

# New Academies, Old Problems

An Analysis of Dominant Discourses and their Effects on  
Equity in English Education Policy Making.

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# Abstract

This thesis addresses the influence of discourses of globalisation, the knowledge-based economy and neoliberalism on the position of equity in English education policy making. It departs from the assertion that discourses are constitutively important in creating certain rationales for policy reforms within the field of education. The paper switches empirical attention in this area away from New Labour in favour of examining the Conservative Party's proposals for school reforms – although New Labour policy is also considered in order to address whether these discourses have produced a degree of consensus amongst English policy makers. Theoretically, the paper draws on a number of conceptualisations of discursive trends in education policy, in addition to theories of educational equity. Methodologically, a discursive analysis of the Conservative's policy is carried out following Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach. On account of this analysis, it is argued that the dominant discourses of globalisation, neoliberalism and the knowledge-based economy are producing a narrow conceptualisation of equity in English educational policy making, based upon notions of economic instrumentalism. Additionally, it is also concluded that these discourses have created a strong political consensus in English education around conceptualisations of equity and a reform agenda aimed at expanding 'choice' in compulsory schooling.

*Key words:* education policy, globalisation, knowledge-based economy, equity, discourse

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# Table of contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1	The Purpose of the Thesis .....	4
1.2	Delimitations .....	5
1.3	Relation to Previous Research .....	5
1.4	The Structure of the Thesis .....	6
<b>2</b>	<b>Theoretical Framework.....</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1	Cultural Political Economy and the Knowledge-Based Economy .....	8
2.2	Dominant Discourses in Contemporary Education Policy.....	9
2.2.1	Defining Discourse.....	9
2.2.2	The New Education Gospel .....	10
2.2.3	Globalisation and National Competitiveness.....	11
2.2.4	Neoliberalism, the ‘Choice Agenda’ and Consumerism.....	13
2.3	Equity in Education.....	15
2.3.1	The Meritocratic Perspective .....	16
2.3.2	Critical Perspectives .....	16
<b>3</b>	<b>Methodology.....</b>	<b>20</b>
3.1	What Kind of Discourse Analysis? .....	20
3.2	Policy, Problem Representations and Analysis .....	22
3.3	Empirical Material .....	23
3.4	Implementing the Analysis.....	24
3.5	Limitations and Critique .....	24
<b>4</b>	<b>Analysis.....</b>	<b>27</b>
4.1	New Labour .....	27
4.1.1	Widening Participation.....	27
4.1.2	Academy Schools.....	28
4.2	The Conservatives .....	30
4.2.1	The ‘New Academy’ Policy .....	30
4.2.2	The Problem .....	31
4.2.3	Identifiable Discourses .....	32
4.2.4	Origins and Mechanisms .....	36
4.2.5	Silences.....	38
4.2.6	Effects.....	41

4.2.7	Producing and Disseminating.....	43
4.3	Discussion.....	46
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>58</b>

# 1 Introduction

In many industrialised countries, not least of all England, education has been the subject of intense 'policy hyperactivism' over the past two decades (Ball 2008: 2). Education systems across the developed world have experienced a plethora of policy shifts, reforms and new agendas. Some of these changes have been radical, such as Sweden's school voucher reforms of the early 1990s, whilst others have been incremental – although no less far reaching – such as the changes undergone by the English education system since the introduction of high-stakes testing and a standardised national curriculum in 1988.

These reforms have been heavily influenced by certain discursive understandings of globalisation and recent social, political and economic transformations. This has led many states to place a greater emphasis on education in light of the supposed needs to produce high-skilled workforces capable of competing in a global 'knowledge-based economy' (Kenway et al 2007; Morrow and Torres 2001; Jordan 2006, Lauder et al. 2006; Robertson 2005). Simultaneously, on an individual level, de-industrialisation and the emergence of post-fordist social formations have led to a degree of 'individualisation' in which personal biographies are increasingly seen as open-ended narratives to be negotiated in the uncertain terrain of 'late capitalism' (see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). In this context, education is seen as ever more important in determining individual life chances.

However, education policy has not just been remoulded around understandings of contemporary societal transformations but has also been reshaped by more overtly political shifts in terms of the ascendance of neoliberal ideology. While societal transformations associated with globalisation and post-fordism have often informed the *raison d'être* of educational reform, it has been neoliberalism which has often informed many of the actual policy changes. These changes have predominantly produced a marketisation of education – that is to say an introduction of markets within education systems – but have also included the introduction of rigorous testing regimes and the infiltration of the organisational philosophy of new managerialism into the education sector. Within the English school system, these transformations have been highly visible over the past quarter century. Successive reforms have been directed at improving standards through introducing various market-inspired policies designed to increase the

amounts of ‘choice’ and competition within compulsory schooling – what Greener (2008) has labelled as the ‘choice agenda’ in British policy making.

This agenda has its origins in the 1980s when the then Conservative government introduced a number of supply-side changes to the school system designed to create greater diversity within school provisioning. This was achieved through diversifying the school system by introducing three new types of state-schools: sponsor-led ‘City Technology Colleges’; semi-autonomous ‘grant-maintained schools’; and subject-focused ‘specialist schools’. At the same time as these structural changes were carried out, complementary reforms also introduced a national curriculum, a national regime of rigorous pupil testing and the publication of examination results in ‘school performance tables’. The latter of these reforms enabled parents to compare the relative performance of local schools for the first time - something which, alongside the introduction of per-pupil funding, created a degree of competition between schools as well as a degree of educational consumerism amongst parents (West 2010: 24). After the election of Tony Blair’s New Labour government in 1997, these market-inspired reforms deepened and the Conservatives’ relatively modest ‘City Technology College’ programme was extended into the more expansive flagship ‘Academy School’ programme, whilst the number of ‘Specialist Schools’ grew significantly to the extent that 85 per cent of all state-secondary schools now share specialist status (West and Currie 2008: 24).

## 1.1 The Purpose of the Thesis

These reforms, together with their discursive foundations, raise important questions as to how issues of equity and equality are being affected within education. Thus this thesis has one central aim: **to explore how discourses of globalisation, the ‘knowledge-based economy’ and neoliberalism affect the position of equity within English education policy making.** I wish to contend that discourses of globalisation and, in particular, notions of the knowledge-based economy and neoliberalism have led to a discursive strengthening of the position of education as a means of delivering national economic competitiveness and that this, more economically instrumentalist view of education, sits antagonistically to addressing issues of inequality within the English education system.

I will address this aim through an empirical analysis of the Conservative Party’s proposals for reform of compulsory schooling. I will specifically examine their proposals to introduce greater competition into state schooling through

establishing what they have labelled '*New Academies*'. Given the change in government which has recently occurred in the UK, as well as the hitherto empirical concentration on New Labour policy (see below), I will also seek to address the possibility that these discourses have produced a degree of political consensus in English policy making concerning the role of education and the position of equity within it.

The central aims of this paper can be formulated in the following research questions:

- **How do discourses of globalisation and the knowledge-based economy affect the position of equity within English education policy making?**
- **To what extent can these discourses be considered to be producing a political consensus in English education policy making?**

## 1.2 Delimitations

Before proceeding it is necessary to discuss certain delimitations to the thesis. This paper is not concerned with offering a chronological account of shifts in education policy. Although it will be necessary to discuss policies with reference to historical factors, in order to provide contextual information, the aims of this paper are not to offer an account of temporal shifts in the triad of discourses, education and equity. This would simply be beyond the capacity of a paper of this kind and size. Instead this paper is concerned primarily at highlighting how dominant contemporary discourses influence the field of education and the position of equity within it. For similar reasons, the paper cannot address English education as a whole (i.e. primary, secondary and tertiary), although it is necessary to discuss other levels of education for contextual reasons.

## 1.3 Relation to Previous Research

Given that they had held government for thirteen successive years (between 1997 and 2010), it is unsurprising that previous research in this field has been heavily concentrated on examining education policy under *New Labour*. Much of this research has been deeply critical and has sought to challenge the understandings of globalisation and the 'knowledge-based economy' which informed New Labour during this period (Ball 2008; Wolf 2002). In his overview of New Labour education policy, Stephen Ball (2008), for example, argues that

notions of globalisation and economic competitiveness have colonised ways of thinking about education to the extent that equity has become marginalised within English education policy. In an earlier overview of how the choice agenda has effected educational equity more generally in the Anglophone world, Whitty (1997) similarly concludes that concerns with educational equity have been reduced to rhetorical commitments and 'wishful thinking' within contemporary policy making. Meanwhile, Biesta (2004) has argued that the promotion of market imperatives in education (consumerism in particular) may be restricting the possibilities to think about education beyond economic instrumentalism.

Other authors have sought to challenge notions of the 'knowledge-based economy' *per se* – as well as the related presumption that education is key to economic growth – drawing attention instead to the iniquitous effects which can result from the accentuation of education's economic importance (Brown and Hesketh 2004). Pacquette (2007) examines these recent shifts within policy making and argues that there has been a movement away from equality and towards more euphemistic and generic notions of 'quality' and 'excellence for all'. Overall, a common thread in this literature is that understandings of globalisation and the 'knowledge-based economy' are combining with a market-orientated policy agenda to re-emphasise the economic mission of public education systems which, in the case of England and many other advanced industrialised countries, is overshadowing broader concerns of equity and equality in education.

This paper builds upon and contributes to this existing body of literature and, in doing so, seeks to test its central claims that certain dominant discourses have emphasised education's economic importance to the extent that equity is no longer seen as a central concern within English education policy. However, this paper also attempts to move the empirical focus away from New Labour and towards the education policy of the newly elected Conservative government. This is a unique time in British politics which marks a shift in policy making personnel unseen since the mid-1990s. As a consequence, it is also an opportunity to examine the dominance of these discursive influences and to ask the question of whether they have led to a political consensus within English education policy.

## 1.4 The Structure of the Thesis

The remainder of the thesis has been structured into three parts. In the next part (Part 2) the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the paper are laid out. A



number of important concepts and discourses, which inform the analysis in Part 4, are identified and discussed here. Part 3 then moves on to address the methodological considerations of the paper. It is here that I outline the method of discursive analysis which is applied to the Conservative's 'New Academy' policy proposals. Part 4 begins with a discussion of the link between New Labour policy, discourses and equity – something which is necessary in order for a comparison to be made with Conservative Party policy and to address the extent to which a consensus can be seen to exist in contemporary English policy making. After this, the central analysis of the Conservative's 'New Academy' proposals is presented – according to the discursive approach laid out in Part 3. Thereafter, a discussion is offered which sums up the key findings of the analysis in addition to addressing these findings in relation to the theoretical and conceptual points sketched out earlier in the paper. Finally, Part 4 brings the thesis to a close by rounding up the papers central conclusions before suggesting potential areas of further research.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

In this next section I outline the theoretical foundations upon which this thesis is built. I begin by outlining the perspective of Cultural Political Economy which informs the overarching discursive perspective which I adopt. I also use this discussion to introduce the notion of the 'knowledge-based economy'. After this I proceed to discuss two of the central conceptual aspects of this paper in the form of a) contemporary discursive trends in education policy and b) conceptualisations of equity in education. The concepts discussed here are those which inform the analysis later on in Part 4 of the paper.

### 2.1 Cultural Political Economy and the Knowledge-Based Economy

As an ontological, epistemological and theoretical starting point for this thesis I use Bob Jessop's Cultural Political Economy. As a combination of approaches from critical political economy and critical semiotic analysis, Cultural Political Economy can be described as a critical approach to political economy which views semiosis as key. Ontologically it considers subjects and objects as socially constructed, while epistemologically it rejects universalistic and positivistic accounts of reality in favour of taking a critical realist stance (Sayer 2000). Although heavily influenced by the 'cultural turn' in the social sciences, Cultural Political Economy rejects pure constructivism and perspectives in discourse analysis which view the world as purely a product of discursive formations. Instead it seeks to straddle a middle path which combines a recognition of the semiotic together with the extra-semiotic (material) features of social relations (2004: 161). There is here a certain dialectic involved between these semiotic and extra-semiotic features (2004: 164) and semiosis is seen as embedded in material practice – "the world does still constrain language and ways of thinking" (2004: 164). Jessop's take on semiosis here refers to the "intersubjective production of meaning" and the cultural turn's emphasis on argumentation, narrativity, rhetoric, hermeneutics, identity, reflexivity, historicity and discourse (2004: 161).

