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Marta Araújo ^a

^a Institute of Education, University of London, UK

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A *Fresh Start* for a ‘failing school’? A qualitative study

Marta Araújo^{*}

Institute of Education, University of London, UK

This paper examines *Fresh Start*, a New Labour flagship initiative to raise education ‘standards’ in a radical and innovative way. Drawing on a qualitative study of a comprehensive school in England, I argue that the initiative added to the problems faced by the ‘failing school’ and promoted rather traditional ways of raising ‘standards’ due to the close surveillance that *Fresh Start* schools were subjected to. In the case studied, the needs of the pupils that the initiative was meant to address were being sacrificed in the school’s construction of a ‘successful’ identity. While the initiative has now lost momentum, some lessons can still be learnt. This paper illustrates the complexity of creating a new school, as well as the need to attend to the specificities of the local context and experiences in raising ‘standards for all’ pupils.

1. Introduction

Previously associated with the conservative restoration (Ball, 1994), the question of ‘standards’ has dominated much of the debate on education in England and became a cornerstone in the manifestos of all the major political parties in the 1997 general election (Pyke, 1997). When New Labour took office that year, the focus on ‘standards’ was promoted within an apparent commitment to social justice: with the principle ‘to benefit the many, not the few’ (DfEE, 1997, p. 11), David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education, emphasised that he was committed to raising ‘standards’ in *all* schools, for *all* pupils (Blunkett, 2000; DfEE, 2001a). To achieve this ambitious goal, the Labour Government targeted low-attaining schools, including the so-called ‘failing schools’. This category applies to schools where attainment, pupil behaviour, teaching quality or management systems are considered especially poor following an OFSTED inspection.

In this context, New Labour designed several initiatives to tackle underachievement, mainly in inner-city schools, such as *Education Action Zones* (DfEE, 2001b), *Excellence in Cities* (DfEE, 1999a) and *Fresh Start* (DfEE, 2001c). Whilst the two former relied on the provision of additional support to schools (financial and professional, private and

^{*}Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Colégio S. Jerónimo, Apartado 3087 3001-401 Coimbra, Portugal. Email: marta@ces.uc.pt

public), *Fresh Start* was based on a different assumption: no additional funds would make a school successful when management and leadership were poor. Thus, the initiative made management teams and teachers more accountable, relying on their power to establish a new identity for the re-opened school. They were accountable not only to the state, but also to the wider public through the high visibility given to this initiative and the close surveillance it was subjected to in the media.

In this paper, I begin by looking at the changing contexts of construction and restructuring of the initiative. Then I use qualitative data to illustrate the impact of its implementation on teachers' and pupils' experiences and the complexity of creating a new school. I conclude that *Fresh Start* promoted an approach that neglected the context of the school and social constraints on pupils' academic success.

2. The making of *Fresh Start*

Fresh Start is 'the statutory process of closing a school causing concern and opening a new school on the same site' (DfEE, 2001c, p. 1), with improved facilities, a new name, leadership and staff. Implemented since 1998, it was an option available for schools that either had 'serious weaknesses' or required 'special measures' following an OFSTED inspection or that the local education authority (LEA) had identified as having major problems (DfEE, 2001d).¹

It was suggested that *Fresh Start* 'relies heavily on the "most extreme form" of School Reconstitution from the US' (McLay, 2003, p. 3). Reconstitution Schools were introduced in the early 1980s to bring about racial desegregation. Implementation entailed a change of staff and pupils, reduced class sizes, community and parental involvement and extra funding for the schools (Bacon, 1997). Its results were not ambitious, though the initiative provided more support for schools than *Fresh Start*: Reconstitution Schools had difficulties in attracting experienced staff, the results could take years to become visible and often attainment remained the same or worsened (Hardy, 1999). These shortcomings do not seem to have been carefully considered by New Labour. Furthermore, when David Blunkett, then shadow Education Secretary, first proposed *Fresh Start* the response was of the utmost caution, with teachers particularly concerned about securing their jobs (Spencer, 1995). That also did not discourage the Labour Party and the initiative was made official when it took office in 1997 (DfEE, 1997).

This 'drastic measure' to tackle underachievement in 'failing schools' became part of Labour's 'zero tolerance of underperformance' (Labour Party, 1997), relying heavily on headteachers or 'superheads':²

The change would have to be more than superficial. It would need professional leadership of the highest calibre and would need to be seen by everyone as a clean break, and an attempt to create a new and ambitious sense of purpose. (DfEE, 1997, p. 30)

Local education authorities were to identify 'failing schools' and draw up plans for improvement, subject to OFSTED inspection (Labour Party, 1995). In schools where all other measures for improvement had been tried and had failed, closure or *Fresh Start* were to be considered. Closure would apply where alternative suitable

places for pupils were found in the area; otherwise, *Fresh Start* was to be adopted. The school would then close at the end of the summer term to allow time to recruit new staff before re-opening for the new school year.

