
Book Review

Unleashing Greatness: getting the best from an academised system

The Report of the Academies Commission, January 2013

London: Pearson/Royal Society of Arts

The self-styled Academies Commission was set up by the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), which itself sponsors an Academy in Tipton in the West Midlands, and the Pearson Think Tank, among other things an influential textbooks giant, to answer two key questions about the Academies Programme, launched by New Labour back in 2000:

- What are the implications of complete academisation for school improvement and pupils' attainment?
- How can improvement and attainment best be secured within this academised system?

And it is worth noting, as we shall see later, that these questions carry within them certain taken-for-granted assumptions.

The Commission was chaired by Christine Gilbert, from 2006 to 2011 Ofsted Chief Inspector; and comprised three other high-profile commissioners: Professor Chris Husbands, Director since 2011 of the Institute of Education in London; Brett Wigdortz, Chief Executive of Teach First, the charity that encourages 'high-flying' graduates to work in 'disadvantaged' schools; and Professor Becky Francis of King's College in London and at the time Director of the Pearson Think Tank.

Press accounts of the Commission's Report (see, for example, the story in *The Guardian*, January 10, 2013) tended to give the impression that the authors were highly critical of the whole Academies Project, particularly with regard to covert selection methods, but this is highly misleading and ignores the context within which the Commission was expected to carry out its work. At the press launches, both at the RSA and at the Institute of Education, it was made very clear that there should be no questions which queried the very existence of Academies and Free Schools.

Right at the outset (p. 4), the Report emphasises that the Commission was not tasked to revisit or question the policy decisions which gave rise to the Academies Programme, and that the Commissioners are, in fact, strongly supportive of the new educational landscape inaugurated by New Labour, and

endorsed by the coalition government under David Cameron and Michael Gove. It is argued that 'the recent introduction of Academies has provided much-needed vitality to the school system'; and support for 'autonomy-driven improvement', encapsulated in the Academies Project, is expressed in very strong terms:

The Commission strongly supports the aspirational vision that lies behind the Academies Programme. This Programme was set up to address entrenched failure in schools with low performance, and, most particularly, those schools located in the most disadvantaged parts of the country. The vision is one of autonomy-driven improvement, rooted in expectations of excellence, supported by outstanding leadership and governance. In removing Academies from the control of local authorities, the expectation is that these schools will use their greater freedom and independence to lead and manage more effectively and more innovatively, so that pupil outcomes improve. (p. 4)

The Report is useful for giving us the basic facts about the Academies story. When New Labour left office in May 2010, there were 203 Academies in existence, with another 60 or so at the planning stage. These early *sponsored* Academies, in what could be called the first phase of the Project, were set up to replace so-called failing secondary schools in disadvantaged areas and sponsors ranged from entrepreneurs and philanthropists, to charities, private schools, universities, and even local authorities. This model changed in 2010, as a result of the coalition government's decision to encourage schools judged 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted to convert to academy status, and to extend the Programme into the primary sector. Such has been the speed of academisation since the election, that at the beginning of November 2012 (when the Commission began work on its Report), 2456 Academies were open, accounting for around half of all maintained secondary schools in England. The expansion has not, however, been uniform or universal across localities; and primary Academies currently stand at only 5% of all primary schools.

Although the Report claims that there have been 'stunning successes' among individual sponsored Academies and Academy Chains, raising expectations of what it is possible to achieve, even in the most deprived areas of big cities, it *does* concede that some Academies have been able to take advantage of their ability to set their own admissions criteria by 'cherrypicking' the most 'able' and motivated pupils. A new Admissions Code came into force in February 2012, but the Schools Adjudicator is not able to consider objections in respect of any variations from the Admissions Code where these have been authorised for individual Academies by the Secretary of State.

In the words of the Report: 'Academies' autonomy over admissions has attracted controversy, and fuelled concerns that the growth of Academies may entrench rather than mitigate social inequalities' (p. 63). The Commission reveals that it has received numerous submissions, suggesting that 'Academies

are finding methods to select covertly', such as holding social events for prospective parents, or asking them to fill in lengthy Supplementary Information Forms (SIFs) when applying for a place. 'Such practices can enable Academies to select pupils from more privileged families where parents have the requisite cultural capital to complete the SIF in ways that will increase their child's chances' (p. 65).

And it seems that Free Schools are also adept at finding ways to flaunt the admissions rules. We learn that Canary Wharf College, a Christian Free School in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, admitted just *one* pupil who was eligible for free school meals among its first 60 entrants – in a borough where almost *half* of young people are eligible.

The Report is also sceptical about the claim that, broadly speaking, the new Academies have been very successful in raising pupil outcomes, quoting research by Henry Stewart which shows that local authority schools in disadvantaged areas have done just as well, or even better. It is all too easy, say the authors, to make frequent reference to Mossbourne Academy in the London Borough of Hackney, without pointing out that this experience is not common (p. 23).

Above all, there is a fatal flaw and contradiction at the heart of the Academy experience, for which there appears to be no easy solution. The Commission believes that 'a fully academised system is best seen as a community of schools, each independent, but working best if connected to the rest of the system' (p. 5); but striking a balance between 'independence' and 'interdependence' is easier said than done, if you want to prove that *your* Academy is the best school in the area, with the most motivated pupils and the most impressive set of examination results. This point about the incompatibility of 'freedom' and 'interdependence' was made by Estelle Morris in a recent article in *Education Guardian* (January 22, 2013): 'If you believe – as the most ardent supporters of Academies seem to – that the biggest problem in education has been the lack of autonomy for schools, it must lead to undervaluing interdependence. You create schools that have greater freedoms, but you destroy the glue that draws schools to each other'.

In the light of all these problems and criticisms, the Report's recommendations and conclusions strike one as being cautious and mealy-mouthed. We are told that 'the DfE should require all schools and Academies to publish data on applications and acceptances for school places in relation to free school meals', as if this alone will cause all schools to behave selflessly. Other proposals sound great, but have no real meaning, given the anarchic state of our school system, particularly at the secondary level: 'The Government should set out a coherent framework for the planning and commissioning of school places'; 'Individual Academies and groups of Academies should embrace a new relationship with local authorities', etc. (p. 11). Why not simply take away the right of any school to act as its own Admissions Authority? If we have to have these wretched schools, why not insist that all funding arrangements are fair and equitable? Why not insist that no school should be bullied into becoming

Book Review

an Academy against the wishes of teachers and parents? Why not, just for a second, question the very idea that a fully academised system is the only way forward for education in this country?

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