' of boys' current curricular disadvantage, with the implicit questioning of the basis upon which earlier efforts to improve girls' access to the curriculum were made, acts to validate the subsequent claim that it is this which has led to boys' under-achievement. Hence, even where educational practices are identified as being a partial cause of boys' under-achievement, it is not current practice that is responsible. Rather, it is the supposedly over zealous changes of earlier progressivists (and by extension even girls themselves) who are at fault. Despite the contradictions within the analysis offered by this teacher, it operates to give further credence to the category of 'under-achieving boys'.

These assertions of under-achievement act to validate the school's focus upon, and demand for, D-to-C conversions. Through the practice of identifying students as under-achieving, the school avoids the appearance that it is attempting to get 'natural' grade D students to convert their grades to Cs: a move that would, of course, deny the very notion of 'ability' enshrined in the school's actions. Rather, within the dominant view of fixed and generalized ability, the school sees

itself as attempting to get 'natural' A-to-C grade students to increase their performance so as to fulfil their intellectual potential.

As such, implicit to the school's notion of 'under-achievement' is an understanding of 'ability' as stable and predictable, while also being mutable enough to be unfulfilled or unmet. It is already clear that targeting students on the D/C borderline intersects conveniently with the league table demands for higher grade passes. The key to understanding the iniquitous effects of these processes lies in the nature of the interventions made with appropriate 'under-achieving' (but supposedly capable) students. The understanding of 'ability' mobilized by the school enables those students thought to be most likely to make the D-to-C conversion (that is those students considered most valuable to the league tables) to receive particular attention. In practice, it is an approach that embodies familiar biases against students of working class background and Black young people (regardless of class).

These processes represent a second element in the process we have called educational triage: the school is seeking to identify those for whom additional resources might prove the difference between life and death/success and failure. In this instance, however, it is clear that the professional judgements which identify suitable 'cases for treatment' are deeply scarred by social class, gendered and racialized perspectives on the health/ability/potential of students.

The 'Achievement Initiative': working with under-achievers

Since the 1995/96 academic year, one strategy by which Taylor Comprehensive has sought D-to-C conversions has been through an *'Achievement Initiative'*. The main component of this initiative is the establishment of *'Achievement Groups'* in which final year students (selected by their Head of Year) are mentored by individual teachers and given additional support and assistance in preparation for the GCSE examinations. Selected students are invited to attend these groups, which meet outside school time and are led by members of the teaching staff on a voluntary basis. It is interesting to note that the nature of support offered, and the selection of students by a senior member of pastoral staff, indicates that in regard to these Achievement Groups *the pastoral can be seen to be 'ministering' to the demands of the academic.*[17] In addition, an indicator of the importance attached to this initiative is the status of the teachers involved; in addition to some year 11 tutors, the volunteers also include the Headteacher, both Deputy Headteachers and the Head of Year 11.

For the Headteacher, the express aim of these groups is to raise the number of students attaining five higher grade passes. We have already seen his assertion that: 'the best thing that we can do for our pupils is to strive to get the greatest possible proportion achieving that five high-grade benchmark': he goes on to say 'In this regard, our Achievement Initiative is being tested in its first year of operation'. A recent Head of the Year 11 makes it clear that this was the initial aim of the Achievement Initiative and remains an important aspect of it. However, in selecting students from her year group, she has broadened the scope of the Achievement Groups to include students *from across the perceived ability range*. Furthermore, she states that she selected students to ensure that the groups had an equal gender balance:

> 'They're kids who are under-achieving (...) it tends to be across the curriculum, (...) on my list it was mainly kids who are not getting five A-to-Cs, but there are other kids who are under-achieving, and kids with special needs who'll get a little extra attention, and I tried to make it equal boys and girls (...) the intention is to improve their grades, it's not just about A-to-Cs (...) to me there's more to achievement than five A-to-Cs.'
> (Head of Year 11)

Because of this teachers' particular concerns with equality issues, the actual membership of these Achievement Groups appears on the surface to be relatively equitable, i.e. no particular groups of students (in terms of class, gender or ethnicity) dominate. However, a more telling measure of the processes at work here may be the eventual *outcomes* of the initiative rather than the composition of the groups. As we have noted, some teachers are not only aware of inequalities in the identification of likely candidates for D-to-C conversion, but are also prepared (so far as is possible given their location in the staff hierarchy) to modify (subvert?) the systems. It is equally clear, however, that such individuals are in the minority and that their views (of under-achievement and the school's priorities) are out-of-step with the dominant position that currently informs most academic and pastoral moves in the school.