Fresh Start was implemented in September 1998 in three secondary schools and, in the following year, in another eight secondary and four primary schools. However, from mid-March 2000, three 'superheads' of *Fresh Start* schools resigned within one month. This was a blow to the initiative. By that time, the government had begun proposing the setting up of *City Academies*, independent schools with substantial public funding, private or voluntary partners and management, not required to accept every pupil attending the 'failing school' they replaced. *Academies* were 'an alternative where there is consistent failure, where the alternative is that the children and the community no longer have a school at all' (BBC, 2000). This was the aim of *Fresh Start*; failing to acknowledge that its results were not impressive, the government was subjected to strong criticism: it was argued that the introduction of *City Academies* served to deflect attention from the failing *Fresh Start* initiative (Eason, 2000). The government responded quickly to these allegations, with the Minister for School Standards claiming in Parliament that in the first *Fresh Start* schools there was a reduction in truancy and an increase in the number of pupils attaining five or more A*-C GCSE grades (Hansard, 2000a). Yet, the announced closure of a *Fresh Start* school and the subjection of three other schools to special measures further undermined confidence in the initiative. Schools were unable to attract enough pupils and with funding from the LEAs largely depending on pupil numbers, they were struggling with a budget deficit. Also, education attainment was sometimes worse than that in the 'failing schools' they replaced (Dickens, 2000). Although at times it was stressed that *Fresh Start* was not a 'quick fix' (Carvel, 2000), the idea transmitted and certainly fuelled by the media was that it was some kind of panacea that would turn around the 'worst' schools in the country.

This called for a major restructuring plan. In 2000, the government publicised the allocation of capital funding³ and greater control over the initiative by the DfEE (Mansell, 2000) and that nine other schools would have a *Fresh Start* in September, challenging the rumours that the initiative would be discarded. New guidance was then issued, including obtaining clear commitment from the LEA, the reviewing of staff and governors and the creation of a plan to raise achievement with clear strategies, to be agreed with the LEA, OFSTED and the DfEE (HMSO, 2000). It was also suggested that schools that did not attain a lower limit of 15% of secondary pupils achieving five A*-C GCSE grades for three consecutive years would be considered for closure or *Fresh Start* (Crowne, 2000). However, claims that the initiative would be so widely implemented were soon dismissed. Estelle Morris, the Minister for School Standards, maintained that *Fresh Start* would only be used where it was most likely to be successful (Woodward, 2000).

Subsequently, the initiative came to play a very small part in the measures to raise 'standards'. In 2001, the government set for the first time a deadline (of three years) for improvement (DfEE, 2001e), which was seen by many as more realistic. In Parliament, the government had declared that the time required to turn around a

school subjected to special measures had decreased from 25 months in 1997 to 17–18 months in 1999–2000 (Blunkett, 1999; Hansard, 2000c). This had obviously put a tremendous pressure on the schools to provide pupils with a proper *Fresh Start*. Allowing three years for improvement seemed a more appropriate expectation, although the threat remained that the school would be closed if it failed further OFSTED inspections. Since then, *Fresh Start* has moved off the government's agenda, becoming 'a last resort' (DfES, 2001a, p. 57) and a 'rare' option (DfES, 2007a). Despite its recent low profile, the initiative has been 'quietly very active' (Revell, 2003): every year a few schools are given a *Fresh Start* away from the gaze of the media. Nowadays, these are schools designed to replace a closing school subjected to special measures or significant improvement, or secondary schools with less than 30% of pupils achieving at least five A*–C GCSE grades (DfES, 2007a). The schools are provided with financial support to assist the plan to raise attainment, guidance from the DfES and subjected to termly inspections. *Fresh Start* is now a temporary measure.

3. The study

This paper draws on a wider qualitative study that explored how perceptions of pupils' discipline and attainment articulated with ethnicity, gender and social origin, shaping their schooling experiences (see Araújo, 2005, 2007). The school that agreed to host the study was signalled by an inspector working on racial equality. With its re-opening as a *Fresh Start* school, the impact of education policy came to feature prominently in people's everyday experiences. Thus, in this paper, I focus on the transformation of the school due to its new status as a *Fresh Start*.

Fieldwork started in 1999 and lasted for a period of approximately 18 months. In this period, *Fresh Start* was being closely scrutinised by the media, particularly after several 'superheads' resigned. This meant that I often had to reassure participants of my professional identity and role as a researcher, rather than as a journalist.⁴ The study focused mainly on a form in Year 7 (aged 11) and their teachers. Semi-structured interviews, direct observation and the collection of documents were used to elicit data on the teachers' and pupils' experiences of schooling. Written consent from pupils' guardians was sought via the form tutor. A total of 23 pupils, out of the 26 in the form studied, were interviewed in friendship groups of two in Year 7 and individually in Year 8 (aged 12). Their teachers and other school staff (such as the headteacher and learning mentors) were also interviewed, some twice. Observation focused on Science and Personal and Social Education lessons, due to the diverse statuses and classroom atmospheres associated with these two subjects, and also included Year assemblies and parent days. In addition, I collected and analysed school documents, including the prospectus, discipline policy, pupil records, incident reports and tables of attainment. Key government documents, including Education Acts, Green and White Papers, official guidelines and political manifestos, were also examined. The data were analysed using a loose version of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), particularly the method of 'open coding' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This means that, for practical reasons (related to limited time and funding), I did not

stay in the field until all possible categories were exhausted, as the authors of grounded theory postulated. Nonetheless, rather than using previously defined categories to code the data, categories emerged from the data collected throughout the period of fieldwork. Finally, it should be noted that most of the fieldwork took place in the first year of school. Such a time scale imposes some limits of the data: it both reflects an atmosphere of transition and does not account for a full exploration of subsequent changes and improvements. Yet the time scale also calls our attention to the fact that innovation can take years to be visible and that criteria used to assess the success of a school need to take this into account.