Jessop applies Cultural Political Economy to an analysis of recent politico-economic shifts in terms of the emergence of a post-Fordist economic formation. For him, the decline of Fordism – as the dominant post-war politico-economic narrative – has opened a gap for a new discursive economic imaginary. This gap is currently filled by a dominant economic narrative in the form of the ‘Knowledge-Based Economy’ (KBE):

[...] the KBE seems to have become a master narrative in many accumulation strategies, state projects and hegemonic visions and has steadily required through the 1990s a key role in guiding and reinforcing activities that may consolidate a relatively stable post-Fordist accumulation regime and its mode of regulation (Jessop 2005: 152).

Broadly speaking, the knowledge-based economy can be defined as a dominant ‘economic imaginary’ (Jessop 2004: 166) of contemporary capitalism which views knowledge and information as the central forces of economic productivity. It is distinguishable from industrial Fordism in the sense that information and knowledge are now seen to have overtaken (though not replaced) capital and physical labour as the primary sources of economic productivity (Brown and Hesketh 2004; Leadbeater 2000). However, as will be discussed later in this paper, the knowledge-based economy is a mercurial and somewhat elusive concept which escapes more thorough definitions. This partly explains its attractiveness to decision-makers, for whom it has created rationales for changes in a broad collection of areas, ranging from technology and culture to employment and education. This thesis concentrates on one particular feature of the knowledge-based economy – the *discourse(s)* which surround it; and one specific material area of it – education policy-making.

## 2.2 Dominant Discourses in Contemporary Education Policy

### 2.2.1 Defining Discourse

I utilise Norman Fairclough’s definition of discourse as “particular ways of representing aspects of the world” (2003: 124) which affect how the world is given meaning and understanding through language. Discourses in this sense are not merely passive representations of how the world is, or is seen to be, but are “also projective, imaginaries, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied to projects to change the world in particular

directions” (ibid). I have chosen this definition of discourse because it is relatively straightforward without being overly simplistic.

In education policy making, a strong understanding of discourses is essential since it is through discourses that the possibilities of what can, and what cannot, become reality are constructed (Fejes 2006a; Ball 1998, 2008; Biesta 2004). Discourses are socially produced representations which set limits on how the world (and aspects of it) can be thought about (Bacchi 2009: 35). They may often be so widespread that their claims – their representations of the world – become taken-for-granted ways of thinking about given subjects. Focusing on identifying dominant discourses can therefore be a way of challenging certain understandings of the world while highlighting some of the consequences which these understandings produce. As Ball (2008: 13) points out, and as this thesis will elucidate on, the influence of certain discourses on education is twofold. On the one hand discourses construct the ‘need’ for reform. While on the other hand, they also define the ‘appropriate’ shape of such reforms.

### 2.2.2 The New Education Gospel

Norton Grubb and Lazerson (2006) argue that the combination of globalisation, the knowledge-based economy and neoliberalism has created a new ‘educational gospel’ amongst policy-makers in advanced industrial societies. Under this new ‘gospel’, education policy is seen as a cornerstone of state strategies to deliver competitive and dynamic national economies. This new discursive positioning of education – which seeks to steer education towards more economic and utilitarian goals – has produced a number of interrelated policies specifically directed at driving up educational standards. Although there are numerous descriptions of what these include (see, for example, Apple 2000; Biesta 2004; Wright 2005) Lauder and colleagues have labelled this family of policies as the ‘*state theory of learning*’ (2006: 51). With particular reference to Anglo-American reforms, these authors argue that such a policy cluster has had a profound influence on the type, content and nature of contemporary education. Above all, they state that it can be seen as an approach to learning concerned with the introduction and strengthening of market forms in education. Policy examples include the expansion of parental choice, the introduction of standardised rigorous testing regimes, and the penetration of ‘new managerialist’ philosophies (which assert the necessity for educational institutions to operate as if they were private businesses) into education systems.

Wright (2005) examines this new orthodoxy in the context of transformations to Higher Education in England. Taking an anthropological perspective, Wright frames these changes in the context of broader shifts initiated by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and then developed further by New Labour. She argues that 'mobilising metaphors' – such as Thatcher's emphasis on the 'individual' – make appeals to public sentiment and incrementally transform conceptions of the social world. Such metaphors are forged in the fine linguistic distinctions politicians make in the numerous speeches and arguments they present in the course of public debate. They may often include words and symbols which, although neutral and positive sounding, are deeply imbued with political meaning. In the case of Higher Education in England, words such as 'professionalism' and 'autonomy' – traditionally holding warm meanings to British academics – have been transformed in a process aimed at redirecting universities and their staff towards more corporate models (see Wright 2005). Although Wright's work here is concerned with higher education, these linguistic and policy shifts are evident across all-levels of education.

Ball describes a more general rhetorical ensemble evident in New Labour's rhetoric of education and public sector reform which includes terms such as "transformation, modernisation, innovation, enterprise, dynamism, creativity and competitiveness" (Ball 2008: 14). It is semantic clusters like these which feed into understandings of contemporary politico-economic formations in which globalisation and the 'knowledge economy' take centre stage. Such understandings do not only dominate national policy making but are also reflected on a transnational scale as the dominate discourses within international governmental organisations, such as the OECD, whose ideas have, in turn, heavily influenced national policy making (see Robertson 2005; Rinne et al 2004).

### 2.2.3 Globalisation and National Competitiveness

The notion of the 'knowledge-based economy' in particular has been central in repositioning education within the nation-state. According to this, knowledge is now understood as an elementary source of productivity in contemporary economies and thus education, more than ever, is fundamental to securing national economic competitiveness. However, despite their broad acceptance and rhetorical usage, as well as their profound implications, there is a dearth of understanding amongst policy makers of what exactly constitutes a 'knowledge-based economy' and a 'high skills society'. Contrary to the expectations which these notions might create, much recent labour market growth has actually occurred in low-skilled service sector employment (see Brown and Hesketh

2004). This ambiguity leads Lloyd and Payne (2003: 129) to suggest that, rather than referring to any singular reality, these terms are often treated as 'empty boxes' – to be filled with descriptive meaning of how the world is, or should be, according to the actors using them.

In this sense, these notions have much in common with larger ones such as 'competitiveness' which have shaped political discourse during recent decennia. Rosamund (2002), for example, has argued that terms such as 'globalisation' and 'competitiveness' have become banal aspects of political discourse to an extent that they are presented as commonsensical notions unworthy of discussion. Despite more nuanced and sceptical understandings of these terms within academic literature, their self-evident and commonsensical usage in everyday political discourse imbues them with immense power. Taking a constructivist approach to the development of a 'European Economy' Rosamund goes on to argue that the power of the term 'competitiveness' has been central to creating the rationale for European Union market liberalisation policies over the past quarter century. Such notions of 'competitiveness' have also been used more specifically in relation to knowledge-based economy discourses and have thus served to justify a greater role for the EU in national education policy (ibid: 172).

Andreas Fejes (2006a) argues that understandings of the 'knowledge-based economy' also represent new omnipresent 'planetspeak discourses' which have built on notions of 'globalisation' and 'competitiveness' to narrow ways of thinking about education into purely economic terms. Taking Sweden as an example he argues that the idea of the knowledge-based economy is presented in public policy as a self-evident phenomenon which requires a greater link between the economy and education in order for Sweden to remain globally competitive and not to 'lag behind'. This is a necessity which requires no less than a radical reconstruction of the 'educable subject' itself. Fejes states that, whereas the twentieth century was dominated by civic and social notions of the educable subject as a responsible political citizen and as a bearer of the Swedish welfare state, the twenty-first century educable subject takes the form of the 'lifelong learner' capable of gaining the knowledge and skills required to independently negotiate the fluid and flexible labour market of the post-fordist knowledge economy. The discursive positioning of present-day education is thus illustrative of broader shifts to the mission of the state associated with the dismantling of Fordist and Keynesian institutional frameworks. In contrast to industrial capitalism, which steered education towards creating citizens and disciplined and reliable workforces, the need of contemporary capitalism for more flexible, adaptable and skilled labour (Morrow and Torres 2001: 35) posits education as mode for transferring greater responsibility onto the individual in terms of their labour market situation.

## 2.2.4 Neoliberalism, the 'Choice Agenda' and Consumerism

It is not just societal transformations and understandings of globalisation which have been important in repositioning education in today's world. More overtly political transformations, heavily influenced by neoliberal ideology, have also been fundamental in this process. Many contemporary welfare states have relinquished themselves of the responsibility to provide employment for their citizens and have instead transferred this responsibility onto the individual, who in the form of the 'life-long learner' is obliged to engage in education in order to obtain the material security which the state may once have provided (Wright 2005: 8). For the individual, therefore, education becomes reduced to a market transaction. The individual becomes the consumer and the educational institution the provider. This transformation is particularly evident in the case of English Higher Education where government discourses frame the rationale for attending university in terms of the increased earning power which a university degree provides (ibid: 17). Other rationales, such as the opportunity for self-development through intellectual endeavour, are noticeable only for their absence in government literature.

Neoliberal economics have been particularly influential in the more general reform of public services and the introduction of markets and quasi-markets into public service provisioning. The notion of 'markets' in this context is often presented by policy-makers as 'ideologically neutral allocative mechanisms' which can empower service users and transform bureaucratic professional-led systems of public service provisioning (Greener 2008: 94). In the UK for example, introducing forms of market competition between service providers has been an explicit part of what Greener (2008) labels as the 'choice agenda', which has dominated public service reforms since the 1980s. Such an agenda is visible in English education in attempts to introduce greater competition between state-schooling as well as attempts to create a more consumerist attitude towards education. In this case, 'choice' can be seen as an example of Wright's (2005: 6) 'mobilising metaphors', in which an intrinsically positive sounding word or phrase is encompassed within a more overarching discursive framework aimed at encouraging commitments to markets and competition.

On face value, the choice agenda and educational consumerism may not necessarily be entirely negative. As Biesta points out, the introduction of consumerism may actually weaken the provider-led inflexibility of previous education systems (2004: 74). University students in England, for example, have been reluctant to accept the tag of consumers, because of the crass instrumentalism attached to it, but have instead seen the introduction of tuition fees as an opportunity to exploit consumer rights in the face of institutions

perceived at prioritising research over teaching (Wright 2005: 18). Nonetheless, the seeping in of economic and market discourses into both the rationale of education as well as its organisational structure poses important questions as to the consequences these may have for equity in education. Though often presented as a panacea for improving standards and delivering economic competitiveness, the spread of markets within education may potentially have more damaging consequences to educational equity. As this paper will address later on, the discourses which have been discussed here – globalisation, the knowledge-based economy and neoliberalism – may be producing ways of thinking about education which reduce the possibility to deliberate in its form and purpose beyond economic instrumentalism (ibid; Kenway et al 2007; Biesta 2004; Ball 2004).

At this point it is necessary to sum up a number of key points which have been discussed so far and which inform the theoretical and conceptual foundations of this paper. Firstly, following Bob Jessop's Cultural Political Economy, the knowledge-based economy has been identified as a dominant politico-economic narrative which posits knowledge at the heart of contemporary capitalist production. Secondly, discourses have been defined as powerful representations of the world which set limits on how the world (and aspects of it) can be thought about. Thirdly, in the field of education policy, a number of key discursive trends have been discussed. These trends include notions of 'competitiveness' and 'globalisation' which form part of a new 'education gospel' and positions education at the heart of national strategies of economic competitiveness. Finally, neoliberalism – in the form of the expansion of markets, consumerism and individualism in education – has also been identified as a central discourse in educational policy making which has been influential in creating a 'choice agenda' in compulsory schooling (something which the paper addresses in more detail in Part 4).

Overall, the discussion in this section has sought to describe some of the dominant discourses which are present in contemporary education policy. As the reader may have noticed, it has also been a discussion which has strayed beyond the empirical concerns of this paper – that is to say, national policy-making in English education. Nevertheless, as will become evident later on in the paper, the discourses and concepts identified here are of particular relevance to the parochial focus of this study.



## 2.3 Equity in Education

Although economically instrumentalist rationales have always been present, the notion of equity has also been a foundational concept within education policy since the inception of public education systems in the nineteenth century (Pacquette 2007: 335). As Lauder and colleagues eloquently put it:

It is through science that we develop the technologies intended to improve our material well being, while through the humanities it is hoped that moral and social progress can also be achieved. But what strengthens this faith is the idea that it is a source of social justice and economic efficiency: that education offers students the promise of equality of opportunity irrespective of social background, gender, or ethnicity, while providing the economy with an educated workforce (2006: 2).

