
Towards Whole System Improvement

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ABSTRACT The relationship between academies, and school autonomy more generally, and the wider system is a crucial issue in the battle to improve school-level education. International experience indicates that emphasising choice and competition to drive improvement is not effective and that changing structures does not yield better results for students. A whole system approach is required based on a strong and democratic multi-level infrastructure of support and a common administrative and legal framework underpinned by the principles of public not contract law.

The Academies Commission, launched in May 2012 by the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) and the publishing empire Pearson and due to report in late 2012, coined a striking expression: 'academised system'. The term was used several times in the questions about which it invited submissions of evidence, for example 'What are the levers and barriers to school improvement within a totally academised system?'.^[1] Seeing the apparently oxymoronic term prompted me to submit a statement of evidence to the Commission, on which this article is based. Language is significant in shaping public perceptions. I have written a number of pieces recently on the relationship between academies, and school autonomy more generally, and a focus on the wider system.^[2] I believe this is a crucial issue in the battle to improve school-level education.

The resistance in England to the integration of school provision has deep historical roots. In the 19th century state education developed in England much later than on the continent. 'The dominant tradition that remained was a voluntary system characterised by great diversity of schools and a lack of integration between them'.^[3] The current situation in many areas can fairly be described as a complex patchwork of schools and school types with strong local hierarchies that has been very difficult for families, particularly those with limited educational background, to navigate ^[4] and much greater public debate about the problems of parental choice and school admissions than is common in developed countries.^[5] These features are likely to be reinforced by the process of 'academisation' unless strong countervailing measures are taken.

The Paradox of Autonomy

A paradox of the current position in England is that despite the persistent and growing emphasis on autonomy most practitioners consider themselves significantly constrained by government requirements to an extent that is

undoubtedly far greater than their forbears thirty or forty years ago would have done. Yet performance by international benchmarks has been variable particularly in relation to equity. According to the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 'in the United Kingdom, both the within and between school impact of socio-economic background are well above the OECD average. Indeed, the United Kingdom stands in second place [out of 33 countries] after Luxembourg in terms of the between-school performance variance explained by the socio-economic intake of schools'.^[6] The last finding is especially disturbing since it suggests that performance turnarounds, so often cited by policy-makers, while still possible are exceptionally challenging in this country because of the unusual strength of the contextual factors.

The degree of autonomy being established for the majority of publicly-funded schools through the process of academisation appears to be far greater than has been sought in any other country of significant size. As a leading international analyst of 'the self-managing school' has noted, there is no convincing evidence that increasing school autonomy has the large impact on outcomes that its advocates have claimed.^[7] An OECD study of leadership development indicated that at least two conditions are required for autonomy to have beneficial effects: the core responsibilities of leaders must be focused on educational matters to avoid the role overload that autonomy tends to generate, and there needs to be adequate support including relevant forms of training and development.^[8] In other words autonomy needs to be set within a defined framework and a strong infrastructure of support. The latest PISA findings suggested that the degree of curricular autonomy a school system offers its schools is positively related to the system's performance but the relationship is less clear over staffing and budgetary decisions.^[9] Autonomy is not a simple concept and key questions about it include autonomy for whom and over what?

Despite these findings and the ever-growing power of central government the dominant rhetoric has continued to be about autonomy, independence and liberation from bureaucracy (meaning of local authorities). Elsewhere ^[10] I have suggested that three of the factors that account for the persistence of this emphasis are:

- The commitment over the past quarter century to free market ideology;
- The peculiar constitutional arrangements under which England is governed, with limited checks and balances to central power;
- The symbolic power of the elite independent school sector in England.

The leading international analysts Ben Levin and Michael Fullan have sharply criticised this direction of travel.^[11] They argue that an emphasis on choice and competition as the drivers of improvement has not been shown to work in England or elsewhere and that the most successful countries tend to have less differentiated systems. In their view changing structures such as governance and accountability does not yield better results for students. They advocate a 'whole system' approach in which 'The heart of improvement lies in changing teaching

and learning practices in thousands and thousands of classrooms, and this requires focused and sustained effort by all parts of the education system and its partners'. A key element of this is an emphasis on *capacity building* at all levels of the system. A similar critique has been made from a British as well as an international perspective by Dylan Wiliam.[12] He points out that, since individual teacher quality has a much greater impact on student achievement than have differences between schools, our focus should be on leadership and teacher development rather than structural change.

