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There is Another Way: building a new vision for schools from the bottom up

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ABSTRACT The last twenty years have seen continual change in the education system, much of which has been poorly planned, ideologically driven, lacking in coherence and without an evidence base. The key aspects of accountability, school governance and structure, curriculum and assessment and teacher training and development are critiqued (reviewed) from the perspective of the leaders of a school in East London, and an alternative strategy is articulated addressing these issues but based on a much greater degree of trust, and rooted in research and evidence.

Introduction

In the last 20-30 years our school system has experienced much top-down, often micro-managed change, driven from the centre by politicians of all parties. We would not dispute the fact that change was needed. Equally, there is no doubt that some of this policy agenda has resulted in significant progress, the rapid improvement in attainment in London being an excellent example. However, this process of change has lacked coherence and it has, in the main, not been supported by any kind of evidence base; rather, it has been ideologically driven. Crucially, it does not seem currently to be leading to the creation of the great school system desired by politicians and the wider community. Worryingly, it could be argued that it is resulting in a system characterised by pupils experiencing a narrow, assessment-focused curriculum; teachers with low morale, exhausted by the demands of accountability; schools that are experiencing more and more difficulty in recruiting and retaining good teachers; and school leaders devoting too much time to structural and management issues, at the expense of teaching and learning.

As school leaders, we feel that an alternative 'vision' needs to be articulated, a vision that is rooted in the knowledge and experience of schools, teachers and other education professionals, a vision that is evidence based and that starts with teaching and learning. The speed and quantity of change has often made it difficult to present a coherent rebuttal of these ideologically driven policies, much less the articulation of an alternative. This vision needs clarity about the aims and objectives of education and needs to recognise the importance of there being an education system with many component parts – school structure and governance, curriculum, assessment, leadership, teaching and learning, accountability, teacher training and continuing professional development. All of these components are interdependent, such that changes in one element have ramifications and consequences throughout the system. An understanding of this has been singularly lacking over the last few years amongst politicians and in a Department of Education, obsessed with school structures, where it frequently feels that the approach is 'act now, think later'. It is only in the schools where all these elements 'come together', and it is head teachers, their leadership teams and staff who have to make sense of them.

An alternative vision needs to recognise this complexity, it needs to encompass all these components, and it needs to engage pupils, parents, teachers and the wider community. It is this articulation of a coherent alternative that we hope to explore in this article.

The Current Situation

There have been many critiques of current and recent government policy and while not wanting to add yet another, it is important to understand what the often chaotic experience of the last twenty years has felt like, as seen from a school perspective. In so doing, in addition to the impact of each individual policy or change we would want to emphasise the piecemeal and unconnected nature of this politically driven agenda.

However, before embarking on this review of the recent past, it is appropriate to describe our own particular school and local authority context, as this undoubtedly has impacted on how we view the current state of education. Morpeth School is situated in Bethnal Green in Tower Hamlets. Twenty years ago the majority of the pupils were from traditional white working-class East End backgrounds. There has recently been significant population change resulting in a situation where now more than 60% of pupils come from Bangladeshi backgrounds. However, throughout this period, irrespective of ethnicity, levels of disadvantage have been high, with currently about 70% of the school eligible for the Pupil Premium. Attainment has risen significantly, with over 70% of pupils achieving the 5 A*-C with English and Maths benchmark in each of the last three years, and the last two Ofsted judgements have both been 'Outstanding'. Although we have reservations about the narrowness of these two measures of accountability, we feel it is important that the argument we want to present is made from a position of strength, as a

'successful' school. Our strategy has always been to put our pupils' needs first and not be 'bullied' by the Department of Education, and our success has enabled us to resist and mediate some of the government policy, acting as a filter and always looking for ways in which we could adapt initiatives to our circumstances. Schools that constantly fear the impact of an unfavourable inspection are much less able to do this.