In the post-industrial countries of late capitalism, the position of educational equity has taken on renewed importance. In these states, increasing credentialism and credential inflation means that educational achievement plays an ever greater role in determining life-chances. Already more than 70 per cent of young people enter some form of Higher Education in the US, Canada, South Korea, Finland and Japan, while in many other countries in the developed world participation rates are approaching or have exceeded 50 per cent (Altbach 2009). In this situation, educational qualifications are an increasingly important gate-keeper to the labour market. With so many people possessing graduate level qualifications, increasing congestion within the graduate labour market means that the possession of a degree is no longer a guarantee to a strong labour market position (Wolf 2002; Collins 2002). Rather, the type and level of degree, as well as the institution which awarded it, become ever more important (Reay et al 2005). The increasing importance of education in the labour market has profound effects on equity as educational inequalities are more likely to be transferred into broader social inequalities. Low and declining levels of intergenerational social mobility in the UK, for example, appear to be attributable to a strengthening of the relationship between family wealth and Higher Education attendance (see Blanden et al 2005).

Although it is important to bear in mind that “there has been no golden age of equity from whose pristine moral excellence we have newly fallen” (Pacquette 2007: 338), this next section introduces the various ways in which educational equity has been theorised. Before proceeding, however, it is important to clarify what exactly is meant by ‘educational equity’. In this paper, I address equity in terms of *social class inequalities* in the education system. I am concerned specifically with looking at how issues of equity are manifested in English

education policy through addressing inequalities which relate to differences in educational attainment between different social classes. I recognise that inequalities in education are multifaceted and occur along other social divisions, such as gender and ethnicity, and that many of these differences intersect in education and form more complex arrangements of cross-cutting cleavages (see Walkerdine et al. 2001; Reay et al. 2005). However, for reasons of space, the scope of this thesis is restricted to examining equity in relation to social class inequalities.

Broadly speaking it is possible to identify two views of educational equity: one unproblematic version which lauds education as the site of equality of opportunity, and one more critical view, which argues that education is either the site for social groups to gain positional advantage or a site of the reproduction of socio-economic inequalities.

### 2.3.1 The Meritocratic Perspective

For some, the shift towards post-industrialism also marks a shift to a more equitable society where the importance of education will necessarily weaken old social hierarchies. This view can be labelled the 'meritocratic perspective'. It is a view based on the idea of educational meritocracy where education produces a society based on achievement rather than ascription. Its genesis is found in theorisations of post-industrialism (such as Bell 1973) and, today, to a large extent, it is the view which has gained most traction with policy makers. Something which Collin's suggests can be attributed to its unproblematic view of education and inequality (2002: 29). It is also an approach which is visible in more recent theorising about societal transformations which has argued that the shift to post-Fordist social relations will lead to the withering away of social class itself, in favour of more individualised stratification patterns based on educational achievement (see, for example, Beck 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). The concept of 'meritocracy', initially coined (satirically) by Michael Young (2001a [1958]) as intelligence + effort = achievement, is central to this view of education and equity in a post-Fordist knowledge-based economy. Such unproblematic theorisations about educational equity are popular among British policy makers as will become evident later on in the paper.

### 2.3.2 Critical Perspectives

In opposition to the meritocratic perspective, there are also theorisations of educational equity which are more problematising and draw attention to the

iniquitous possibilities of education systems. The first of these theorisations, which can be labelled the 'Weberian perspective', views the state and hence the education system as a site of positional competition between social groups. Although the state is not always seen to operate in the interests of elites, dominant social groups are able to mobilise their political and economic power, as well as their status, to structure the education system in their own interests. Through doing so they are in turn able to ensure that education remains an institution which sustains social stratification through status positions in an occupational structure justified by educational achievement. According to this perspective, increasing credentialism results from, on the one hand, the economic advantage and social prestige which credentials bring, while on the other hand, the wish for dominant social groups to maintain their social positions in the face of increasing competition from subordinate groups (Weber 1991: 241). As more and more individuals acquire educational qualifications, the worth of educational qualifications in the labour market diminishes and the demand for yet higher level qualifications subsequently increases (Collins 2002; Wolf 2002). For example, jobs which may once have simply required an upper secondary education begin to demand at least a graduate level education.

In the wake of such growing credentialism, and because of increasing congestion in the skilled labour market, powerful groups may attempt to gain advantage in the pursuit of educational qualifications by attempting to shape the education system in their favour (Weber 1991: 241-2). This may be achieved through, for example, demands for greater diversity in the provision of schooling and hence more stratification in the educational system. This scenario is more faithful to the dystopia envisaged in Young's original conception of meritocracy, where notions of 'merit' (in the form of credentials) become monopolised by elites who consequently become self-reproducing (Young 2001a [1958]; 2001b).

This notion of reproduction is also central to the second critical approach to education and equity – that offered by Pierre Bourdieu. Without going into unnecessary detail about his work here, the Bourdieun perspective suggests that the pedagogy, curricula, methods and structure of the education system reflect the culture, norms and disposition of the dominant class. Middle-class pupils thus have a greater advantage in education because their 'cultural capital' converges with that which the education system requires for success. Conversely, working class pupils' underachievement can be explained by their relative lack of such cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Although Bourdieu's work has been criticised for presenting an overly deterministic link between social class and educational attainment, which is questioned by empirical data (Jenkins 1992: 113-9; Sullivan 2001) the concept of cultural capital does nevertheless highlight the subtle mechanisms in which 'privilege' can be

translated into 'merit' and in which powerful social classes and elites gain advantage in the field of education. It therefore challenges the unproblematic conception of merit within the meritocratic approach which views educational achievement as a simple combination of 'effort' and 'ability' – thus implying that the underachievement of certain social groups is a cause of relative lethargy and/or inability.

Overall there are many different ways in which middle class families are advantaged within education. Norton Grubb and Lazerson neatly summarise some of these advantages as operating through:

[...] the ability of high-status parents (especially professionals) to teach their children the cognitive abilities and the non-cognitive behaviours necessary in schools; through the role models and values parents (and their communities) provide children; through the income differences that allow some parents to provide more books and computers, travel and recreation, private tutoring and college tuition; [and], through the greater ability of some parents to negotiate the formal education systems on behalf of their children, because of the cultural compatibility between well-educated families and educational institutions (2006: 302).

These advantages are thus both material (in the case of using financial capital for computing equipment or university tuition) and intangible (in the case of the cultural capital synergies between middle class parents and education systems).

In summary, this section on equity in education has covered a number of points. It began by introducing educational equity in relation to social class inequalities in educational attainment. It then outlined three perspectives of educational equity: the meritocratic perspective which views education as a site of equality of opportunity; and the two more critical Weberian and Bourdieuian perspectives which view education, respectively, as a site of positional competition and social reproduction.

At this juncture in the paper, the reader may be wondering how these perspectives relate to the preceding discussion of dominant discourses in education policy. The answer lies in the argument that these discourses – globalisation, the knowledge-based economy and neoliberalism – privilege the more unproblematic view of educational equity presented in the meritocratic perspective. At the same time, in positioning the purpose of education policy within larger economic goals of national competitiveness, these discourses exclude the more critical perspectives of educational equity which stress that education is a site of positional competition between social groups in which

certain classes are better positioned – in terms of their social, cultural and financial capital – to gain advantage in what Brown and Lauder (2006: 333) describe as a ‘scramble’ to secure educational credentials. As I will expand upon in Part 4 of this paper, the importance which these discourses attach to simply increasing the number of skilled workers masks issues of equity where the growing significance of educational credentials can be seen as actually intensifying the position of education as a institution through which class advantage/disadvantage is reproduced.

## 3 Methodology

Having established the paper's main theoretical and conceptual foundations I now move on to outline the methodological approach with which the paper's research questions are tackled. As stated in the introduction, the paper's central questions will be addressed through an analysis of the discourses which surround the Conservative Party's proposals for school reform as well as a comparison with how this policy relates to the education policy of New Labour. The central methodology framework which I have utilised has been a discourse analysis of the Conservative Party's 'New Academy' policy proposals.

### 3.1 What Kind of Discourse Analysis?

As a method of social scientific research, discourse analysis can be conducted in a multitude of ways. Some of these discursive approaches give relatively clear and distinct guidelines for how to carry out discourse analyses. These approaches tend to fall into the more detailed linguistic analysis of specific texts offered by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (see Wodak and Meyer 2001). Fairclough's version of CDA, for example, operates within the framework of systemic functional linguistics where language, including grammar, is seen as shaped by the social functions it has come to serve (2003). Interestingly, Fairclough has utilised CDA to show how certain linguistic characteristics feature within mainstream discourses surrounding contemporary globalisation. For example, he shows how governmental texts often construe globalisation as a reified entity elided of human agency through instances of nominalization (the grammatical transformation of processes into nouns). Thus, instead of presenting globalisation as a process where certain agents have been key – such as national governments, international governmental organisations and transnational corporations – it is rather presented as an agency-less phenomenon which requires radical political, economic and social transformations. Examples can be seen in oft-repeated truisms such as 'globalisation creates new demands on nation states' (see Fairclough 2003).

Compared to other approaches to discourse analysis which I will turn to shortly, CDA offers a relatively clear method for studying discursive structures. Its critical

engagement with these structures also sheds light on the more opaque ways in which dominance and power are manifested through language (Wodak 2001: 2). Further still, in the case of Fairclough's approach, CDA can provide a relevant method for the analysis of discourses of contemporary political economy which informs the perspective of cultural political economy adopted in this thesis. However, despite these attributes, the linguistic focus adopted by CDA is not particularly suited to addressing the aims of this paper. This thesis is concerned with how discursive narratives operate as a means of rationalising certain policies while at the same time precluding others. It is therefore more concerned with the link between discourse and policy. That is to say, how discourses of contemporary political economy can be seen to shape the production of public policy.

The second approach to discursive analysis follows a line more directly related to Foucault's extensive body of work on discourse. Unlike CDA, this second tradition is not concerned with a detailed linguistic analysis of texts but is instead applied more generally to examine how certain discourses are implicated in the construction of particular subjectivities and relations of power. For example, Fejes (2006b) tracks shifts in the discursive construction of the 'educable subject' in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Sweden and shows how notions of the 'lifelong learner' have led to the creation of a new educable subject who must assume personal responsibility for negotiating the flexible labour market of a knowledge-based economy.

These approaches to discourse analysis are significantly less prescriptive than CDA, tending to be based on individual interpretations and applications of Foucault's work (ibid). As such, explicit methodological directions for how to conduct discourse analysis in this tradition are often left unformulated or implicit, in favour of theoretical assertions or empirical documenting (Flick 2006: 326). Because this thesis is not solely concerned with approaching discourses through Foucault's body of work this is not the most suitable approach to discourse analysis for addressing the questions in hand. Instead, this thesis has applied a different approach to the two traditions outlined above by opting to follow a more relevant method to discursive policy analysis in the shape of that offered by Bacchi (2009). I say more relevant here because Bacchi's method, which she has labelled the 'Whats the Problem Represented to be' approach (henceforth referred to as WPR), is specifically formulated for analysing policy.

## 3.2 Policy, Problem Representations and Analysis

WPR is based on the premise that policies and policy proposals, by their nature, imply that some kind of 'problem' exists and that policy is presented as providing solutions to such problems. Problems are often implicit in policy proposals and the aim of WPR is to uncover some of the underlying discourses and assumptions upon which 'problems', and policy, are built. Problems do not simply exist but are instead partly constituted by policy itself. Thus instead of focusing on the policies themselves, WPR is concerned with how the world is represented through the 'problems' implied within policy:

[...] that policies by their nature imply a certain understanding of what needs to change (the 'problem') suggests that 'problems' are endogenous – created within – rather than exogenous – created outside – the policy-making process. Policies *give shape* to 'problems'; they do not *address* them (Bacchi 2009: x, original emphasis).

The WPR approach provides a way to question the taken-for-granted assumptions which inform policy and policy proposals by problematising the problems uncovered within them (Bacchi 2009: xvi). It follows Deleuze's assertion that a problematisation of problems themselves can be a means to unveiling dominant social and power relationships (Deleuze 1994 in Bacchi 2009: xvi). The problems presented within policy can thus be seen as discursive representations of the world which have, in turn, real material implications (Bacchi 2009: xviii).

