

How academies threaten the curriculum

The privatisation of secondary education through the academies programme raises serious concerns with regard to the ownership, control and public accountability of schools. The most destructive change of all, however, is likely to be the final dismantling of the entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum for all pupils regardless of ability. This principle underpinned the rationale for replacing 11-Plus segregation with a system of common schooling for all, with the aim of spreading access to all levels of education to all sections of society.

Between 1997 and 2007 there has been a spectacular increase, from 45 percent to 63 percent, in the proportion of pupils gaining five or more A*-C grades at GCSE or equivalent. This has been encouraged by the annual publication of the "100 Most Improved Schools" list, which comprises of those schools with the biggest gain in five-plus A*-Cs over the previous four years. The highest performers in the list have regularly achieved spectacular progress over even this short time period.

In order to investigate this remarkable educational phenomenon I teamed up with a professional statistician, Roger Davies, and with the support of the TES, we attempted to analyse the Key Stage 4 (KS4) curriculum and 2005 results of the schools in the 2004 "Most Improved" list.

Our first finding concerned the value of the five-plus A*-Cs measure that drives league tables and is still used by the DCSF to measure and define school improvement, especially in the case of academies. We found that such school improvement was linked to poor comparative performance in English and Maths. We went on to show that such "school improvement" was largely explained by the introduction of one or more GNVQ courses, where a single GNVQ pass counts as four A*-C GCSE passes and where pass rates are very high. (The degree of improvement as indicated by the place in the "100 Most Improved" schools list for 2004 was strongly related to the average number of A*-C grades attributable to GNVQs.)

The tendency for GNVQ science to replace GCSE science was so strong that in some of the "Most Improved" schools no pupils took GCSE science courses at all. "School improvement" was also linked to poor provision and take-up of European languages and history, and the "Most Improved" schools tended to have the most impoverished curriculum in terms of pupil access to these subjects.

It is our belief that curriculum entitlement is important and that parents and the wider community should have ready access to information about the range of examination courses available in schools, which subjects are compulsory, which are optional, and the restrictions placed on subject choice. There should also be full disclosure of the examination

entries and results in each subject. However, despite being able to call upon the administrative resources of the TES and the Freedom of Information Act (FOI) we had difficulty in obtaining this information from many schools. Unwillingness to disclose curriculum information and subject-by-subject exam results was linked to the degree of "school improvement".

It is not just access to a broad and balanced curriculum that is suffering in academies. When he analysed the five-plus A*-Gs results, the level 1 qualification, Terry Wrigley of Edinburgh University discovered that a higher proportion of pupils in academies failed to achieve even this lowest level benchmark in 2006 than had done so in their predecessor schools five years earlier. So despite massive investment by the taxpayer, plenty of time for innovation to take effect and expulsion rates of three times that of state schools, academies are doing worse with the very pupils (those that survived into Year 11) whom they are primarily intended to benefit.

The admissions arrangements of many academies raise more curriculum concerns. "Fair banding" is increasingly being used to provide so-called balanced intakes. Walsall Academy, for example, requires all prospective pupils to take the NFER Nelson Non-Verbal Cognitive Ability Test (CAT), a form of intelligence test, as part of its admissions process. The school defines five bands on the basis of the national normal distribution of standardised scores in this test. The local catchment area provides a disproportionate number of pupils in the lower bands (a fact with disturbing implications) but leaves unfilled places in the upper bands, which are filled by pupils from more affluent areas further away. The rejected lower-band pupils enter the surrounding state schools and the more distant state schools lose their more able pupils to the academy. Other academies make even more unjustified use of banding in their admission systems.

Academies, with the support of the DCSF, can keep their curriculum secret. The Walsall LA has asked Walsall Academy for its subject results. The academy has declined to provide them. The same is true for the annual pupil census, so the Walsall LA is not only unaware of what is being taught to whom in the academy, but also it does not even know how many pupils there are there.

Are such privatised academies really a desirable model for the future of the English education system, or are they just the latest and most extreme manifestation of an approach to education that is being increasingly discredited wherever independent research is applied, and which has been abandoned in all other parts of the United Kingdom?

Roger Titcombe

CASE believes in a fully comprehensive, locally accountable and democratic education system.

Take the London Challenge, Mr Brown!