Perhaps the outstanding feature missing from the last twenty years, as viewed from the schools, has been the lack of any national consensus regarding both the aims of our education system and the values we want to develop in our young people. Each change of government, and frequently each change in Secretary of State, has, therefore, given this vacuum, resulted not only in ideologically driven change but also frequently in the pursuit and imposition of personal beliefs and prejudices. The most recent, but by no means only, example of this has been the obsession with the notion of an educational market. We know that this is not a genuine market; we know all parents want a good local school and we know that the vast majority of them are happy with the schools their children attend. Yet we are forced into competition, knowing that this will almost certainly disadvantage the most vulnerable in our society, not least those pupils with special needs, and magnify local and regional variations.

Against this background we identify four main strands of policy affecting schools – accountability, school and local authority structure, curriculum and assessment and teacher/school leader supply and development. In the sections that follow we look at each of these four areas.

As already noted, most schools and teachers recognised the need for greater accountability. However, the extent to which measures of accountability and inspection now dominate schools, in particular the impact of an adverse inspection judgement, has created an environment dominated by fear and has resulted in a narrowing of both the curriculum and pupils' experiences in many schools. The introduction of the EBacc, and its recent upgrading in importance, provide an excellent illustration of this. When the idea was first announced by the Secretary of State, many schools, fearing that this would become the new measure against which they would be judged, decided to change their Key Stage 4 curriculum, literally overnight. Schools cannot be blamed, but this is manifestly a ridiculous way to manage curriculum change. More generally, schools, on an annual basis, have to manage the ever-changing nature of both what is measured and how their performance is judged through each new version of the Ofsted framework. A good example of the latter is the radical shift in the importance of observations made by the inspectors, from being the key indicator of the quality of learning and teaching through to a situation where most observations now last less than 15 minutes and are not deemed important in comparison with other indicators. In the not too distant future, they may disappear from the inspection process altogether.

It is not, therefore, surprising, in this environment driven by high-stakes accountability, that attention in many schools has narrowed down to what will be measured and reported. Hence the extent to which BTEC Level 2 courses

('worth' four GCSEs) came to be used on such a massive scale in secondary schools along with other 'gaming' strategies. Using such approaches, schools may have apparently raised attainment but the qualifications frequently did not serve the pupils well – an excellent but disturbing illustration of a situation where the school's best interests do not coincide with the pupils' best interests, and also of our assertion that there have frequently been perverse consequences of decisions taken without considering the interrelated nature of the school system.

The second policy strand has been driven by the belief that changing school structure and the so-called 'middle tier' will of itself raise standards. In the last twenty years we have had grant-maintained schools, city technology colleges, specialist schools, academies, free schools, university technical colleges and all-through schools. Similarly, we have seen, and are seeing, a determination to undermine and reduce the power of local authorities but without thinking through the implications. Act now, think later! All schools were encouraged, 'bribed', and may even ultimately be forced, to become academies but no one seemed to think through the implications of this strategy. For example, who would support a free-standing academy when it got into difficulties? When eventually the scale of this issue became apparent we have had the introduction of regional school commissioners, eight of them who might eventually have responsibility for almost 3000 schools each, a situation not only lacking any transparent accountability but also creating an impossible task. The recent White Paper acknowledges these issues, and ventured some attempt at a 'policy fix', but it was yet again ill thought through, as its withdrawal showed.

Not surprisingly, most research supports the view that structural change is not a 'silver bullet' for school improvement and, as already noted, can have a negative impact in terms of schools being forced into competing in a false market. Apart from the more obvious adverse effects of this competition, large amounts of public money are now spent on public relations, advertising in newspapers and on buses, banners outside schools, etc., and of course there is the cost of the academy conversion itself. The politicians responsible for these structural changes then have to defend their decisions and we find ourselves being bombarded with inaccurate information – 'academies achieve better results than maintained schools' – which we know the evidence does not support, but which continues to be repeated at every opportunity. There are some successful academy chains, but just as with local authorities, there is a mixture. Many are doing well but many are not and are failing to provide a good education. The solution now appears to be Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) because it has become clear that market-driven academisation is not inclusive, and providing support to schools is impossible to coordinate – yet another example of a belated attempt to address an ill-thought-through policy that schools have had to live and work with. Whatever their failings, local authorities had a responsibility for all schools and the education of all young people.