4. Implementing *Fresh Start*

4.1 The 'failing' Millhaven High and the Fresh Started Greenfield Comprehensive

Millhaven High was a co-educational comprehensive created in the early 1980s and located in a large English city. By the 1990s, it was portrayed in the national press as one of the worst schools in the country, gaining a bad reputation for low academic achievement and high levels of truancy and disruption. Consequently, just over half the available places were filled (around 500 places were filled then, while nowadays that figure has risen to nearly 900). Before Millhaven closed, it served a largely disadvantaged community: nearly three-quarters of the school population were eligible for free school meals,⁵ over four times the national average (DfEE, 1998), and almost 30% of the pupils were refugees in England. There was a high turnover of pupils, partially accounted for by the significant amount of short-stay accommodation in the area. The head of Student Services at the new *Fresh Start* school, who had worked for six months at Millhaven prior to its closure, stressed the implications of the school's unpopularity:

For a number of years, they'd had very small numbers of students wanting to come here. And if that happens, you then pick up students who have additional needs more often...either they've been excluded, or they just come into the country and need additional support in terms of English as an Additional Language...And that's fine, if you got the teachers to be able to support that...But quite often the school didn't get the teachers to support the students until they've been here for 6, 9, 12 months. Because of the way the funding is worked out. (Ms Clarke, head of Student Services)

The per capita funding formula adds financial strain to undersubscribed schools, making pupil support more difficult. This situation worsened after the late 1980s, with the introduction of a neo-liberal approach (Ball, 1993) that promoted a quasi-market in education and an emphasis on parents and pupils as 'consumers' (see also Tomlinson, 1997; Demaine, 1999). With schools competing against each other to perform well in league tables, those that achieved less well became undersubscribed and many were forced to close or to continue running in adverse conditions.

This seemed to be the case at Millhaven High. The school had a declining intake of pupils and an associated budget deficit, which resulted in deteriorating facilities and poor resources. Unsurprisingly, given the severely disadvantaged community it served and the established association between social and ethnic origin and

attainment (Gillborn & Mirza, 2000), the school scored poorly in performance tables. This placed Millhaven in a position of vulnerability in the quasi-market of education. Despite the widespread negative images of the school, there was official recognition of its success in teaching refugee pupils and those receiving support for English as an Additional Language (EAL) and staff were said to be committed and caring. This could be seen, for instance, in teachers' voluntary involvement in after-school clubs (estimated at almost 90%), which helped pupils recently arrived in the country to secure their skills in English and in other subject areas. Such strengths, however, did not translate into easily measurable results. With the new regime of OFSTED inspections introduced by the Conservatives in 1993 and its managerial approach based on external accountability (Thrupp & Ball, 2001), the school became even more vulnerable. Two years before Millhaven was closed, it received a damning report from OFSTED: 'standards' of achievement were considered low and the quality of teaching was thought to be unsatisfactory; special measures were required. Six months later, another OFSTED inspection found that satisfactory progress had not been made and that major problems remained unsolved, namely, low 'standards' of attainment, unsatisfactory teaching and problems with attendance and punctuality. The inspectors believed that the senior management had been able to establish a strong leadership through good teamwork, but that some teachers were not committed to the improvements and post-holders did not have the necessary skills to successfully implement the changes. Also, though the report praised again the work being carried out by teachers and learning support teams with pupils who received support for EAL (over half the school population) and targets for improvement had been set, it was thought that the school could not break the 'cycle of failure' and pass the OFSTED criteria. Hence, one year later, the local council decided to close the school and give it a *Fresh Start*, despite pupils and parents campaigning to save the school (TES, 2000).⁶ This was the ultimate declaration of the school's failure, although Millhaven was not an isolated case: around 10% of the local schools were declared to be 'failing' (BBC, 1999).⁶ Rather than investing in the school to enable it to overcome the continual financial strains, Millhaven was allowed to decay until the flagship *Fresh Start* rescued it, after which it was to be used as an example for other 'failing schools'. Following official guidelines on the initiative, all staff were made redundant and had to reapply for their jobs. Only four teachers stayed.

Greenfield Comprehensive opened on the same site and had an intake of over 600 pupils. The community served by the school was socio-economically disadvantaged, though less so than the school it replaced: around 50% of pupils was eligible for free meals (and 30% of Year 7s), compared with the national average of 18.3% at the time (DfEE, 2000), whereas the figure had been 75% in the previous school. As there was no significant departure of free-school meal beneficiaries, the new school had already started with a considerably more mixed intake in terms of social background than that of the 'failing school' it replaced. The cultural diversity of the school was reflected in the variety of languages spoken: there were more than 30 different language backgrounds and over 40% of the pupils received support for EAL, the national

average being 8% (DfEE, 2000). Over two thirds of the pupils came from minoritised backgrounds and around 15% of the pupils on the rolls were refugees in England (half of the percentage at Millhaven), coming mainly from Somalia, Albania, Turkey and Kurdistan. Since the school re-opened, all year groups have been oversubscribed, which is particularly important within the per capita funding formula.

