

# Whose schools are they, anyway?

## A review essay

*Terry Wrigley and Gawain Little*

### ABSTRACT

This review essay brings together reflections on four recent books about the current state of England's school system, how this was brought about and what might be a road to recovery. The books have some overlapping themes such as the academy system, testing, accountability and central political control, but interesting differences of approach; however, all of them raise fundamental questions about system change and the quality of young people's education. The conclusion consolidates and extends the theories from the four books with the aim of enhancing a clear understanding for education campaigners and finding ways forward. Both authors have been actively involved in building Reclaiming Schools, a research network established to underpin the work of the NEU, parents and other activists through reliable knowledge (see [reclaimingschools.org](http://reclaimingschools.org)). The Reclaiming Schools website has regularly drawn on the work of several of these books' authors. Full publication details for each book addressed in the review essay can be found at the end.

**Keywords:** social justice, neoliberal education policy, academisation, systemic change, resistance

### Introduction

Four books have appeared in the past year which take a comprehensive look at the state of the English school system, and how this arose.<sup>1</sup> It is not the intention of this essay review to judge them against one another and choose a winner, as with TV personality shows and cookery competitions. They will appeal to readers in different ways and complement each other in the perspectives they adopt and the ways they illuminate their common theme. There is a core of shared content, supplemented by particular focal issues, as in a Venn diagram.

All of them are important reading. They deal in a holistic way with the collapse of school-based education over the past 30 years, and particularly since 2010. They are all thoroughly researched and referenced. The authors are very experienced, with an extensive history of both engaging with the system and developing a critical analysis. Social justice is central, particularly the impact of poverty and the school response. The authors are passionate about education and the need for a broad and engaging

curriculum - and dare we say it, schools that are actually allowed to care.

The books are not short of villains, both politicians and the leading ideologues of the Right who have been key to reshaping the system. However, this is not a story of individual distortion or destructiveness: central to these books is an attempt to grasp how the prime movers have intervened at a meta-level to create a system in which greed and venality flourish.

All the books, albeit in different ways, seek to develop a theory of how the change has occurred and how a truly educational system can be re-established. This is no easy matter, and even all four books together leave some important questions unresolved. (Hence, our consolidation and extension of this discussion at the end.) However, they are essential texts in stimulating and resourcing resistance to the current mess.

### **Terry Edwards and Carl Parsons, *How to dismantle the English state education in 10 easy steps, Zero Books***

This is an angry and provocative book – and rightly so. The writers’ tone conveys the cynicism with which private interests and big business have captured England’s schools. In its details, this process often looks like trial and error, suck it and see, but the book leaves us in no doubt about the political strategy and central government direction behind it. It is meticulously researched, unveiling devastating facts.

The different stages and dynamics of this monstrous dispossession of a public service are explained chapter by chapter. Of course, it is not a linear process, but one in which the different tactics recur and are redeployed as crises occur and teachers or parents start to resist. These ‘ten easy steps’ include rubbishing state schools, cutting local authority budgets, and removing local oversight.

Chapter 1 describes how some very large businesses without previous experience were able to muscle in and become large-scale providers. For example: Serco moved imaginatively from origins in RCA Records (owned by Sony Music) to operating in health, transport, justice and immigration.

The manoeuvrings of the corporate world are powerfully summarised:

- Have friends in high places (politicians and others) who create laws which let you in
- Establish regulations to give private operators an advantage
- Creep in carefully and seem benign
- Get a seat at the ‘top table’ to talk to and ‘advise’ national policy makers
- Work at polished publicity: branding and mottos work a treat in kidding the public and politicians alike

We are introduced to the organisations running the biggest multi-academies trusts (MAT).

The book has some hard-hitting collections of detail. In chapter 7, 'Pay the few much more and care much less', readers can find a table showing how much the 20 highest-paid trust bosses received. The largest trusts have 50-75 schools, the size of a small local authority, but their chief executives are paid many times more than their equivalent directors of local authority education departments. The highest paid receives a cool £440,000. (That figure from March 2019 has quickly become out of date: Warwick Mansell's blog has just revealed that Harris' leader now receives a staggering £525,000 pay and pensions package (<https://bit.ly/3sGiKH2>). This in a system which is nominally 'not for profit', and which claims to spend taxpayers' money effectively to benefit children.

