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## Reasons to Be Cheerful: the story of one community school and the New Labour government

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**ABSTRACT** This article was originally presented at a seminar run by the Secondary Umbrella Group on the theme of 'A Review of Labour's Achievement: Where next for secondary education?' It looks at the struggle of one secondary school and its local community to improve educational opportunities and life chances for its students. The author, a long-term governor at the school, uses the school's story as a lens through which to look at some of the major educational initiatives of New Labour's time in office. Without those initiatives, the school's story – and the lives of its students – would be very different. The school's fortunes have been fundamentally and positively affected by government policies, as they have also been shaped by the political policies of their Local Authority. Readers are left to determine for themselves which policies have offered most to the young people at the school.

Politics matters. It's not a game or a badge to wear. Which side wins affects people's lives – above all those with the least voice, money or options, shifting their fortunes for better or worse far more than governments touch the rest of us.  
(Polly Toynbee, *The Guardian*, 13 June, 2009)

### **Context of the School: the local authority**

The school is located in Buckinghamshire, an affluent Local Authority in the South East of England, where household incomes are 34% higher than the UK average. The County ranks 144th out of 150 in terms of government indices of deprivation (where 1 = most deprived) though there are 'pockets of disadvantage.' (Buckinghamshire Local Area Agreement, 2008)

Buckinghamshire is a local authority that 45 years ago delayed its response to Circular 10/65 and has continued, ever since, to maintain a fully selective system of secondary education. The Authority has always been Conservative controlled, with small numbers of Opposition councillors. At the time of writing, there are 45 Tory councillors in office, alongside 11 Liberal Democrats. Whatever the opinions expressed by Tory leaders in Westminster, the commitment of Buckinghamshire's politicians to selection remains the cornerstone of any local discussion on education. The Leader of the Council, David Shakespeare, responded instantly and angrily when his own national party, in the person of David Willetts, said that grammar schools 'entrenched advantage' and that Tory government would therefore not be creating new ones:

Council leader David Shakespeare has written to David Willetts, Shadow Education Secretary, to make it quite plain that the Council will not only keep its grammar schools, but wants to be able to provide more when housing growth demands it. (Buckinghamshire County Council, 2007)

Within weeks of this intervention from the shires, David Willetts disappeared to the back benches.

### **The School**

The school serves one of the 'pockets of disadvantage' described in the County's Local Area Agreement. In 2005, school governors completed a mapping exercise that matched student postcodes to the areas of deprivation identified in the 2004 Index of Multiple Deprivation, published by the office of the Deputy Prime Minister. This study enabled identification at sub-ward level of the nature and extent of the socio-economic deprivation experienced by the local community. The study showed that students and their families experienced deprivation levels equal to those experienced in urban, Northern cities:

48% of students live in 4 areas that are identified as within the most deprived 10% in England, in terms of income deprivation.

15.6% of students live in an area identified as one of the 5% most deprived in England in terms of education, skills and training.

39.8% of students live in areas identified as among the country's worst 20% in terms of adult skills.

Such evidence shows that the local area is one of entrenched poverty, with low skills levels and inadequate education. Interfacing with this systemic deprivation is the further factor of ethnicity.

One of the consequences of Buckinghamshire's selective system is that it effectively segregates students on the basis of social class and ethnicity.

Although the population of the town served by the school has a minority ethnic population of approximately 20%, approximately 75% of the school's population is of Black and Minority Ethnic heritage. The majority of these students are of Pakistani heritage, from the Mirpur district of Kashmir, in Northern Pakistan, an isolated rural area among the foothills of the Himalayas. Bob Doe, writing about Mirpuri pupils in *The Times Educational Supplement*, commented that:

In contrast to some of the more outward-looking immigrant communities from the subcontinent which have prospered in the UK, the inward-looking and culturally conservative Mirpuris tend to remain concentrated in the poorest housing and the lowest-paid jobs. (Doe, 2006)

In addition, Doe observed that exposure to Western culture, had, if anything, made the Mirpuri immigrants 'even more Islamic and devout and to identify even more strongly with their community.'

### **Challenges Faced by the School**

The challenges faced by this school are, to some extent, shared by all the 'non selective' secondary schools in the Authority. However, the levels of deprivation experienced by the students at the school and the ethnic composition of the student body, has made those challenges acute.

