

Deconstructing the state education system

Within days of the Coalition Government being formed, Michael Gove, the new Secretary of State, removed all traces of the Department of Children, Schools and Families, the signage and the website. DCSF documents should no longer be used. The department is now the Department for Education. Since that start he has announced the closure of the General Teaching Council, the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency and the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency.

He has also introduced a new Bill in Parliament, the Academies Bill, and has written to every headteacher of a school designated as “outstanding” by Ofsted, inviting them to register an interest in becoming an academy. In this he offered them:

- freedom from local authority control
- the ability to set the pay and conditions of their staff
- freedom from following the National Curriculum
- ability to change the length of terms and school days
- greater control over their budget
- the money the local authority currently spends on their behalf.

“All schools acquiring these freedoms will be liberated from the bureaucracy which was attached to Academies from 2007,” according to Mr Gove.

In fact, he should have written to governing bodies, not headteachers, as it is their decision whether to become an academy. When the National Governors’ Association asked him about this he said that it was an “oversight”.

Short and vague

The Academies Bill, which was introduced into the House of Lords on 26 May, contains few provisions. The main ones are:

- it enables all maintained schools to apply to become academies, with schools rated “outstanding” by Ofsted being effectively pre-approved
- it allows maintained primary and special schools to apply to become academies in their own right
- it gives the Secretary of State the power to issue an academy order requiring the local authority to cease to maintain the school
- it removes the requirement to consult the local authority before opening an academy
- it requires the consent of any existing foundation (mainly churches) before a school applies to become an academy (and prohibits the religious character changing during the conversion to academy)
- it deems academy trusts exempt charities.

Not only is the Bill short in length – it lacks clarity in many

aspects. Academies will be subject to a “funding agreement”, but there has been no information about what will be in that agreement – or whether it will be a standard agreement or different for each school. After many requests from members of the House of Lords a funding agreement was produced just before the last day of the Report Stage, but the members complained that there was not enough time to read it. This is typical of the way the Bill has been rushed through in order to become an Act by the end of July.

A two-tier system

The concerns about this Bill are many. A two-tier system will be created as those schools which become academies will be “independent” of the local authority, although accountable to the DfE. They have to be supported by a trust which will be a company limited by guarantee. There is no requirement to consult parents, staff, pupils or the wider community before the decision is taken. Academies do not have to comply with any education law or the Freedom of Information Act, so the rights of parents and children are removed. There are particular concerns about children with special needs. The money which would be removed from the local authority for any school becoming an academy will mean less money at the centre to support all other schools. The governing body has to make the decision to become an academy, but is then dissolved to be replaced by a new one formed by the trust.

Schools which “registered an interest” were initially considered by the government to have applied to become an academy, but it is doubtful whether many governing bodies were consulted as the letter was sent out during half term. Following the publication of the list of schools that registered for information as a result of a Freedom of information request, the government had to backtrack and place a statement on the DfE website to the effect that registration did not in fact mean that they were making an application.

All in all this is a mess. Michael Gove is rushing through legislation that has not been thought through at all. It is pertinent too that most of the schools that have shown an interest are in the wealthier areas. The decision to become an academy will be an entirely selfish one, and will not be cost-free to the system at a time when cuts are being made everywhere. In fact, it will cost the DfE £530m if, as it expects, 200 schools become academies each year over the next four years.

Breaking up the state education system is not in the interests of children or young people and will not raise achievement. CASE has asked to see the Minister for Children and Families, Sarah Teather, to explain our concerns.

CASE Annual Conference: **Markets are for Commodities – Not Children**
Speakers so far confirmed: Professor Bernard Barker and Christine Blower, General Secretary NUT
20 November 2010

Doing “what works”: education in Finland

Michael Pyke

Michael Gove has defended his wish to introduce Swedish style “free schools” on the grounds that he is not interested in “ideology” but in “what works”. Unfortunately, the Swedish model of education does not “work” in the way that Gove implies. After more than 15 years of allowing parents and other groups to set up their own schools at public expense, Sweden’s overall educational achievements have actually declined relative to those of other OECD countries and in some areas of the curriculum are well below those of the UK.

On the other hand, there is a Scandinavian education system that “works” – that of Finland, whose children regularly come top in international comparison tables. But no British Education Secretary, including Michael Gove, has shown any serious interest in trying to emulate Finland’s world-beating system.

Among those in OECD nations, Finnish children spend the least time in the classroom, starting school late and having very long holidays. Formal schooling does not start until the age of seven, although most children will have attended pre-school kindergartens, staffed by highly educated and professionally qualified nursery teachers. Nearly all Finnish children attend their local comprehensive school from age seven to sixteen, so there is no difficult divide into primary and secondary schools.