Our initial analysis of outcomes in the school suggests that of all the students included in Achievement Groups, the majority of those who finally achieved the benchmark of five or more higher grade passes had in fact already been predicted to do so. Of these students only a minority were Black and/or in receipt of free school meals (a crude proxy for those in poverty). In total, only two Achievement Group students achieved the benchmark against teachers' previous predictions. Even here, where it might reasonably be suggested that the initiative had helped support a 'D-to-C conversion', both beneficiaries were white boys. These outcomes seem to confirm that the Achievement Initiative, despite laudable intentions, does little to equalize opportunities in the school, indeed, it may be implicated in further cementing existing inequalities.

CONCLUSIONS

> **triage** n. of action f. *trier* to pick, cull ... 1. The action of assorting according to quality... 2. The assignment of degrees of urgency to wounds or illness in order to decide the order of suitability of treatment.
> (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

In this paper we have begun to explore how one London secondary school has responded to the pressures it perceives as a result of recent education reform. We are still analyzing the full range of data produced by this project, both in Taylor Comprehensive and an additional case study school (not considered here). Any final conclusions must, therefore, be treated with due caution. Nevertheless, the data presented here suggest tentative conclusions of considerable importance in relation to the re-making of educational inequalities within a changing (increasingly fractured, increasingly exclusionary and increasingly surveillant) educational system.

The national reforms have created a web of intermeshing constraints and demands upon secondary schools, all trading on the discourse of 'standards'. One of the most powerful consequences has been the development of what we have termed the *'A-to-C economy'*. Many facets of the school are now driven by the need to maximize performance in relation to specific criteria, most importantly the proportion of final year students attaining at least five higher grade (A*-C) passes in GCSE examinations. It is difficult to overstate the importance attached to this 'benchmark' indicator: it's influence is such, for example, that the school has reduced the number of separate subjects in which students can enter GCSE examinations. Despite the protestations of 'able' students and their parents (who would prefer to maximize the number of higher grade passes) the school now enforces a situation where students spend more time in fewer subjects. The official rationale includes reference to levels of student stress and available resources but the driving factor is the need to maximize the number of students gaining *five* higher grade passes. In the A-to-C economy more than five higher grades are somewhat superfluous.

In its attempts to respond to this new situation the school has tacitly adopted a model of 'ability' that is at odds with the progressivist rhetoric of its 'comprehensive' ethos and enshrines the most simple, regressive and potentially divisive understanding of intelligence (as a fixed and generalized characteristic that can be measured accurately and used to predict future performance). This understanding is operationalized through a range of strategies, including 'Achievement Groups', meant to target and support students designated as 'under-achieving' in relation to their supposed ability. The processes embodied within these strategies, however, may replicate wider inequalities of opportunity within the school more generally. By this point many students are fulfilling the low levels of achievement 'predicted' by earlier judgements of their 'ability': these young people are seen as beyond any of the 'D-to-C conversion' strategies, as practically 'un-treatable'.

Perhaps most importantly, the various developments at the school level seem almost incessantly to threaten deeper and more extensive inequalities of opportunity and outcome between groups of students positioned in relation to 'ability', social class, gender and ethnic origin. There is some way to go in our analysis of the realities of life in Taylor Comprehensive. Increasingly, however, we are minded of a model of educational provision based on the principles of battlefield triage. In the heat of battle medical personnel are faced with horrendous decisions in their attempts to prioritize those in need of immediate medical assistance. The overriding goal is to identify those wounded badly enough to require urgent treatment, but not so severely injured that survival is unlikely whatever attention they receive. Some wounds are painful but not life threatening: such personnel have to wait. Some people have such severe wounds that, given the constraints of the battlefield, they are unlikely to survive even with additional attention: they are allowed to die. These decisions would be unthinkable under normal circumstances, but are made in response to a prioritization of perceived need in relation to current circumstances and finite resources. Comparable decisions are being made as teachers attempt to ensure their school's survival within the educational market place. English secondary schools currently operate in a context where the requirement to 'raise standards' has become all powerful. Under a Labour Government, with roots in the socialist struggles of organised workers, there was briefly hope of change (after almost two decades of Thatcherite reforms). If anything, however, the mantra of 'raising standards' has become even louder and its enforcement even more brutal. 'Standards' are judged publicly against a narrow, elitist and closely policed set of definitions; most importantly, the five A-to-C benchmark. The demands of the A-to-C economy are such that schools now think (and practice) what would previously have been unthinkable. Taylor Comprehensive is urgently trying to identify and make interventions with those students who, with additional attention, might contribute to the all-important proportion of five A*-to-C passes. Students who seem destined for even greater levels of success can be left relatively unattended; their interests and perspectives are no longer a priority. Concurrently, those deemed unlikely to achieve the benchmark, even with additional support, must be sacrificed in the harsh realities of educational triage. Our initial analysis of developments at the school-level suggest that the casualties are likely overwhelmingly to be drawn from the ranks of the already excluded and marginalized.