For a number of reasons, the WPR approach provides an excellent method for tackling the aims of this piece of research. Firstly, WPR is congruent with the ontological, epistemological and theoretical claims in which this paper is rooted. That is to say, it is an approach which, through highlighting the importance of discursive representations, compliments the semiotic stance of cultural political economy (Jessop 2004, 2005). Applying WPR can reveal how dominant master narratives of contemporary political economy, in the form of the knowledge-based economy, influence policy making in education at the same time as policy making itself contributes to the construction and sustenance of such narratives. Secondly, WPR is an approach specifically tailored to analysing policy (together with policy proposals) and is consequently particularly well suited to the object of this study: the policies proposed by the Conservative Party. Third and finally, WPR provides a relatively structured method for discursive policy analysis based on the application of six questions which sequentially probe the representations, understandings, rationales, presuppositions, possible exclusions and constructed



subjectivities which are all contained within policy and the problems which it represents (Bacchi 2009: x).

In summary the WPR approach provides a critical and relatively structured approach to discourse analysis which is tailored for addressing policy and policy proposals.

### 3.3 Empirical Material

The empirical material which I have based my analysis on consists of texts which relate to the education policy proposals made by the Conservative Party. Such texts primarily consist of those written documents which set out the party's education policy. However, after considering these texts it has also been necessary to include other texts, such as relevant speeches and newspaper comment pieces, given by Conservative Party politicians. This is because whereas policy documents simply set out certain proposals, these latter texts are richer in providing elaborations and rationales for such proposals. The analysis is as much about the discourses which inform and are propagated through policy as it is about actual policies themselves. It has been necessary therefore to consider texts which extend beyond those which simply state policy proposals in order to tease out and build a fuller picture of the discursive formations which underpin the Conservative Party 'school voucher' policy proposal.

The selection and collection of texts has been relatively open ended. It has involved a certain amount of movement back and forth between complimentary texts in order to build a better analytical picture. Judgements about the appropriateness and importance of particular texts over others have been based upon considerations of relevance as well as the extent to which the content of texts provide insights into how the policy is constituted through problem representations and discursive structures. It is important to point out that this is an interpretative process and therefore, what I have selected as analytically important, in the context of this study, others may not have. This has also required a degree of vigilance in the selection process so that the texts, as well as the particular parts of texts, which I analyse are reflective, and not distortive, of the arguments, narratives and discourses which surround the Conservative policy proposals. Thus if certain texts and documents contain contesting or contradicting positions, then these have been duly acknowledge and discussed within the process of analysis, as recommended by Bacchi (2009: 20).

### 3.4 Implementing the Analysis

After gathering initial material, the discursive analysis of the policy proceeded through the application of six questions recommended by Bacchi's WPR approach:

1. What is the problem represented to be?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?
3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?
6. How/where is this representation of the 'problem' produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be disrupted and replaced?

(Bacchi 2009: 4-19)

I have presented a more detailed description of each question as I have applied them in the analysis. For now it will suffice to say that each question is designed to dig deeper into the ways in which meaning is discursively created in public policy through the representations of particular 'problems' (ibid: 21). These questions were applied systematically to the Conservative Party's 'New Academy' policy proposals. Doing so has provided a degree of structure to the analysis by making it more coherent to implement; in addition to making it more intelligible to the reader. Once these questions have been addressed, a summary discussion has been offered which rounds up the key findings uncovered by the analysis.

### 3.5 Limitations and Critique

In terms of potential **limitations**, it is important to point out that at the time that this study was conducted (early spring 2010) the Conservative Party were not in government. Therefore, the texts analysed were not of the kind produced within government, i.e. policy white papers, which usually form the basis of discursive analyses of policy. This could potentially have posed problems, especially considering that some of the texts which were selected formed part of an election campaign and may therefore have been informed more by short term electioneering rather than the long-sighted discourses which influence the overall direction of political programmes. Although it is difficult to rule out this

factor completely when conducting any kind of analysis of policy, I believe that these problems have restricted through being conscious of them when carrying out the analysis and by discussing potential conflicts, between the influence of electioneering and more long-sighted discourses, when they may appear.

In terms of the **criticism**, then the newness of the WPR approach means that it has not yet been subjected to direct critique. However, I believe that some of the general criticism to which CDA has been subjected to can also be applied to the WPR approach. For example, Widdowson (1995) argues that CDA offers 'partial interpretations' rather than unbiased analysis. It is biased in the sense that it takes a critical, ideological, position as well as because it selects those texts which suit its interpretation. Thus, the discourse analysis of CDA may simply reflect the discursive perspective of the interpreter (researcher). Widdowson also argues that CDA implies that the interpretations it offers are the only ones which are valid and that such interpretations are merely *within* the text, waiting to be discovered and revealed by expert exegesis (ibid: 169). These same criticisms can also be applied to the WPR approach which, as already mentioned, is heavily dependent on interpretation of certain 'problem representations' within policy. Similarly the WPR approach is also in danger of implying that the interpretations which it offers are *the* only valid interpretations.

The WPR approach does, however, have answers to these criticisms. Firstly, the WPR approach stresses the importance of reflexivity during and after the analytical process. This, Bacchi (2009: 19) suggests, can be achieved through considering the six questions with reference to the ones own analysis. The WPR therefore recognises the position of researchers as being immersed in a social world and the discourses and conceptual logics which it contains. Reflexivity, in this case, is one way to keep some form of distance from these logics through an awareness which guards against simply buying into certain problem representations and their discursive critiques. The concern with partiality which Widdowson raises is part of broader questions within the social sciences about the possibility of conducting any form of research without making *a priori* judgements (Meyer 2001: 17). Like CDA, the WPR approach takes the view that social science cannot be made free from such judgements and therefore, unlike other approaches to social science such as positivism, is clear in stating that it adopts a normative emancipatory agenda through presuming that problem representations, together with the discourses which inform them, benefit some groups at the expense of others (Bacchi 2009: 44). It is a critical mode of analysis which aims to bring to light and question some of the less obvious and taken-for-granted discursive structures which inform understandings of the world. Critical analysis is necessary to be able to do this. In Foucault's words:

A critique does not consist in saying that things aren't good the way they are. It consists in seeing on what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based (Foucault 1994: 456 in Bacchi 2009: xv).

Another answer to Widdowson's criticism is that the WPR approach does not, as he suggests is the case with CDA, imply that its particular interpretations/analyses are the only valid ones. Instead it recognises that others may conduct similar analysis but produce different results which can be equally valid. As Bacchi points out the goal of her approach is not to identify some kind of 'extra-discursive reality' but instead to problematise and question ways of understanding presented within policy which have inherently political and potentially harmful effects (2009: 45). Of course, it is possible to raise the objection that this could lead to a degree of 'anything goes' relativism where any interpretation is valid. On this point I agree with Fejes (2006: 37) that this can be overcome by reflexive scrutiny and evaluation based on whether or not the arguments and interpretations included in the analysis are convincing.

## 4 Analysis

This part of the paper begins with a discussion of the link between New Labour policy, discourses and equity before proceeding with the discursive analysis of the Conservative Party's '*New Academy*' policy proposals. While presenting this analysis I develop the paper's main contentions that the dominant discourses discussed earlier are strengthening the position of education as a means of delivering economic competitiveness and that this increasingly utilitarian view of education challenges the ability to tackle issues of equity within English education policy making.

### 4.1 New Labour

#### 4.1.1 Widening Participation

As discussed in Part 2, the view of education as the site of meritocracy is particularly prominent in contemporary discourses surrounding globalisation and the knowledge-based economy. In these discourses, notions of equality are subsumed in broader policy goals such as economic competitiveness. In Britain, such notions are exemplified by the discourses and policies in which New Labour have presented educational equality in recent years. Visions of equality here have been framed in terms of providing equality of opportunity through raising standards and removing barriers for those with 'talent'. In New Labour policy, less emphasis is placed on universal provisioning than on providing opportunities for those considered 'gifted and talented' to reach the 'limits of their capability' (Department for Education and Schools 2005a in Ball 2008: 180). In tertiary education, policy concerns with equality have primarily been addressed through an agenda of 'widening participation' – increasing the number of young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds attending higher education. However, rather than being framed in reference to equality as a desirable social good in itself, the widening participation agenda has instead been framed by New Labour as a way to increase the supply of skilled graduates within the labour market, and thus as a means of maintaining economic competitiveness (Brown and Hesketh 2004; Wolf 2002). Here it is possible to see how overarching discourses associated with the knowledge-based economy, in particular the need to

remain 'competitive' and not to 'lag behind', frame educational equality as an issue of economic importance rather than as one of fairness and equity. Equality in education in this context, though still a concern, is not necessarily a desirable policy aim in its own right but must be justified through reference to its more economically instrumentalist benefits.

One consequence of this is the persistence of broader and more dynamic forms of inequality within higher education (see Wolf 2002; Archer et al 2003). While on one hand, the absolute number of young people from poorer socio-economic backgrounds attending higher education in the UK has increased over the past three decades, the expansion of higher education participation has varied massively relative to social class – with less than 10 per cent of young people from unskilled and semi-skilled social class backgrounds achieving a higher education qualification in comparison to nearly 90 per cent of young people from professional social class backgrounds (Gilchrist et al 2003: 76).

These cleavages are made more acute when one considers the different Higher Education paths taken by different social classes. In comparison to working class students, who are more likely to choose less prestigious degrees (such as business and media studies) at less prestigious universities (such as Bradford or Brighton), middle and upper class pupils are more likely to attend more prestigious universities (such as Oxford and Cambridge) while reading more prestigious degrees (such as PPE and History) (Reay et al 2005). Thus, in the case of New Labour, an emphasis on 'widening participation', rather than on more general inequalities within Higher Education, has meant that relative inequalities in tertiary education not only persist but in many ways deepen according to novel forms of class-based cleavages which, through the accentuation of academic hierarchies (see Bourdieu 1988), transcend traditional divisions of participation and non-participation. Such observations provide support for the claims made within the Weberian perspective of educational equity – discussed earlier in Part 2 – that increasing credentialism acts as one way of maintaining patterns of social stratification.

#### 4.1.2 Academy Schools

The relative marginalisation of equity as a policy concern in education is also seen in the school policy developed by New Labour. This is most evident in recent school reforms and the establishment of new types of schooling in the form of 'Academies'. Introduced by New Labour in 2001, Academies are more autonomous forms of secondary schools which have greater discretion over the content of their teaching than conventional state schools and are freed from a

majority of the demands stipulated within the National Curriculum. They are state-financed but sponsored-led, meaning that sponsors – ranging from businesses, philanthropic organisations and local authorities – contribute a maximum of 10 per cent to the capital costs of building the new school in return for significant power over the day to day running of the school, its teaching and its overall direction, while overall funding is provided by the state. They are aimed at disadvantaged areas with schools described as ‘failing’ by government inspectors (see West and Currie 2008).

Ball describes academies as “an experiment in and a symbol of education policy beyond the welfare state” (2008: 184). Being freed from state control while at the same time incorporating non-state actors – in the form of businesses, local entrepreneurs and philanthropic organisations – they are neither wholly state nor private institutions. They are instead presented within New Labour policy as inventive solutions to the failures of public sector schooling and traditional, welfare state-centric, forms of governance (ibid: 186). As well as fitting into broader goals of public sector reform, academies are represented in government rhetoric as institutions which tie together innovation, inclusion and regeneration to address local problems, inequalities and underachievement in specific areas of deprivation. Through doing this they are also expected to enact a new relationship between education and the economy as well as fostering ‘knowledge cultures’ and new commitments to learning as part of regeneration measures aimed at impoverished communities (ibid: 185).

Academies are not aimed at addressing inequalities so much as they are aimed at addressing ‘underachievement’ in certain areas in need of economic regeneration. Ball describes this as an example of how New Labour education policy is ambivalent to inequality, preferring instead to direct policy attention towards issues of ‘social exclusion’. In this sense, Academy schools provide part of a solution to tackle social exclusion and the problems of unemployment and welfare-state dependency which derive from it. The logic behind such policy strategies is that fairer outcomes will be produced by raising the achievement of all pupils (Ball 2008: 153). Academies therefore provide an example of how issues of equity in English education are subsumed within broader concerns aimed at improving standards whilst also delivering economic regeneration and creating new links between education and the economy. They are therefore demonstrative of how the discourses of globalisation and the knowledge-based economy can be manifested in education and produce policy agendas characterised more by economic instrumentalism than by issues of educational equality. Like the widening participation agenda, the academy reforms are primarily directed at maximising the supply of educated and skilled workers for the post-Fordist knowledge economy through raising educational achievement in

those de-industrialised areas in need of regeneration. Broader issues of inequality within compulsory schooling, as well as their ‘knock-on’ effects to inequality in tertiary education, are largely ignored.