Mary Wallis-Jones

“So we will put in place now a systematic plan of ever tougher measures for eradicating failure. It will start with annual improvement targets for all schools that are falling below the required threshold.

There will be new incentives for the best teachers to teach in the toughest schools, including expanding the Teach First and Teach Next programmes, to have the best possible teacher intake for these schools.

Good schools will be brought in to help poorer schools under improvement networks, that will be run by schools for schools, as the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust motto puts it. Warning notices to trigger intervention powers will include new Interim Executive Boards to take over school management where there is failure. Complete closure or takeover by a successful neighbouring school in a Trust or federation, or transfer to academy status, including the option of being taken over by an independent school, will be an available power.

And there will be 150 more academies in the next three years, en route towards our target of 400. More universities working with us to set up academies, more local authorities doing what Manchester, Birmingham, Oldham and others are doing, putting academies at the heart of their school improvement plans. More independent schools setting up academies to take over failing schools.”

Gordon Brown, transcribed from video recording on BBC News website page of 31 October.

The Prime Minister should listen less to the spurious claims for academies, the Thatcherite belief in the marketisation of state education and the belief that successful businessmen are the best people to make “failing” schools perform. These are the views propounded by Lord Andrew Adonis, still a Schools Minister, and enthusiastically supported by Sir Cyril Taylor, the

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voice of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. They are not based on any real evidence of what works, and they are not views that should be taken seriously by a Labour government.

Why not listen instead to the professionals, the people who really know what works, in particular, Professor Tim Brighouse? As London Schools Commissioner he introduced a number of initiatives with the London Challenge which have proved effective in turning around many London secondary schools, at a much lower cost than the often dubious improvements brought about by academy status. But, typically, many of these initiatives have been starved of funds, not followed through, or thwarted by schools being destabilised by the threat of either being made an academy, or having a brand new Foster- or Rogers-designed academy arriving on their doorstep to cream off their best pupils.

Tim Brighouse also recognised that successful teaching in tough schools in inner city disadvantaged areas took great skill, determination, enthusiasm and perseverance. He wanted to celebrate and recognise the skills of experienced London teachers so that they would be encouraged to stay in London, in spite of the very high housing and transport costs which led many with families to move out. So, Chartered London Teacher Status was launched in 2004, and the first teachers achieved it in December 2006. However, to achieve it teachers have to have taught in London for at least four years, be registered for the award for two years, and meet various performance management objectives, at the end of which they only get a one off lump sum of £1,000, or perhaps the equivalent of one month's rent. A good initiative therefore flounders through underfunding.

Gordon Brown does not talk about Chartered London Teacher status and what could be done to make it more attractive, but about Teach First, another initiative started in London to address the needs of “failing” schools in the most disadvantaged areas. Its website says: “Teach First is a unique business led programme for outstanding graduates and the schools that need them most. Spend two years in challenging secondary schools qualifying to teach while learning to lead with over 90 leading employers.” These high-flying graduates hit the classroom after six weeks preparation for “on the job” training by these “failing” schools, and achieve QTS after a year.

The government is right in thinking that motivating inspirational teachers and leaders is the key to improvement in the most challenging secondary schools. But until all maintained schools have the resources, facilities and money to attract the best staff, there will always be a bottom of the pile.

And, why give state schools away to independent sponsors to run, while the taxpayer foots the total bill?

Rise and fall

The recent decision to close the Ridings School in Halifax is a timely reminder of the uncertain value of relying on “superheads” to turn around failing schools.

Eleven years ago the Ridings achieved notoriety as “Britain’s worst school” when staff threatened to strike unless around 60 “unteachable” pupils were removed. The installation of a new headteacher and management team led to initial improvements, but the improvement was not sustained, and now the school is doomed.

Meanwhile St George’s, Maida Vale, is being “turned around” for the third time. When its headmaster, Philip Lawrence, was stabbed to death outside the school gates in 1995, he was in the process of “turning the school around”. One of his successors, Marie Stubbs, “turned around” the school so well in 2000–01 that her achievement became the basis of a feature film, Ahead of the Class, in which she was played by Julie Walters. Despite this, the school is having to be “turned around” yet again, this time by headteacher Martin Tissot.

