



## Chapter 2: National and International Context

**W**e noted in our earlier reports that the design and implementation of NLS and NNS are inevitably much influenced by the national and international context in which the reform is taking place. We briefly outline themes in the international literature on large-scale reform and identify several issues in the English policy context that have influenced the development and implementation of the Strategies.

### International Context

In many countries, the 1980s and 1990s were characterised by roller-coaster economic conditions, dramatic swings in political ideology and leadership and an eroding consensus about societal values. Rising levels of education have led to declining public confidence in institutions, an escalation of mistrust in public figures and an irresistible demand for greater accountability in public institutions.

During this period, education became a “hot button” for public attention because it was and still is considered to be at least part of the solution to many of these social and economic problems. Our global society, it is

argued, is increasingly complex, requiring educated citizens who can learn continuously and who can work in diverse contexts both locally and internationally. As Rohlen (1999) argues:

*our schools need to teach learning processes that better fit the way work is evolving. Above all, this means teaching the skills and habits of mind that are essential to problem solving, especially where many minds need to interact.*

(pp. 251–252)

The problem of large-scale improvements to the core technology of schooling has been at the heart of school reformers’ efforts in many locations during this period. For example, in the United States, publication of the report, *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission, 1983), is typically cited as the most obvious event precipitating an unprecedented period of concern about teaching and learning in schools that continues unabated to this day. Furthermore, reflecting the prevailing sentiment of the public-at-large, many reform-minded governments have little patience for the usual pace of educational change; reform needs to be done immediately.

Teachers may complain not so much about the nature of the changes being asked of them, but about the number and speed of the changes (Hopkins & Levin, 2000). Such impatience has meant the elimination of such deliberate procedures as small-scale trials, pilot studies, and research and evaluation of the preferred policy initiatives. Instead policy makers may move more or less immediately to large-scale implementation.

Hasty policy launches, however, do not often result in speedy school improvement. Indeed, Elmore (1996) argues that even the most successful efforts to significantly change the core of schools have rarely influenced more than 25% of U.S. classrooms. This claim is focused specifically on:

*how teachers understand the nature of knowledge, and the student's role in learning, how these ideas about knowledge and learning are manifested in teaching and class work. The core also includes the structural arrangements of schools, such as the physical layout of classrooms, student grouping practices, teachers' responsibilities for groups of students, relations among teachers in their work with students, and processes for assessing student learning and communicating it to students, teachers, parents, administrators, and other interested parties.*

(pp. 294-295)

While Elmore's claim is embedded in the U.S. context, and justified with reference to American evidence, there is little reason to believe that efforts to improve the core technology of schooling in other jurisdictions have been significantly more successful. Yet improvements in such core processes seem to be essential if the aspirations held by many governments and their constituents are to be

met. Virtually all the recent efforts at reform, in various jurisdictions, have included a focus on curriculum, accountability and governance, and in most, governments have centralised educational policy while decentralising much of the responsibility for implementation (Hopkins & Levin, 2000; Levin, 2001a).

Most large-scale reform strategies have attempted to influence teaching and learning at least in part by holding schools more accountable for pupil performance. This is evident, for example, in the widespread adoption of pupil testing policies. The United States has seen a strong push for high-stakes testing but the experience in many states suggests that although such tests can be highly motivating, they do not lead to deep and sustained change. But pupil testing and its attendant baggage is just the most obvious policy tool for holding schools more accountable. A recent analysis (Leithwood & Earl, 2000) suggests four basic approaches to such accountability, each premised on quite different assumptions about what is wrong with schools and how to fix them. In practice, however, most large-scale reform strategies include elements of all these approaches to accountability (see also Adams & Kirst, 1999).

The fiscal approach to reform, adopted in jurisdictions such as New Zealand, Ontario and some American states, attempts to reduce the size of government but not with any particular vision for education. This is primarily a structural reform using a centralisation/decentralisation approach, devolving power to schools but retaining considerable control at the centre. Intermediate agencies such as local education authorities or district school boards are reduced in power or in some cases eliminated.