This isn't the end of the financial exposé. The book reveals how one trust, with only 14 schools, pays its chief executive £225,000 and an extra £175,000 to his wife. Then of course, services can be contracted out to relatives, or you might pay your best mate or school chum ridiculous amounts for ill-defined 'consultancy' or 'training'. The rules are so lax that state regulatory bodies have found it nearly impossible to supervise. (See chapter 8 for some of the biggest scams and scandals uncovered by leaks and investigative journalists).

Chapter 4 of this book shows how confidence in public education has been deliberately undermined to create a foundation for the academy system, then subsequently the data evidencing its failure have been massaged.

In chapter 6 the authors articulate their concern about the elimination of practical and vocational courses from the upper reaches of secondary school, partly by rewriting accountability procedures and criteria. This has radically undermined the notion of a comprehensive secondary education. Michael Gove has worked hard to eliminate not only pre-vocational courses, but also design and technology and the creative arts, to create a curriculum aligned with the expectations and prejudices of a traditional elite, despite the protests of key business leaders.

The story of privatisation links to the wider agenda of neoliberalism, and the book points to a number of these. Privatisation has many aspects, including aligning the curriculum with employers' demands, and neglecting personal and social development, creativity, critical understanding. A protracted struggle is required to change the values of the teaching profession.

Our only concern on reading some pages was that some readers who are less familiar with the story might take some sarcastic explanations at face value, but it is difficult to tell this story without using irony. However, this is part of the book's impact and appeal, for example when the authors imagine the voice of the entrepreneurs now running many schools:

Get real, young graduates! Toughen up, you mid-career waverers! Work it out, you old crumbles! The real world is a tough place and finally we are injecting some realism into the business of education (p29).

**Pat Thomson, *School scandals - blowing the whistle on the corruption of our education system*, Policy Press**

Whilst drawing attention to many phenomena which are indeed a scandal – and the author has collected hundreds – this book focuses closely and reflectively on the nature of the corruption involved. In the early chapters, Pat Thomson engages with various theorists of corruption, and the changing meanings of that word. It extends well beyond what we generally understand, for instance nepotism or cheating, seeking to interpret a range of events such as waste or early school leaving as part of the picture. Indeed, on the first page, she announces that:

The connection between explicit corruption and other ‘bad behaviour’ in the school system is at the heart of this book.

It is important to grasp that, although corruption has an ethical aspect and the perpetrators can indeed be blamed, it is not just a matter of ‘a few bad apples’ but of something systemic: the way the education system is structured generates corruption. Rather like institutional racism, we are faced with institutional corruption, often well concealed by English niceties, like cricket played in whites on the village green, but with grenades. This is why Thomson takes issue with theories of corruption which are limited to individual deceit or theft.

Chapter 2 takes us through the process by which the British civil service moved from aristocratic nepotism and self-interest by introducing an entrance qualification and establishing protocols - and then, representing the interests of neoliberal capitalism, reformed again to its current state. Within this, Sidney Webb’s 1901 pamphlet was a turning point for education to be restructured on the basis of local school boards underpinned by principles of efficiency but also decency. The neoliberal reform, including post 1990s restructuring of the Department for Education, has the following features (p28-9, developed through chapters 4-7):

1. the calculative tools of economism become paramount
2. the state is itself subjected to economic rationalism but is, conversely, its agent, for example by creating ‘markets’ among schools
3. public fora in which policies can be seen and debated are removed (despite a rhetoric of ‘public’-ness)
4. the notion of ‘public good’ is contested and recast

Neoliberal reforms across society soon entailed a dramatic rise in inequality, the sale of state assets, an attack on trade union powers and deregulation of the finance industry. A restructuring and re-culturing of the state followed. Concerns were frequently expressed about unequal outcomes in education but without seeking to change the

structures that generated these outcomes, whether within the school system or through economic polarisation.