Finally, it could be argued that Taylor Comprehensive is atypical. Perhaps, for example, Taylor faces especially stiff local competition, maybe its exam results have been poor, prompting unusually fierce measures to 'raise standards' quickly. In fact, the opposite would seem to be the case. The school enjoys a good reputation locally and consistently appears in the school league tables as the highest achieving of all state funded comprehensives in the borough. It is a measure of the disciplinary power of the A-to-C economy that despite all this, and contrary to a conscious ethos of social inclusion, Taylor Comprehensive has adopted an approach to education reminiscent of battlefield triage; selective, painful and destructive.

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Key to transcripts

(...)	piece of talk edited
italic	original emphasis
underline	our emphasis

Notes

1 *Times Educational Supplement*, 18 April 1997, p. 6.

2 Within its first year of Government, for example, New Labour had created a Social Exclusion Unit, to co-ordinate policy meant to achieve greater inclusivity, while simultaneously cutting the welfare benefit available to single parents (a favourite scapegoat of conservative politics on both sides of the Atlantic).

3 At the same time we have also conducted fieldwork in a Grant Maintained (GM) school: a form of school governance created by the Conservatives with the express aim of weakening Local Authority control over education. We hope ultimately to draw on both cases in a longer analysis.

4 The limits of space preclude an exhaustive analysis at this time. In order to open up the key issues, in this paper, we focus on teachers and their understandings . Students' perceptions and experiences form an equally important part of the research and will be examined in detail in future papers.

5 Although the United Kingdom is formally constituted of four countries (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales), education legislation is not common across the UK. Although there are strong similarities, education provision (and education reform) have varied between countries. Since our ethnographic data are generated in England we will focus here upon the reforms as enacted in the English system.

6 Figure 1 shows the performance table for one London borough, as reproduced in a major national newspaper. We have chosen to present Hammersmith & Fulham because in many ways the LEA is *similar* to the one that houses Taylor Comprehensive (our case study school).

7 GCSE examination results are graded A*, B, C, D, E, F, G and U (ungraded). Grades A* to C are commonly described as 'higher grade' passes and viewed as considerably more marketable than other 'pass' grades (D to G). In 60 LEAs there had been a pattern of 'overall improvement' between 1992 and 1995, i.e. relatively more students had achieved the five A-to-C benchmark level, while proportionately fewer had left school completely unqualified. In 36 LEAs, however, there was increased polarization with more achieving the five A-to-C level *and* more leaving without any pass grades (Hackett 1995).

8 In a letter to the *Times Educational Supplement* (12 January 1996, p. 23) Sir Tim Lankester (formally a senior civil servant at the Department for Education and Employment), drew on official data to argue that lower achieving schools had enjoyed the greatest improvements. He based this on the relative improvement in the percentage of students achieving at least five A*-C passes 'in schools around the bottom quartile point' and those 'around the top quartile'. The relative improvement was somewhat misleading, however, since improvement by those at the bottom quartile point was being compared with such a low starting point. In fact, the *gap* between the two sets of schools had widened: in 1993 the lower schools achieved 20.1%, the higher 55.05% (a gap of 34.95 percentage points); in 1995 the lower quartile achieved at 21.7%, the highest at 58.45% (a gap of 36.75 percentage points).

9 In this paper we use the term 'Black' to include all those groups classified in the last Census as of 'Black Caribbean', 'Black African' or 'Black Other' ethnic heritage. We also use the term 'African Caribbean' as a general descriptor for this group. In this we follow the most common practice for self-identification among the people so categorized.