The international context provides encouragement for reform-minded governments to view education as a source of solutions to many of their economic and social problems. Governments tend to adopt reform strategies that assume that greater school accountability will improve pupil performance, often implementing those strategies on a large scale very quickly. Whether such policies can be expected to be successful, however, is in some doubt, based on current knowledge about how schools actually improve (Hopkins & Levin, 2000). The phenomenon of “reform overload” causes further difficulties. In many jurisdictions, a succession of reforms, often with conflicting ideologies from different governments, has led teachers to be sceptical about any new effort. Ontario is a good example of such overload and scepticism, with teachers now displaying negative motivation to implement government accountability policies (Leithwood, Steinbach & Jantzi, 2002).

There are, however, alternatives to starting with an emphasis on high-stakes accountability. The state of Connecticut, over a ten-year period, developed and implemented a comprehensive set of policies focused on improving the teaching profession (and thus teaching in the classroom). Described as “low-stakes, standards-based reform” (Wilson, Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2001, p. 31), the reforms included:

- raising teacher salaries;
- increasing licensing requirements;
- facilitating the entry of qualified out-of-state teachers;
- toughening requirements for temporary licenses;

- creating a staged licensing process for beginning teachers, with a master’s degree required for a professional license;
- requiring and funding trained mentors for all beginning and student teachers; and
- requiring school districts to develop professional development plans, career incentive plans and teacher evaluation systems, and contribute to the cost of implementation of such plans. (p. 9)

Connecticut’s reforms appear to have achieved considerable success. Teacher shortages no longer plague school districts, while student achievement has increased. As with all good policies, this has been steady, hard work.

*The story of Connecticut’s reform is one of focused, purposeful capacity-building throughout the educational system, driven by pointed attention to teaching quality and the creative use of available policy levers. ... Examined over time, this array of constantly unfolding policies is an unusual story of large-scale, iterative, system-wide, state-wide reform.*

(Wilson et al., 2001, p. 32)

Our brief review of the international context for reform gives a glimpse of the increasing complexity of the reform process. Policy makers are confronted with the need to balance different ideologies, include different points of view and communicate complex initiatives in terms that will be accessible to the public. They are also trying to do this within the usual time span of a government term, usually no more than four to five years. During this relatively brief period, policies must show visible results if political support and resources are to be continued over the longer term – a development that is necessary for change to be embedded and sustained.

## National Context

### The Policy Context for NLS and NNS

In addition to these international forces, unique social, political and economic histories of a political jurisdiction shape the nature of large-scale reform strategies in powerful ways. Among the critical factors in understanding education in England are the country's perceived decline in world status after 1945, the tremendous importance of social class in shaping life chances and the highly polarised politics with two main national parties alternating in government. The education system has a long history of elitism as evidenced by highly selective institutions and, until recently, quite limited access to advanced education. Each of these factors has had an important influence on the development of education policy.

For the last 20 years England has been engulfed in educational changes, stimulated largely by a concern about global economic competitiveness. In the 1980s and for much of the 1990s, the Conservative government made a series of major changes, including greater parental choice, local management of schools at the expense of the powers of local authorities, a national curriculum, national testing and a national system of school inspections (Ofsted). In addition, collective bargaining for teachers was eliminated and teacher training substantially restructured.

Prior to the introduction of the national curriculum in the late 1980s, primary teachers in England were in many ways "left alone to teach." For some, this might be termed the era of "uninformed professionalism."

*I started teaching in 1972. There was no curriculum. You could do what you liked. ... I hadn't the faintest idea of what I was doing but I went out there and did what I could. ... Nobody should have been expected to do what I was expected to do.*

(Strong, 2002, p. 11)

In England, as in many other countries, an international focus on language and mathematics education fuelled concerns about how well primary schools were providing their pupils with the foundations for learning. Questions arose as to whether pupils were learning important basic skills (Reynolds & Farrell, 1996), with a particular focus on what has been popularly termed the "long tail of under-achievement."

Education in England has a long and contentious history of accountability. Beginning with research showing that schools had differential effects on their pupils (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore & Ouston, 1979; Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis & Ecob, 1988), there has been a concerted emphasis on identifying the qualities of effective schools and on trying to improve ineffective ones. Pupil attainment results are published in performance tables and Ofsted inspections provide detailed public reports of school performance. Over the years, heated and sometimes acrimonious debates developed about the form of accountability that has emerged, especially the focus, at one time, on "naming and shaming."