Thirdly, and perhaps most damaging for our young people, we have had continual change in the curriculum. Surely as a nation we could agree, independent of political bias or prejudice, what we want our pupils to learn and experience? We have already mentioned the damage done by giving BTECs the equivalence of four GCSEs. Having a baccalaureate might be a good way forward but to establish one and have the subject content that all our pupils will study determined at the whim of a particular Secretary of State seems unacceptable. Did anyone think through the consequences of the EBacc on the arts and the other subjects not included in this qualification, the impact on staffing and even the implications for school buildings?

At post-16 the removal of AS level as a linear qualification leading to A2 similarly has not been considered, not least in terms of the effect on pupils applying to university. The only externally verified qualifications for most pupils will now be GCSEs, taken at age 16, and it seems likely that we will see the re-introduction of university entrance examinations, a situation which will surely advantage independent school pupils. The sad reality is that the next 4-5 years will see continual change to almost every aspect of our assessment systems with little or no regard to the impact on teachers, pupils and parents.

The fourth key element of policy focuses on the school workforce. In the early years of this century there were positive signs both in teacher recruitment and teacher development. There were large numbers of well-qualified graduates joining the profession, even if this was in part due to the general economic climate and the lack of other opportunities; there was a real focus on developing our knowledge and practice around teaching and learning; and there was in the National College of School Leadership the beginnings of a coherent and professional focus on developing our school leaders. However, the last few years have seen the impact of ideology in this area as well, and the situation has changed rapidly. Higher education has not been trusted with teacher training and the locus has shifted to the schools. There are many schools doing this well but we believe this is encouraging a view that only a degree is needed to teach, and this is leading to deprofessionalisation of teaching. We accept that not all Postgraduate Certificate in Education provision was high quality but surely all professions need to combine practice with theory? However, perhaps an even more serious consequence of the change is that there appears to be no national planning of teacher supply, with serious shortages in many subjects and graduates confronted with huge numbers of potential training establishments and little information on how to choose. Add to this the removal of the college of leadership as an independent institution and it feels as though much of the progress that was being made has been lost to an ideological belief in the power of the market, and has added another example of a complete inability to foresee the impact of decisions in one area of policy on the whole system.

An Alternative Approach

So where does this leave us? We would argue that we are in a situation where all aspects of our school system are lacking evidence-based, strategic direction and where there is no recognition that the various components should create a coherent whole. We have a system that is in a state of perpetual change and is driven by ideological rather than educational motives. We do not presume to have answers but along with many other school leaders and teachers we have thoughts on possible ways forward. However, before embarking on specific proposals, we feel that there are two key principles that we would like to see underpin a new approach – a willingness to develop trust throughout our school system and a much greater use of evidence and research.

Our experience in our schools and classrooms is that, when we show trust, the vast majority of our children and adults learn, develop and grow. Of course we need systems to identify and support those who do not, but we need to build a model that is based on a positive view of the potential of our children and adults, that trusts them, not on a model whose default is negative and whose main objective is to identify failure. We believe that the same principle that applies in the classroom can apply in schools and in the wider educational system; that we should start from a positive position of trust and a belief in what people, with appropriate support, can achieve. This stands in opposition to what we have at present, with the overriding focus of our current system on identifying and dealing with the weak schools and weak teachers. This ignores the reality that the vast majority of schools and teachers are not 'weak', and instead creates an environment where fear is prevalent, risk-taking even in good schools is discouraged and professional judgement is replaced by a 'tick box culture'. In this environment only those schools that are highly successful can take risks and yet we know that it is when risks are taken that learning takes place. This does not mean that failure should be tolerated but, as in a classroom, systems are needed to deal with this that do not dominate our behaviour.