4.2 *A Fresh Start in their eyes: pupils and teachers' accounts*

Whilst this was soon to change, it was in an initial context of accountability, innovation and some optimism that teachers and pupils entered Greenfield Comprehensive. In this section, I address the major issues related to *Fresh Start* that emerged during fieldwork.

Building a new school. When the school was given a *Fresh Start*, the local council approved an ambitious rebuilding programme to modernise its image and offer better facilities, planned to be finished for the new school year. Yet, even when I finished my fieldwork a year and a half later, only two-thirds had been completed. Normal school days thus meant having building workers, scaffolding and all sorts of machinery around the school grounds, with the sound of hammering, drilling and the workers' portable stereo as the soundtrack for lessons. Also, many classrooms were incomplete; during the first two terms there were no changing rooms and the Science labs had no electricity, gas or technicians. As a pupil said, 'It just doesn't feel like a school'.

The time that the building work took to be completed contributed to a hectic atmosphere and seemed to be of great significance to the pupils, who felt that their school life was constrained due to the lack of facilities. Whenever a piece of building work was completed or new equipment was acquired, this would immediately be mentioned as the best thing happening in the school, contributing towards a better learning atmosphere: 'The new building is smart, and makes pupils work harder...' (Lucy, Year 8). While teachers tended to downplay the impact this had on pupils' behaviour, it does illustrate the importance that pupils placed on having their school running normally. This was particularly evident amongst those coming from more privileged backgrounds, some 'too posh' to be in a comprehensive school, as a teacher put it, who had high expectations of the school due to its *Fresh Start* status. From their perspective, Greenfield just did not offer the basic facilities they would normally expect:

It was a new school...So they shouldn't have opened it until it was ready. Because we hadn't got a library and most things I just take for granted. (Sophie, Year 7)

Other practical issues in the running of the school underwent constant changes at the beginning of the year, such as the organisation of the school day, timetables and forms. This added to the disorganised atmosphere and had implications for discipline, as pupils could easily get away with wandering around pretending not to know where they should be. Despite the enormous impact that the difficulty in establishing basic routines had on the running of Greenfield, a greater one was yet to come: the headteacher's resignation.

Interrupted leadership. Mr Williams, the headteacher, was initially seen as a charismatic individual, capable of restoring the confidence of parents and turning the school around. He encouraged pupils to take responsibility for learning and believed in diminished discipline for non-violent behaviour. The former headteacher of a middle-class school with little experience of inner-city schools, Mr Williams came to be seen as naïve and idealistic. A serious discipline incident made some parents question his ability to manage the school and differing views on how to deal with the episode led to the deterioration of communications with the governors and the local community. Barely a year after starting at Greenfield, Mr Williams resigned. Whilst his resignation had specific contours, we should not ignore the fact that *Fresh Start* promoted a managerial approach that imposed on headteachers the heavy task of ‘success against all odds’ (Thrupp & Ball, 2001). The fact that four ‘superheads’ of *Fresh Start* schools resigned within a couple of months illustrates the pressure placed on them.

Just before Mr Williams left, an OFSTED inspection report subjected Greenfield to special measures once more. Although some issues were improving (pupils’ progress, behaviour and attendance), teachers’ implementation of lesson plans and the fulfilment of the school’s mission were considered unsatisfactory. The report also stressed the legacy of ‘dysfunctional management systems’ that the school was now facing and the governors’ and the LEA’s inadequate exercising of their roles. Both Mr Williams’s resignation and the report had a negative impact on the teachers’ morale, with the school atmosphere being described as ‘chaotic’ or ‘out of control’. The media fuelled this, as television, radio and newspaper coverage depicted the school as an example of how easy it is for things to go wrong in a *Fresh Start* school. This helped in shaping pupils’ views:

I read in the newspaper that Mr Williams lied about being a superhead. Actually, in the last school he was at he made it rubbish. And he pretended to be good, so the government thought that he was good, so they put him in this school to make it better, but he made it worse. (Nina, Year 8)

Although a caricature, this extract captures the prominence of the figure of the headteacher in rescuing ‘failing schools’.

Divisions. Only one term after the school’s *Fresh Start*, frustration was already building up. Many teachers and support staff felt that ideas were not materialising and enthusiasm faded, particularly after the headteacher resigned: they saw this as a statement on the practical impossibility of running the school with a different vision of education:

I think it’s not the school I joined. It’s not...It hasn’t got the same ideals. I mean the ideals that it had were not realised, and I think it’s changed quite a lot...I can’t see any way that I’m going to get more personal satisfaction here, you know? I want to try something a bit newer, I think. I mean, this was why I came here, and it’s turned out not to be new. (Ms Miller, PSE and Maths teacher)

These teachers believed that at Greenfield they would be able to ‘start from scratch’ and develop innovative pedagogical practices, an expectation created by the *Fresh Start*. However, the pressure on the initiative to raise ‘standards’ did not encourage this.

The new headteacher, Mr Jones, was a former inspector and was seen as the man who could succeed in rescuing the school. He benefited from the support of the school governors, local and national government; without this, change can be hard to implement. Mr Jones pursued a more traditional approach to education based on strict disciplining, which came to receive substantial support from teachers who shared his vision of education and felt that a 'pragmatic' approach was required. Under his management, rules were more and tighter and so 'the students are getting away with less', as a teacher told me. Though the prioritising of issues of discipline and control by Mr Jones was not directly related to *Fresh Start*, these seemed to be of greater importance than those directly related to attainment, which reinforces the idea that the initiative downplays the local context and experiences.