## 4.2 The Conservatives

### 4.2.1 The ‘New Academy’ Policy

The Conservatives describe their school reforms as borrowing from the Swedish model of ‘free schools’ as well as New Labour’s Academy school programme. These reforms are designed to lead to the establishment of new schools, which the Conservatives label ‘*New Academies*’. Such reforms are based on the idea of per-pupil funding, otherwise known as ‘school vouchers’, where each pupil is attributed a yearly grant for his/her education which they can take to a school of their choice. Like existing Academy schools in England, *New Academies* will be entirely state-funded and will be prohibited from charging additional fees. They will be set up and run by ‘existing educational providers’, charities, trusts, voluntary groups, philanthropists and parent co-operatives. Unlike their Swedish counterparts, the Conservatives will run such schools purely as not-for-profit organisations and thus bar companies from drawing a profit from such schools<sup>1</sup>.

*New Academies* will be independent of state control and will have greater freedoms than state-schools over their day-to-day operations (such as curricula and teaching pay-structures) (The Conservative Party 2007: 36-7; 2010a: 50-3). However, in contrast to New Labour’s Academies, any of the actors described above can decide to establish a *New Academy* and fund it on the basis of the number of pupils it attracts. According to the Conservatives, this will lead to thousands of new schools in which parent cooperatives are likely to be the most eager actors behind their establishment. Such schools are expected to “compete with surrounding local authority schools, helping to exert pressure for higher standards” (2007: 37) while acting as “beacons of excellence in areas where school standards are unacceptably low” (2010a: 53).

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<sup>1</sup> However, pressure has been applied by companies involved in schooling – who have argued that a profit-making incentive has been central to the extensiveness of the Swedish ‘free school’ reforms (see *The Guardian Friday 2 October 2009*). This raises the possibility that the not-for-profit stipulation in the Conservatives’ proposal could be removed sometime in the future.



## 4.2.2 The Problem

### What is the 'Problem' Represented to be?

This question is the first to be posed under the WPR approach (discussed in Part 3). Its purpose is to clarify what 'problem' representations are implied within a given policy. It is an important question because it underpins the assertion of the WPR approach that policies are not simply 'solutions' to some form of existing 'real' problem but, instead, are constitutive of 'problems' themselves (Bacchi 2009: 3).

If we look at the Conservative Party's school voucher proposals we can see the overall 'problem' as represented as being a lack of competition and consequent sub-optimal standards within the compulsory schooling sector. In the two key documents which set out the plans for these reforms, the Conservative Party's (2007) education policy paper and the 2010 Conservative Party election manifesto (2010), the policy is framed respectively in terms of 'raising the bar' and 'raising standards in education'. In the words of Michael Gove, the Conservative Secretary of State for Education, the New Academy schools programme will:

[...] break the bureaucratic monopoly on school provisioning, which denies parents choice, and introduce competition to specifically drive up standards (Gove 2009a).

The central problem is thus represented as being a 'monopoly on school provisioning' which denies the 'choice' and 'competition' needed to 'drive up standards'.

However, it would be simplistic to suggest that this is the simple 'problem' represented in the *New Academy* policy. As Bacchi (2009: 4) points out, policies are often complex and nested within a number of interrelated problem representations. In this case, the *New Academy* policy is no exception and is also presented within Conservative Party texts in relation to the three additional 'problems' of large school sizes, excessive bureaucracy and, most interestingly, educational inequality.

With regards to the first of these, *New Academies* are envisaged in Conservative Party literature as leading to a new generation of "smaller schools with smaller class sizes" in which "teachers know their pupils" names (Conservative Party 2010a: 51). In terms of bureaucracy, such school reforms are also seen as tackling the supposed restrictive effects of officialdom which, in the words of David Cameron, leader of the Conservative Party, the "belief that politicians and

government officials are the only people with good ideas is a belief that belongs in the past” (Cameron 2007).

The most interesting additional problem representation which features in the *New Academies* policy is that of educational inequality – something which is emphasised heavily in the Conservative’s presentation of the policy. For example, the full title of the central document which sets out the *New Academy* proposals is “Raising the bar, closing the gap: An action plan for schools to raise standards, create more good school places and make opportunity more equal” (The Conservative Party 2007). The description of ‘raising the bar’ and ‘closing the gap’ thus appears to imply that the problem of unequal opportunity is also related to the problem of low standards caused by a lack of competition.

In summary, the central problem representation of the school voucher policy can be described as a lack of competition and choice in the supply of compulsory schooling and a consequent lack of high standards. Additional problem representations include large school sizes, excessive bureaucracy and educational inequality. Thus having established ‘what the problem is represented to be’ the analysis now moves on to probe deeper into the discursive factors which can be seen to inform the *New Academy* policy.

#### 4.2.3 Identifiable Discourses

##### **What Presuppositions or Assumptions underlie this Representation of the ‘Problem’?**

This next question is attended to uncover some of the discursive understandings which underpin certain policies and problem representations. The aim here is to identify the taken-for-granted presumptions and assumptions which lodge within certain problem representations (Bacchi 2009: 5). Through posing this question it is possible to shed light on how *New Academy* policy is influenced by the dominant discourses discussed earlier in this paper (Part 2).

To begin with, the central problem representation of the need to ‘drive up standards’ in education can be seen to fall into the discourse of the knowledge-based economy. This is illustrated, in this case, in the repetition of the familiar mantras of globalisation and the knowledge-based economy through which the Conservative Party’s education policy is introduced:

Globalisation is bringing huge benefits, not least the opening up of new cultures and nations to the promise of freedom. For those nations equipped to adapt, globalisation also promises the chance to extend wealth and opportunity to more

citizens. Countries, and individuals, who are highly-skilled will benefit hugely as more and more opportunities open up for their talents to be used. But those nations and individuals without high levels of skills will lose out, as jobs and opportunities increasingly move elsewhere (Conservative Party 2007: 12).

Here we can see how education is being positioned, on the one hand, within the larger economic 'opportunities' presented by 'globalisation'; while on the other hand, emphasis is placed on the risks presented by 'globalisation': that countries are in danger of 'losing out' if they do not ensure that their economies are sufficiently 'high-skilled'. These assertions echo the discourses described above in which education is placed at the heart of delivering national economic competitiveness and where a failure to recognise this new reality risks the prospect of 'lagging behind' (Fejes 2006; Brown and Lauder 2006). There is also no attempt to define 'globalisation' here, it is simply presented as a phenomenon to which nations and individuals must react to in order to take advantage of its self-evident 'opportunities'. Thus the notion of 'globalisation' appears as an 'empty box', in the language used by Lloyd and Payne (2003), which, in this case, is filled with the familiar descriptions of the world where education is fundamental to economic success.

The positioning of education at the frontline of delivering national competitiveness is particularly evident in the following quote in which Michael Gove defends the Conservative Party's prioritisation of education in light of the recession of 2009. In doing, he likens the importance of education to that of defending Britain's former East Asian colonies from Japanese assaults during the Second World War:

Every weapon we have will be deployed to fight educational failure. Because we find ourselves in the middle of another great global convulsion and the enemy today, as it was 70 years ago, will be complacency in the face of the challenge from the east (Gove 2009b).

Although clearly intended as a stirring piece of political rhetoric, with its Churchillian undertones, the metaphor of warfare is a strong indication of the influence which discourses of globalisation and competitiveness have exerted on Conservative Party education policy. Education here is portrayed as a 'weapon' which must be used in order to defend the British economy from the competitive challenges posed by the 'enemy' economies of East Asia.

The strength of the discourse of competition is also evident in the way in which educational inequality is presented when outlining the *New Academy* policy:

While our finest universities are some of the most impressive educational institutions in the world, and our strongest schools work daily miracles, we live in a country where the gap between those who perform best, and those left behind, is growing wider. This is not just a reproach to our vision of a more socially just Britain, it also constitutes a massive waste of talent which could be harnessed in the interests of all (Conservative Party 2007: 12).

[The] lack of opportunity for the poorest is, to me, plain immoral, but it is also increasingly economically foolish because we cannot afford to waste any talent. We must maximise the country's economic firepower (Gove 2009b).

These quotes appear to echo the position of equity within New Labour policy, where equity in education is not an end in itself but, instead, a means to which greater amounts of talent can be harnessed for the sake of maximising 'the country's economic firepower'. Thus one of the central presumptions within the *New Academy* policy appears to be that raising educational standards, in the context of globalisation and the knowledge-based economy, plays a key role in delivering economic competitiveness. The policy therefore can be seen to be illustrative of a continuation of the 'new educational gospel' (Norton Grubb and Lazerson 2006) which has gripped British policy makers over recent decennia.

Another element to the presumptions which inform the *New Academy* policy, and the problem representations it contains, is found in the influence of the discourses of neoliberalism, choice and competition. In this instance, the school reforms are described, in the language of economics, as a 'supply-side revolution'; while 'choice' is consistently repeated as an empowering mechanism for pupils and parents (see Conservative Party 2007). As Greener (2008) points out, when describing the 'choice agenda', 'choice' is often portrayed within policy making as a politically neutral mechanism for improving public services. This appears to be the case here too, as the Conservatives describe their proposals as a way of improving school standards whilst transforming traditional sclerotic systems reliant on state-bureaucracy:

Since the free schools programme was established in Sweden, over 1,000 new schools have opened. They have been founded by foundations, charities and others – and they have attracted pupils by offering better discipline and higher standards. Because any parent can take money the Swedish Government spends on their child's education and choose the school they want, standards have risen across the board as every school does its best to satisfy parents (Conservative Party 2010: 50).

[New Academies] will compete with local authority schools, helping to exert pressure for higher standards in the surrounding schools (Conservative Party 2007: 37).

Therefore, having established the need to improve standards in education through deploying the discourses of the knowledge-based economy and globalisation, the *New Academy* policy can also be seen to represent an extension of the 'choice agenda' which has dominated English education reform since the mid 1980s. Within this agenda, the discourse of neoliberalism is strongly apparent and increasing certain market principles within education, through a 'supply-side revolution' and increased competition, is seen as the best way to 'drive up standards'.

However, a particularly interesting point here is that, within the presentation of the *New Academy* policy, increasing 'choice' is not only seen as likely to improve overall standards but is also expected to produce greater equality within education. Many of the documents and speeches which outline the Conservative Party school reforms begin with a contextual preamble which outlines some of the differences in attainment experienced by different social groups (see for example Conservative Party 2007: 13; 2010: 51, Gove 2009a). After this, increasing choice is framed as being particularly beneficial to the poorest pupils, whose educational options would, according to the Conservatives, be greatly extended under the *New Academy* proposals. Something which is presumed will lead to greater access high standard schools for these children:

We want to give more people more power to open more good schools. That will give parents more choice, it will create greater incentives for more of our existing schools to do better, and above all it will help us make opportunity in our country more equal (Cameron 2007).

[W]e will open up the system to provide all parents with the sort of choice currently only the rich enjoy (Conservative Party 2007: 16).

The presumption here is that choice and competition will improve educational standards for those groups currently most disadvantaged within education and, as I address shortly, there is no suggestion that middle-class families are likely to benefit most from increased choice within state-schooling.

In summary and as could be expected, the key presumptions within the *New Academy* policy appear to coincide with the dominant discourses discussed earlier in this paper. Firstly, discourses of globalisation, competitiveness and the knowledge-based economy are evident within the policy through the way in

which education is seen as key to individual and national economic success. These discourses create an economic rationale for policies aimed at improving both standards and equity in education. Secondly, neoliberal discourses of competition and 'choice' appear evident in the shape of the policy itself. The *New Academy* policy appears to be a continuation of the 'choice agenda' where increased competition and consumerism within schooling is expected to produce higher standards and, consequently, greater educational equality.

#### 4.2.4 Origins and Mechanisms

##### **How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?**

The purpose of this question is to examine the origins, history and mechanisms through which problem representations have come about (Bacchi 2009: 10). If we examine the problem representations contained within the *New Academy* policy, we can see that there are a number of factors which have contributed to the emergence of such 'problems'.

To an extent the 'problem' of low standards has its origins within the development of notions of 'competitiveness', 'globalisation' and the knowledge-based economy which have pervaded policy making in the past thirty years. As Rosamund (2002: 165-8) points out, notions of 'competitiveness' arose originally out of American and European concerns about the rapid economic growth of certain East Asian economies. This growth, in countries such as Japan and South Korea, challenged North Atlantic economic dominance and led to new fears within America and Western Europe that these economies were in danger of falling behind their East Asian counterparts. Such fears remain evident today and can be seen in the quote above from Michael Gove in which he warns against "complacency in the face of challenge from the east" (2009b). On a more macro level, these problems are also representative of the emergence of a new politico-economic imaginary in the form of the knowledge-based economy, which to some extent has replaced the previously dominant economic narrative of Fordism (Jessop 2004, 2005). This shift has been fundamental to a repositioning of education towards more economically instrumentalist goals. One consequence of this discourse has been that issues of standards within education have risen up the political agenda. In England, this has produced a rationale for educational reforms designed to improve standards.