This book brings out key examples of corruption and malpractice in academies, including some notable ‘scandals’ which hit the headlines, and in some cases the criminal courts, but the main aim of chapters 4 and 5 is to analyse the systemic corruptions of a system which privileges individual gain over public benefit. It discusses financial irregularities which have been systematically hidden or justified, such as academy ‘sponsors’ not paying their share, debts landing on local authorities or the state, and the ‘re-brokering’ of unsuccessful academies which might taint the brand of the original MAT. The system has reduced headteacher ‘autonomy’ and denied parents a voice, while higher and higher salaries have been paid to the new CEOs, peaking at a package of £550,000 with the Harris Federation. These chapters are a powerful testimony to the work of investigative journalists such as Warwick Mansell and the staff at *Schools Week*. Meanwhile, corruption at school and trust level was facilitated by loose and unenforceable regulations, such as the vague requirement for larger ‘related party transactions’ (work subcontracted to family members) to be ‘at cost’, whatever that means.

Chapter 6 looks at the ‘effects of effectiveness’, in other words the impact of a datafied surveillance system which stigmatises schools based on flawed data, applies damaging sanctions, and narrows curriculum and pedagogies. Chapter 7 is equally strong on analysis, focusing on ‘gaming’ (‘using rules and procedures designed to ensure due process and protection of a system in order to manipulate it to particular ends.’) Examples include using easy to pass vocational certificates with inflated statistical value, entering students with fluent English for EAL exams intended for near beginners, sending home weaker teachers during Ofsted inspections and shipping in more impressive ones, and off-rolling (i.e. deviously excluding) low attaining students.

The final chapters discuss possible remedies. Chapter 8 engages in a hard-to-resolve debate about the role of basic honesty and moral decency compared with the generative effect of structures leading to damaging actions and outcomes. Chapter 9 argues for the centrality of ‘public good’ as the basis for school administration, with management based on wisdom, not just data. It calls for ‘effectiveness’ to be rethought in terms of a reflective public discussion of educational aims.

### **Ruth Lupton and Debra Hayes, *Great mistakes in education policy, and how to avoid them*, Policy Press**

Choosing a marketable title is always important for publishers, with risks of distortion. Just as the previous book as about much more than ‘scandals’, this one might suggest that the problems of the system derive from a few errors of analysis or judgement. Far from

it: it is about systemic errors, not random miscalculations or logical inconsistencies.

Uniquely in this collection, it draws on what is happening in the Australian as well as the English school system. The book begins with a clear explanation of the differences, making it accessible to readers in both places and beyond. Good use is made of case studies in each country, including the testimonies of teachers.

*Mistake 1: turning to the market* is the subject of chapter 6. This looks at various effects where competition takes the place of fair allocation. Paradoxically, competition between schools leads to a situation where, rather than parents choosing schools, schools are finding ways of choosing children. Competition, and threats against less successful schools (usually schools serving poorer areas), makes staff recruitment difficult for weaker competitors. It creates disincentives for schools to collaborate. Surprisingly, limited attention is given to privatisation, including England's academies, or to features of neoliberalism such as New Public Management, though most readers will have little difficulty making connections.

*Mistake 2: Letting test scores drive policy* is dealt with in chapters 3 and 7. England, and increasingly Australia, are characterised by the extensive influence of testing on policy, and statistically registered attainment becomes a diversion from other educational aims. The curriculum narrows, neglecting wider skills and attitudes including those relating to citizenship. Transmission teaching, and teaching to the test, are encouraged. Learning becomes boring and demotivating. Despite the rhetoric of 'closing the attainment gap', students growing up in poverty suffer the most from the above effects. In one teacher's words:

Pupils are not children anymore; they are dots on a graph which must look a certain way. I am leaving teaching because of changes to teaching. I have seen teachers ignore a class because they have to hit data deadlines because that is what is important these days.

*Mistake 3: Over-prescribing teachers' work* is treated in chapter 5 and also chapter 8. Despite the rhetoric of valuing teacher professionalism, the pressures tend towards standardisation and scripting of teaching. Governments are engaging in panic-mongering, turning the public against teachers. The worst effects of straightjacketing teachers plays out in the most disadvantaged areas, where teachers are blocked from adapting and connecting with students. Teachers lives become dominated by bureaucratic tasks, often, in England, from fear of Ofsted; a prime example was headteachers' demands for 'triple marking' because it was believed this would satisfy inspectors. The net result is teachers becoming exhausted, distracted from genuine development, and ultimately leaving the profession.

