
From a Whisper to a Scream: the Campaign for Education in Brighton & Hove

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ABSTRACT This article gives a brief history of the creation and first two years of the Campaign for Education in Brighton and Hove. It makes a case for grass-roots responses to the various neo-liberal policy initiatives undermining all phases of public education. This article was written prior to publication of the White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere*. Since then the campaign has acted as the centre of a broad mobilisation against the White Paper.

Introduction

Brighton Rock, the Royal Pavilion, the Palace Pier and seagulls define the city of Brighton & Hove for some but the city also has a higher proportion of its population working in the public sector than the national average and education is an important part of that sector. The city has two universities, two sixth-form colleges, a further education college, an adult education centre and more than seventy schools. The city also has a relatively highly qualified population, a higher than average turnout at elections [1] and a habit of changing its politicians. Three different parties have led the city council over the last 15 years and the city currently has MPs from three different political parties. There is a healthy engagement in civil society and, from defending the National Health Service to campaigning against inequalities, Brighton & Hove residents like to organise themselves.

By 2014, neo-liberal policies were seriously impacting on education locally. A long-running campaign opposing cuts and the privatisation of services at the University of Sussex had resulted in the suspension of students. As Michael Gove was pursuing his vision to see all schools become academies, a free school, just up the A23 from Brighton & Hove, had become one of the first

to collapse, confirming the scepticism of parents and teachers in Brighton & Hove. Only three of the city's more than seventy schools were academies – all sponsored academies forced to convert. An attempt by one secondary school in 2011 to consider conversion to academy status had been thwarted by parents, pupils and staff united in their opposition.[2] Yet, by March 2014, the head of Hove Park School, a successful and popular local authority school, was advising the school's governing body to convert to academy status. Meanwhile the principal of the local further education college was announcing devastating cuts to provision, the closure of a popular and specialist course in journalism, the almost complete removal of education for students with special needs and the axing of up to 50 jobs. Coincidentally, the principal had been vice principal at Barnfield College shortly before the ignominious collapse of the Barnfield Federation of Barnfield College and a number of academies sponsored by the college.[3]

With schools, further and higher education all under attack, a group of Brighton & Hove parents, teachers, lecturers and local government employees, many involved in separate campaigns, saw the common themes and organised a public meeting to debate the need to defend all phases of education. On 23 April 2014 an 'education question time' took place chaired by Warwick Mansell – a respected education journalist and columnist for the *Guardian* – with Caroline Lucas, MP, Max Hyde, President of the NUT, Andy Schofield – ex head teacher of a Brighton secondary school and an academy in Wiltshire – and Dr Jon Berry, a former secondary school teacher turned academic at the University of Hertfordshire.

More than 250 people packed the event, enthusiastic to debate the impact of neo-liberal policies on education, from early years to higher education. Questions from the floor ranged from challenging the barmy notion that a child could hold a pen before she could name any colours, through to the challenge to creativity of a system which measures success by using crude results and league tables. The concern for fairness and equality was manifest in questions about social mobility, the forcing of schools to become academies and the narrowing of a curriculum where certain subjects are seen as more 'valuable' than others. Concern was also expressed about the way in which national education policies seemed designed to undermine the trust and dedication of a committed workforce.

The Campaign for Education in Brighton & Hove

The 'education question time' meeting concluded with a commitment to establish a Campaign for Education in Brighton & Hove to work with, and be supported by, local NUT and University and College Union branches, Trades Council and People's Assembly, and raise the profile of education in the run up to the 2015 election. The Campaign's founding statement [4] was clear that attempts to turn schools into academies against the democratic wishes of parents and the severe cuts and financial chaos across the phases of education were

symptoms of a process of marketisation that spawns competition, standardised testing (even for infants), obsessive monitoring, the erosion of democratic influence and a more divided education system.

Determined to articulate its vision for education as well as oppose the neo-liberal vision, the Campaign set out a number of principles for an inclusive and comprehensive system of public education:

- Good inclusive local education designed to meet the needs of all and of all ages;
- Education planned and managed locally through collaboration, rather than competition, and in the interests of the local community;
- Schools that are democratically accountable to the local community through elected representatives and open meetings;
- Education that is publicly funded and free at the point of delivery;
- Teaching and learning that is provided by trained and qualified staff, with professional autonomy over curricula and assessment and working in the interests of learners.

One of the Campaign's first initiatives was to support the Hands Off Hove Park campaign (also supported by the Anti Academies Alliance and the NUT).[5] The issue of democracy became central to the Hove Park campaign as it emerged that the governing body had failed to fill three parent governor vacancies and parents demanded a ballot on the proposal to convert. Under much pressure the governing body agreed to a ballot to fill the governing body vacancies. Meanwhile, the (then) Green-led city council agreed to hold a non-binding ballot on the proposal to convert.