We have a stronger generation of school leaders and teachers than ever and with their hard work we have made progress in our schools over the last two decades. We need now to show trust in their ability to lead the system. From what we can learn from our colleagues in the world's current high-performing education systems such as Singapore and Finland, professional trust is key to success. We need to increase the professional autonomy of school leaders and teachers, and actively encourage them to be innovative in improving standards in their schools. We need to trust them and not allow the need to identify and support those schools where this does not work, to drive the whole system.

Our second underlying principle is the need to move away from the individual beliefs, ideologies and prejudices that we see in all aspects of our school system and focus on evidence and research, at the same time ensuring that we avoid the rush to follow the latest fads. Our well-trained and skilled workforce wants to improve outcomes for our pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. If we are to enable this to happen, we need to

create a system which is not only based on evidence but which also actively encourages research. Schools need to work more closely with universities and with organisations such as the Sutton Trust and the Education Endowment Foundation. It is clear that the search for causal links between different teacher behaviours and improved attainment is still in its infancy. But it is equally clear that we need an approach that is evidence-based, not simply grounded in 'this is what we have always done' or in one individual's or group's view of great teaching. We need a profession with research, evidence and professional learning at its core, focused on learning outcomes for pupils. We need to ensure that school policies are evidence-based and provide new and existing teachers and school leaders with the knowledge to evaluate and use good evidence to improve results in the classroom, especially for disadvantaged pupils.

With these two principles underlying any policy or strategies, we believe that an alternative might 'start at the end', with what we want in our classrooms, and build from there through the school to the local area and finally to the country. This is idealistic perhaps, but at least it is building on the positive and starting with pupils and the classroom teacher. What do we want our pupils to learn and how do we want them to learn? Aside from basic skills and subject knowledge, what are the values we want them to acquire? What skills and knowledge do we want our teachers to have? This immediately takes us into the key areas of our system – the curriculum and our teachers.

In terms of the curriculum and assessment we would suggest that, as already noted, this is too important to be left to politicians and to be subject to their whims and prejudices. We are aware of the dangers of 'copying' from other countries but as educationalists we believe that we can learn from others provided we recognise differences in context. In Finland, which of course has a very different economic and social history to us, the school curriculum is the responsibility of an independent commission and is subject to a review every 10 years. This review commences three years before any changes are introduced and schools have at least two years to prepare. This model has much to recommend it, not least the acceptance that the curriculum belongs to the whole society, not just the current elected government. The setting up of such a commission, independent of government, would, we believe attract widespread support.

Moving on to the second key element in the classroom, the teachers, there may again be something to be learned from Finland – not in the detail of their system but in their belief that teaching is a profession and therefore requires a high level of preparation and training, both theoretical and practical. We believe that while there was certainly room for improvement, the model of a partnership between higher education and schools is likely to create the strongest teaching workforce and the ability to plan teacher supply. Equally, if not more importantly, we need a commitment to continuous professional development. Given the rising retirement age, it is possible that some teachers could be working for in excess of 45 years. Learning needs to be at the core of what happens in the classroom, but all the current evidence shows that the

high-achieving systems invest heavily in the learning and professional development of their teachers. It is through this good-quality professional development that real improvements in teaching and attainment take place. We need teachers who have both subject and pedagogical knowledge and who have a career pathway that recognises, as in other professions, that their professional development doesn't stop when they qualify but is renewed through life. Too often, professional development is seen as something to fill the statutory training days rather than an integral part of every teacher's entitlement. If professional development is to be prioritised, time must be made available as part of teachers' existing workload, and not in addition to it. Our experience is that just as much as pay or other incentives, teachers value a school that prioritises their professional development.

