# Educational Policies of New Labour

## Introduction

Over the years, there have been significant changes and reforms in the legislation and policies that affect education in the United Kingdom. Different political leaders and governments have expressed their commitment to improving the education system by introducing significant reforms. Some of the reforms have played a key role in promoting the accessibility of education by children from different social backgrounds. Other reforms have served to narrow the gap between the poor and the rich in academic achievement (Warnock et al., 2010). It is evident that the changes introduced by Margaret Thatcher and the Labour Government registered the most significant impacts on the education sector in the United Kingdom. It is imperative to understand how the policies under each government addressed the existing social problems at that specific time. This paper will explore the impact of Margaret Thatcher’s law of immigrants in the United Kingdom as well as the New Labour policies and their impact on education.

## Discussion

Margaret Thatcher was one of the leaders in the United Kingdom who introduced stringent policies. She served as a British prime minister for 11 years. During her tenure, Margaret Thatcher sought to transform the British community in various ways. She had numerous policies that affected every sector in the United Kingdom. Particularly, immigrants registered adverse effects under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher. She empathised with the public opinion regarding the protection of the British identity (Jupp, 2016). Particularly, the public was against the increasing number of immigrants that had altered the composition of the British society by increasing the number of the minority groups (Gidley, 2007). However, Margaret Thatcher introduced specific policies that affected the education sector. Before her tenure, many schools were under local authority control, an aspect that made funding extremely difficult. Margaret Thatcher allowed schools to receive funds directly without the involvement of the local authority.

Margaret Thatcher also emphasised the need for free schools to admit students from different backgrounds without the need to deny some students access to education. Schools were under the instruction to embrace applicants from different areas, providing parents and children with a significant level of choice. The Education Act of 1988 introduced a significant level of autonomy that allowed school governors and heads to make important decisions without consulting the local authorities (Wearmouth, 2012). Undoubtedly, Margaret Thatcher had a great vision surrounding the autonomy of schools and allowing all learners to access quality education in their school of choice. With the available choice, many people were likely to opt for the performing schools, as an aspect that led to the development of a league table of schools. The education reforms under Margaret Thatcher allowed immigrants to apply and receive admission to different schools without discrimination. As a result, immigrants had a better chance to access quality education.

Tony Blair became the leader of the Labour Party in 1994. During his campaign, he cited his commitment to introduce education reforms that would transform the United Kingdom. He recognised the existing social problems that compromised academic achievement. Particularly, the United Kingdom lacked the equality of opportunity for all the children irrespective of their background. There were existing achievement gaps between the upper class of the society and the lower class members. Many of the schools were yet to embrace diversity and inclusion, and Tony Blair sought to introduce reforms that would enhance diversity in the education sector (Wolf, 2002). Undoubtedly, Tony Blair introduced numerous policies during his tenure by according to his perceived priorities for the government. During the campaigns, Tony Blair was specific that education represented one of the significant priorities for the labour government. Some of the remarkable changes introduced by the Labour Government included policies to improve education standards as well as other policies designed to enhance diversity and the equality of the opportunity (Brown, 2016). The Sure Start Program represents one of the critical initiatives by the Labour Government that targeted preschool children and their families residing in disadvantaged areas. Evidently, the Labour Government recognised that families living in disadvantaged areas were less likely to register desirable education outcomes and needed programs to prepare preschool children for better performance in school.

The purpose of the initiative was to empower preschool children to thrive once they gained admission into the school. Previously, children from disadvantaged families were less likely to thrive in schools and often registered poor grades. For this reason, the Sure Start initiative launched in 1997 sought to promote social inclusion. The Sure Start program represented an upstream public health intervention (Jupp, 2016). The Labour Government opted for a proactive approach to resolving social problems instead of a reactive approach (Blundell, 2012). An upstream intervention can address the specific causes of social problems. Specifically, upstream interventions focus on the prevention of social problems that may have an impact in the future. The Sure Start program succeeded in providing a remarkable intervention in the early life of a child. Such an intervention relied on services from various professionals who worked with the preschool children and their families. It was apparent that disadvantaged children often exhibited a poor start and organisation of their lives (Brown, 2016). Through this intervention, the Labour Government addressed the inequalities existing among school going children. The project had far-reaching outcomes in ensuring that children from poor backgrounds were able to register positive outcomes once they joined the school. A critical analysis of the Sure Start program reveals that it could register positive outcomes in increasing equal opportunities in education.

