
Academies in Action: case studies from Camden and Pimlico, 2007

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ABSTRACT Both main UK political parties lend enthusiastic public support to academies, in the name of supporting the nation's poorest pupils. But Gordon Brown's Labour is, in reality, unsure about this undemocratic model while the Tories may well in the future exploit academy 'independence' for retrograde ends. Two contemporary case studies from London, in Camden and Pimlico, show the inherent dangers of this controversial national programme; they represent a blow to a truly modernised comprehensive model and give too much power to private interests. The private sector is keen to get involved for its own, often defensive, reasons. Meanwhile, Brown's Government has little time left to make truly substantive changes to our education system that will really benefit those that need it most.

There is something almost surreal about current education policy. We are used to the sight of a Labour government pushing the merits of marketisation, parental choice and the benefits of the private over the public at every turn; now we have a Tory front bench boldly repositioning itself as the party in defence of disadvantage, an astonishing claim to those of us with political memories long enough to recall the Thatcher years.

But beyond the big set speeches, the irritable parliamentary skirmishes and digestible sound bites, neither party is being completely open with the electorate about their real agenda, particularly in relation to academies.

Certainly, both are keen to lay claim to this ambitious programme. For the Government, these brand new schools, many of them in urban heartlands, continue to be a powerful symbol of core New Labour values: aspiration and innovation welded to social justice. The reality, of course, is a little more complicated. There are clear indications that the Government has private doubts; there are fears that the academy project is an expensive policy

experiment, with worrying implications for the future of our democracy, but one from which there is no rowing back without unacceptable loss of face.

For the Conservatives, the academies are nothing short of a political godsend. Backing these shiny new institutions appears to confirm the party's apparent reinvention of itself as modern, fair and caring. But Cameron's Conservatives understand only too clearly the way in which these quasi independent schools can be used to re-assert an old form of segregation, between the so called academic and the vocational, in new infinitely subtle forms; once entrenched, it is a shift that will take generations to unpick.

This lack of transparency means that the real debate over academies is being conducted outside the parliamentary arena. The most substantive discussion about the funding and accountability of academies, standards of learning within them and the implications for social cohesion, are being thrashed out elsewhere: in the pages of journals such as these, in informal public inquiries that have been, and continue to be, held up and down the country, at conferences of educational experts and enthusiasts, among teachers and parents and, to a certain extent, within the news and feature pages of the national papers.

The Failure of Choice and Diversity

As in so many areas of policy, Blairism paved the way for this current impasse through the pursuit of 'choice and diversity' within the education system, in general, and more specifically, with Blair's domestic policy swansong, the 2006 Education and Inspections Act. This further eroded the power of local authorities and strengthened the mechanisms through which many more quasi independent state schools, funded by the tax payer, but largely independent of democratic control, could be established.

The Act split the Labour Movement down the middle with ex Secretaries of State and even a hitherto loyal ex Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, criticising the Government's 'direction of travel'. Some last minute concessions, relating to fair admissions and the retention of community schools, were agreed: even so, the Bill became law only with Tory support. But despite a change of government leadership and strong indications that Brownism does not want to break the links between education and local authorities, the DCFS remains committed to creating diversity of provision at local level; academies are the key building block of this strategy.

Meanwhile, evidence of inequality continues to grow. Segregation by class, race and faith is intensifying in our education system. In the words of Steve Sinnott, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers: '... social class has become the pre-eminent issue for government to tackle' (*Guardian*, November 28, 2007).

Two important studies published this autumn were agreed on this single theme. According to the results of a Lancaster university study, looking at the effect of the specialist schools programme and the Excellence in Cities initiative,

published in November 2007, educational resources under the specialist schools programme, led by Blair favourite Sir Cyril Taylor, have been allocated 'inefficiently and inequitably' with more money going to schools with higher proportions of better-off children. At the same time interim results from an ongoing Cambridge study, assessing literacy and numeracy progress in primary schools, also found that the gap between the highest and lowest achievers in Britain is wider than in many other countries.

Choice and diversity, it seems, have benefitted those who need it least.

These findings did not stop the centre right think tank, the Centre for Policy Exchange, from arguing, in late November 2007, in the week following publication of the Cambridge and Lancaster studies, that only *more* choice and diversity, *more* independence for state schools, could help the most disadvantaged. In the same week, Michael Gove, Shadow Education Secretary, who has repeatedly referred to the ways that the current education system fails the disadvantaged, declared that academies would take centre stage in their new policy to create 32,000 new 'good school places.'

It is not hard to see why the opposition has attached itself with such relish to academies; these semi independent schools could easily pave the way for a subtly or not so subtly segregated secondary sector. Evidence from researchers like retired head teacher Roger Titcombe (published in this edition of *FORUM* and elsewhere) shows clearly that the curriculum in many academies is at risk of becoming dangerously degraded. There are also well grounded fears that academies in some large conurbations will become too closely linked to local employer need. And in some leafier areas, with a potentially more upmarket sponsor, the new admissions freedoms granted to academies means they could easily be moulded into de facto grammars.