#### *Underfunding*

One fundamental issue, which became the subject of public debate from 2002 onwards, was the LA's underfunding of its secondary modern schools. Councillors regularly protested that all students were 'funded equally', failing or refusing to grasp the point succinctly made by Jonathan Kozol that

Equity does not mean simply equal funding. Equal funding for unequal needs is not equality (Kozol, 1991, p. 54)

By 2002, the situation had become dramatic, with 13 of Buckinghamshire's 21 secondary modern schools experiencing significant deficit budgets, while the grammar school sector as a whole had surpluses over three quarters of a million pounds. Deficit budgets had a major impact on pupil achievement, leading to increased class sizes, problems with teacher recruitment and constraints on curriculum development. The Missing Bucks campaign for fair funding by the Upper Schools (as the secondary moderns are known in Buckinghamshire) has been described by Ros Levacic and her colleagues (Levacic, Simmons and Smales, 2004)

The impact of deficit budgets had been particularly dramatic in the five schools in the LA that had significant numbers of students of Black and Minority Ethnic heritage: the situation was described at the time by the present

author (Simmons, 2002) In the school that is the focus of this paper, the deficit budget had risen to £700,000.

### *Underachievement*

Not surprisingly, students of Black and Minority Ethnic heritage do not share in the high level of performance seen elsewhere in the Local Authority, so that underachievement of particular groups of students is a significant issue. While, Buckinghamshire white students outperform not only pupils nationally but also pupils from Buckinghamshire's statistical neighbours, with over two thirds finishing Key Stage 4 with results well above national norms, only about one third of minority ethnic students leave school with that 'gold standard' of attainment. Consequently, the gap between minority ethnic pupils and white pupils is greater than the gap observed nationally. The consequence, in terms of application to university/further education/training means that Buckinghamshire students of minority ethnic heritage are half as likely to move on to higher education/training than their white peers.

The time taken for the gap to reduce will be lengthy. If projections are based on results achieved, our data shows that it will be over 10 years before the achievement of Pakistani pupils approaches that of white pupils: Black Caribbean pupils do not achieve parity in the foreseeable future. (Simmons & Williams, 2004)

In 2009, OFSTED commented that the pace, in Buckinghamshire, of narrowing the gap between pupil groups 'generally remains too slow' (Buckinghamshire County Council, 2009).

### *Catchment Areas*

The problem of under-funding affected most non-selective schools in the Authority: the challenge of underachievement affected only those few schools serving areas of deprivation. But in a couple of other areas, the school faced challenges that were unique to its situation. One such challenge was that of 'student flight'. While the school serves areas of significant deprivation, also in its catchment area were areas of more affluent housing, home to middle class white and Asian families. These families began in growing numbers to express preferences for schools further away, many openly saying that they preferred a more ethnically mixed school for their children.

They paid their own costs of transport until the Local Authority, following a local decision to change catchment areas, decided to underwrite the cost of transport to these more distant schools. The Governors of the school saw this decision to pay transport costs as 'bussing on the rates', potentially at odds with the Council's duties under the 2002 Race Relations Amendment Act. Their protests brought about no change.

*The Building*

The other highly challenging issue faced by the school was that of its building. Long-term under-funding had left the school short of money for maintenance, but problems were more profound than any maintenance budget could address. 18 scattered buildings, decaying woodwork, multiple defective forms of heating – all contributed to a school building that for years had not been fit for purpose. The everyday experience of students and their teachers included inadequate sanitation, decaying buildings and freezing classrooms. The Local Authority's asset management team identified 114 instances where aspects of the school building actively worked against effective teaching and learning. For a number of years the school's governors campaigned vigorously for a new building: they were regularly told that no money was available from the Local Authority. Meanwhile, the governors watched the construction, elsewhere in grammar schools, of sophisticated IT areas, fitness suites and, in one local school, a theatre.

The New Labour government's Academy scheme seemed to offer a way forward, as far as a new building was concerned. But that proposal was vetoed by the Local Authority on the grounds that it would create funding inequalities for other schools.

In 2006, following long-term lobbying by governors, the Local Authority agreed to a phased rebuild of the school, due to take 10 years to complete. However, with bulldozers already on site, ready to start enabling work for Phase 1, the project was suddenly cancelled. Local politicians blamed the cancellation on changes in central government funding for council loans. David Shakespeare made it clear that this was a party political row: 'We rely on the Government keeping its word and servicing loans,' he said. He added that 'if the council went ahead with the planned programme it would add 1.5 per cent to council tax this year and every year after that' (Smith, 2006)

Mr Shakespeare could offer no hope for the future:

We have to solve (the problem) ...But at this time we can't tell you what solution it will be. (Smith, 2006)

**New Labour and the School**

The problem was that, in the Buckinghamshire context, the school and its pupils were invisible (Simmons, 2005). It was rare for senior officers or politicians to visit the school. When they did come, by invitation, they were invariably surprised to find a happy working atmosphere and polite, helpful students – and their cars intact when they came to leave. Governors felt that power lay in the hands of people who had no interest in change, in fact, in some cases, were committed to things staying the same. It seemed to the school's governors that the Authority's only interest appeared to be in the high status grammar schools, with their boarding facilities and, in one case, a wine club.