Amongst pupils, most interviewed preferred Mr Jones's strictness, as they thought that this would provide the school with a second *Fresh Start*, creating a distinct and better public identity. They felt that the atmosphere became more stable and organised: 'I get less disrupted this year, in the classes and in the corridors. The headmaster's done quite a few changes for the better' (Julia, Year 8). While also agreeing that more discipline was needed, a smaller number of pupils preferred the previous headteacher, Mr Williams, from whom they thought they received more respect: 'cause he had a better way with children... Even if you had an exclusion, the way he spoke with me, made it not so difficult for me to understand' (Ismail, Year 8). These were boys of minoritised backgrounds, who had been more subjected to the school's disciplinary procedures. As I showed elsewhere (Araújo, 2005), a deficit approach to minority cultures, associated with teachers' understanding of discipline as a matter of 'attitude' compounded a picture in which minoritised boys were seen as a disciplinary 'problem', receiving disproportionate punishment. This resulted in some of these pupils becoming increasingly alienated. Significantly, these were mainly the pupils with whom Millhaven High had developed good practice, and that some teachers at Greenfield were now willing to discard, as illustrated in the following quote:

(The form is) very mixed. You have kids in that class who are very clever, and kids in that class that are not very clever at all. You have kids that work hard, and then kids who don't work hard. I mean, you know what's the people like. Lucy will always do her best, and Sebastien and people like that. Very good kids. And then you've got people like Ismail, and Joe and Omi... that just... and Jamie. That just don't give their potential at all. And they're just wasting their time, and they're wasting everybody else's time. (Mr Roberts, form tutor)

Significantly, by referring to particular individuals, Mr Roberts thinks of 'very good kids' as white pupils with a privileged socio-economic background, while the four pupils seen as wasting everyone's time are from ethnic minority backgrounds. This was also evident in interviews with other teachers.

Staff and pupil mobility. The change in the school's leadership had severe implications in terms of retaining staff, with about one third leaving the school after their first year at Greenfield. Staff mobility posed further problems for the quality of the education being provided. For instance, the Maths department

happened to have only one full-time teacher, with most of the staff coming from teacher agencies or brought in by the headteacher. This meant that pupils could have a dozen different supply teachers for one single subject within a school year. Such a high level of change was certainly much greater than expected and, although this was not the case in every department, it did present a major difficulty. On a wider scale, we can locate this problem within national shortages of qualified teachers (Shaw, 2002), with Mathematics and Science teachers being in especially short supply (Arkin, 2002). At the level of the school, it was teachers' low morale and the atmosphere at Greenfield Comprehensive, plus their awareness of how easy it was to secure employment elsewhere, that contributed to staff mobility:

A lot of people left after the first year. And I did think about it, because it was so difficult. I think we've really got to enjoy the challenge to carry on working here when there are jobs that you can go to that would be easier, you know?...they could earn the same money somewhere else, and what's the point of being under a sort of pressure that you were under here all the time, really. (Ms Ojy, Music and English teacher)

Consequently, most of the teachers who stayed were committing themselves to Mr Jones's management and this helped legitimise his power. Mr Jones himself preferred to emphasise the failure of the previous management in not being able to sustain a stable working atmosphere than to acknowledge that (politically) different visions of education were at the core of the divisions between staff, leading many to leave.

Concerns with pupil mobility also emerged. The staff were aware that particularly the parents of newcomers had sent their children to Greenfield expecting state-of-the-art facilities and a good learning environment. Instead, they saw their children attending a constantly changing building site in which quality education had yet to materialise. In the form observed, eight of the 26 pupils left the school within five terms after it re-opened. Some of the staff empathised with their disillusionment and were concerned about the school being under special measures and the impact this could have on the recruitment of pupils. Yet staff fears did not materialise and the school was oversubscribed in its second year. Mr Jones then suggested that pupil mobility was no longer a problem at Greenfield. This is particularly important for a school with the per capita formula funding in place.

A 'successful' identity. *Fresh Start* was about the creation of a new school identity, a rupture with an ethos of 'failure'. Indeed, some pupils adopted official discourses on 'failing schools', blaming Millhaven for the problems that Greenfield was facing:

Especially when Year 11s and Year 10s are gone, I think...It's gonna be a much better school, 'cause most of them are from Millhaven High, and they don't have much strictness in their...They don't have much manners and all that... (Sinead, Year 7)

When interviewed in the following school year, Sinead added: 'In general, all got better. The teachers have got better. They kind of like fired the old teachers, at the beginning they expelled all the Millhaven High lot'. For pupils like Sinead, success was to be achieved with a 'clean break' (DfEE, 1997, p.30) with the 'failing' Millhaven. Such distancing from Millhaven seemed to result from the negotiation of a more positive identity, which some pupils felt they would not accomplish by

attending a 'failing school' with 'failing students'. On the other hand, pupils that were more socially disadvantaged, and particularly those caught up in the school's disciplinary system (mainly boys), did not express such rupture with the ethos of Millhaven. In my view, they resorted to previous knowledge (for instance, from siblings) about the school to assess their experience at Greenfield, rather than denying altogether its past.

