
Inner London's Education Authority: reflections on ILEA twenty-five years after closure

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ABSTRACT It is 25 years since the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) was abolished and management of education in central London transferred to 13 London boroughs. The author reflects on the experience of being an ex-ILEA head teacher, and of managing one of the new local education authorities in the immediate post-ILEA period. He begins by commenting on the role played by this journal in supporting dialogue between teachers and academics at a time of heightened debate about non-selective education.

The Significance of *FORUM*

FORUM began when dialogue about the nature of non-selective comprehensive education was energising debates in both secondary schools and higher education. It was at the forefront of discussions on the changing nature of the curriculum and alternative ways of grouping students in non-selective schools. At the time, as is often the case with the work of politicians, the focus was on the new structures required to produce non-selective schools. The question of how the internal arrangement of learning (the curriculum) should respond to a non-selective intake had been neglected. It was, for example, over 10 years after the introduction of legislation to support the introduction of comprehensive schools that Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) (1978) began a systematic study of the 'Entitlement Curriculum'. The absence of any coherent understanding of how learning ought to be organised provided the motivation for Brian Simon et al to establish *FORUM*.

One of the strengths of *FORUM* was its ability to link the work of educators in higher education to the experiences of practising teachers in schools. Working, in the late 1980s, as the new Chief Inspector for

Leicestershire Local Education Authority (LEA), I was immediately impressed with the close links between teachers and the Education Department at Leicester University. The notion of the classroom as a complex environment, which would be better understood through classroom observation and through teachers developing practical theories to guide their planning of learning, was at the heart of this productive relationship, forged between the University and the LEA's schools. *FORUM*, with its strong Leicestershire connections, not surprisingly carried 'discussions on new trends in education' (to quote its cover page) to a wider, national audience.

The Demise of ILEA

The demise of ILEA in 1990 was the beginning of the weakening of the role of LEAs and the inevitable, but rarely acknowledged, centralisation of the management of education by successive governments. There has been much debate about the motivation for breaking up ILEA. The proposal was in fact almost an afterthought attached at the end of the 1988 Education Act, which introduced the National Curriculum. The Greater London Council (GLC) had been removed in 1986 and the next two years saw the gradual erosion of support for ILEA. Politicians from the 'New Right' of the Conservative Party accused ILEA of being high spending and of tolerating low standards in schools. These arguments were simply masking a more fundamental problem, which focused on the organisation and management of schools. Like the GLC, ILEA was dominated by Labour supporters, many of whom were on the far left of politics (only three out of 12 inner London boroughs had a Conservative majority). As Conservative policy in general moved to the right so conflict with ILEA politicians, some of them full time, was inevitable. This theme will be returned to later in the article.

ILEA's Commitment to Comprehensive Education

Any evaluation of the work of ILEA should begin with its commitment to comprehensive education. ILEA took over education in inner London from the London County Council (LCC) in 1965. It inherited a complex arrangement of schools with a high proportion of voluntary schools and grammar schools. The early eighties saw the closure or amalgamation of the grammar schools as ILEA sought to establish a non-selective, inclusive education system. As part of this process the ILEA worked closely with the Boards, managing voluntary schools, to arrange transfer to secondary schools. This positive relationship with the Boards was based upon a shared understanding that non-selective schools ought to, ideally, have balanced intakes from across the whole ability range.

It was not uncommon for inner London secondary schools to have 70 or more first languages other than English. An inclusive education service was more likely to promote harmony across inner London than a selective service, which divided children from the age of eleven. By drawing children together

from a range of social, ethnic and religious backgrounds comprehensive schools could foster tolerance and understanding.

ILEA shared much in common with the aims of *FORUM*. It was supporting a serious attempt to fashion an education service based on the principle that all children/students are of equal value. The accusation that it was complacent about low standards was not supported by a comparison of results with similar inner-city authorities. Researchers in general concluded that results for ILEA schools were what were to be expected from inner-city schools where pupils face a complex range of personal and social issues. Such comparisons are not, however, always a convincing basis for defending standards. Critics of ILEA's performance could usually find evidence of where schools were underperforming. With over 900 primary schools and 150 secondary schools, this should not be too surprising. The question is, did ILEA have the will, the expertise and the resources to address this issue?

Managing the ILEA

Support for ILEA came from those who believed that coordinating education services, across the inner London boroughs, would be more efficacious than each borough working independently. ILEA divided its day-to-day management of services into 10 divisional offices. The allocation of pupils to schools, the allocation of staff and the provision of revenue resources were all managed at the local level. Divisional inspectors were allocated to schools. I worked for 11 years in Division 2 (Camden and Westminster) and found support was always helpful and to the point. More remarkably, considering the size of ILEA, I found access to senior officers at County Hall encouraged and open. ILEA had such a strong identity that the kind of support I have described inspired loyalty from the managers of schools and other institutions in adult, further and higher education.

ILEA's Innovations

The cost of education in ILEA was higher than in other parts of the country. It would be wrong to attribute this to wastefulness. ILEA was an innovative organisation addressing some of the most complex educational issues in the country. Because of its strong sense of purpose and its position in the capital it was able to appoint high-quality officers and inspectors, particularly to its senior positions. What follows is a brief description of some of the most influential innovations where ILEA took a lead nationally:

- The Inspectorate was supported by an advisory service made up of teachers on temporary secondment. This combination aimed to provide follow-up support to schools where inspections had identified weaknesses.
- Specialist Teachers' Centres were established covering all the major areas of the curriculum.