10 Taylor is a large co-educational secondary school located in an Outer London Borough. The school serves students aged 11 to 18, with a sizeable proportion remaining in the 'Sixth Form' to continue their studies beyond the end of their compulsory schooling (at age 16). Most students are drawn from economically diverse local communities, including large areas of public housing but also pockets of affluence. Some students attend even though they do not live in the school's borough. Around a quarter of the school population is of minority ethnic heritage, the largest group being of African Caribbean ethnic background.

11 In referring to an 'A-to-C' economy we have not forgotten that the highest grade possible is, in fact, an A*. Rather, we are deliberately echoing teachers and students who, in their talk about grades, rarely mention the 'starred' grade explicitly.

12 All subsequent quotations of the Headteacher are drawn from this document. Unless otherwise stated all other quotations are drawn from tape recorded interviews.

13 In fact these discussions in Taylor anticipated moves now suggested by the Labour Government itself. As part of a strategy to 'raise school standards for everyone - including those children in deprived rural and inner city areas' it has been proposed that 'Education Action Zones' will be established: schools in each EAZ will be able to suspend the normal requirements of the National Curriculum and concentrate more time on 'numeracy' and 'literacy' (DfEE 1997c).

14 This band system is a legacy from the days of the now abolished Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). In Taylor the bands are theoretical, insofar as separate class groups are not formally banded by ability as has sometimes been the practice in the past (Ball 1981).

15 Following an article by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (Chris Woodhead), for example, the country's best selling daily newspaper carried a story headlined 'Great White Dopes: working-class white boys are the big failures in Britain's schools' (*The Sun*, 7 March 1996, p. 2). In fact, the best available evidence suggests that this discourse of white loss is overblown. Overall, boys of African Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic background seem less likely to attain five higher grade passes and more likely to complete their compulsory schooling without any pass grades (Gillborn & Gipps 1996). At a national level, however, there is presently a crisis discourse that presents boys (as a relatively homogenous group), but especially working class boys (regardless of ethnic divisions), as severely under-achieving (cf. DfEE 1998).

16 We followed two cohorts of students during our two years of fieldwork within Taylor: including 33 Black students and 298 white peers. Of the Black students, only two (5.6%) were placed in the top ability band: this compared with 99 (33.2%) of whites.

17 See Power (1996) for a full exploration of the historically competing, yet shifting, relationship between the pastoral and the academic. In the instance discussed here, the pastoral can be seen to have shifted into a position where it is not merely subordinate to the academic, but actually colonized by it.