Within the Conservative Party's proposals, the 'problem' of low standards is made particular acute by reference to OECD studies which suggest that standards in education have fallen in England over the past decade. These findings are used to both chasten New Labour's educational record while also

creating a case for 'urgent action' to improve English schools (Cameron 2010). The study which receives particular attention is a report by the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Within the report it is stated that the performance of British 15-year olds in reading, mathematics and science have declined since 2000 and thus the position of Britain's education system has declined relative to other OECD member states. The level of importance attached to this report is illustrated in the way in which the Conservative Party use it to emphasis the 'problem' of low standards in education within their 2010 election manifesto:

[...] Britain is slipping down the world league tables in reading, Maths and Science, and violence in the classroom is a serious problem. We are falling behind other countries, and there is a growing gap between the richest and the poorest (Conservative Party 2010: 51).

Although there are a number of additional problems represented in this extract (such classroom violence and a growing gap between rich and poor), the reference to 'slipping down world league tables' and 'falling behind other countries' appears to be intended to draw attention to an apparent urgency in reforming the school system.

The use of statistics is always a selective process and the reference to PISA study here raises two points. On the one hand it further emphasises the importance of not 'falling behind' other countries within policy making; while on the other hand it shows how certain international governmental organisations influence national policy making. In this case, the results of the PISA study are utilised to scandalise current education policy. PISA itself is presented as a neutral comparative study of national education systems and the possibility that the OECD has its own policy agenda with regards to education – an agenda heavily influenced by the knowledge-based economy discourses (see Robertson 2005; Rinne et al. 2004) – is ignored. Thus, a further observation here is that there is a certain international dimension to how the issue of standards have been problematised within the *New Academy* policy.

Moving on, the 'choice agenda' is another important historical aspect to the development of the *New Academy* policy. One key problem which is represented within the proposal is that standards are low because there has been a lack of choice and competition within the state-school sector. This fits into a the policy trend in English education over the past thirty years which has been aimed at introducing more market forms within education. As already mentioned in this paper, some key policies within the 'choice agenda' have included the introduction of school league tables (which allow parents to compare the relative

performance of local schools) and the diversification of types of schooling (through the introduction of 'City Technology Colleges', 'Specialist Schools' and 'Academies'). The Conservatives are quite open in stating that they aim to build upon these reforms. In presenting their *New Academy* reforms, for example, the Conservative Party state that they will introduce such schools by "radically building on existing Academy legislation" (Conservative Party 2007: 36). The Conservative Party school reforms can thus be seen to mark an extension of a policy trend which has dominated school reforms in England over the past twenty-five years. Albeit an extension which, by introducing a 'school voucher' system, goes considerably further than hitherto reforms in creating greater competition and consumerism in compulsory schooling.

To recapitulate, the 'problems' of low standards and insufficient choice are rooted in the discursive notions of globalisation and competitiveness in which national education systems are portrayed as being key to delivering economic dynamism. Such problems also fit into broader understandings of the knowledge-based economy as the current dominant economic imaginary. In the *New Academy* policy, references to the OECD's PISA study are used to emphasise the urgency of such reforms in light of the danger of falling further behind other countries. The shape of the actual reforms can also be seen as part of a wider commitment to market-based reforms which has characterised British policy making over the past quarter century.

#### 4.2.5 Silences

##### **What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?**

This question is based on the argument that "policies are constrained by the ways in which they represent the 'problem'" (Bacchi 2009: 13). Its purpose is to problematise the problem representations contained within particular policies. It is part of the more critical objectives of the WPR approach and is aimed at identifying some of the issues and perspectives which are silenced within such problem representations.

If we look at the central 'problem' represented within the *New Academy* policy – low standards because of a lack of competition – it is possible to see that contained within it is a conceptualisation of educational equity which is essentially based on the meritocratic perspective (discussed above in Part 2). With regards to how equity is conceptualised within the policy, the key problem is not that different social groups or classes are differently positioned in regards to education; it is simply that there are not enough 'good schools'. Thus, the



problem of equity in education is seen simply as a matter improving the educational choices available to parents and children from lower socio-economic groups. This interpretation is supported by claims made by the Conservative Party, when outlining their plans for school reform, in which they state that people in present-day Britain are “no longer bound by the traditional constraints of place, class and institution” (The Conservative Party 2007: 2).

In adopting a meritocratic perspective, the *New Academy* policy thus appears to forego the more critical perspectives of educational equity which view education as a site of positional competition (Weber 2008) and social reproduction between socio-economic groups and classes (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). The possibility that increasing credentialism within the labour market has increased education’s position as a site of positional competition is omitted, as is the possibility that certain classes are better positioned to negotiate ‘choice’ in education.

Recent work on the position of equity in education has shown that, in the England, educational choices *themselves* are deeply affected by one’s socio-economic position. I have already discussed research by Diane Reay and colleagues (2005) which has shown how choices in higher education are affected by social class position (see Part 4.1.1). Lucy and Reay (2002, however, show how these negotiations of choice are also evident in the selection of secondary schools. These authors show how middle-class families are deeply aware of the importance of strong educational credentials in an increasingly congested skilled labour market and how, in the context of choosing a secondary school, this awareness can translate into “deep anxieties about the maintenance and reproduction of objective and subjective signifiers of class location” (ibid: 322). A failure to secure the ‘right’ school is perceived by these families as potentially jeopardising their children’s educational success which, in turn, could result in downward social mobility (for the child) and a slip from a class position linked to occupational and educational status.

With this scenario bearing heavily, the parents in Lucy and Reay’s study attempt to ensure that their children attend the best possible school through employing various methods such as buying private tuition (in order to clear entrance exams for selective schools), moving into the catchment areas of high-performing schools and even, in some cases, ‘going private’ and sending their children to fee paying schools (ibid: 325). Interestingly, even those left-leaning parents with a strong commitment to the egalitarian ideals of comprehensive education were faced with anxieties over how their children would fair in certain local comprehensives perceived as being ‘inadequate’ (ibid: 328-9). This latter point highlights how ‘choice’ and market reforms can lead, reluctantly, to an

undermining of previous commitments to more equitable institutional structures (Jordan 2006: 117). Overall, Lucey and Reay draw attention to the ways in which anxieties created by credentialism translate into deliberate strategies on behalf of middle-class families to secure educational advantage on behalf of their children. Similar research by Gillies (2005) has also shown how middle-class families often 'know how to work the system better' and are more skilled in challenging decisions which they perceive as undermining their children's education.

In the Conservative Party policy, these strategies of middle-class parents – and their possible iniquitous consequences – are ignored. Choice and competition are seen as devoid of producing classed effects. The possibility that *New Academy* schools may be most popular with middle-class parents, as a way from them to escape the perceived inadequacies of comprehensive mixed-classed education, are not considered. Instead, *New Academies* are framed in equitable terms because they will, supposedly, raise overall standards and thus increase the overall educational achievement of secondary school children – some of whom are presumed to be children from lower class backgrounds. What is not mentioned is that middle-class parents, anxious about their children's educational progression, may be most keen on establishing *New Academies* and that this, in turn could lead to greater social segregation in schooling and a scenario of 'middle-class' flight from conventional state-schools. This more iniquitous scenario is supported by research in Sweden which suggests that social segregation has increased in Swedish schools since the introduction of school voucher reforms in the early 1990s (see, for example, *Skolverket* 2006; Böhlmark and Lindahl 2007). However, the Conservatives neither address this research nor the scholarly and public debate which has surrounded the 'free school' reforms in Sweden – thus suggesting that the commitment to solving the 'problem' of inequality through *New Academies* is more rhetorical than evidence-based.

To sum up this part of the analysis, the *New Academy* policy appears to privilege a meritocratic perspective to education where increasing equity is seen as a matter of improving overall school standards. Such conceptualisations fail to problematise more entrenched forms of inequity which arise from education's importance as a site of positional competition between different social groups. The problem representation of low standards because of a lack of choice does not address challenges to educational equity such as the strong desire of middle-class families to gain an advantage for their children through 'working the system'. Thus the possibility that *New Academies* may be most popular with middle class families wishing to escape the 'inadequacies' of conventional state

schooling is ignored – as is evidence from the Swedish experience which suggests that such reforms can lead to greater social segregation in schooling.

#### 4.2.6 Effects

##### **What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?**

The purpose of this, penultimate, question is to examine the effects which are produced by the problem representations contained within certain policies. This does not refer to a focus on evaluating ‘policy outcomes’ but, instead, is aimed at scrutinising problem representations in order to see how they may benefit some social groups while harming others (Bacchi 2009: 15). Bacchi (ibid) identifies three kinds of effects which need to be considered here: discursive effects, subjectification effects and lived (material) effects.

To an extent, the **discursive effects** of the *New Academy* policy have already been addressed in relation to the preceding three questions – all of which have sought to expand on the discourses which are visible within the *New Academy* policy. Nonetheless, there is a need to think about how these discourses restrict ways of thinking in education which may, in turn, effect different social groups. One observation here is that, in creating the rationale for educational reform primarily in economic terms, the discourses of the knowledge-based economy and globalisation act to marginalise concerns with producing greater equity within education. However, as already mentioned, there is also a significant focus on equity within the *New Academy* policy and its problem representation. Thus, there appears to be a contradiction here between, on the one hand, reforming education for the sake of economic competitiveness, and on the other hand, reforming education for the sake of greater equity – both are presented by the Conservative Party as central to their plans to reform the school system.

Nevertheless, the focus on increasing choice and standards as a way of increasing economic competitiveness as well as equity has an important discursive effect. It presupposes that equity in education – and the relative underachievement of lower social classes – is caused because lower socio-economic groups do not have access to decent schools. As discussed above, the presuppositions exclude more problematic conceptualisations of educational equity which draw attention to the advantages which middle class families have – in terms of their social, financial and cultural capital – and the desire of middle class families to use these advantages to secure competitive advantage within the education system. Of course, as Brown and Lauder (2006: 333) argue, the point here is not that raising standards is not important but that it does not address the problem of positional conflict within education. Something which is

increasingly evident as growing credentialism intensifies competition for jobs within the labour market.

If the problem representation of standards can be seen as producing important discursive effects when it comes to conceptualising equity in one-dimensional terms, then the notions of choice and competition in educational provisioning can be seen as producing significant **subjectification effects**. These effects are those which relate to how subjects are created within policies and their problem representations. The notion of 'subject' here is based on Foucault's assertion that discourses can socially position individuals so that these 'subject positions', in turn, act as standpoints from which the social world is understood (Bacchi 2009: 16).

In the case of the school voucher reforms within the *New Academy* policy, an important subjectification effect is produced as parents and pupils are turned into *consumers*. In addition to increasing competition between schools, such reforms are also reliant on increasing consumerist attitudes to education where parents are encouraged to take the money allotted to their child's education (the 'school voucher') and 'shop around' for the best service. One consequence of this is that greater responsibility is transferred onto the individual or, in this case, the parent. In a state-funded education system in which schools compete and students consume, the individual therefore becomes responsible for their own educational success through the choices they make. Increasing consumerism in education can thus be seen as part of larger structural changes to the welfare state in which the individual is increasingly expected to take on a greater responsibility for their own biographical progression (Jordan 2006: 130; Fejes 2006a).

The third and last effects which need to be considered in this part of the analysis are the **lived (material) effects** of problem representations. Within Conservative Party policy documents the material effects are presented as being higher standards in education, more choice and greater freedom. In turn, these effects are seen as increasing the educational attainment of young people from poorer social groups – thus leading to greater social mobility (Conservative Party 2010: 10). However, as I have already discussed, these expected outcomes appear to be overly presumptuous. What may indeed occur is that the increase in choice and diversity in the provision of state-funded schooling may actually have the counter-effect of increasing social segregation – as seen in similar reforms in Sweden – together with the persistence of forms of educational inequality based on class advantage/disadvantage. Through increasing social segregation in education, *New Academies*, may therefore actually entrench educational inequalities and, in turn, further reduce social mobility within England.