- The Research and Statistics Branch provided high-quality information on performance in schools and colleges; it undertook seminal research into race, special needs and equality issues.
- Adult education flourished, although the authority would acknowledge that it catered mainly for middle-class residents from both inner and outer London.
- In 1970 ILEA became the first authority to establish Education Guidance Centres for the (temporary) placement of disruptive children.
- In 1981 'Keeping the School under Review' was introduced to provide teachers, head teachers, parents and governors with evidence, from systematic school self-evaluation, on the progress of the school.
- Detailed reports on the 'condition' of ILEA primary schools (Thomas Report), secondary schools (Hargreaves report) and special needs (Fish Report) were prepared in the 1980s by experts in their fields. The demise of ILEA prevented full consideration of the implications of these reports for policy changes.
- Sophisticated consultation processes involving parents, governors and teachers were introduced ahead of their time compared to other LEAs.
- ILEA was also the first LEA to devolve resources to schools so that governors, head teachers and teachers could relate decisions on the use of resources to the needs of their particular pupils/students.

The Response of Parents

Having experienced the many positive sides to working for ILEA, it came as no surprise to me to see the feelings amongst parents when the Government's proposals for closure were announced. Parents mounted a strong campaign to support retention of ILEA. A referendum showing parents supported the retention was ignored.

Problems Faced by ILEA

Stuart Maclure, former editor of the *Times Educational Supplement* and author of a history of the ILEA, called the abolition 'an act of educational vandalism'. Looking back to the period prior to abolition, it is, however, difficult to imagine the survival of ILEA. There were aspects of the service which could have been improved. The relationship between the teacher unions and the ILEA members, some of whom were full-time politicians, was often hostile and unproductive. The eighties was a period of drastically falling rolls and ILEA ought to have been more robust in addressing the issue of teacher surplus and school closure. In particular, ILEA failed to address the issue of education for 16-19-year-olds. Falling rolls in the 1970s was a clear opportunity to address the issue of overall school organisation. Members and unions failed to agree on how to proceed to use the opportunity to improve 16-19 provision. This

problem was exacerbated by the number of voluntary schools, which were more able to resist change than county schools managed directly by ILEA.

The Post-ILEA Period

Setting up one of the new LEAs, following the demise of ILEA, I was predictably impressed with the professional way in which ILEA's officers provided detailed briefing papers on aspects of the education service being devolved to the 13 inner London boroughs. It also came as no surprise to see ex-ILEA officers assuming influential roles in other areas of education. Two went on to become Directors of the Institute of Education.

They have both been critical of governments' (Labour and Conservative) approaches to education. The present focus on free schools and academies is leading to the over-centralisation of management of schools and predictable questions about how effective this management can be. Under ILEA, schools were maintained and not controlled. Accusing LEAs of controlling schools is a common distortion of the facts, and is used to justify more freedom for schools. Greater freedom from LEA maintenance was inevitable and desirable. The form that support for schools takes is, however, an important issue. Over-centralisation will create an impossible task for those responsible at the centre. Local government's capacity to provide support for schools has been so weakened that consideration is rarely given to a return to maintenance by LEAs. Both Labour and Conservative governments appear threatened by the idea of strong, effective local government.

It is not surprising that educationists, steeped in managing education in our inner cities as well as in the shire counties, are able to point to the flaws and inconsistencies in the education policies of successive governments. The surprise is how politicians remain unwilling to take these criticisms seriously. The same point could be made about the attitude of politicians to research conducted by educationists.

It is interesting to reflect on the present performance of secondary schools in inner London. Following the introduction of the London Challenge (2003), these schools now perform above the average for the country, and outperform many shire counties. The Challenge is based on collaboration between schools and underpinned by acknowledgement of the central role of teachers in managing learning and, therefore, school improvement. The organiser of the Challenge observed that, if ILEA had remained in place, there would have had to be changes to its management. His task in 2003, however, would, he acknowledged, have been simpler if an overarching management of education in inner London had still existed.

I started by making links between *FORUM* and ILEA around their explicit commitment to comprehensive education. The LEA I was involved in developing, in the post-ILEA period, is the one identified by the Office for Standards in Education as giving parents the greatest chance nationally of choosing a good primary school (92%). Furthermore, not one of the schools

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inherited from ILEA has become an academy. The planning of the new authority was based upon the values and principles of non-selective, comprehensive education. This has proved to be a unifying feature of work in the borough. It has been the basis on which collaboration and trust between students, parents, teachers, governors, officers and members has been prioritised. Brian Simon, Nanette Whitbread and their fellow members of the original editorial board of *FORUM* would, I am sure, have approved. ILEA's support for an inclusive education system was equally deserving of approval. ILEA's legacy forms the basis for the present achievements of London schools.

On a more pessimistic note, the change in the demographics of London is giving serious cause for concern about the future of comprehensive education in inner London. The high cost of housing is causing families to move to the suburbs. The social mix, which characterises many schools, will be lost. If you want to see what the future could have in store, look at the situation in Paris where the centre of the French capital is almost exclusively populated by those with higher incomes. This has had damaging consequences for the education of students living outside the inner ring road of the city. Politicians would be foolish to underestimate the contribution comprehensive schools make to social cohesion.

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