



EDUCATION CUTS

Under pressure from local authorities and the Inspectorate, the Government recently published the Report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate on the effect of local authority expenditure policies on the education service in England. The effects of the cuts which the HMI Report documents are so severe that the Government was obliged to take this step into 'open government' in view of veiled threats by several authorities to leak the document on a massive scale.

The Report draws together observations made by HMI during the autumn term 1980 in the course of routine and full inspection visits to over 660 primary and special schools, some 380 secondary schools and 80 colleges of further and higher education, as well as returns on all local education authorities in England and Wales made in November 1980 by district inspectors and their teams.

The Report stresses the central importance to educational standards of adequate resources in terms of staffing and equipment although it asserts that many of the problems currently facing schools must also be attributed to the decline in the birth rate and to falling rolls, the major impact of which has still to affect secondary schools and the tertiary sector. Nevertheless, what emerges clearly from the survey, is that government

cuts are frustrating any attempt to use the opportunity provided by falling rolls to reduce class size and improve educational provision, indeed are exacerbating problems such as diseconomies of scale inherent in any move by the authorities to implement a balanced reduction in the teaching force.

90% of all LEAs have reduced their teaching force between 1979 and 1980; the total reduction being in the order of 10,000 full time equivalent posts. Although this reduction coincided with a marked fall in the school population, which nationally allowed a marginal improvement in pupil teacher ratios in the primary sector, class sizes in the secondary sector increased and there are indications that many LEAs have reached the position where they cannot reduce the level of supply cover further without causing a breakdown in schools' programmes where staff are absent owing to illness or released for in-service training. To date, the reductions have been achieved without recourse to compulsory redundancy although this threat has only been averted in areas such as Avon, Nottinghamshire and the West Midlands by the concerted action of teachers' unions and parents.

Natural wastage, premature retirement and voluntary redundancy are the most popular means of reducing staffing. Whilst

teachers' unions are understandably more likely to accept this type of cut rather than enforced redundancy, this increases the problems for education authorities in their long term curricular planning and in catering for children with special needs.

Many primary schools have cut back on part time staff, many of whom are used to help children who have difficulty in learning to read. 'This is a particular example of the way in which schools fail to make common provision for children as resources become tighter.'

In both primary and secondary schools there is increasing evidence of teachers being obliged to take subjects for which they are inadequately qualified or not qualified at all. The strain on teachers in secondary schools is worsened further where their teaching groups contain pupils of much wider an ability range than is appropriate. Recent statements by Dr Rhodes Boyson in the House of Commons advocating a wholesale return to streaming give rise to particular concern in this respect as the problems experienced in comprehensive schools may be falsely attributed to mixed ability teaching *per se* rather than to the failure to train and resource teachers adequately for this type of teaching.

Cut-backs in the level of in-service pro-

vision and in financial assistance for teachers can only lead to a worsening of staffing mismatch and to a further decline in expertise. Furthermore, uncertain teacher employment prospects resulting in lower recruitment to teacher training colleges and B Ed courses are creating a threat to the maintenance of the essential subject basis for the training of teachers.

The consequences for the curriculum of cuts in teachers numbers are made even more serious by the crisis facing schools in terms of books and equipment. In nearly 80% of LEAs the purchasing power of per capita funding for books and equipment has been reduced in real terms compared with 1979-80. In extreme cases the actual amounts are less. In nearly 50% of primary schools and in over half of secondary schools the book supply was described as unsatisfactory with frequent reference made to out-worn and out-dated books and shortages which necessitate the sharing of text books in examination classes.

Many schools rely increasingly on parental contributions to purchase essential items of books and equipment, with staff devoting official time to organising fundraising activities. As the Report remarks: 'A disturbing outcome of such practices is that it

makes more pronounced the differences in levels between schools; large schools become better resourced than small ones, and all types of schools in areas of socio-economic difficulty tend to remain at a disadvantage compared with schools in favoured areas.'

Charging for instrumental music tuition and swimming has taken these subjects out of the range of some pupils. Although the recent High Court Ruling that such music charges are unlawful is an important re-assertion of the right to free state education enshrined in the 1944 Education Act, it may prove a pyrrhic victory if the response of education authorities is to curtail such tuition altogether.

Maintenance, repair and decoration of school and college buildings remain a popular target for savings in over half of all LEAs. In some cases the maintenance programme has been cut to such an extent that actual safety hazards have arisen.

The conclusions reached by HMI on the effects of government and local authority cuts, couched in unemotive, non-committal terms, are sombre: 'In their visits to institutions, HMI's strong impression was of professional commitment and resourcefulness. Nevertheless there is evidence that teachers' morale has been adversely affected

in many schools. Its weakening, if it became widespread, would pose a major problem in the effort to maintain present standards, let alone improve them.'

The HMI Report, which was drawn up *before* the further 1% cut in spending for 1981-2 and the new rate support grant provisions, is a damning indictment of government spending policy on education. The effects of the cuts are catastrophic in absolute terms. Seen from the viewpoint of a commitment to equality of opportunity in education, the position is even more dire. The cutting of expenditure on the state sector coupled with the diversion of public resources into the private sector through the Assisted Places Scheme threatens to widen further the gaps in educational provision between children from middle-class and from working-class backgrounds. While the failure to maintain and improve per capita expenditure on books and equipment sharpens the differential still more as teachers are unable to introduce new curricular material suitable for non-sexist teaching, for combatting racism and for preparing children for life in a multi-ethnic society.

Contributors:

Andrew Gamble, Fiona Simpson

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