A former Downing Street adviser Robert Hill has put the case for a 'whole system' approach succinctly: 'For too long education policy has been about trying to create successful institutions rather than an effective school system'.[13] A successful example of the kind of systemic approach that is needed to 'lift all boats' was the programme of intensive support to schools known as the London Challenge [14] and its extension to other urban areas, the City Challenge [15], which have been shown to promote significant school improvement among both under-performing and good and outstanding schools as well as increasing the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and narrowing some attainment gaps. The evaluation of City Challenge emphasised one highly significant but often overlooked point: 'Perhaps the most effective aspect of City Challenge was that it recognised that people, and schools, tend to thrive when they feel trusted, supported and encouraged. The ethos of the programme, in which successes were celebrated and it was recognised that if teachers are to inspire pupils they themselves need to be motivated and inspired, was a key factor in its success'.

Changing the Dynamic: two basic requirements

The process of academisation is moving in the opposite direction from the whole system approach. I suggested to the Academies Commission two features which are essential to a whole system approach to improvement and invited them to assess the proposals before them at least partly on the basis of how well they display those features. The first is that they should be *multi-level* in character. *The support and performance management of all schools should be provided locally and the concepts of 'local school system' and 'local family of schools' should have real meaning. Nor is it right for the only significant democratic input to schooling to be at central level.* Relying on the vagaries of chain development and ad hoc school to school support would create a ramshackle infrastructure which could not underpin a 21st-century education system. It would fail millions of children and parents as well as the wider society and economy.

Considerable scepticism should therefore greet attempts to elaborate such *laissez-faire* approaches, for example David Hargreaves's concept of a 'self-improving school system' which is being promoted by the National College for School Leadership, now an executive agency of the Department for Education.[16] As a major OECD review of over 200 studies on introducing markets in school education pointed out, collaboration can be a fragile process

in a competitive climate: '[R]esearch from different contexts suggests that co-operation is a vulnerable strategy and requires continuous mutual agreement. Competitive behaviour can be decided on by an individual school and has a tendency to spread with time'.[17]

One potentially highly significant attempt to alter this dynamic is the recent large-scale development of an association of co-operative schools promoted by the Co-operative College and the wider co-operative movement within the state education system. The fact that in September 2012, just four years after the initiative began, there were over 350 such schools in existence with many more starting the consultation process is a powerful indication of the values of many school leaders and teachers, in particular their belief that co-operation rather than competition is the best way to foster sustainable school improvement.[18]

England is a moderately large country of over 50 million people which has over the past 20 years undertaken the gradual defenestration of the intermediate tier of government in education with the apparent aim of having just two significant layers of governance: the individual school operating in a competitive local market and a distant central government and its agencies as the sole political and governance authority. Yet as the McKinsey study of factors underlying the success of the world's most improved school systems indicated the role of mediating layers is a vital one.[19] In England the major Nuffield Review of 14–19 Education and Training [20] saw the development of 'strongly collaborative local learning systems' as essential to building the coherent provision for this age group which is in general seriously lacking at present.

This is not to suggest that everything about the current structure of local government in England is appropriate for education. There is a strong case for citizen voice and service co-ordination at a 'locality' or community level below the present structures, a natural space that in many areas might cover a population of perhaps 100,000.[21] These smaller units might often be the appropriate entity for the kind of local learning system that the Nuffield Review mentioned above recommended. At the same time, some local authorities are too small to be able to undertake overall planning or provide specialist services cost-effectively. Whatever the precise arrangements, it is crucial that intermediate bodies have serious responsibilities, adequate resources to carry them out effectively and democratic legitimacy.

A second feature essential to a whole system approach is that *all publicly-funded schools should be placed within a common administrative and legal framework based on the principles of public not contract law*. The distinction between maintained and non-maintained publicly-funded schools is indefensible. The danger with this type of distinction is that the 'tiering' which is already such a sharp feature of English schooling will be reinforced and that this will accentuate stratification based on social factors and academic ability. It follows that variations in levels of autonomy between different categories of school should

be kept to an absolute minimum and a strong and convincing rationale should be provided for any such differences, which is not the case currently.