In their last year at comprehensive school the pupils must make a choice between leaving school altogether, continuing to a vocational school or continuing to an academic school. In making these choices, pupils are guided, not by formal examination results – there are none – but by the school’s internal assessments. Only at the age of 19 do Finnish pupils have to

sit formal, nationally administered examinations. Fewer than 10 percent of pupils choose to leave school.

Finnish schoolteachers are very highly qualified. To be accepted for teacher education, students have to demonstrate not only a high level of academic ability but also that they have the right personal qualities to undertake what is a very demanding job. Entry to teacher education courses is highly competitive, with a rejection rate of over 80 percent. This competitiveness derives more from the high levels of respect that Finnish society accords to teachers than from noticeably high salaries. Finnish schoolteachers enjoy very high levels of professional autonomy, and are supported in their work by a national inspectorate which itself is possessed of great expertise.

An egalitarian system

Another characteristic of Finnish education is its egalitarian philosophy. Finnish schools cultivate an atmosphere of relaxed informality, with younger children especially enjoying a close and supportive relationship with their teacher. Most classes in comprehensive schools are of mixed ability with extra help being given to children in difficulty, not by poorly paid classroom assistants, as in the UK, but by fully qualified teachers with expertise in special needs education. All school meals are free, as, indeed, is all university tuition. Private schools do exist but the sector is hedged around with strict laws and, as a whole, is small and weak.

Of course, there are dangers in “educational tourism”. Education is, among other things, a cultural construct and it is naïve to suppose that “what works” in one country will necessarily transplant to another.

Compared with multicultural Britain, Finland has a homogeneous population, the only significant racial minority being Swedes! Finland does not have our history of early industrial growth followed by lengthy decline: until fairly recently it was an agrarian society. Finnish culture values education and the taxpayer is willing to invest heavily in it; the great majority of Finnish parents read to their children from an early age, which may well account for Finland having the world’s highest levels of childhood literacy.

Nevertheless, there are clear lessons to be learned from Finland’s success. First of all, the current system has not just evolved but has been brought into being by far-sighted and determined political action. Secondly, it is clear that a properly constructed and resourced system of comprehensive schools is a more effective means of achieving a properly educated nation than the class-based stratification that characterises our own schools. Thirdly, it is clear that a highly educated and professionally trained workforce with a high degree of autonomy, supported by the expertise of a dedicated inspectorate, offers a much more effective model for success than our own, in which an under-educated and insecure workforce is bullied by government into conformity with whatever ministers think to be the “correct” methods. Above all, it seems that creating a positive atmosphere in which all children are encouraged and expected to succeed works much better than market forces with their battery of fear-inducing and stultifying tests.

So why does Michael Gove not attempt to learn from a system that really does “work”, rather than from one which has already failed? Could the reasons be ideological after all?

The price of coalition

Liberal Democrats may have shoehorned significant chunks of their policy into the Coalition Agreement, but it seems that they have dropped the ball – comprehensively – when it comes to education legislation and reform.

The “Equity and Excellence” policy that the Lib Dems passed at their Conference in March 2009, and which is still on the party website, puts the local authority very squarely and unequivocally at the heart of state education provision. This chimes well with Lib Dem policies on greater localism, and applying fairness and equity to all policy areas.

The document was notable for ensuring that “all schools, including existing academies, would be under the strategic oversight of local authorities and not Ministers in Whitehall”. It is difficult to imagine two documents as much in contradiction with each other as this and the Academies Bill currently going through Parliament.

Although those on the right of the party can point to allowing greater autonomy in

schools, more diversity in structures, and greater choice for parents as being consistent with a Liberal approach, this has always to be set against the principle of harm as a moderating force, as advanced by that great Liberal, John Stuart Mill. The harm principle holds that each individual has the right to act as he wants, as long as these actions do not harm others.

There is a significant argument that within the rather skeletal Academies Bill, there is much room for harm to equality of opportunity for children in local communities. Then there is the overriding harm of causing greater division in society, in the shape of creating what seems inevitably to be a two-tier school system.

As this Bill moves through Parliament, Lib Dems need to use their progressive, moderating force to highlight the many areas for potential harm, and flesh out the Bill to ensure that greater fairness is built in. Otherwise, Lib Dems must really begin to ponder the value of coalition, and, more importantly, its price.

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Membership

To join CASE send £15 (£15 unwaged) with your name, address and phone number to CASE (address above)

Class matters more now than ever

For those of us who believe that a life-enhancing education should be a fundamental right for every child, the general election was never going to bring much joy. CASE's main concerns beforehand were that selection by schools of students by social class had been actively but covertly promoted by Conservative and New Labour administrations since 1988, through specialist schools, faith schools and the academies programme, while the ability of communities to make an input into local education had been steadily eroded through the privatisation of the service and the attrition of the stakeholder model of school governance.