Before proceeding to the final question in this analysis, the effects of the problem representations can be summarised into three points. Firstly, in terms of discursive effects, the emphasis on raising overall standards in education acts to close off more problematic accounts of equity in education which stress education's role as a site of positional competition. Secondly, the aims to increase competition and choice in school provisioning produce subjectification effects in which parents are encouraged to think of themselves as consumers and are thus, through the choices they make, expected to assume greater responsibility over their children's educational progression. Thirdly, increasing choice and diversity in school provisioning can be seen to have the lived (material) effect of benefitting middle class families over working class families and thus lead to greater social segregation and inequalities in education.

#### 4.2.7 Producing and Disseminating

##### **How/where is this representation of the 'problem' produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be disrupted and replaced?**

This final question builds on question 3 (which explores origins and mechanisms) to direct attention to the ways in which certain problem representations become dominant. Its purpose is to identify possible resistance to such problem representations.

On a discursive level, it is possible to see the notion of 'choice' as a key 'mobilising metaphor' (Wright 2005) through which the *New Academy* policy is promoted. Within the policy, choice is portrayed as empowering and is contrasted, in a binary fashion, to the restrictive effects of bureaucracy. As an intrinsically positive sounding word, 'choice' is used within the presentation of the policy as something which is inherently desirable:

People expect to be able to make choices about the services they use, based on robust information about the quality on offer (Conservative Party 2010: 52).

Schooling is thus no different from other services and because people expect to make choices over the services which they use, so should parental choice be extended for parents with children in education. Thus 'choice' is presented as a self-evident right which people should have and which current bureaucratic educational provisioning cannot provide.

However, if we consider the notion of 'choice' in more critical terms then it is possible to see that it is also being used here beyond its symbolic connotations of freedom. It is, rather, also being deployed as a mobilising metaphor for policies essentially aimed at the further marketisation of education through increasing competition in the provision of schooling at the same time as increasing consumerist attitudes to education.

Moving on, as already mentioned in the discussion of the use of the PISA study, there is an important international element to how the 'problem' of standards and choice is supported within the *New Academy* policy. This international element is particularly important and forms a key rhetorical tool through which the Conservative Party attempts to promote their school reforms. Another illustration of this is the prominence which is attached to the apparent 'success' of similar reforms in Sweden:

Fifteen years ago the Swedes decided to challenge declining standards by breaking the bureaucratic stranglehold over educational provision and welcome private providers into the state system... Those new providers have not only created schools with higher standards than before, but the virtuous dynamic created by the need to respond to competition from new providers has forced existing schools to raise their game. There is a direct correlation between more choice and higher standards – with the biggest improvements in educational outcomes being generated in those areas with the most new schools (Gove 2008).

This notion of a Swedish 'success story' is repeated throughout Conservative Party policy documents and acts as a way to legitimise the claims made within the *New Academy* proposals (see Conservative Party 2007: 16; 2010: 51). Phillips (1989) shows that references to 'successful' foreign examples are a prominent tool in which policy-makers use to gain support for domestic reforms. He stresses the political purposes which these foreign examples often serve and points out that, in many cases, such examples may be painted as 'successful' by those policy makers wishing to mimic them, at the same time as such reforms are being critically re-evaluated within their countries of origin. Halpin and Troyna (1995) also emphasise the political purposes which policy borrowing can serve and argue that the appropriation of foreign policies is most likely when there is a congruence between education systems and the "dominant political ideologies promoting reform within them" (ibid: 303).

The *New Academies* proposals would appear to support these arguments. As discussed already, despite their positive portrayal in Conservative Party texts, a more critical debate has emerged in Sweden which has challenged 'school voucher' reforms on the grounds of equity (see for example Skolverket 2006; TES

2010). Interestingly, Husén (1989) has shown that there is a historical precedent for the use of Swedish reforms as exemplary within British policy making – showing how the Swedish comprehensive reforms of the mid-twentieth century were used by opposing policy makers in Britain as either providing a case *for* similar reforms or as a case *against* them. What appears to be different with these contemporary proposals is the existence of a degree of consensus amongst English policy makers concerning reforms aimed at expanding choice.

Be this as it may, the Conservative Party, and policy makers in general, are not the only actors through which the ‘choice agenda’ is promoted and through whom a lack of diversity is problematised. The marketisation of education has encouraged other actors, within the commercial sector, to also become engaged in promoting certain problem representations and subsequent policy solutions. *Kunskapskolan*, for example, are a Swedish company who run over 30 ‘free schools’ in Sweden and have recently expanded to the UK where they plan to open a chain of new Academy schools. They have received significant publicity and media attention in which they have sought to promote the benefits of school autonomy and greater diversity in school provisioning (see, for example, *TES* 2008a; *Guardian* 2009; *Independent* 2010a). Their founder, Anders Hultin, a former advisor to the Swedish government who helped form the Swedish ‘free school’ reforms in the 1990s, has also argued that the Conservative’s *New Academy* reforms should go further than existing plans and allow private companies, like his own, to make a profit from the running of such schools. This he argues would create greater incentives to establish new schools and improve standards (*Guardian* 2009). What this shows, therefore, is that marketising reforms in education can open up the space for new, commercial, actors to become engaged in policy debates and problem representations in order to attempt to shape public policy in their own interests.

A final aspect of this analysis is to consider how such problem representations can be resisted. The dominance of the ‘choice agenda’ within English education is evident in the extent to which both Labour and the Conservative Parties, (and also the Liberal Democrat Party<sup>2</sup>), have followed its policy prescriptions of increased competition and diversity in compulsory school provisioning. There are, however, significant contradictions between notions of choice and equity and it is these which can be seen to provide avenues of resistance. As has already been discussed in much detail, the power and ability to exercise choice varies between social classes, with middle class families able to ‘work the system’

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<sup>2</sup>Which, at the time of writing (spring 2010), had become the junior member of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government.

better than working class ones. This point is one which has been taken up within media discussions of the Conservative proposals for school reform and, as happened with the comprehensive school reforms of the 1970s (Husén 1989), have used Sweden as an example of the iniquitous consequences which school voucher reforms can produce (see, for example, *Independent* 2010; *TES* 2008b, 2010; BBC 2010).

Thus, although the notion of choice may have produced a consensus amongst policy-makers, its central prepositions are far from hegemonic – being subjected to critical counter-arguments within broader media debates. One explanation for this cleavage could be the dominance which discursive understandings of the knowledge-based economy and globalisation have held within policy making in recent years. Such understandings appear to have necessitated a policy concern with improving educational standards as a primary goal of reform, whereas, issues of equity have been restricted to an increase in the number of young people gaining school leaving certificates (GCSEs at the A\*-C grade range). In contrast, such understandings of globalisation and the knowledge-based economy appear to be less restrictive within media debates and thus broader concerns of educational equity have remained in place.

To bring an end to this analysis, this final question has brought attention to a number of ways in which the ‘problems’ of the *New Academy* proposals are disseminated. Firstly, the emphasis on ‘choice’ appears to act as a ‘mobilising metaphor’ through which support is gathered for extensive market reforms in education. Secondly, Sweden is put forward as a successful example of how such reforms can address the problem of low standards and a lack of choice – albeit in a highly selective manner which excludes more critical concerns with increased segregation which have arisen within the Swedish case. Thirdly, marketing reforms have opened up space for new commercial actors within education to also become engaged in the promotion of certain problem representations which may benefit their own interests. And, finally, in terms of possible resistance to these problem representations, debates within the media have attempted challenge a policy making consensus with regards to such reforms by highlighting the discrepancies between greater choice and greater equity.

### 4.3 Discussion

The analysis of the *New Academy* policy has produced a number of findings into how dominant contemporary discourses associated with globalisation and the knowledge-based economy affect the position of equity within the English



education system. Overall, the analysis suggests that commitments to enhance educational standards for the sake of economic competitiveness sit uncomfortably with attempts to produce greater equity within education. Equity, as a concern of policy making, does not necessarily become marginalised but the emphasis on improving standards through marketisation and the expansion of 'choice' affect the ability to commit to genuine attempts to improve educational equality.

The analysis suggests that the Conservative Party's proposed school reforms are heavily influenced by the dominant understandings of globalisation, the knowledge-based economy and economic competitiveness which were discussed earlier in Part 2 of this paper. Reforming compulsory schooling is seen as essential to averting the prospect of 'lagging behind' other nations in terms of creating a high-skilled economy. The analysis therefore supports claims that globalisation has created a new 'education gospel' where education policy is enmeshed within broader government strategies to deliver competitive and dynamic national economies in which 'knowledge' and skills are considered key areas of economic productivity.

Within the presentation of the Conservative's *New Academy* policy, the notions of globalisation and competitiveness themselves are simply presented as self-evident phenomena to which public policy must react too and which create rationales for educational reform. In turn, the shape of these reforms appears to be heavily influenced by the discourse of neoliberalism. Increasing 'choice' and 'competition' is seen as essential to improving standards in the provision of compulsory schooling. In the language of economics, *New Academies* are described as leading to a 'supply side revolution' which will create thousands of new schools and drive up standards in education through increasing competition. They will also lead to new freedoms for parents and an increase in choice which will challenge the restrictive effects of bureaucracy within schooling. For these reasons, the Conservative Party's plans for school reform can be seen as representing the latest extension to the 'choice agenda' which has dominated English education policy over the past twenty-five years.

Contrary to expectations, there does appear to be a genuine commitment to improving educational equity within the *New Academy* proposals. Indeed a central 'problem' which informs the policy is represented as being the inequalities which exist within the current compulsory school system. These inequalities are upheld to compromise education's role in producing a high-skilled workforce. As in New Labour policy, educational inequalities are seen as resulting in a 'waste of talent' which could otherwise have contributed to economic competitiveness. One way of viewing this would be to argue that issues of

inequality are no longer a policy concern within education *per se* but, instead, are rationalised only in relation to their negative economic consequences (Ball 2008). This analysis lends support to this argument. However, this observation does not necessarily mean that equity in education is no longer seen as important. On the contrary, this analysis would suggest that the dominance of globalisation and knowledge-based economy discourses actually appear to *enhance* the position of equity within educational policy making. Albeit, a position which is encompassed within these broader discursive frameworks.

This contrasts with previous examinations of English education policy which have argued that equity in education has been marginalised by such understandings of globalisation (Ball 2008; Wolf 2002). Ball, for example, argues that:

Within policy, education is now regarded primarily from an economic point of view. The social and economic purposes of education have been collapsed into a single, overriding emphasis on policy making for economic competitiveness and an increasing neglect or sidelining (other than in rhetoric) of the social purposes of education (2008: 11).

The analysis of the Conservative Party's *New Academy* proposals presented here, as well as the preceding discussion of New Labour's education policy, would indicate otherwise. Far from 'an increasing neglect or sidelining of the social purposes of education', this paper suggests that educational equity is given extra salience in policy making by being positioned within the dominant discourses of globalisation and the knowledge-based economy.

Nevertheless, although it would appear that equity is not being marginalised within policy, it is possible to draw some more problematic conclusions to how equity is being affected by the influence of certain discourses in educational policy making. This analysis would suggest that at the same time as raising the salience of equity as a policy issue, the economic instrumentalism attached to education policy making is *restricting* conceptualisations of educational equity. The Conservative Party's proposals, in keeping with New Labour's school reforms and attempts at 'widening participation' in HE, conceptualise equity in narrow terms as simply increasing the number of young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds achieving good school leaving certificates (GCSEs in the A\*-C grade range). The emphasis is therefore on increasing the overall numbers of young people gaining qualifications within education – under the presumption that this would contribute to economic growth by increasing the number of skilled workers within the labour market.

However, this represents a narrow conceptualisation of equity within education. Similar to New Labour's attempts to increase the overall numbers of young people attending university, equity in the Conservative Party proposal is simply a matter of improving the *absolute* numbers of young people gaining school leaving certificates. The existence of *relative* inequalities in the educational attainment of different groups is excluded from this conceptualisation of equity. Hence the more critical theorisations of educational equity which are presented within the Weberian and Bourdieun approaches are largely ignored. The position of education as a site of positional competition between social groups, in which contemporary credentialism increases the efforts of the middle classes to seek advantage within the education system, fails to be considered as a problem for educational equity.

This failure to conceptualise equity in more nuanced terms provides one explanation for the apparent contradiction between the aims of improving equity and the emphasis on raising standards through increasing choice and competition within compulsory schooling. As Whitty (1997) has pointed out, proponents of competition in schooling have often hoped that, through offering greater choice, such reforms would not only increase standards but would also produce greater equity by providing disadvantaged children with the schooling opportunities previously only available to those who could afford private schooling or a house near to a high performing state-school. This analysis of the *New Academy* policy supports this observation.