Indeed, Greenfield was creating a 'successful' identity. Almost two years after Mr Jones came into office, OFSTED no longer required special measures, although pointing out that results in English and attendance still needed improvement. Since Greenfield opened, the percentage of pupils attaining five or more A*–C grades in GCSE exams has increased from 5 to almost 50% in 2006, as illustrated in Table 1.

The gap between the school's performance and the national average, the main goal of New Labour's *Fresh Start* initiative, was eventually narrowed down. Considering 'standards', the school was constructing a 'successful identity'. Such achievement contrasts sharply with the atmosphere described in this paper, as most fieldwork took place in the first year after re-opening, in which the school performed lower than ever witnessed at Millhaven High. This probably reflected the impact on their schooling of all the changes the pupils experienced. Yet, it was during fieldwork that crucial choices were made regarding political views of education that affected the school ethos and how it went about raising its standards. This had important consequences for racial and ethnic equality, as I further explore below.

'Standards for all'?. Although 'standards' were raised, it is not certain that all pupils benefited equally. The data collected indicate that minority ethnic pupils in the form studied were disadvantaged by the school's approach to selection (this is explored in detail in Araújo, 2007). The use of setting,⁷ a practice promoted by New Labour,

Table 1. Proportion of pupils attaining 5+ A*–C GCSE grades and no passes, from 1994–2006.

Year	School	Percentage of 5+ A*–C GCSE (% for England)	Percentage of no passes (% for England)
1994	Millhaven High	19 (43)	16 (8)
1995	Millhaven High	10 (44)	31 (8)
1996	Millhaven High	9 (44)	20 (8)
1997	Millhaven High	13 (45)	21 (8)
1998	Millhaven High	10 (46)	13 (7)
1999	Millhaven High	n/a	n/a
2000	Greenfield Comprehensive	5 (49)	25 (6)
2001	Greenfield Comprehensive	22 (50)	6 (6)
2002	Greenfield Comprehensive	23 (52)	26 (5)
2003	Greenfield Comprehensive	33 (53)	17 (5)
2004	Greenfield Comprehensive	47 (54)	14 (4)
2005	Greenfield Comprehensive	44 (56)	8 (3)
2006	Greenfield Comprehensive	48 (58)	8 (3)

Note: n/a=official data not available; source: DfES, 2006.

was significantly extended at the *Fresh Start* school under Mr Jones's management. This is despite clear research evidence of overrepresentation in the 'lower sets' of pupils from socially disadvantaged and minority ethnic backgrounds, particularly boys (Hallam & Toutounji, 1996; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Ireson & Hallam, 2001). In the form observed, decisions on the allocation of pupils into sets were, to a significant extent, based on perceptions of attitudes and behaviour, considered as at least as important as academic attainment in deciding future educational paths, sometimes independently of previous attainment. Such criteria positioned minoritised pupils, particularly boys, 'at risk' of being seen as disruptive or as having the 'wrong attitude', thus closing down their educational opportunities. Pupils receiving support for EAL were particularly over-represented amongst those in the 'lower sets' in Science, so that they could go 'nice and slowly' (Ms Coleman, Science teacher): whilst amongst the 'lower sets' 10 of the 14 pupils had EAL support, in the 'top set' only one of the 12 pupils had. This is particularly important as teachers acknowledged that through setting they prioritised the needs of 'more able' pupils. The idea that they were educating some outstanding pupils seemed more satisfactory than that of raising the aspirations of the deprived local community served by the school. Whilst this was an aim of *Fresh Start*, for which Millhaven staff had been praised, such good practice and experience on racial and ethnic equality seems to have been wasted. The wider context of education policy, which has been promoting pupil selection and competition between schools, encouraged this: with the imperative to perform well in GCSE examinations, schools sometimes invest more resources in pupils seen as able to contribute in raising the overall attainment (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000).

Furthermore, the role of the changing social composition of the school in the improved academic performance remains unclear. Available data suggest that the high visibility of the flagship initiative and the re-opening of the school with new staff and facilities contributed towards attracting pupils from more advantaged backgrounds, filling in the places that were often vacant at the 'failing' Millhaven High. The proportion of pupils entitled to free-school meals there was nearly three-quarters. At Greenfield, it was about 50% (in Year 7, it was only 30%). This significant increase in relative figures for less disadvantaged pupils may be contributing towards raising 'artificially' the academic performance of the school. Research has shown the association of academic performance and social, ethnic and linguistic background (Gillborn & Mirza, 2000; DfES, 2007b). As the raising of 'standards' was reported after the period of data collection, I was not able to collect further school data throughout time on the association of social and ethnic background and GCSE results to test this hypothesis; it is thus not completely clear whether the raising of 'standards' is ascribed to certain groups or to an overall improvement. Despite this, available data do suggest that the setting practices used at Greenfield were contributing to further academic differentiation, disadvantaging the most vulnerable pupils and favouring those traditionally more advantaged (Araújo, 2007). Thus, it remains uncertain whether the identity that Greenfield was creating was one based on 'standards for all'. Future research on the impact of

educational initiatives should thus take into account changes in the social composition of schools. This is now facilitated by the way in which statistics in education are collected and analysed, taking into account ethnicity, EAL, free school meals and special needs (DfES, 2007b).