Some readers may be tempted to dismiss these comments on the grounds that they are far removed from the present policy pathway. However I contend that we should have in mind a vision of a desired future direction even if it differs markedly from the current one, and even if we consider that only small steps towards that vision are feasible at the present time. Michael Fullan recently identified four evidence-based ‘wrong drivers’ for whole system reform.[22] The wrong driver most relevant to this discussion is fragmented strategies instead of integrated or systemic ones. The right drivers, which include capacity building and systemic solutions, ‘are effective because they work directly on changing the culture of school systems (values, norms, skills, practices, relationships); by contrast the wrong drivers alter structures, procedures and other formal attributes of the system without reaching the internal substance of reform – and that is why they fail’.

Notes

- [1] See http://www.academiescommission.org/?page_id=185
- [2] Joining up the Dots: academies and system coherence, in H.M. Gunter (Ed.) (2011) *The State and Education Policy: the Academies programme*. London: Continuum; Towards a Fair and Coherent School System (2010), www.newvisionsforeducation.org.uk; Ron Glatter (2009) Let’s Look at Academies Systemically, *Management in Education*, 23(3), 104–107, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0892020609105802>
- [3] Wiborg, S. (2009) *Education and Social Integration*, p. 40. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [4] West, A., Barham, E. & Hind, A. (2009) Secondary School Admissions in England: policy and practice. <http://www.risetrust.org.uk>
- [5] Green, A. & Janmaat, J.G. (2011) *Regimes of Social Cohesion and the Crisis of Globalization*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [6] OECD (2010) Viewing the United Kingdom School System through the Prism of PISA, paragraph 23. <http://www.pisa.oecd.org/dataoecd/33/8/46624007.pdf>.
- [7] Caldwell, B.J. (2008) Reconceptualizing the Self-managing School, *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, 36(2), 235–252. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1741143207087775>
- [8] Punt, B., Nusche, D. & Moorman, H. (2008) *Improving School Leadership, Vol. 1, Policy and Practice*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- [9] OECD (2010b) PISA 2009 Results: what makes a school successful? Resources, Policies and Practices. Volume IV. <http://browse.oecdbookshop.org/oecd/pdfs/free/9810101e.pdf>

- [10] Ron Glatter (2012) Persistent Preoccupations: the rise and rise of school autonomy and accountability in England, *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, 40(5), 559–574.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1741143212451171>
- [11] Levin, B. & Fullan, M. (2008) Learning about System Renewal, *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, 36(1), 289–303. The quote is on page 291. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1741143207087778>
- [12] Wiliam, D. (2010) Teacher Quality: why it matters, and how to get more of it. www.dylanwiliam.net (listed under 'Papers 04/12').
- [13] Hill, R. (2008) The Value of Partnership Working, *Education Journal*, issue 109.
- [14] Ofsted (2010) London Challenge.
<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/london-challenge>
- [15] Department for Education (2012) Evaluation of the City Challenge Programme. Research Report RR215.
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/AllRsgPublications/Page1/DFE-RR215> The quote is on page xi.
- [16] Creating a Self-improving School System (2010).
<http://www.viccso.org.au/userfiles/files/creating-a-self-improving-school-system.pdf>
- [17] Waslander, S., Pater, C. & v.der Weide (2010) Markets in Education: an analytical review of empirical research on market mechanisms in education, <http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP%282010%2915&docLanguage=En>, para. 188.
- [18] See for example Woodin, T. (2012) Co-operative Schools: building communities in the 21st century, *FORUM*, 54(2), 327–339.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/forum.2012.54.2.327>
- [19] See Barber, M. (2011) Re-imagining Educational Governance: an international perspective.
<http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/12/pdf/barber.pdf>
- [20] Nuffield Review of 14–19 Education and Training in England and Wales (2009) *Education for all: the future of education and training for 14–19 year olds*. London: Routledge.
- [21] See discussion of 'localities' on pages 82 and 84 of Ranson, S. & Crouch, C. (2009) *Towards a New Governance of Schools in the Remaking of Civil Society*. Coventry: University of Warwick Institute of Education and Institute of Governance and Public Management for the CfBT Education Trust.
- [22] Fullan, M. (2011) *Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform*. Melbourne: Centre for Strategic Education, Seminar Series 204.

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