When the Labour Party won the election in 1997, education was identified as the number one priority. In a speech to the National Association of Head Teachers, Prime Minister Blair inserted a concern for equity to this education priority:

*The fundamental failure of British government in the 20th century has been a failure to attach sufficient importance to public education for the broad majority of people. ... We have been good at educating an elite at the top but ... the imperative to raise standards for the many in line has been neglected.*

(2 June 1999)

Elements of the national context are particularly important as influences on how policies are perceived and understood in schools. The history of government pressure and support for education over the last 15 years has shaped the way that schools view government intervention. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a sudden and dramatic increase in pressure, with little or no additional support, at least from the perspective of schools. With the change of government in 1997, some in education hoped for a reversal of this trend. The government, however, although increasing funding and other support, did not ease the pressure. Instead, DfEE (now DfES) explicitly adopted a “high challenge, high support” stance toward schools, combined with the principle of “intervention in inverse proportion to success.” Many teachers and headteachers were disappointed to find that pressure would remain a dominant feature of government policy. Such apprehension and scepticism coincided with the introduction of NLS, which came a year earlier than its mathematics counterpart. Some concern was expressed in schools and in the media, about what was seen as the overly prescriptive or top-down nature of a government policy that sought to actually change teaching practice.

The national context shaped the development of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies to a considerable extent. The

context permitted the expenditure of greater government resources on school improvement, ensured that a strong element of accountability would be part of any reform effort, provided the structures for holding schools more accountable and justified the focus on literacy and numeracy. A distinct contribution of the Labour government was the emphasis on the long tail of under-achievement and on raising standards for low-attaining pupils.

In capitalising on the national context, the government developed a high-profile initiative that was based on the previously established National Literacy and National Numeracy Projects and guidance from evaluations of the Projects by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) (Sainsbury, 1998; Minnis, 1999) and Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, 1998a, 1998b). The Strategies focused attention and resources on a common goal – improving the literacy and mathematics of all pupils, but especially the disadvantaged, in primary schools across the country. In a speech to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Michael Barber (at the time the head of SEU and the primary mover behind the education reforms) indicated that the government had put into place a framework for continuous improvement. In his words, the framework centred on *high challenge, high support*, with NLS and NNS at its core, intent on narrowing the achievement gap and raising standards for all.

## **Related Education Policy Issues**

### *Workload*

Teacher workload has emerged as an issue of considerable concern in England over the last few years. One recent study of teacher workload concluded that “the teachers

involved in the research, while on the whole enthusiastic about their work, felt downtrodden, stressed, overworked” (Edwards, as cited in Johnson & Hallgarten, 2002, p. 3). Such views are shared by teachers internationally (as documented by Scott, Stone & Dinham, 2000). In our interviews with LEA and school staff, the concern appeared to be not so much excessive workload as the large number of initiatives from the central government, without time for reflection and consolidation. As well, concerns about autonomy inevitably interact with workload, affecting teachers’ motivation.

Prompted by frequent expression of workload concerns, DfES commissioned a review by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2001), who found that the total volume of work on an annual basis was comparable to that of other professional and management occupations, but the work of teachers and headteachers was more intensive. Most worked fifty to sixty hours per week during term times. The report concluded with suggested directions for improvement, as well as requirements for a successful implementation strategy. In response to these findings and following initial pilot programmes, the School Teachers’ Review Body also made recommendations about workload, with guaranteed time in the school week for marking and lesson preparation.

Workload issues are seen as contributing to recruitment and retention challenges: A recent report on the future of the teaching profession in England noted that “the government is right to concentrate on workload as the most unattractive feature of the profession” (Johnson & Hallgarten, 2002, p. 1). The government is committed to continuing to address this issue through a variety of approaches, including greater use of

teaching assistants and other support staff to take on some non-teaching duties, easing the load on teachers, as well as other policies intended to reduce excessive hours of work.

### *The Teaching Profession*

The modernisation of the teaching profession has been a major focus of the government. Government actions have included establishing the General Teaching Council as a regulatory body setting criteria for professional practice, developing national standards for the teaching profession (based on work by Hay/McBer, 2000), beginning performance-related pay for teachers and implementing a performance management review scheme in schools.

Difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers, experienced in many countries, are affecting schools across England, particularly in and around London where high housing costs add to the difficulties. Government incentives such as “golden hellos” and living stipends for trainee teachers have had some impact on recruitment, with applications to teacher training increasing between 2001 and 2002, according to the Graduate Teacher Training Registry. As well, the number of teacher vacancies has fallen slightly during the same period (Office of National Statistics, 2002), although some commentators wonder to what extent the rosier picture may be due to increased use of teachers who are not properly qualified or use of overseas staff not trained in the Strategies.

Teacher shortages not only affect regular staffing and coverage in case of illness, but also may create a revolving door of training and expertise. LEAs train newly-hired staff, who may then leave, requiring the LEA to repeat the training over and over. Shortages also make it difficult to obtain the supply coverage

necessary for teachers to take part in professional development sessions. To address this latter problem, LEAs have begun offering training on weekends or during holiday periods.

An increase in the number of teaching assistants may help to ease the impact of teacher shortages, although there has been considerable debate about what the limits of the teaching assistant role should be. The government has provided funds and opportunities for recruitment and training of such assistants. The role is developing as a career option, with national standards and a national 4-day training programme delivered by LEAs. Trained teaching assistants are widely used to work with small groups of pupils, under the guidance of the classroom teacher.

As we will outline later in the report, in the autumn of 2002 the government issued further proposals designed to address issues related to the profession of teaching.

### *School Leadership*

School leadership, especially the role of headteacher, is increasingly recognised as a crucial requirement for education reform. The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) began operation in September 2000 as a centre for headship and senior management training; the aim is to strengthen leadership through nurturing, supporting and developing school leaders. It has been proposed that the NCSL qualification will be a requirement for new headteachers, in recognition of the increased complexity of the role and the need for expert management and pedagogical leadership on the part of headteachers. Other initiatives may be needed to attract prospective candidates for headteacher positions, given what some data suggest is becoming a difficult situation with

regard to recruiting senior staff (Howson, 2000). On the other hand, some of our informants suggest that from their experience, the pool may be smaller but it is of high quality.

*People who are becoming heads now are better prepared and better supported than heads ever have been. There is a much better sense of what leadership is. ... I know it is a cliché but there is a better culture of shared leadership in schools. The role of subject leader particularly has developed.*

(Strategy leader)

### **Issues Beyond Education**

Beyond these topics and issues specific to education, the Strategies are inevitably influenced by the broader policy context. For example, social pressures such as those caused by poverty are critical; research consistently shows that children's academic achievement is strongly related to various measures of family socio-economic status (e.g., West, Pennell, West & Travers, 2001). There is evidence that the United Kingdom has greater social inequalities than most European countries, although less than the United States (Seymour, 2000). To address the situation, the government has expanded programmes such as Sure Start and other initiatives intended to address child poverty. In July 2002, the new School Standards minister, David Milliband, spoke of plans for schools to be centres for many child services, an indication of the government's awareness of how social and educational issues are linked in the lives of children.

### **Education as a Political Priority**

In reviewing the national context for the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, the impact of the high political profile of education policy is obvious. When party leaders make

education their first priority and when it is reported that ministers will resign if achievement targets are not met, the political stakes around education become very high indeed. In such circumstances, education policy will be the subject of careful attention not only by politicians but also by the media and other commentators. Such has certainly been the case in England, at least during the period of our study.

In some ways high political visibility is desirable, in that it is often linked to more resources as well as more attention from key people. However, a high political profile can also lead to the demand for simple solutions and instant results. There will tend to be less tolerance for subtlety of approach and less willingness to accept mistakes or delays and more pressure on everyone involved, from ministers to children. This is the inevitable price of political attention and the resources it brings. As one of our interviewees observed:

*There are days when I wish we could have this Strategy without its political dimension, but then I wake up and know you can't have one without the other. If it were not for the political imperative, the whole thing would never have happened in the first place.*

In the next chapter, we look at how the Strategies operated as policy levers, looking at the sophisticated and many-faceted efforts to change school practice through a co-ordinated policy initiative driven from the centre. At the end of the chapter, we return to the national context, showing how the factors identified in this chapter continue to influence the evolution of NLS and NNS.