5. *A Fresh Start?* Discussion and conclusions

Fresh Start was presented as being about strong leadership and good teaching, rather than a funding programme to raise achievement. Its underlying assumption is that if schools are failing to deliver quality education, the school leadership and teachers are to be held responsible and replaced. This is in spite of research and official data available showing that 'failing schools' often serve disadvantaged areas (Thrupp & Ball, 2001; Lupton, 2004, 2005), which is indicative of wider social, cultural and economical factors in attainment.

The assumption behind *Fresh Start* is consistent with the school effectiveness movement in research (Thrupp & Ball, 2001) and, significantly, it was supported by Michael Barber, a researcher on school effectiveness who became a leading education advisor to New Labour.⁸ In the mid-1990s, Barber played a crucial role in the highly controversial⁹ closure of Hackney Downs, a secondary modern school for boys in London that was considered 'the worst school in Britain'. He was chair of the Education Association (or 'hit squad', as it was known at the time) that took over the school, appointed by the Conservative Government. Barber (1996) argued that Hackney Downs:

...provides the clearest possible evidence that neither increased funding nor reducing class sizes are on their own, the solution to this country's educational problems. Unless the management is good and the teaching of high quality, even very large sums of money will change nothing. (p. 116)

This assumption is problematic in at least two ways. Firstly, while funding alone cannot solve every problem in education, problems in schools in challenging circumstances are generally exacerbated by insufficient financial support. For instance, in her research, Ruth Lupton (2005) found that teachers in disadvantaged schools were trading-off in their investment in teaching and management quality in order to be able to deal with priority issues concerning the welfare of their pupils. Lupton argues that this was due to inadequate resources. In particular, financial assistance would enable teachers to work in smaller groups in the classroom, having learning resources or the appropriate staff to provide pastoral support. Secondly, discourses that frame the question of quality in education as a matter of *either* funding *or* management efficiency (or any other single factor for that matter), divorced from the socio-economic contexts in which schools are located (Lupton, 2004), can hardly make a significant difference.

In this sense, the similarities between Hackney Downs and the *Fresh Start* initiative are prominent, with both embracing the 'largely context-blind school effectiveness movement' (Lupton, 2005, p. 591). Within this movement, researchers tried to identify and isolate 'school matters' that make a school 'effective', such as

the nature of leadership, teachers' expectations, pupils' motivation, behaviour and attendance and parental and pupil involvement (e.g. Mortimore *et al.*, 1988). Whilst there are a few exceptions (e.g. Mortimore & Whitty, 1997), the focus was generally on individual schools and intervention targeted at 'failing schools' (Angus, 1993). This helped to pin the problem of underachievement on school leadership and teachers (promoting 'naming and shaming' policies), marginalising considerations of the appropriateness of the curriculum or the social, political and economic context of schools (Angus, 1993; Tomlinson, 1997; Reynolds, 1999; Lupton, 2004). Additionally, by disregarding a body of influential sociological work that focused on schools as sites of cultural and social reproduction (such as that by Bourdieu, Bernstein or JWB Douglas), this led to unrealistic expectations that schools could compensate for society (Thrupp, 1999).

The discourse of school effectiveness has been captured by New Labour. As Michael Fielding (1999a) argued, we are witnessing a 'dominance of the school effectiveness movement on the government's educational imagination' (p. 177). This is evident in the promotion of a 'can do' and 'no-excuse' culture, which has been considered naïve for not being critical about 'what works' (and *for whom*), downplaying of the complexity of the social context of inner-city schools (Thrupp & Ball, 2001; Lupton, 2004). The setting of a managerialist agenda (Lupton, 2005), that conceives of the quality of education as the performance of managers and teachers, is strikingly evident in *Fresh Start*. Official discourses on 'failing schools' promote the idea that there is one best way to tackle underachievement in all 'failing schools' and that this is easily identifiable and consensual. In particular, it is suggested that a 'culture of success' can be implemented by strong leadership, disregarding structural inequalities and the particular contexts in which schools operate. This is despite New Labour being more willing to acknowledge social constraints on 'failing schools' than the Conservatives and the initiative being meant to respond to the needs of pupils and their communities (Thrupp & Ball, 2001). As Lupton (2005) argues, although New Labour policies have been more supportive of schools, 'they are still founded upon the belief that quality differences between schools are primarily the responsibility of the schools themselves and can thus be tackled by initiatives at the school level' (p. 591). As I suggested throughout this paper, managerial solutions are not sufficient to deal with problems that are both educational *and* social.

Moreover, the implementation of initiatives such as *Fresh Start* must take into account the particularities of each school, so that its strengths are not lost at the expense of the 'standards' rhetoric. At Greenfield, it is difficult to assess precisely the impact of *Fresh Start*, as the school was also involved in other policy initiatives. Nonetheless, it seems clear that its implementation added in some ways to the problems of the school it replaced. The difficulty in establishing basic routines at the school, the headteacher's resignation and ensuing staff mobility created an atmosphere of perceived chaos, with teaching and learning taking place in conditions that were far from ideal. Although these issues were very visible but transient, there were significant changes in the approach to education taking place at the school that

were subtler yet enduring. According to several OFSTED reports, there had been 'very good results' amongst refugee children due to the quality work being carried out at Millhaven High, a school committed to raising the aspirations of a community where attainment was traditionally low. This past experience was erased in the transition to the *Fresh Started* school, despite the significant proportion of pupils receiving EAL support. Greenfield was creating an identity based on 'traditional' approaches, through the policing of teachers' work, strict discipline and increased selection within the school, favouring the 'more able'.