Despite these hopes, the marketisation of schooling can be seen as producing more detrimental effects to educational equity. Such reforms fail to take account of the classed nature of 'choice' itself and the advantageous position which middle class families often have in negotiating the education system. Increasing diversity in school provisioning is therefore more likely to benefit the middle-classes by creating a more stratified and segregated school system. In contrast to the comprehensive reforms of the 1960s and 1970s, which were aimed at increasing equity in education through the removal of a selective two-tier secondary school system which favoured middle-class pupils over working class pupils (see Husén 1989; Gorard and Smith 2004), the choice agenda can be seen as increasing social stratification within schooling and thus potentially leading to greater inequality within English secondary education.

This analysis also supports the observation made by Apple (2000: 233) that market-based solutions to educational problems are often based on appeals to 'common sense' thinking rather than grounded in evidence based research. This is certainly the case here in the Conservative proposals where the benefits of choice and competition are portrayed as being self-evident. More critical

evidence, which has suggested that reforms aimed at expanding choice can have more iniquitous consequences, are excluded from the policy proposals. This itself can be interpreted as illustrative of the contemporary dominance of neoliberal discourses within British policy making – where the benefits of markets are seen as so axiomatic that recourse to justifications on empirical grounds are seen as unnecessary.

On account of this analysis it is also possible to conclude that there is a strong political consensus within education policy making in England. The discourses and rationales behind the Conservative's *New Academy* proposals mirror those which have been identified with New Labour's education policy. Similarly, equity is conceptualised in narrow numerical terms in both party's policy. Both parties see globalisation and the knowledge-economy as central rationales behind school reforms whilst the shape of such reforms is heavily influenced by the notions of choice and competition. The view of equity which is visible in the Widening Participation agenda adopted by New Labour is also similar to the view of equity which is visible within the Conservative's school reform policies. In both cases equity is portrayed in one-dimensional terms as increasing the overall numbers of young people gaining educational qualifications. In contrast, relative inequalities in the type and level of qualifications between different social groups are unaddressed.

## 5 Conclusion

This thesis can present two broad conclusions which provide answers to the research questions posed in the paper's introduction. Firstly, the dominant discourses identified in this paper appear to have led to a restrictive conceptualisation of educational equity. In the Conservative's *New Academy* policy, the discursive influences of globalisation, the knowledge-based economy and neoliberalism create a rationale for school reform based upon an economically instrumentalist view of education as central to delivering national economic competitiveness. In turn, these discourses are then mobilised to justify an apparent need to improve school standards through increasing school choice. Educational equity is not marginalised by these discourses but it is encompassed into the more utilitarian understanding of education's economic purposes. As such, notions of equity are conceptualised in narrow, one-dimensional terms of simply increasing the number of young people achieving educational qualifications. Deeper understandings of educational equity – which draw attention to the importance of relative inequalities in educational attainment and education's role as a site of positional competition and social reproduction – are ignored.

Secondly, when compared to New Labour's education policy, the Conservative's *New Academy* policy would suggest a continuation of a strong political consensus surrounding education and school reform within policy making in England. This consensus is visible in both the continuation of the 'choice agenda' in policy making as well as in each party's conceptualisation of educational equity. Although it was not in the original intentions of this paper to address the reasons behind such a consensus, I would suggest that this itself is attributable to the dominance of discursive understandings of globalisation, the knowledge-based economy and neoliberalism and the policy programmes which such understandings rationalise.

On a more general level, this paper has highlighted the discursive importance of globalisation and the knowledge-based economy. Much recent literature within the social sciences – and political science in particular – has been concerned at addressing many of the material effects of 'globalisation'. This is particularly apparent in the plethora of literature addressing shifts in global political-economy and the academic debates which have emerged over the political

effects of the expansion of transnational commerce (see Strange 1996 and Weiss 1997). Whilst neither diminishing the importance of this literature nor these debates, this paper has drawn attention to how globalisation is as much a discursive phenomenon as it is a material one (Jessop 2004). It has shown how the discourses of globalisation and the knowledge-based economy have – through their representations of education as central to the economic fortunes of individual nation-states – exerted significant influence on national policy making. In the case of English education policy, these influences have in turn produced profound effects to issues of educational equity.

By submitting the Conservative's school reform proposals to a critical analysis this paper has presented new empirical material to the study of discursive influences in contemporary education policy making. In doing so at a time of political transition within the UK, it has also been able to ask questions about the dominance of these discourses across English policy makers – something which previous literature's empirical focus on New Labour has been unable to do. However, on reflection, the analysis has been focused on a policy which has yet to be implemented. At the time of writing this paper, the policy has yet to leave the writing board. This is a limitation with the discursive analysis of policy which has been deployed in this study. Policies on paper and in speeches may be significantly different from those which eventually become manifest in new institutions, new structures and new behaviours. Although this does not compromise the conclusions which have been drawn from this analysis – since the paper was only concerned with examining the discursive influences on policy *making* – it does raise questions which need further exploration. I would suggest that more research in this area return to the Conservative proposals for school reform, once they have been implemented, to examine possible changes in the shape of the final policy.

In addition to this, it is also important to point out that there are limits to the generalisability of this paper's findings. Because the empirical concerns of this thesis have been parochially focused on English education policy it is not possible to apply these findings to other national contexts. Notwithstanding this, the discursive influences addressed here are fairly widespread and are visible in education policies across the industrialised and developing world (Robertson 2005; Dale 2007; Ball 1998). Therefore I would suggest that a potentially fruitful line of further research examine the role which local institutional contexts play in mediating the affects which the discourses of globalisation, the knowledge-based economy and neoliberalism have on the position of equity within national educational policy making. One possible way of conducting such research could be to undertake a cross-country study based on a comparison of two or more states which are differently categorised within Esping-Andersens (1990) typology

of welfare regimes. Doing this could potentially shed light on the dominance of these discourses in more general terms, as well as the importance of local historical and institutional structures in mediating the influences of these discourses on education and the position of equity within it.

## 6 Executive Summary

The English education system has experienced substantial ‘policy hyperactivism’ (Ball 2008: 2) in recent years. Many of these new policies appear to be heavily influenced by certain discursive understandings of globalisation and recent social, political and economic transformations. This has led many states to place a greater emphasis on education in light of the supposed needs to produce high-skilled workforces capable of competing in a global ‘knowledge-based economy’ (Kenway et al 2007; Morrow and Torres 2001; Jordan 2006, Lauder et al. 2006; Robertson 2005). In addition to this, the rise of neoliberalism has also been a substantial influence. In the case of England, these shifts have led to a policy agenda aimed at improving standards in education through the introduction of various market-inspired policies directed at increasing levels of ‘choice’ and ‘competition’ in compulsory schooling.

These reforms, together with their discursive foundations, raise important questions as to how issues of equity and equality are being affected within education. Thus the thesis has one central aim: *to explore how discourses of globalisation, the ‘knowledge-based economy’ and neoliberalism affect the position of equity within English education policy making.* This aim is answered through an original discursive analysis of the Conservative Party’s ‘New Academy’ policy proposals, based on Bacchi’s (2009) ‘What’s the problem represented to be’ (WPR) methodological approach to public policy discourse analysis. Given the change in government which has recently occurred in the UK, as well as the hitherto empirical concentration on New Labour policy, the paper also addresses the possibility that these discourses have produced a degree of political consensus in English policy making concerning the role of education and the position of equity within it.

In the field of education policy, a number of key discursive trends are discussed to provide a theoretical and conceptual platform for the analysis. These trends include notions of ‘competitiveness’ and ‘globalisation’ which form part of a new ‘education gospel’ and positions education at the heart of national strategies of economic competitiveness. In addition to neoliberalism – in the form of the expansion of markets, consumerism and individualism in education – which has also been identified as a central discourse in educational policy making which has been influential in creating a ‘choice agenda’ in compulsory schooling.



Three perspectives of educational equity are also outlined and discussed in order to provide a conceptual framework for the analysis. These are: the meritocratic perspective which views education as a site of equality of opportunity; and the two more critical Weberian and Bourdieuian perspectives which view education, respectively, as a site of positional competition and social reproduction.

Bacchi's WPR approach is identified as the most suitable methodological approach to the discursive analysis of the Conservative Party's school reform policy. It is an approach which is found to be the most structured and appropriate in addressing the paper's central empirical concerns as well as befitting to the overall discursive approach adopted within the thesis.

The analysis results in a number of findings. These are summarised below:

- The analysis suggests that the Conservative Party's proposed school reforms are heavily influenced by the dominant understandings of globalisation, the knowledge-based economy and economic competitiveness. Reforming compulsory schooling is seen as essential to averting the prospect of 'lagging behind' other nations in terms of creating a high-skilled economy. These discursive understandings create the rationale for school reforms.
- In turn, the shape of these reforms appears to be heavily influenced by the discourse of neoliberalism. Increasing 'choice' and 'competition' is seen as essential to improving standards in the provision of compulsory schooling. In the language of economics, *New Academies* are described as leading to a 'supply side revolution' which will create thousands of new schools and drive up standards in education through increasing competition.
- Contrary to expectations, there does appear to be a genuine commitment to improving educational equity within the *New Academy* proposals. The analysis suggests that the dominance of globalisation and knowledge-based economy discourses actually appear to *enhance* the position of equity within educational policy making. Albeit, a position which is encompassed within these broader discursive frameworks.
- Although it would appear that equity is *not* being marginalised within policy, it is possible to draw some more problematic conclusions to how equity is being affected by the influence of certain discourses in education policy making. The analysis suggests that, at the same time as raising the salience of equity as a policy issue, the economic instrumentalism attached to education policy making is *restricting* conceptualisations of educational equity.

- The emphasis is on increasing the overall numbers of young people gaining qualifications within education – under the presumption that this would contribute to economic growth by increasing the number of skilled workers within the labour market.
- This represents a narrow conceptualisation of equity within education. The existence of *relative* inequalities in the educational attainment of different groups is excluded from this conceptualisation. Hence the more critical theorisations of educational equity which are presented within the Weberian and Bourdieun approaches are largely ignored. The position of education as a site of positional competition between social groups, in which contemporary credentialism increases the efforts of the middle classes to seek advantage within the education system, fails to be considered as a problem for educational equity.
- The marketisation of schooling can be seen as producing more detrimental effects to educational equity. Such reforms fail to take account of the classed nature of ‘choice’ itself and the advantageous position which middle class families often have in negotiating the education system. Increasing diversity in school provisioning is therefore more likely to benefit the middle-classes by creating a more stratified and segregated school system.
- The analysis also points to the existence of a strong political consensus within education policy making in England. The discourses and rationales behind the Conservative’s *New Academy* proposals mirror those which have been identified with New Labour’s education policy. Similarly, equity is conceptualised in narrow numerical terms in the policy of both parties. Both parties see globalisation and the knowledge-based economy as central rationales behind school reforms whilst the shape of such reforms is heavily influenced by the notions of choice and competition. The view of equity which is visible in the ‘Widening Participation’ agenda adopted by New Labour is also similar to the view of equity which is visible within the Conservative’s school reform policies. In both cases equity is portrayed in one-dimensional terms as increasing the overall numbers of young people gaining educational qualifications. In contrast, relative inequalities in the type and level of qualifications between different social groups are unaddressed.

Overall, the thesis draws two central conclusions. Firstly, the dominant discourses identified in the paper are held to have led to a restrictive conceptualisation of educational equity. In the Conservative’s *New Academy* policy, the discursive influences of globalisation, the knowledge-based economy and neoliberalism create a rationale for school reform based upon an

economically instrumentalist view of education as central to delivering national economic competitiveness. In turn, these discourses are then mobilised to justify an apparent need to improve school standards through increasing school choice. Educational equity is not marginalised by these discourses but it is encompassed into the more utilitarian understanding of education's economic purposes. As such, notions of equity are conceptualised in narrow terms of simply increasing the number of young people achieving educational qualifications. Deeper understandings of educational equity – which draw attention to the importance of relative inequalities in educational attainment and education's role as a site of positional competition and social reproduction – are ignored.

Secondly, when compared to New Labour's education policy, the Conservative's *New Academy* policy would suggest a continuation of a strong political consensus surrounding education and school reform within policy making in England. This consensus is visible in both the continuation of the 'choice agenda' in policy making as well as in each party's conceptualisation of educational equity. It is suggested that this consensus is attributable to the dominance of discursive understandings of globalisation, the knowledge-based economy and neoliberalism and the policy programmes which such understandings rationalise.

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