*Mistake 4: Misunderstanding educational inequalities* is the subject of chapters 4 and 9.

The authors describe a range of measures which are proving damaging to the most disadvantaged. These include encouraging local hierarchies of schools, such that some schools are stigmatised. Ability grouping of various kinds leads to students labelled 'low ability' experiencing a tedious curriculum. Student who become disenchanted are then punished, in the more ruthless academy chains, by isolation regimes, often leading to exclusion by devious means. There have been multiple initiatives for poorer areas, but often short-lived, with insufficient funds, a standardised curriculum, and too much focus on narrow views of attainment. Nothing is done about financial polarisation in the wider society, and judgements about school failure are based on flawed data which take no account of multiple disadvantage, or indeed the benefits some schools enjoy from having students with privileged lives and abundant cultural capital.

*Mistake 5: Leaving education out of education policy making* (chapter 10) explains how politicians educated in elite private schools, and business executives with little knowledge of education, are using flawed knowledge to develop policy. The authors see this as a reason for overreliance on data and on spuriously scientific 'evidence' from trials and meta-analyses. (See p129 for the error of 'effect size'). Professional knowledge developed by teachers in daily interactions with young people is neglected.

Chapter 11 is particularly interesting as a case study which brings many of these 'mistakes' together - the imposition of synthetic phonics, a particular method of teaching reading mandatory in England and being heavily promoted in Australia. The chapter relies on the work of a range of literacy experts, including Margaret Clark, a veteran scholar who has relentlessly coordinated researchers and data around this issue in both England and Australia.

The final chapter, 'There are alternatives', is rather disappointing. It points briefly to neoliberalism before retreating. It mentions some education systems which are moving in a different direction. It outlines some valuable principles and preconditions of change, but unfortunately there is no real discussion of potential levers for change.

### **Nigel Gann, *The great education robbery - how the government took our schools and gave them to big business*, Austin Macauley Publishers**

Nigel Gann is an adviser on governing bodies and an expert on governance. His book draws strongly on this expertise to raise crucial issues about the English school system, beginning with the core question: Whose school is it, anyway?

The text moves between a case study of how a local village school was levered into academisation and takeover by a multi-academies trust, and the wider account and analysis of how England's schools have been alienated from public control.

The local case study tells of a thriving rural primary school which hit some bumpy road when its headteacher retired. There was a shortage of applicants - a familiar story



nowadays - and the deputy reluctantly took the headship but became ill. An adverse Ofsted inspection produced an inadequate judgement.

In earlier times, the local councillors and the LEA advisers would have provided timely support, but this capacity was no longer there; local authorities have been stripped to the bone by government budget cuts and strategic vandalism. Like many others, Somerset had been restructured and re-cultured in accordance with government expectations. They quickly pushed a reluctant governing body towards allowing the school to be taken over by a small MAT located in a rural town with which it had few connections.

The process is a brilliant illustration of how consultation can be turned into a sham by short-circuiting discussion and decision-making. Behind-the-scenes activity led to the appointment of the MAT's chosen candidate, one of its existing teachers, as the village school's new head even before it became an academy.

The case study is reinforced by accounts of three other schools where there had been significant opposition to academisation. There are clear signs of Ofsted's complicity, with inexplicable delays in finalising the report. One was a victim of the concerted Ofsted attack on Steiner schools initiated (on whose behalf?) by Amanda Spielman.

These specific stories provide illuminating detail and help ground the story, but the book's greatest strength is its explanation and analysis of change at national level. It begins by introducing its chosen concept 'corporatisation' (rather than the more generic privatisation) to signify removal of state schools from the overall responsibility of local authorities, and transfer of leadership and governance to independent trusts directly accountable to a government department. The trusts are 'corporate bodies' and their members self-appointed, with few meaningful obligations to parents or students. Individual schools within trusts have no independent legal status, and the governing bodies' powers become only advisory, within whatever parameters the trust decides. In ways which remain untested and ill-defined, the school's buildings and grounds have become the property of the trust. Whilst Nigel Gann acknowledges that many trusts do have good relations with schools and governors, the essential point is that the official structure of relationships works against this.