Our attempts to lobby the three main parties before the election fell on deaf ears – when ears were presented at all. That was one of the main reasons we felt compelled to try to put our views about the education system to a wider public by placing an advertisement in a national newspaper. Our thanks to all those supporters who signed it and to all those who donated money to help us place it.

Measures to hit the poor

Throughout the general election campaign we felt that the discussions on education were superficial and wedded to an unquestioning acceptance of the neo-liberal dogmas of “choice and diversity” and the benevolent invisible hand of the market. That the market could go disastrously wrong seemed not to have been noticed, even though most people are now expected to pay the bill for the bankers’ jamboree. It is no longer fashionable to analyse developments in terms of class politics. We were reassured, after all, that social class was no longer relevant in this

country by the likes of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair. Class war or not, however, it is the poor or the working class or the people at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, however you wish to characterise them, who will suffer most from the dysfunctions of the market. They are the people who depend most on services provided by the state, which are now targeted for cuts, and who are least equipped to choose from what the market has to offer. They are the people whose schools are constantly being designated as failing, put into special measures and previously threatened with privatisation under the academies programme, and they are the people whose children were then surreptitiously shuffled out of the new academies so that they do not provide obstacles to the schools’ improvement.

Now Secretary of State Michael Gove is encouraging schools judged by Ofsted as “outstanding” to become academies. *The Observer* (6 June 2010) pointed out that these schools have 40 percent fewer poor pupils than the national average. Ofsted’s judgments about schools are substantially based on raw examination scores, and examination scores correlate consistently with social class. In short, the new government’s education policies are continuing the trend of previous governments towards a two-tier system that for the most part preserves the class structure of this acutely divided country. The poor will remain in the schools designated as failing and those schools will be kept in line through the ritual sacrifices of “special measures”. Ask this privately educated government why they want to do that? Well because they can, and to do anything else would cost them a lot more money.

Turning back?

The Pendulum Swings – transforming school reform *Bernard Barker, Trentham Books, £18.99*

Professor Barker believes, on somewhat tenuous evidence, that we are about to see a turning away from the ideas that have dominated education policy since the disastrous 1988 Education Reform Act, and that supporters of progressive education must themselves be ready with clear policies as the pendulum swings back in their direction. In fact, only the last of the book’s eight chapters makes any serious effort at pointing the way forward, and even there the ideas seem very short of actual policies that a government might introduce.

As the first ever head of a comprehensive school to have been educated in one, Bernard Barker might be expected to uphold the ideals that drove the various experiments of the 1960s and 1970s. Accordingly, he offers a friendly, although not entirely uncritical, view of the work of the early pioneers of progressive comprehensive education. Here a dilemma is identified: these pioneers frequently found themselves leading their teaching staff where the latter did not want to follow. In order to pursue their ideals of greater democracy in education, many “progressive” school leaders paradoxically adopted very undemocratic and authoritarian approaches to school management. It is disappointing that Professor Barker does not take the opportunity to look critically at the recruitment and education of schoolteachers in our society.

What the book does offer, on the other hand, is a detailed and devastating critique of the policies pursued by successive governments since 1988. Professor Barker identifies five illusory beliefs upon which both Conservative and Labour policies have been based. These are examined in detail in a chapter each:

- Effective and efficient schools overcome disadvantage and improve life chances.
- Markets and competition improve efficiency and outcomes.
- Central regulation and inspection ensure high standards of quality and performance.
- Successful leaders transform their schools and change the system.
- Best practice in teaching and organisation can be transferred so that every school performs at a high level.

Using a highly readable combination of statistical evidence, detailed case studies and personal anecdotes, Professor Barker demonstrates, quite unanswerably, the mistaken nature of these beliefs, many of which have assumed the status of holy writ in current educational discourse. These chapters are quite riveting and make the book essential reading for anyone interested in current educational problems. Highly recommended.

Comment

It feels as if every day the Coalition makes a new announcement of changes in the education system. Just about anything introduced by the previous government is being cut or removed, supposedly because of the financial situation but in fact in pursuit of the new government’s own ideologies.

There has been no consultation and no consideration of the evidence. If there were it would be recognised that charter schools in America and “free schools” in Sweden, on which many of the proposals are based, are not improving education there for all, or even at all.

There will be greater inequalities and more young people out of school, less support for those who need it most and less money for school buildings, training and resources.

The recent promise by Nick Gibb, Minister for Schools, to allow teachers to search pupils and to use force will not improve relationships or behaviour, but is

likely to make both worse and to destroy trust, while slimming the National Curriculum to the basics and learning by rote will alienate young people, not inspire them to learn.

Despite some justifiable criticisms, many of Labour’s developments helped schools to provide a much more varied and exciting curriculum, restricted only by the SATs. However, the new government wants to test children at six – in most countries, where children often do better than here, they have not started school at this age.