The experience of these two schools follows an all-too-common pattern. A failing school is given an expensive makeover: new head and senior management, new or refurbished buildings, new equipment; perhaps a new uniform or even a change of name. Initial enthusiasm among pupils, parents and staff leads to a rise in standards. The head’s achievements are recognised, perhaps by a knighthood. But often the improvements fail to last and the cycle starts again.

The reasons are not hard to discern: the success of a school depends ultimately not upon the ability of its teachers but upon the motivation of its pupils. When the majority of these come from unstable and deprived backgrounds, success requires not only a level of talent that is rare in the teaching profession but a level of commitment that cannot be sustained in the long term.

A much better idea than relying upon “superheads” would be to end selection, both overt and covert, and ensure that every school has a socially and academically balanced intake.

Academies review

An urgent review of academies has been ordered by ministers amid growing concern at the heart of government that education policies are failing to target the most disadvantaged pupils. The review was made public on 13 November and an eight-week deadline has been set to examine whether academies are achieving their original goals of tackling the weakest urban schools.

The review will be carried out within Downing Street, not by the DCSF. All CASE members should also submit any information or experiences of the academy programme as soon as possible to the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit, Horse Guards Road, London SW1A 2HQ.

What Future for Pimlico School?

Bridget Chapman

Pimlico is an inner-London community comprehensive only a mile or so from the Palace of Westminster. It is housed in an iconic Brutalist building which opened in 1970 and in the past was well known for its liberal ethos.

In November 2006 Pimlico School was failed following an Ofsted inspection. This followed years of neglect from Westminster Council who had allowed the school buildings to deteriorate badly.

After the inspection our much-loved headteacher, who had devoted his working life to the school, disappeared almost overnight. Our governing body was sacked and a "super head" from a neighbouring school was imposed upon us, along with an Interim Executive Board. Although we were promised a shadow governing body this has never happened and Westminster Council has now published plans to turn us into an Academy sponsored by an organisation called Future.

This decision followed an informal consultation in which 96 percent of respondents clearly stated that they wanted Pimlico to remain a community school. In a linguistic twist worthy of Lewis Carroll the council announced that this could be achieved through the imposition of an academy with a "community ethos". So stakeholders' views were ignored and the council ploughed on regardless.

Since then Pimlico has recorded its best A Level and GCSE results ever, with 52 percent of students achieving five-plus GCSEs A*-C. Of course we can do even better, but this gives the lie to the suggestion that Pimlico needs to have its status redesignated because it is a "failing" school.

Westminster's chosen sponsor, Future, is the brainchild of John Nash, a wealthy

venture capitalist, and his wife Caroline. The organisation has no experience of running a school, although John Nash's company, Sovereign Capital, owns the Alpha Plus group of independent schools who will apparently be advising Future on the running of the school. It seems likely that Alpha Plus will be paid for its "expertise" – surely there is then scope for profits to be made from the public purse, and a massive conflict of interest?

The Pimlico School Association, which represents students, staff and parents at the school, has been spearheading a campaign against the imposition of academy status. It has held several large public meetings at which the votes have shown clear and forceful opposition to such an imposition. Westminster is aware of the force of feeling, but continues to ignore us.

On 10 November we organised our own Committee of Enquiry to address the question: What future for Pimlico School? The submissions from parents with children in academies, and colleagues working in academies, highlighted just how poor the educational provision in them is, and made us all the more determined to fight on. Future and Westminster declined to make submissions to the enquiry.

So, what's next? Well, although the proposed academy has to undergo the statutory consultation process we already know that Westminster will do all it can to skew the results. And if the results don't say what they want they will simply ignore them and try to push their plans through irrespective of what the people they represent want. We know from other campaigns such as Islington Green that, in the end, the most effective tactic in the fight against an academy is direct action. That's the route we now intend to take. We have no choice.

Comment

Gordon Brown's threat to close or replace schools where fewer than 30 percent of the pupils achieve five A*-C grades in the GCSE has rightly been condemned by practically everyone with any professional knowledge of how our education system works.

The assumption behind this "clunking fist" announcement is that academic success is a matter of discovering and employing the correct pedagogical "methods". Schools that "fail" do so because the head and the teachers are not good enough.