Much of the book deals with the key players at national level, including Gove (with his close ties to Murdoch), Dominic Cummings and Lord Agnew. 'Comment journalists' are well represented in the inner circle, with a paucity of educational knowledge. Gove is presented as obsessive about 'business' though his links are rarely with productive ones as opposed to money-shuffling buyers-and-sellers. There is a telling comment that Gove took over in 2010 with a strategy that was about destruction, rather than a vision for the future. There is a lovely quote from *The Great Gatsby*:

They were careless people... they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them



together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made (p44).

Whilst this aptly describes conservative governments since 2010, it misses a key aspect of Gove's project as Secretary of State: his obsession with welding neo-classical and neo-conservative practices and values to neoliberalism, and his obsessively serious but shallow espousal of a 'knowledge-based' curriculum. (<http://classonline.org.uk/pubs/item/the-politics-of-curriculum-in-schools>)

Section 3 reinforces the case-study accounts of how school governance is transferred without real consultation, under the heading of 'professional fouls'. The techniques include withholding information, deploying partisan 'objective advisers', misrepresenting the legal situation, having firm decisions already prepared, timing a consultation for the school holidays, and presenting preferred outcomes as faits accomplis. When people ask specific questions, the response is often a scripted claim which does not relate to the question, of the form 'We always take great care of local schools by encouraging collaboration'. Gann describes this as 'lazy evasion' (p139). Parallels can be found elsewhere, of course, for example with fracking. Gann makes the interesting point that Conservatives hate consultation because the rich have fewer local roots and do not particularly need or value local facilities.

In place of public values, we have a system tainted by the 'seven deadly sins' of school corporatisation:

- venality
- deceit
- secrecy
- centralisation
- cronyism
- isolationism
- precariousness

A chapter is devoted to each. The section also includes some of the major financial scandals. (pp201-3)

Drawing on his extensive experience, the author is able to outline key elements of democratic governance - principles and values which the English system works against. These include:

- representativeness - members having the right and duty to represent those who elected them
- diversity - membership should reflect the diversity of the local population
- transparency - a willingness to answer questions and listen to complaints

- being accessible
- encouraging wider discussion of key issues
- developing a shared vision and strategic direction

The final section seeks to outline one possible way to move towards a restoration of democratic control. Recognising the obstacles which might face rapid abolition of trusts, the conclusion suggests turning schools into membership charities, limiting groups of schools to specific localities, and trust boards which are representative and held to account. Given the extent to which local authorities have been underfunded and denuded of expertise, Nigel Gann proposes the establishment of a Local Education Board for each local authority, which would be partly directly elected by the public and partly by governors of schools and other organisations. The key duties would be:

- ensuring universal access to quality comprehensive provision
- ensuring appropriate education for children regardless of need
- enabling cooperation
- ensuring fair admissions
- sharing best practice and enabling innovation
- providing information to the public, and an impartial appeals process

## **Conclusion**

This review essay began by emphasising the shared aims of these new books. One of these is to develop a coherent theory to explain the dramatic transformation which has taken place in England's school system. Each of the books makes a major contribution to that task. Sound theory is essential for effective opposition and building coalitions to bring about change. We will attempt to develop this thinking here.

Villains there are aplenty, but it is clearly inadequate to ascribe these changes to a few (un)heroic individuals. It remains important, however, to grasp how the key players have created systems which spawn hundreds of other greedy people. But explanations based on people can only make sense in terms of the opportunities afforded by the political and economic environment. Any explanation that does not consider capitalism's neoliberal turn remains inadequate.