The government would do well to pause and reflect, and find out more about how our education system works. They should look at research and then consult teachers, governors, parents and particularly young people before making any further changes. As it is, they are on course to destroy a lot and to achieve nothing beneficial in its place.

Melian Mansfield

Not what they're cracked up to be – the American “charter schools”

The idea of “charter” schools originated in the USA in 1988. As then conceived, the ideal model of a charter school was as a legally and financially autonomous public (in UK terms, “state”) school that would operate much like a private business – free from many state laws and district regulations, and accountable more for student outcomes rather than for processes or inputs. Minnesota was the first state to pass a charter school law, in 1991, and, by 2009, 41 states and the District of Columbia had charter school laws.

There are two principles that guide charter schools. The first is that they will operate as autonomous public schools, being freed from many of the procedural requirements of district public schools. Autonomy is believed to be critically important for creating a school culture that maximizes student motivation by emphasizing high expectations, academic rigour, discipline, and relationships with caring adults. In support of this view, 68 percent of American teachers are reported as saying that schools would be better for students if principals and teachers had more control and flexibility about work rules and school duties.

Accountability

The second principle is that charter schools are accountable for student achievement. They are answerable to their sponsor – a local school board, state education agency, university, or other entity – to produce positive academic results and adhere to the charter contract. While this accountability is one of the key arguments in favour of charter schools, evidence gathered by the United States Department of Education suggests that the schools are not, in practice, held to higher standards of accountability than traditional public schools. Although over 600 charter schools – around 12.5 percent of the total – have closed, these closures have not, in the main, been brought about by academic failure. In many states, charter schools which fail academically are simply re-opened with a new managerial team and told to try again.

The charter school model appealed to New Labour ministers faced with the difficulties posed by inner-city “sink” schools, and became the basis for the City Academy programme. Later, however, Labour came to see developing the programme as a desirable end in itself, even offering academy status to financially troubled schools in the private sector. This approach has been continued by the new Secretary of State, Michael Gove, who is offering academy status to state schools with an inspection judgement of “outstanding”. Whatever the merits of the model, it is fair to say that Labour ministers were initially motivated by the desire to improve conditions in inner-city schools but that ministers have now become obsessed with the virtues of autonomy and private provision of public services.

Patchy results

While there have undoubtedly been individual successes among charter schools, their overall record to date is one that should give our own government pause for thought. The most

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authoritative study of charter schools was conducted by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University in 2009. It studied 70 percent of the nation's pupils attending charter schools and compared their academic progress with that of demographically matched pupils in nearby public schools. The report found that 17 percent of charter schools reported academic gains that were significantly better than those of traditional public schools; 46 percent showed no difference from public schools; and 37 percent were significantly worse than their traditional public school counterparts. The authors of the report consider this a “sobering” finding.

If a combination of school autonomy, input from the private sector and clearly defined outcome targets does not, in itself, lead to higher educational standards, we are bound to ask why both Labour and Conservative parties have become so fixated by this model. That there may be long term economic motives behind their thinking is not, of course, admitted!

CASE believes in a fully comprehensive, locally accountable and democratic education system. It campaigns for the right of all children to the best in state education, regardless of their race, gender, home circumstance, ability or disability

News in brief

New Bill

The Education and Children's Bill is to be introduced in the autumn. The Queen's Speech stated that it will “give teachers greater freedom over the curriculum and allow new providers to run state schools”. It is designed to open the door for “free schools”. According to the Queen's Speech, it will also improve school accountability to ensure “headteachers are properly accountable for core educational goals of attainment and closing the gap between rich and poor”, reform Ofsted, introduce a mandatory reading test for six-year-olds, bring in a “pupil premium” to give more money to schools that admit the poorest pupils, and give teachers the powers to improve behaviour and tackle bullying.

The New Schools Network

The New Schools Network has just been given £500,000 by the government to help groups of parents and teachers set up “free schools”. They claim that 450 such groups have approached them (there is a map on their website showing where they are). It gives advice to potential school providers, but the advice does not mean endorsement as any potential provider will be subject to suitability checks by the Department for Education. For more information see www.newschoolsnetwork.org.

Worries over Special Educational Needs

There are huge concerns about the support that will be given to children with special educational needs in the new academies. Nick Gibb, Minister for Schools, said in response to a parliamentary question, “Funding of academies for special educational needs (SEN), except for those pupils with individually assigned resources, is paid by the Young People's Learning Agency, not by the local authority.” If a maintained school fails to make appropriate provision for a child with a statement a local authority has the power to compel it, but it cannot do this with academies.

Not much future for school building

The much publicised axing of the Building Schools for the Future programme, made in order to save more than £750 million initially and £5 billion overall, will fall hardest in affluent Conservative areas, such as Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Chelsea, where projects were scheduled to take place in the later stages of the programme. The scheme was designed to help poorer areas first.

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