The Labour Government also introduced the Every Child Matters initiative. The program sought to emphasise the need to protect children from any form of risk, fear, and danger. The government responded to the case of a child named Victoria, who had succumbed to extreme cases of mistreatment and abuse. After rigorous investigations surrounding the death of the child, there were recommendations on how to improve the child protection systems in the United Kingdom (Jupp, 2016). It was evident that the government had not been doing enough to protect children from any source of harm. For this reason, the Every Child Matters Program sought to provide a well-coordinated range of services that contribute to the success of children in various aspects (Warnock et al., 2010). In the education sector, the program transformed the manner in which schools and agencies functioned. Previously, teachers, doctors, social workers, and other professionals had been working in isolation paying attention to high levels of confidentiality. Such practices made it impossible to share information regarding the abuse of children or the potential risks they were facing. The case of baby Peter served to demonstrate how working in isolation only served to compromise the safety of children (Brown, 2016). The various agencies involved in the case of baby Peter did not act proactively in a way to prevent his death. The baby had suffered immensely under the case of his mother and her boyfriend. Such cases demonstrated the need for programs that helped different professionals and agencies to work together in the protection of children.

The Every Child Matters Program emphasises the need for active collaboration among teachers, healthcare workers, and other professionals in promoting the welfare of children. The level of collaboration depends on the unique situation of the family or the specific needs of the child. Schools have an important responsibility in protecting children by creating a favourable environment for learning (Blundell, 2012). It is evident that schools recognise their role in providing a safe environment for all children and protecting them from any risk. Some schools provide a diverse range of services such as child care, family learning, parenting support, student support, as well as health and social care (Gidley, 2007). Educational and clinical psychologists also participate in the program with the purpose of improving the welfare of children. The program enhances investment in children from the early years in school through the Sure Start program. The introduction of extended schools that provide personalised learning to children with unique needs is also a benefit of the program. There are efforts to increase retention of children in schools by highlighting some of the common causes that lead to school dropouts.

The Labour Government also introduced policies that could improve the education standards. Some of these policies focused on reducing class sizes to a manageable number of 30 students. The labour government proposed the introduction of literacy and numeracy hours in which children would focus on reading and mathematics with the core objective of improving their performance (Jupp, 2016). The government compelled children to start school at four years under the Sure Start program. The government also enhanced the level of inspection of schools to ensure that they exhibited compliance with the new policies (Wearmouth, 2012). The labour government also introduced Education Action Zones with the purpose of providing extra funding for schools located in disadvantaged areas. The Education Maintenance Allowance was also a feature of the New Labour policies that promoted the education of children from low-income families (Brown, 2016). The introduction of specialist schools was also a significant move by the Labour Government to provide learners with an opportunity to explore different ventures.

Child-centred learning became a concept that governed the approach used by teachers in giving instructions. The labour government also expanded the Special Educational Needs provision. Tony Blair played a significant role in addressing the common problems that the working class was facing (Wolf, 2002). Each of the policies introduced created better opportunities for children from the working class families to access quality education. It was evident that the New Labour policies sought to increase the access to equal opportunities for all the children irrespective of their social background. Tony Blair had recognised the existing social problems such as poverty and unemployment and their role in affecting academic performance (Blundell, 2012). Disadvantaged families lacked the opportunity to educate their children before the reforms of Tony Blair. Evidently, his efforts under the labour party were able to register positive outcomes.