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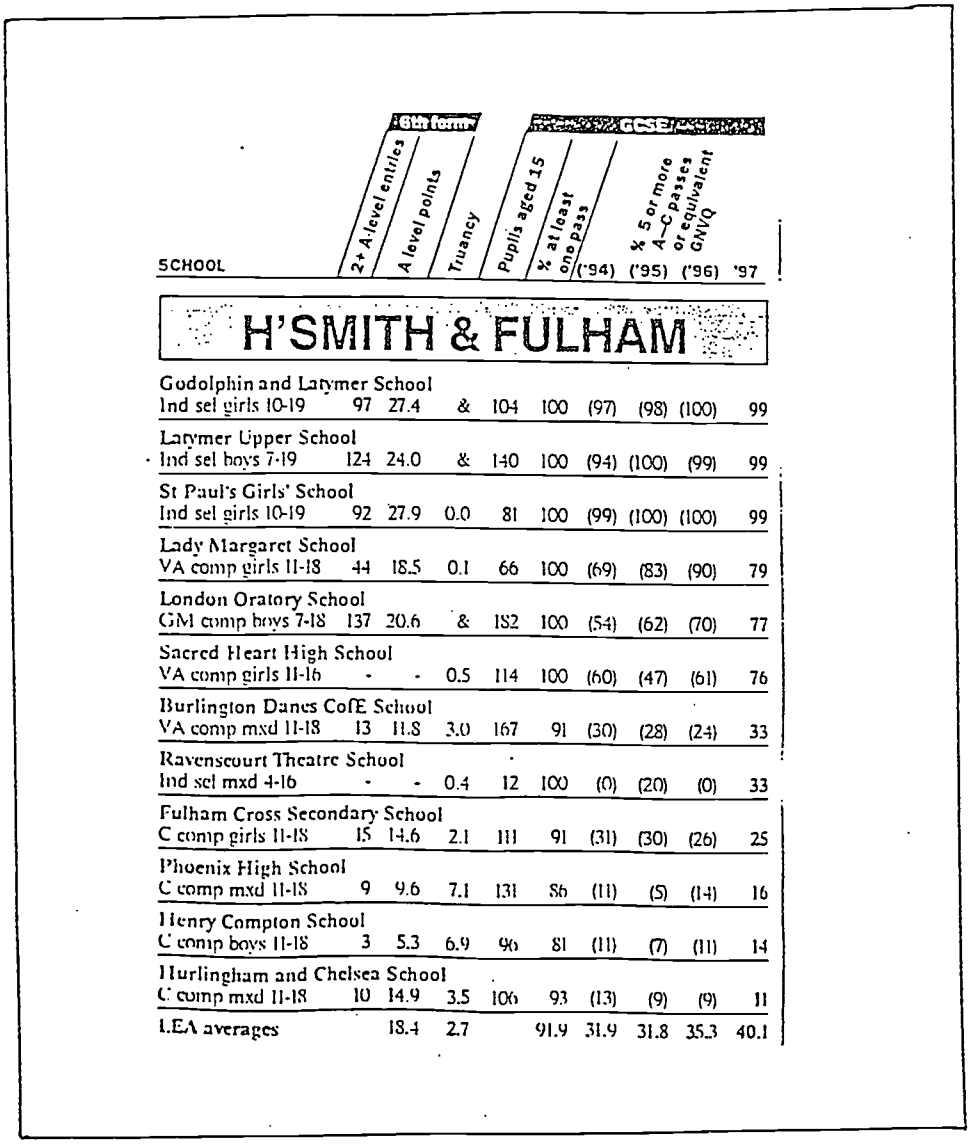
FIGURE 1. SECONDARY SCHOOL LEAGUE TABLE FOR A LONDON BOROUGH



SCHOOL	6th form: 2+ A-level entries	6th form: A level points	6th form: Truancy	GCSE: Pupils aged 15	GCSE: % at least one pass ('94)	GCSE: % 5 or more A–C passes or equivalent GNVQ ('95)	('96)	'97
H'SMITH & FULHAM								
Godolphin and Latymer School Ind sel girls 10-19	97	27.4	&	104	100	(97)	(98)	(100) 99
Latymer Upper School Ind sel boys 7-19	124	24.0	&	140	100	(94)	(100)	(99) 99
St Paul's Girls' School Ind sel girls 10-19	92	27.9	0.0	81	100	(99)	(100)	(100) 99
Lady Margaret School VA comp girls 11-18	44	18.5	0.1	66	100	(69)	(83)	(90) 79
London Oratory School GM comp boys 7-18	137	20.6	&	182	100	(54)	(62)	(70) 77
Sacred Heart High School VA comp girls 11-16	-	-	0.5	114	100	(60)	(47)	(61) 76
Burlington Danes CofE School VA comp mxd 11-18	13	11.8	3.0	167	91	(30)	(28)	(24) 33
Ravenscourt Theatre School Ind sel mxd 4-16	-	-	0.4	12	100	(0)	(20)	(0) 33
Fulham Cross Secondary School C comp girls 11-18	15	14.6	2.1	111	91	(31)	(30)	(26) 25
Phoenix High School C comp mxd 11-18	9	9.6	7.1	131	86	(11)	(5)	(14) 16
Henry Compton School C comp boys 11-18	3	5.3	6.9	96	81	(11)	(7)	(11) 14
Hurlingham and Chelsea School C comp mxd 11-18	10	14.9	3.5	106	93	(13)	(9)	(9) 11
LEA averages		18.4	2.7		91.9	31.9	31.8	35.3 40.1