Beyond the energy and venality and ambition of these individuals, we need to appreciate the way they work. Since Thatcher, the Right have been highly skilled at making meta-level interventions that, whilst appearing technical and bringing some kind of tangible benefits, create deep and systemic change. Key examples include a high level of budgetary autonomy for schools, leaving the local education authority threadbare; primary school tests and the associated accountability machine; the powers of the Secretary of State to dictate curriculum; Ofsted; and academies, including multi-

academy trusts. These carefully chosen strategies - though their full implications may not have been immediately grasped – have had a hegemonic power, in the sense of enabling governments to play to some shared interests among many parents: it is not only ‘middle-class’ parents who become anxious about their children’s futures.

These meta-level changes have entailed a cultural transformation among teachers and parents, changing norms and expectations. It is often difficult to think outside these new norms. For example, ‘assessment’ now has a default meaning of grading and scoring, risk of failure, and a connotation of datafied comparison between schools. A child’s progress through the years is, by default, understood in terms of quantitative measures, rather than a rich multi-dimensional description by the teacher to the parent, around a portfolio of children’s work, of that child’s personal and educational development. We can call this a discursive explanation of change.

Acceptance of the ‘new normal’ has been aided by the tens of thousands of experienced teachers who have been driven out – teachers with strong values, teachers who could no longer stomach what was happening to the children in their care, teachers who couldn’t put up with the bullying, or those who were just too tired to cope any more. This helped extinguish the memory of what a decent education looked like. Whether this was part of the Right’s strategy, it certainly worked in their favour. An earlier and more vigorous resistance might have prevented this.

Since 2010, the strategic measures have increasingly focused on educational ideology and curricular practice. This is something that many opposition groups, including even teacher unions, have fully to appreciate. The latest review of teacher education is not simply a technical evaluation but an attempt to further remove the influence of expert practitioners and researchers from the formation of new teachers, and to remove any opportunity for newcomers to consider the *aims* of education and whether standard practices fulfil them. The emphasis on ‘evidence-based teaching’ (experiments, effect sizes, meta-analysis, Hattie, EEF and the rest) privileges a research model which has been rigorously discredited theoretically, but government continues to throw lavish funding at it because it reinforces and justifies its narrow conceptions of learning. Flattering teachers with the idea that research can be successfully carried out by schools in isolation further serves these purposes: ResearchED was a remarkably clever government strategy, not the creation of teachers, as Gibb has himself acknowledged. Sadly, he has found allies (stooges?) with far greater capacity at using social media than we have.

Part of the Right’s success has consisted of limiting the capacity of opponents to build resistance. In the 1970s, progressive change began to take off because classroom teachers were able to think through curricular and pedagogical changes with the support of local authority advisers and engaged HMIs, in the local environments of teachers’ centres, and the larger gatherings arranged by subject associations. Beyond this, many

engaged teachers were also active in social movements such as the anti-fascist and anti-racist campaigns. It is an urgent challenge to rethink these capacities and networks for our own time.

Finally, why does any of this matter? Some years ago, one of us wrote:

Capitalism has a problem with education. It needs workers who are clever enough to be profitable, but not wise enough to know what's really going on.

To live worthwhile lives in an age where large sections of the global population are suffering from hunger, disease, poverty and war, we need schools which provide good opportunities for young people to engage with these problems in productive ways. To survive at all in an era of global warming, we need teachers and a curriculum which places central importance on the environment. This, if nothing else, should strengthen our collective determination to overturn and replace anti-educational school regimes such as England is burdened with.

## Note

1. The four books considered here are:

*How to Dismantle the English Education System in 10 Easy Steps*. Terry Edwards and Carl Parsons, Zero Books, 2020, 150pp, paperback, £12.99, ISBN 978-1-78904-430-0.

*School scandals - blowing the whistle on the corruption of our education system*. Pat Thomson, Policy Press, 2020, 314pp, paperback, £12.99, ISBN 978-1-44733-855-0.

*Great mistakes in education policy, and how to avoid them*. Ruth Lupton and Debra Hayes, Policy Press, 2021, 216pp, paperback, £16.99, ISBN 978-1-44735-245-7.

*The great education robbery - how the government took our schools and gave them to big business*. Nigel Gann, Austin Macauley Publishers, 2021, paperback, £11.99 ISBN 978-1-39843-271-0.

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