The story of two academies-still-in-the making, both in London, illustrates the divergent paths that academies could take in the future. It also illustrates the strength of on-the-ground protest against many of these new schools.

Chaos in Camden

In Camden, at the time of writing, there is ongoing conflict between parents, proud of a strong local authority with a good record in terms of its community schools, and University College London (UCL), who have put forward proposals for a super academy, which, if it goes ahead, opponents fear will unbalance the achievements of this four star local authority.

According to Malcolm Grant of UCL, the new academy will concentrate on developing 'high standards for pupils and a commitment to developing individual potential; the establishment of an internationally renowned centre of excellence for the teaching of science and mathematics; languages at the heart of the curriculum; and a mission to provide education for global citizenship.' (*Guardian*, November 20, 2007).

Many local people, however, are unhappy at the way that consultation has been managed. According to local campaigner, writer and journalist Fiona Millar

The situation in Camden has ... flagged up quite how undemocratic and loaded in favour of the sponsor, the process of opening an academy is. Following the 2006 Act , every other type of new school now has to enter a competition, which involves a transparent process in which the bids can be judged. Academies can slip down a preferred sponsor route which allows the local authority to give the school the go ahead without a competition or any detailed scrutiny of the sponsor's plans. This is totally at odds with Gordon Brown's stated aim of more local democracy and accountability.'
(private email correspondence, November 2007)

Opponents of the UCL academy, which includes local representatives of the Church of England and hundreds of borough parents, argue that by concentrating a high status institution, with potential for overt and covert selection, in the wealthiest part of the borough, Camden will have an elitist school in its midst that will undoubtedly depress standards in surrounding schools. UCL has pledged to operate within the borough's family of schools and operate a non selective admissions process. But Millar argues that

A lot hinges on how the academies use their freedom to manage their own admissions. Some are adopting the same models as local community schools but others, like the proposed UCL school, clearly don't want to be pinned down regarding their intentions until they effectively have the school in their control.

Some existing academies, for instance, use banding to engineer themselves a more favourable intake while turning away local children from disadvantaged homes; this inevitably affects other local schools.

Panic in Pimlico

The story of Pimlico school is even more telling. Once a proud and self confident comprehensive with its famous specialist music provision and distinctively modern 'brutalist' building, the 'old' Pimlico is due to be closed and re-opened as an academy in September 2008. Pimlico Academy will be sponsored by a charity called Future, led by venture capitalist and charitable entrepreneur John Nash, a contributor to the funds of Tory leadership hopeful David Davis. Both Future, and Nash, are connected to a group called Alpha Plus, which run a string of private prep schools, including an exclusive secondary, Portland Place, in London's West End.

This autumn, Westminster Council chose Future, above two other potential sponsors, including top private school, Westminster School, to take

over Pimlico in 2008. The new sponsors will benefit from a total rebuild, currently estimated at 35 million pounds.

In common with many hard pressed inner city schools, Pimlico has suffered many problems in recent years, including weak results at Key Stage Three and occasionally severe discipline issues. But it remains renowned for its excellent music provision and uniquely open relations between teachers and pupils. Despite this, Ofsted placed the school in 'special measures' in December 2006.

According to teacher, and Westminster NUT officer, Bridget Chapman, 'The school has been a victim of deliberate neglect by Westminster Council for years. The building was falling apart. It was boiling in summer and freezing in winter. The previous head was expressly forbidden from permanently excluding a handful of students who were very difficult.' O'Neill Hemmings, parent and head of a Lambeth primary, claims that Ofsted's decision 'was a harsh judgement on the school's failings.'

At a recent public enquiry held by the Keep Pimlico Comprehensive campaign, doubts were aired over the Ofsted judgement. According to Professor Terry Wrigley of Edinburgh University

There are enormous question marks hanging over the Pimlico inspection ... The inspection failed to take into account a number of issues relating to why the school was failing. The report is totally bizarre.' (*Camden New Journal*, November 16, 2007)

However, Ofsted's judgement freed Westminster council to pursue alternative status for the school. An Interim Executive Board, chaired by a high ranking Westminster official, appointed Jo Shuter, the head teacher from another community school in the borough, Qinton Kynaston, as a new 'Super Head'. Opponents of academy status argue that Shuter and her team, unlike the previous Pimlico regime, were afforded considerable resources and Council support with predictably positive results: the school's GCSE and A level results in 2007 were the best ever. The Council still decided to press ahead with plans for an academy, even though well over 90% of staff and parents consulted wanted Pimlico to remain a community school.