source: Schools Report, *The Times*, 18 November 1997

FIGURE 2. NATIONAL 'BEST' AND 'WORST' LEAGUE TABLES FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

GCSE: TOP COMPREHENSIVES

	Percentage of pupils passing five GCSEs at A-C*
Old Swinford Hospital, Stourbridge	98
Watford Grammar School for Girls, Watford	93
Coopers' Co. and Coborn School, Upminster	92
Hertfordshire and Essex High School, Bishop's Stortford	90
Coloma Convent Girls' School, Croydon	89
Emmanuel City Technology College, Gateshead	89
Watford Grammar School for Boys, Watford	89
Sexey's School, Bruton, Somerset	88
St Albans Girls' School, St Albans	88
Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, Penrith	87
Brentwood Ursuline Convent High School, Brentwood	86
Dame Alice Owens School, Potters Bar	86
King's School, Peterborough	85
Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School, Kensington	84
Brooke Weston CTC, Corby	83
Thomas Telford School, Telford	83
Arden School, Solihull	82
Holt School, Wokingham	82
St George's School, Harpenden	81
Bishop Luffa CofE School, Chichester	80
Ecclesbourne School, Belper	80
Hutton Grammar School, Preston	80
Presdales School, Ware, Herts	80
Ranelagh School, Bracknell, Berks	80
Silverdale School, Sheffield	80
St Augustine RC (GM) Comp.School, Trowbridge	80
Bullers Wood School, Chislehurst	79
Haybridge High School, Stourbridge	79
Lady Margaret School, London	79
Langley Park School for Girls, Beckenham	79
Sacred Heart of Mary Girls' School, Upminster	79
St Aidan's CofE High School, Harrogate	79
Loreto College, St Albans	78
Thornden School, Eastleigh	78
Dixons City Technology College, Bradford	77
Harrogate Grammar School, Harrogate	77
London Oratory School, London	77
Parmiter's School, Watford	77
Wellsway School, Bristol	77
Wymondham College (GM), Wymondham	77

GCSE: HIGHEST FAILURE RATE

	Percentage of pupils with no GCSEs at any grade
Blakelaw Sch, Newcastle upon Tyne	42
Windsor HS, Salford	41
Copperfields College, Leeds	39
West Gate Community College, Newcastle upon Tyne	38
Eston Park Sch, Middlesbrough	37
Deansfield HS, Wolverhampton	36
Merrywood Sch, Bristol	36
Ashmead Sch, Reading	35
Ducie HS, Manchester	34
Shorefields Community Sch, Liverpool	34
Edward Sheerien Sch, Barnsley	33
Middleton Park HS, Leeds	33
Ridings Sch, Halifax	32
Forest Comprehensive Sch, Nottingham	31
Amy Johnson Sch, Hull	29
Kingsmeadow Sch, Gateshead	29
Mary Linwood Sch, Leicester	29
Primrose HS, Leeds	29
St Alban's CofE Sch, Birmingham	29
Beanfield Sch, Corby	28
College HS, Birmingham	28
Croxteth Community Comprehensive Sch, Liverpool	28
Kaskenmoor Sch, Oldham	28
Moreton Community Sch, Wolverhampton	28
St Chad's Sch, Tilbury, Essex	28
William Crane Comprehensive Sch, Nottingham	28

GCSE: BOTTOM OF THE LEAGUE

	Percentage of pupils passing five or more GCSEs at A-C*
Ramsgate Sch, Ramsgate, Kent	1
Campion Boys' RC Comprehensive Sch, Liverpool	2
High View Sch and Technology Centre, Derby	2
Our Lady of Fatima HS, Liverpool	2
William Crane Comprehensive Sch, Nottingham	2
Copperfields College, Leeds	3
Handsworth Wood Boys' Sch, Birmingham	3
Amy Johnson Sch, Hull	4
Pen Park Sch, Bristol	4
Skerton HS, Lancaster	4
Aston Manor Sch, Birmingham	5
Battersea Technology College, London, Wandsworth, London	5
Frankley Community HS, Birmingham	5
Gillingham College, Gillingham, Kent	5
Holmesdale Community Sch, Snodland, Kent	5
Parkside Sch, Plymouth	5
Perronet Thompson Sch, Hull	5
Ashmead Sch, Reading	6
Bowling Community College, Bradford	6
Dartford West Boys' Sch, Dartford, Kent	6
Haven HS, Boston, Lincs	6
Henry Mellish Sch, Nottingham	6
Middleton Park HS, Leeds	6
Moston Brook HS, Manchester	6
Ridings Sch, Halifax	6
Spurley Hey HS, Manchester	6
St Alban's CofE Sch, Birmingham	6

source: Schools Report, *The Times*, 18 November 1997

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