Moving up from the classroom to the school, the primary function of school leadership should be to support the teachers in the classroom and thereby the attainment of their pupils. Of course there are a multitude of administrative and pastoral tasks that school leaders have to perform but at the core of their work should be teaching and learning. To support and develop our school leaders we need to re-establish an independent College for School Leadership. The courses and qualifications for middle and senior leaders need to incorporate the latest thinking on leadership, teaching and learning and we need an open dialogue about leadership so that one model does not dominate and stifle creativity. We would, for example, question strongly the view expressed recently that we need head teachers to be 'battlers, bruisers and battle-axes' (*Schools Week*, 2016). This is based so strongly on such negative premises about our pupils, unlike a model with trust, supported by challenge, at its core.

The awareness that there needs to be a middle tier between schools and the Department for Education seems now to be accepted again. But unfortunately this is yet again an area where political ideologies are being played out. All the evidence suggests that there is no structural 'silver bullet' and that all models will have strengths and weaknesses. Energy would be much better used in addressing and supporting the weaker parts of whatever system we have than thinking that a new one will solve all our problems. The starting point for this part of the system should be the support to schools and the provision of services such as admissions and pupil place planning. Our own preference would be for this to be carried out through some democratically accountable body but this seems further away than ever and at present the real priority is to put in place a universal system that includes all schools.

Support for schools in difficulties was formerly provided by the local authority, supported by good or outstanding schools, but it now appears that local authorities, with their role continually diminishing, will not even be commissioning school improvement services. They will be delivered on a school-to-school basis through MATs, teaching schools and in other ways. This may sound good in principle but it must not be seen as a cheap alternative. Many schools, particularly those in more challenging settings, and even those

that may appear strong, can be fragile and have limited capacity to help others in a systematic way. In this situation there is a need to accept, if this is the preferred system for school improvement, that schools need to be supported in creating additional capacity – and there is a cost to this.

We recognise the need for accountability in our schools, and accept the importance of independent inspection and published exam results. However, it is important that the accountability system values and measures what is important and focuses on improving our schools and connecting good practice. Very few, if any, countries have an inspection system as demanding and punitive as ours. In a system where schools were trusted and given space to innovate, inspection could be limited to identifying strengths and weaknesses except where there was real evidence of pupils being failed. Schools could show that they were raising standards, using evidence to inform practice and encouraging research. We need an inspection system which encourages this rather than focusing on narrow grades or rankings, which in addition to their impact on our schools also have little international support. We welcome some of the changes planned in performance tables, where progress is taken into greater account. However, the most powerful lesson of the last few years with regard to performance tables is that schools will divert resources and energy to what is being measured. We need to ensure, therefore, that we measure what we value, and we recognise the need to make sure that whatever we measure must not create a tension between the interests of the pupils, and the interests of the school. We must have a system of measuring success that genuinely reflects the achievements of pupils and schools without any perverse consequences.

In conclusion, we recognise an apparent contradiction between criticising too much change, and then suggesting more change. That said, we need in the first place to ensure that our priorities are clear, not least the desire to create a system that enables all our pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to achieve; we must develop a much greater national consensus around what we want in the curriculum of our schools and how we want to assess this, bearing in mind that we want to measure what we value; we need to plan this sufficiently far ahead to ensure that the appropriately trained teachers are in place to deliver this curriculum; we need to rethink how we develop systems to support the continuous development of our teachers, trusting that if we do this we will be investing in and valuing our greatest resource; we need to develop an accountability system that celebrates success, that looks positively at how schools can improve, not one that is focused solely on identifying failure; and we need urgently to invest in supporting and developing our structural system and stop thinking that there is another model that will lead to greater improvement.

Reference

Schools Week (2016) Sir Michael Wilshaw: we need battlers, bruisers and battle axes to improve schools. http://schoolsimprovement.net/sir-michael-wilshaw-we-need-battlers-bruisers-and-battle-axes-to-improve-schools/

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