A critical analysis of the New Labour policies on education reveals that they registered positive outcomes. One of the significant outcomes was the improvement of education standards and the availability of a greater choice and variety for all the children irrespective of their social background. There was a significant improvement in scores in both the GCSE and SATs. The New Labour policies led to a greater number of specialist schools allowing students to pursue any subject of their interest (Blundell, 2012). Previously, parents and children had limited choices in the education system. However, the launching of specialist schools provided parents and students to choose wisely on the best option for their children. Under Tony Blair, education gained a positive reputation because the policies introduced a “Learning Society” that recognised the benefits of education (Wolf, 2002). The move by the Labour Government to invest immensely in the education system was a positive one. The education system in the United Kingdom registered positive outcomes in all aspects and created more opportunities for learners. The education reforms introduced by the labour government served to resolve most of the critical social problems that were affecting the society.

The New Labour policies have also been subject to criticism based on their outcomes in the British society. Some critics argue that the policies have been unable to increase the availability of equal educational opportunities. Tony Blair focused on introducing various policies as a way of addressing the existing inequalities in the society (Wearmouth, 2012). Despite the criticism, it is apparent that some of the reforms served as a starting point for children from disadvantaged families to access education. Tony Blair allowed the existence of private schools, an aspect that has exhibited wide criticism. The existence of private schools poses a threat to the efforts of creating equal opportunities for all children. The rich members of the society can opt for the private schools that provide a diverse range of privileges (Warnock et al., 2010). However, the existence of private schools also provides parents with a diverse choice of the most reasonable and beneficial services available for their children. It is unfortunate that the policies did not fully address the inequality issues that the British society was facing. Tony Blair’s tenure has received an appraisal for the efforts to introduce programs and initiatives that registered a positive impact on children.

## Conclusion

A critical analysis of some of the historic reforms in the education sector reveals that the United Kingdom has been making efforts of improving education outcomes. Moreover, the reforms over the years demonstrate a commitment to use education to resolve different social problems. Under Margaret Thatcher, there were significant education reforms that affected the welfare of immigrant families (Gidley, 2007). However, the most significant reforms occurred during the labour government tenure. Tony Blair had highlighted his intention to place education as a priority for the government. In response to his commitment, he introduced several policies that sought to enhance diversity, achieve increased access to education, and enhance the level of equality in access educational opportunities. Tony Blair policies of education sought to transform the experiences of learners on the expected outcomes from different levels in the education system. The introduction of programs such as Sure Start and Every Child Matters demonstrated Tony Blair’s commitment to improving educational outcomes (Warnock et al., 2010). Each of the programs sought to address the interrelated social problems that reduced educational outcomes. Evidently, the labour government policies registered a positive impact by transforming various aspects of the education system. However, some of the policies did not succeed in addressing the highlighted social problems.

## Summary

The British government has been making efforts of transforming the education system through the introduction of various reforms. Since the Margaret Thatcher tenure, the United Kingdom has registered numerous policies that seek to transform the education sector. Margaret Thatcher laws allowed schools to operate under the control of local authorities while emphasising the need for schools to admit all the applicants. These reforms on the education sector later served to address some of the existing social problems. After Thatcher’s reforms, the society was still facing inequalities in the education sector with disadvantaged communities lacking the access to quality education. The labour party under the leadership of Tony Blair introduced significant reforms that have far-reaching outcomes. Some of the policies introduced the Sure Start initiative, the Every Child Matters initiative, and enhanced diversity in education.

Tony Blair paid attention to education as a tool that can transform the lives of children in the United Kingdom. For this reason, he introduced policies that sought to improve the standards of education and to emphasise better teaching approaches. Other policies addressed the social problems of disadvantaged families with the core objective of helping them to access quality education. A critical analysis of the impacts of the Tony Blair policies demonstrates that they were successful in addressing the existing social problems. Despite the level of impact, critics emerged to discredit the worth of the policies. However, it was evident that the reforms had registered positive outcomes with the purpose of transforming the education sector. Some of the policies resolved the challenges that low-income families experienced as they strive to maintain their children in schools. An evaluation of each policy demonstrates a measure of positive outcomes based on the scores of students and their experiences in school.

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