Fresh Start encouraged this through its focus on external accountability. Indeed, Fielding (2001) argues that the system of accountability in place (rather than reciprocal responsibility between schools and communities) promotes 'a culture of blame'. Also, within the context of pressure to perform well in GCSE results and raising 'standards', schools can be discouraged from implementing innovative pedagogic practice that results in social inclusion (which was what the initiative aimed at). This is particularly true for *Fresh Start* schools because, with New Labour, intervention is 'in inverse proportion to success' (DfES, 2001b, p. 67). With this principle underlying intervention, the so-called 'failing schools' are targeted for ever-increasing control and accountability, not only to the state, but also to the public through the close surveillance of the media. The wider context of education policy may thus be constraining the extent to which such initiatives can help schools in actually making a difference (Thrupp, 1999).

Additionally, the current rhetoric of 'standards', focusing on the school's overall attainment in performance-related tables, may be concealing the complex processes that disadvantage pupils of some backgrounds. It has been suggested that there is a clear contradiction between New Labour's move towards social inclusion and its continuing support for a quasi-market in education through policies that promote competition and selection in education (Demaine, 1999). The data collected at Greenfield does suggest that although the 'failing school' raised its performance, possibly not all pupils are benefiting equally (mainly through the increased use of setting). If we are to improve achievement in inner-city schools, education policy needs to address fundamental matters concerning attainment, such as those related to resources, curricular innovation and pedagogy, and to design measures to raise, in particular, the attainments of pupils who are traditionally disadvantaged. The limitations of this study call for further research to explore how the implementation of policy initiatives such as *Fresh Start* impact on ethnic and racial equality. An evaluation of any initiative that does not question *whose* 'standards' have been raised is necessarily weakened. Demaine (2005) more recently argued that New Labour policies should be understood within the wider social and political context of an 'unequal society' that they cannot compensate. Yet it is my view that the expectations created by the rhetoric on social inclusion have been wrongly frustrated, precisely because the social inclusion card has been so often played, and strategically so, to win the vote of a segment of the electorate.

In this paper, I provided some evidence that the *Fresh Start* initiative rests uneasily with claims from the government that it implements 'evidence-informed policy' (for

a detailed discussion on the relation between research and policy see, for example, Gewirtz, [2003] and Whitty [2006]). I would like to add a concluding note on the purposes of schooling. The continuing imposition of goals and target-related funding has helped to exclude the non-measurable aspects of the curriculum, downplaying the social formation of pupils as citizens (Ball, 1994). And yet the broader discussion on the articulation of the purposes of schooling (and education) and the means to attain them has been marginalised. In this respect, Michael Fielding (1999a, 2001) has argued that in the context of the market place, education policy in Britain has conceived of ‘outcomes’ as the purpose of education, rather than as a means to the purpose of the personal, of *becoming a person*. In his view, neither OFSTED nor ‘school effectiveness’:

has a considered view of what it is to be or become a person outside a de facto presumption of atomistic individualism; neither has a set of values that would enable to make judgements about for example, what might constitute ‘effectiveness’ in other than market terms, and neither has a grasp of the proper relationship of means to ends. (2001, p. 702)

While the debate on values is open to dispute, Fielding (1999b) calls for a clarification of what we are to attain, so that ‘well-meaning but philosophically flawed government policy’ (p. 286) can be judged. Making evident the aims and means of schooling, and shifting the debate onto the articulation between these, is essential if we aspire to a *Fresh Start* in the construction of truly democratic societies.

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Notes

1. The decision to provide a school with a *Fresh Start* is usually taken by the LEA, although the Secretary of State can also enforce the closure of a particular school when education provision is seen as having insufficient quality (DfEE, 2001c). Regulations to allow the implementation of *Fresh Start* were integrated into the *Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998* (HMSO, 1998) and in *Circulars 6/99* (DfEE, 1999b) and *9/99* (DfEE, 1999c).
2. This was how the headteachers of *Fresh Start* schools were labelled by the media at the time, by virtue of the task they were facing and the £70,000-plus salaries some of them were to receive.
3. Initially, LEAs were meeting investment costs for *Fresh Start* using existing funds (*New Deal for Schools* and *Standards Fund*). Only in May 2000 the government announced its intention to make capital funding available (Hansard, 2000b).
4. Reassuring students that I was not a journalist was generally easily achieved, as they seemed satisfied with my reassurances that I was carrying out research; yet it did limit my movements in the informal spaces of the school, as teachers felt the need to be over-vigilant with the media: after the school was depicted in negative ways on TV and in other media news, it was now limiting access to the premises. On the other hand, I also had to reassure students that I was not a teacher or another member of staff. In order to do so, I chose not to report their

- misbehaviour in situations in which the teacher was temporarily absent from the classroom. This was very important in helping to create complicity with students.
5. As no other data that would allow making inferences on social background were available, I used eligibility for free school meals as a proxy for poverty, which is standard practice in official statistics in England.
 6. Documents that could identify the school are not fully referenced.
 7. With setting, 'Pupils are grouped according to their attainment in a particular subject' (Ireson & Hallam, 2001, p. 10).
 8. Barber was also the head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit within the DfEE.
 9. See Barber (1996) and Tomlinson (1997) for their divergent views on the case.

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