It was direct intervention from Whitehall that started change, with the unexpected announcement that the school was to be included in the *Excellence in Cities* initiative. *Excellence in Cities*, introduced by New Labour in 1999, aimed to drive up standards in urban areas so that they could catch up faster with schools in more affluent areas. The school actively sought inclusion in *EiC*, though it was the Whitehall computers that had first identified the need for additional funding. When the Head Teacher and Chair of Governors went up to Sanctuary Buildings to discuss the school's inclusion in the scheme, the clarity of the civil servant took them aback: 'We're giving you the money,' he said. 'Because you need it.'

The school had for the first time become visible.

*EiC* money brought an initial investment of 3 million pounds to the local area. It funded an Excellence Cluster that included two secondary schools and a number of primary schools. The initiative had a number of strands, creating Learning Mentors and directly investing money in a Behaviour Improvement Programme and a Gifted and Talented programme.

National evaluations demonstrated the effectiveness, in particular, of Learning Mentors, showing a clear link between learning mentor support and achievement. Evaluations from the NFER showed a clear impact on levels of confidence, engagement, self esteem and attendance (NFER, 2004)

Inclusion in *EiC* led to further investment of direct government funding, in particular through the Behaviour Improvement Programme and the Leadership Incentive Grant. The *LIG*, for example, brought £125,000 additional revenue into school, to strengthen leadership at all levels and to build the school's capacity for sustained improvement.

Research and evaluation of the Behaviour Improvement programme by Susan Hallam and her colleagues at the University of London showed again an increase in achievement, improved family liaison and support for excluded pupils at a national level. (Hallam et al., 2005) OFSTED noted the improvement in standards linked to *EiC*:

.. an Ofsted report in December 2005 said that the £386 million scheme was highly successful and had contributed to a steady improvement in GCSE results. Schools increased the proportion of pupils who gained five A\* to C grades by 5.2 percentage points over the past three years, narrowing the gap with other schools from 10.4 to 7.8 points.

Inspectors said the *EiC* initiative had improved social inclusion and standards in England's poorest areas since its launch in 1999. In eight out of 10 *EiC* schools visited, the leadership and management were highly effective and had made the most of their extra money, an average of £120 per pupil a year.

(*The Times Educational Supplement*, 2 December, 2005)

At a local level, governors observed that EiC offered opportunities that many students had never had before, including personal mentoring, visits to Universities and a range of enrichment activities. For some individuals and groups of students, these opportunities were life changing. The Learning Mentors became part of the infrastructure of the school, liaising with the community and working with challenging students. In 2007, three years after EiC began the GCSE results were the best the school had had.

The school may not have been on a local map – but it was on a national map, a map that highlighted the most disadvantaged young people and focused resources on them. The cloak of invisibility had gone for good.

### **Building for the Future**

While EiC was having its impact in classrooms, those classrooms continued to be physically unfit for purpose and the campaign for a new school continued.

In September 2006, to the amazement of the school community, it was announced that there was to be a new school. The money had come directly from central government, under the *Building Schools for the Future* initiative. BSF is the biggest capital investment in schools in the last 50 years through which every secondary school in England will, by 2020, be rebuilt or renewed to reflect changing teaching and learning methods. Teachernet describes it thus:

BSF – worth £2.2 billion in its first year (2005-6) – aims to ensure that secondary pupils learn in 21st-century facilities. Investment will be rolled out to every part of England over 15 waves, subject to future public spending decisions.

By 2011, every LA in England will have received funding to renew at least the school in greatest need – many will have major rebuilding and remodelling projects (at least three schools) underway through BSF and the remainder will have received resources through the Academies programme or Targeted Capital Fund.

By 2016, major rebuilding and remodelling projects (at least three schools) will have started in every LA.  
(Teachernet, accessed February 26, 2010)

Buckinghamshire, which was not due to benefit for the project for some years to come, had been given one new school as a pathfinder project. The school, as the 'school in greatest need' had been selected as that project. The total cost of the project was estimated at £31 million with the new school scheduled to open in September 2010.

The school had been selected because of the potential for transformation that it would have in the local community, which currently offers few recreational opportunities or venues for adult learning. During the community consultation process, a major feature of the BSF initiative, local people

repeatedly commented on the need for a place to hold community meetings and to have learning activities outside the conventional school day.

At the time of writing, the new building is rising rapidly and on schedule. It is the only new school to be built in the Authority for many decades and will send a signal to the community of the value and importance of its young people to the life of the town. Research elsewhere has shown that, while buildings in themselves do not transform educational achievement, the school is likely to see a rise in achievement as a result of its new facilities (Earthman, accessed February 26, 2010) The governors see the new building as 'invitational', attracting rather than compelling the community to share in what it has to offer. Already, with the opening of the new school a year away, student recruitment for the coming school year has risen.