On 15 July 2014, as it was announced that Gove had lost the confidence of the Prime Minister and was being replaced as Secretary of State for Education, the city council announced the result of the parental ballot. On a turnout higher than for local elections more than 70% were against conversion. The following morning, the school was closed as teachers, represented by the NUT, took action in opposition to conversion. Later, the results of the parent governor elections were announced and of the nine candidates, three 'No to Hove Park Academy' campaigners topped the poll and were elected. By September, the governing body for Hove Park School had abandoned its conversion proposal. Brighton & Hove's record remained: after four years of national insistence, coercion and inducement not a single school in Brighton & Hove had freely and voluntarily agreed to convert to an academy. Within six months the head teacher at Hove Park had left the school.

In further education, the campaign to defend courses – including those for students with special needs – gathered huge support, including from the Labour Party's prospective parliamentary candidate for Brighton Pavilion as well as the sitting Green Party MP. Disappointingly, the campaign was not able to stop course closures and lecturers being made redundant. However, less than a year later the principal of the college stood down and, although the Campaign's

supporters didn't know at the time, the battle to save the city's services for those with special educational needs was not over.

A core principle of the Campaign for Education was the recognition that all phases of education are subject to the same policy agenda, and the Campaign soon responded to the distortion of early years care and education; distortions that included an over-emphasis on formal learning, the imposition of baseline assessment and a focus on 'school readiness'. In October 2014 the Campaign's second public meeting brought together an expert panel and more than 75 parents and teachers to discuss and debate a 'manifesto for the early years'.^[6] Members of the Campaign also contributed to the national Charter for Primary Education and, in February 2015, supported parents in their campaign to save children's centres from closure – a campaign that was successful in winning a reprieve from closure.

The Campaign is proud to include education academics, as well as others, providing educational and professional challenge to the ideological justifications for current education policy. University schools of education have been the subject of policy assault as teacher training has been shifted from universities to schools. So when the head teacher and chair of governors at an outstanding school in Crawley (West Sussex) announced that the school wished to convert to an academy the Campaign was astonished to see a university appear on the other side of the debate. The preferred sponsor was the University of Brighton Academies Trust – a trust that had only been legally established a matter of weeks before the announcement.

Some universities attempt to present the sponsorship of academy schools as 'community engagement' but their involvement is not disinterested and, it has been argued, they are responding to the competitive 'market' by increasingly looking for a revenue stream and/or prestige.^[7] Crawley parents were not convinced by the proposal either and questions were asked about the University's interest in this conversion and, again, the democratic deficit was apparent. A call for a ballot of parents was rejected, as was a request to extend the consultation period. A campaign to keep the school a community school sprung up, supported by parents, the local Labour Party candidate for Crawley, local trade unions, the Campaign for Education in Brighton & Hove and the Anti Academies Alliance.

During the Crawley campaign, academy apologists claimed that the local Conservative-controlled county council's winding down of support for its schools in the light of the national academy policy was a reason for conversion. The damage this local policy had on schools was exposed by an independent report, commissioned by the county council, asserting that even academies wished to remain part of the family of local authority and that the council's clear promotion of academisation was resented. Commentators noted that the council was also a low spender on school improvement services (reflecting national austerity measures) and concluded that these local policies, together, might explain why the county was the lowest performing of all south-east counties at GCSE.^[8]

Only two months before the 2015 general election, Brighton & Hove City Council, the very council that had organised a ballot for Hove Park School parents, surprised teachers and parents by rushing through a decision supporting a bid to open a free school from the University of Brighton Academies Trust (fresh from its involvement in the controversial proposal to convert a school in Crawley). This bid, that would provide additional secondary school places for the city, exploited the legal requirement barring local authorities from opening new schools and the policy insistence that all new schools must be academies or free schools. The nonsense of this policy and legal requirement was exposed when, in 2015, data showed that Brighton & Hove (an authority where more than 95% of schools remained with the local authority) was the most improved local authority in the country and was outperforming many academy chains.[9] The Campaign organised a well-attended public meeting and the NUT and UCU, supported by the Campaign for Education in Brighton & Hove, called for alternatives to a free school to provide more school places while pointing out that the city council had not carried out a local consultation or impact assessment on the proposal, let alone offered a ballot on options to parents.

In the run-up to the 2015 general election the Campaign and the NUT organised an education hustling for all five political parties standing in the city. More than 100 people – mainly teachers and lecturers – attended the event and quizzed the candidates. Many raised concerns about UKIP's education policies and so the Campaign and NUT issued a joint statement challenging UKIP's education policies that, if implemented, would divide children, restrict what they were taught and blame children for the crisis in school places. The joint statement condemned UKIP's proposal to return to selection and grammar schools – a proposal that would mean the return of secondary modern schools for most children. The message to these children would be stark and demoralising: you have failed. The joint statement was also unflinching in its opposition to UKIP's proposal for a return to a more traditional primary education, with 'the three 'R's' [10], exposed UKIP's alarmist, bigoted and fictional picture of schools, condemned attempts to blame the dilapidated state and understaffing of many schools on teachers and the children of migrants and echoed the clear conclusion of the meeting: the diversity and inclusiveness of education enriches it for all.