As in Camden, there has been deep disquiet over the process of consultation. Councillor Paul Dimoldenberg, leader of the Labour group on Westminster Council, questioned proposed sponsor John Nash's links to both David Davis and individual members of Westminster Council claiming that

It is absolutely outrageous that the Conservatives are handing over control of Pimlico School to prominent Conservative supporters and that John Nash's Conservative connections are not mentioned in the council cabinet report. What else has the council got to hide about the deal which has been done with the Future charity?' (*Guardian*, October 23, 2007)

There is also disquiet at the proposals of the preferred sponsor (Future's bid has yet to be officially ratified). John Nash speaks, as do so many involved in secondary schools today, of his

passion for the underprivileged young..... There are no limits, no cop outs, we will not tolerate the idea that certain children can't achieve certain things. We will bring in role models from a similar backgrounds..... There will be also be strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy and a concentration on behaviour management. No-one can learn if the school is not relatively calm.

Nash seems unaware of a continuing and strong middle class presence at Pimlico. He also has plans to introduce 'an army and police cadet programme.' When asked about the lack of accountability of Pimlico Academy, he merely replies

I hope to make the school the successful centre of local community. We are going to build a library that will be available for the whole community.' (*Guardian*, October 23, 2007)

According to Mair Garside, Chair of Governors from 2005 to 2007

He [Nash] talks in depressing and patronising ways about wanting to help 'deprived' children. It just doesn't sound like a comprehensive school.

Garside, whose involvement with Pimlico as parent and governor goes back decades, openly acknowledges that the school needed 'pulling together' but as she says

I feel regret not just that we are losing a good community school, but that we are losing it to a venture capitalist.'

Private Knows Best

Both UCL's plans and the choice of sponsor for Pimlico illustrate the Government's new attempt to widen the net of potential sponsors for academies. Current plans for privatisation now go well beyond the original aim of drawing in wealthy individuals or corporate bodies, including religious groups, to take over control of so called 'failing' inner city schools.

Following concerns about 'mad evangelists and dodgy second hand car salesmen', and then the cash for honours scandal, in which it was alleged (but never proven) that peerages were being offered in return for academy sponsorship, the Government is clearly keen to attract a different kind of backer. The emphasis is now on the involvement of universities, colleges and other national institutions (such as the Royal Society of the Arts) private schools and even local authorities themselves.

In July 2007, schools minister Ed Balls, announcing the exemption of these institutions from the two million pound payment requirement, argued that the test of whether an organisation can be a potential sponsor should not be its bank balance, but whether it can demonstrate leadership, innovation and a commitment to act in the public interest.

In October, junior schools minister Lord Adonis told a conference of head teachers in the independent sector that the Government was interested in the 'educational DNA' of private schools. So far around 25 private schools including Marlborough, Lancing, Dulwich College and Wellington College sponsor or partner an academy. A few minor independent schools have become academies.

Private school involvement in academies kills several birds with one stone, of course. It helps the private sector beat off the current challenge to charitable status, and preserve tax breaks worth millions every year to private schools; it shifts the emphasis of the academy programme from one of supposedly crude commerce to apparent intellectual quality.

At the same time, it provides yet another opportunity for the private sector to lecture the state system on what they're doing wrong, to lend state schools their 'DNA.' Some might argue there is no particular genetic code to crack here: private schools largely succeed because they offer privileged resources to mostly immensely privileged pupils. Urging such institutions to offer educational ideas to an often hard pressed public sector or indeed to suggest that they come in and run them not only encourages continuing ignorance of the very real problems faced by many state secondaries and the pupils in them; it is also one more powerful sign of the tragic loss of nerve at the top of New Labour about the deepest aims and distinct values of state education.

What Now?

The Government has ordered a review of the academy programme, although it is not yet clear how wide ranging an inquiry this will prove to be. Publicly, the need to be seen to defend Blair's legacy lingers on. Privately, it is clear that Brown and his allies are uneasy about academies, their limited achievements in relation to their huge cost, and the mounting questions about accountability, admissions and local democracy.

The Conservative like to claim that Brown's dislike of academies is a form of control freakery, that the Prime Minister cannot bear to lose – or loosen – state control over such a vital part of the public sector. But Brown's caution is grounded surely in his understanding that local authority involvement is one of the best guarantees of genuine fairness for those who need it most.

In a belated recognition of the need to improve the results of the poorest pupils, the Government is currently preparing to publish a ten year plan for children which will focus on raising the achievement gap for pupils from different backgrounds (*Guardian*, November 28, 2007). This is welcome. But

Brown will also need to hold his nerve on his earlier promise to increase state spending to private sector levels, and to press on with his Government's modest challenge to charitable status. And given the Prime Minister's propensity to borrow opposition policies, particularly when he perceives himself to be in a tight corner, perhaps he might look to Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg's recent proposals for school change, which include a targetted pupil premium and shaving class sizes.

The pity and potential tragedy for Labour is that time is fast running out. The current administration may have only a couple of years left to take even a few, bold steps in order to make the necessary changes to the schools – and children – who need it most. Sadder still, the academy programme may, eventually, prove to have been more of a distraction from, than a contribution to, this most important of tasks.

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