In addition, morale and sense of faith in the future has risen significantly, as staff and students watch the new building rise alongside the dismal buildings they currently inhabit. Direct government funding, targeting identified need, has made the school visible, literally, as the construction crane dominates the horizon and the three storey building rises on the school field.

### **The National Challenge**

No one could dispute the positive value of the visibility that BSF has offered the school. The visibility offered by announcement in May 2008 of the National Challenge has been more controversial. The National Challenge was announced as an initiative that would focus on schools with the lowest GCSE results, so that by 2011 in every secondary school at least 30% of students would achieve at least 5 GCSE's at A\* – C including English and Mathematics. £400 million was to be invested in this initiative, with support being tailored to the needs of individual schools. For some schools where reaching this target would be difficult, radical solutions were to be offered. For some schools, this solution would be structural, so that they might become an Academy, a Trust or part of a federation.

Nationally, reaction to the Challenge was mixed, with some schools resenting what they saw as the stigma of failure that they perceived to be intrinsic to the initiative. Schools in selective areas such as Buckinghamshire had especially mixed feelings, since their intake was skewed from the outset and some of them were doing well, in terms of measures of contextual 'value added', with the intake they had. The language of failure used in National Challenge documents was by some felt to be stigmatizing and demotivating, particularly in schools facing challenging circumstances.

The school that is the subject of this article found itself within the National Challenge and, in due course, a candidate for a structural solution. Overall, the school has welcomed the opportunities for change that inclusion in the National Challenge has brought. To date, inclusion in the National Challenge has brought significant increase in resources, enabling the employment of an additional assistant Head Teacher and further staffing



increases. The structural solution is still to be finalized, but is likely to include the bringing in of outside partners within a Trust arrangement. A number of these partners already work closely with the school, but the Trust offers a permanent systemic approach that will outlast any arrangements that individuals might agree. It offers a re-conceptualising and a strengthening of the school at the point where students are moving into the new building.

A few years ago, writing of the White Paper that eventually gave rise to the idea of structural solutions, the writer of this paper commented,

At last, the community – parents, community leaders, school governors – will have the chance to challenge their LA's veto on future educational opportunity. Other partners, with greater motivation for change... will have a chance to get involved in the running of their school.... (Simmons, 2005)

That is where we are at the time of writing. The future is likely to involve new partners, significantly increased resources and a focus on achievement that we welcome. We see the changes as positive discrimination and a challenge to entrenched disadvantage.

### **Conclusion**

In Polly Toynbee's article that began this article, she went on to comment that politics is 'not like supporting a football team through thick and thin'. She went on:

It is not about personal liking or steadfastness. It is usually about holding your nose and choosing hard-headedly between least worst options. (Toynbee, 2009)

If we were really honest, we'd say that not all the choices made by the New Labour government have been the ones we'd like to see. Why, we ask, did they not choose in 1997, to finish the job started by Circular 10/65 and end selection once and for all? If we did the thought experiment and imagined our school in a non-selective system, then a number of the major challenges facing us would be resolved. We'd have an ethnically balanced and more socially mixed intake and we'd have larger cohorts of students, achieving at a higher level, with no need for intervention via the National Challenge.

But, it didn't happen. It is interesting now to look back at David Blunkett's prediction, made in 2000, that by 2011, grammar schools would have disappeared:

[Mr Blunkett] said that the success of government schemes to boost educational standards would see the end of selection in schools... It was schemes such as Sure Start and the literacy and numeracy strategies which would lead to the demise of selection... I would like to place a little bet that selection is seen as a total anachronism, because children have reached a point together where they can

transfer to secondary schools in a way that makes separating them out look completely daft.... (BBC website, accessed August 26 2009)

Sorry, David, you lost your bet there. Good job it was a little one....

But – given that the choices were not always what we'd have liked, the commitment of New Labour to students from less favoured backgrounds has been clear and unwavering. The National Challenge, like EiC before it, is once again an exercise in positive discrimination, focused on ensuring that the most needy students stay at the forefront of Local Authority thinking. They can no longer be invisible.

This article has not included all the initiatives that the school benefited from. It has not discussed, for example, the 'recruitment and retention' money that we used to secure reasonable staffing levels. Nor has it not detailed the support we received during our deficit budget crisis, which was resolved with the support of Ministers in the interests of students.

But what it has shown is that over the period that New Labour has been in power, the neediest young people, such as those at our school, have been the focus of government policy. Yes, there are things we would have wanted to have done differently. But who else would have put these students in the forefront of policy? Look at the alternatives. Acknowledge that New Labour has made a difference to young people who had, before, been invisible. They are, at last, in the picture.

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