There is no research whatsoever that supports this instrumental view of schooling. On the contrary, the overwhelming conclusions of years and years of research are that socio-economic factors are the main drivers of success or failure at school, not pedagogical ones. The best chance for children from deprived or unhelpful backgrounds is to attend a school where the peer group culture is

positive towards school and where, as a result, the teachers have the time and the energy to give them the extra attention they may need.

Unfortunately, the "market forces" approach espoused by all governments over the last 20 years has greatly worsened the chances for such children, who are the least likely to obtain places in "popular" schools. Almost all the schools deemed to be failing are those with over-representation of the least motivated and least resourceful children.

Closing such schools will only be effective if the pupils (and their successors currently in primary school) are then distributed among the "best" schools. As the government does not appear to have the political courage for such a measure, we can expect "failing" schools to be replaced by academies. When these in turn fail, Lord Adonis will tell us that they have been a great success.

Michael Pike

Stitch up in Camden

Lucy Anderson

The recently established Camden branch of CASE has been campaigning for a new secondary school proposed for the borough to be a community school. Despite huge support for this at two well-attended public meetings and throughout the whole council consultation processes, this call has been rejected by the council leadership. Instead it is proposing an academy backed by University College, London, without even the process of an open competition.

Camden LEA was consistently graded excellent under the government's performance assessment regime. During the passage of the Education and Inspections Act, many MPs fought long and hard for the right for excellent-rated local education authorities to propose new community schools. Camden Council would be in an ideal position to win a competition for a new school if it entered a bid, especially in the light of the recent experience with a successful community school bid in Haringey.

In Camden CASE we have recently stepped up our campaigning, backed fully by the National Union of Teachers and many local parents, residents, governors and other stakeholders. We have also held a joint demonstration with the University and College Union branch at UCL, who are adamantly opposed to a UCL-sponsored academy. We have throughout tried to persuade UCL that they could become involved in partnership with Camden schools in other ways, such as by nominating up to four governors to the governing body of a new community school. UCL have provided no coherent reasons why this alternative approach is not appropriate for them.

In addition, there are a number of parents in Camden who are determined to fight the council's decision to go for the academy by the "preferred sponsor" route, which cuts out holding an open competition and bidding for a community school. At the very least, we believe that the law requires that the council should carry out a proper formal consultation on the governance of the new school, which would involve putting the full implications of different options to Camden residents.

More widely, the continued existence of the "preferred sponsor" route for academies is a major issue for CASE nationally as it bypasses completely the competition provisions of the Education and Inspections Act, and arguably breaches the intentions of the legislation. It also exposes the new rights to have parental representations considered properly as a total sham. CASE parents, as well as parents from the Church of England and other Camden campaigns for a new school, all made representations to the Council and to the Secretary of State but have been ignored.

Lucy Anderson is Chair of Camden CASE

Seeing the poverty in “poor”

Michael Pyke

Following the most recent OFSTED Report, in which the Chief Inspector, Christine Gilbert, stated that some 10 percent of secondary schools are “inadequate” or worse, “failing” schools have yet again become a topic for public discussion. Not surprisingly, public commentators wonder why, after ten years of heavy investment in public education by a government that in 1997 proclaimed education to be its major priority, this depressing situation should persist. Equally unsurprisingly, they continue to assert that government policies have been and are correct.

A leading article in *The Independent* of Thursday 18 October is typical of the mulish way in which the organs of middle-class opinion refuse to acknowledge the destructive impact on the education system of failing to take account of poverty and inequality. While accepting that it is “schools in deprived areas” that are failing, the newspaper proceeds to blame the schools, on the dubious basis that the alternative is to blame the children: “It is true that poor discipline and an unsupportive home life make teaching difficult in certain schools. But the primary cause of poor discipline is *substandard teaching* [my italics]. It is not good enough to blame the children. And schools must be a way of liberating children from a chaotic home life. Inadequacy in these institutions is even less acceptable than it would be in wealthy areas.” The leader goes on to endorse the academies programme, concentrated investment in deprived areas, more freedom for individual schools, etc.