After the 2015 election, it was clear that policies that would damage education were set to continue and so plans to wind down the Campaign were postponed (indefinitely). The Campaign again took up the state of post-16 education. The 35% cut in further education funding since 2009 had already driven the local further education college close to financial disaster and cuts in funding for English classes for those not speaking English threatened the diversity of the city and its proud tradition of welcoming refugees and asylum seekers. In late 2015, a 'post-16 education question time' attracted more than 60 people and provoked much debate about the purpose and focus of further and adult education. The meeting concluded that campaigning needs to

continue to promote and defend post-16 education, with calls on principals and corporation members, as well as teaching staff, to support such campaigns.

Conclusion

In its first two years the Campaign has supported a number of local education campaigns, organised public meetings (attracting a total of well over 500 people) and developed a social media presence with a website receiving up to 600 views per post and a Facebook page and Twitter feed with over 100 and 600 followers respectively.[11] It is clear that the Campaign is meeting a local need for information and alternatives to national policy and is serving as a rallying point. Place planning, the failings of the academy and free school policy, early years testing and damaging cuts to funding are still campaign issues and, in Brighton & Hove, the need to defend provision for those with special needs returned – although this time the focus was pre-school rather than further education. Most recently, the Campaign has published an article highlighting how cuts and the policy of removing schools from the local authority family of schools threatens the good practice teachers have developed in addressing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues.[12] The Campaign, and the campaigns it has supported, are now able to support campaigns elsewhere – for example, the Campaign has supported parents in other local authorities and the stunningly successful Hands Off Hove Park campaign has been able to support anti-academy campaigns across the country. And in April 2016, the Campaign, together with the local NUT, supported parents concerned at the revised, chaotic and damaging Key Stage 1 and 2 curriculum tests (SATs) and campaigned with teachers and parents opposed to the Government's proposals to force all schools to become academies.

Two years on, the Campaign can also reflect on lessons learned in sustaining a local education campaign. Firstly, there is a need for a unity of purpose. What has unified the Campaign are fundamental values of equality and humanity in education and a commitment to challenge an education system which has become riddled with, and too often serves to entrench, inequality whilst also reducing much education to an economic instrumentalism.

Secondly, there is the need for unity in response to the common themes used to diminish or devastate all phases of education and the need for solidarity with all those standing up for education. In Brighton & Hove, the value of a campaign able to bring together all those involved in education, from pre-school via schools and colleges to higher education, has been demonstrated.

Thirdly, campaigns need to be built from the bottom up, owned by local parents and education staff and able to hold politicians to account. Politicians can be supportive but are often subject to party pressures and interests. In Brighton & Hove one MP has been remarkably consistent in her support for the Campaign but this didn't stop some of her party colleagues supporting a proposal for a free school. Another politician stood with lecturers and students opposing the closure of courses for students with special needs but this didn't

prevent her party cutting pre-school services for children with special needs two years later. Another MP has been a vocal supporter of training for young people but was not clearly opposed to the conversion of Hove Park School.

Together, parents, teachers, lecturers and those working in education need to come together, be brave and confident and insist that it is they who talk the language of equality and are the champions of fairness. In Brighton we have shown we can organise, act collectively and make our views heard. We hope others will join us in their local communities to say that privatisation, marketeering and cost-cutting should have no place in education.

Notes

- [1] BBC News (2015) Election 2015: Maps of turnout and party strength. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2015-32624405>
- [2] Anti Academies Alliance 2011. http://antiacademies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/AAA_newspaper_autumn2011.pdf
- [3] BBC News (2014) Luton's Criticised Barnfield Federation to Be Broken Up. 24 July. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-28472854>
- [4] Why Do We Need a Campaign for Education in Brighton and Hove? <https://campaignforeducation.wordpress.com/about/>
- [5] Hands Off Hove Park. <https://handsoffhoveparkschool.wordpress.com/>
- [6] A Manifesto for the Early Years. <https://campaignforeducation.wordpress.com/early-years/>
- [7] See, for example, N. Edmond (2016) What Business Do Universities Have in Academy Schools?, *The Conversation UK*. <https://theconversation.com/what-business-do-universities-have-in-academy-schools-50805>
- [8] Report on the Development of the Education Function in West Sussex. Author: Phil Norrey, Chief Executive, Devon County Council. http://www2.westsussex.gov.uk/learning/schools_forum/2014/december_2014/agenda_item_5_pg_review_annex.pdf
- [9] S. Scott (2015) GCSEs 2015: Local Authority Analysis – Who Did Well? (And Who Did Badly?) <http://schoolsweek.co.uk/gcse-2015-local-authority-analysis-who-did-well-and-who-did-badly/>
- [10] Paul Nuttall (n.d.) A Better Education System for a Better Britain. http://www.ukip.org/paul_nuttall_a_better_education_system_for_a_better_britain
- [11] The Campaign for Education in Brighton and Hove website: <https://campaignforeducation.wordpress.com/>
Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1602521553310591/>
Twitter feed: @brightonedqt
- [12] Some People are Gay: it's time schools fully recognised it. <https://campaignforeducation.wordpress.com/2016/02/10/some-people-are-gay-its-time-schools-fully-recognised-it/#more-537>

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