It would be easy to laugh at this pompous and ill-informed nonsense, were it not so representative of mainstream political opinion. No amount of failure seems able to persuade society that we are on the wrong course, having developed a system that is designed to appease “aspirational” parents in marginal constituencies rather than meet the needs of society as a whole. In this system education is offered as a positional good, by definition scarce,

for which parents must compete against each other on behalf of their children. Schools, especially secondary schools, are deemed to be static collections of resources, human and material, whose quality can be assessed independently of their pupils.

This approach leads to an undignified and dishonest scrabble in which parents lie about their place of residence and, even, their religious beliefs, while schools practise various forms of selection, admitted or not, according to how popular they are. In current orthodoxy schools which are unpopular deserve to be so: their resources, leadership, teaching or whatever are not good enough. They are supposed to react to their perceived failure by “improving” but somehow they rarely do.

To understand why this is so, we need to remind ourselves that the most important factor in learning is not pedagogy but motivation and that children’s motivation to succeed at school is largely determined by factors outside the school’s control. Most research suggests that between 70 and 80 percent of examination results and other measurable outcomes of schooling are due to socio-economic circumstances, rather than to the effects of schooling. The task for policy-makers, therefore, is to identify the best way of mitigating the demotivating effects of poverty and deprivation. It does not take a genius to realise that concentrating deprived children in “unpopular” schools is not likely to work.

Unfortunately, such concentrations are the inevitable result of relying upon the exercise of parental choice as a driver of improvement. Government needs to recognise that the only way of securing lasting improvement is to create a system that works for everyone, rather than mainly for the most powerful and articulate. This means ending all selection and introducing measures to ensure that, as far as possible, every secondary school has a socially and academically balanced intake. Without such measures we can expect the hand-wringing of politicians to persist.

A word about sponsors: Jon Aisbitt

Jon Aisbitt is Sponsor for a proposed academy at Falmer, in Brighton and Hove

He is 419th on the Sunday Times Rich List with a £95m fortune.

Formerly a partner and Managing Director in the investment banking divi-

sion of Goldman Sachs, Jon has over 20 years’ experience in international corporate finance and mergers and acquisitions. Today, he is a non-executive director of Man Group plc (Britain’s biggest hedge-fund manager), Deputy Chairman of Ocean Rig ASA and a director of various private equity companies ranging from biotechnology to stockbroking. In addition, he is a Trustee of New Philanthropy Capital, a charity that advises donors and funders on how to give more effectively.

Jon is a former Honorary Treasurer and Member of the Board of Trustees of the NSPCC.

According to the Electoral Commission’s Register of Political Parties, on 13 April 2005 Jon Aisbitt donated £250,000 to Labour’s general election campaign.

News in brief

Parent councils

CASE has long argued for schools to have parent councils. The CASE briefing *A Voice for Parents*, which explains how we think parent councils should work, can be found on our website. Now the DCSF has produced a book, a leaflet and guidance on *Setting up a parent council* – all on www.governor.net.co.uk/parentcouncils.

SEN: Assessment and funding

The Education and Skills Committee reported on special education needs on 25 October. Its recommendations to government included asking what advice will be given on the use of the Common Assessment Framework for assessing SEN and what the implications for statementing will be, and what guidance will be given to ensure the money provided for special needs is spent on them. It also recommended local authorities be required to set out in a single document the support and services they provide for special needs and the reasons for the pattern of provision. It called on government to make an explicit commitment to provide a national framework for SEN. The report is on www.parliament.uk.

Academies programme

The Public Accounts Committee at the House of Commons produced a report in October on the academies programme. Its findings include

- of the first 26 academy buildings 17 incurred cost overruns averaging £3.2million
- literacy and numeracy levels of academy pupils are significantly less than those of pupils in all secondary schools
- contracts in some cases have been allocated to sponsors instead of being put out to competitive tender
- academies are a relatively costly way of tackling low attainment.

The report is on www.parliament.uk.

The tyranny of testing

A new book by Warwick Mansell, *Education by Numbers: the tyranny of testing* (Politico’s, 2007) analyses the testing/exams/high-stakes accountability regime, which now determines so much of what goes on in our schools, and finds it wanting. Parents’ needs, in particular, are not being satisfied by a system which is placing statistical information about pupils’ exam performance above everything else. The obsession with test and exam statistics, which springs from league tables and targets, is damaging confidence in schools. This ties in with the findings of Robin Alexander’s *Primary Review* (on www.primaryreview.org.uk).

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