Re-evaluating education as a community good

A way forward for 21st century schooling

Nigel Gann

Abstract

The author's previous articles for *FORUM*, some co-authored with Dr Andrew Allen, propose a radical restructuring of English schooling to enable more effective engagement with the community and a reassessment of the purposes of schooling. What follow here are a few suggestions that individual schools and academy trusts might take up to bring about some innovations independently of legislative change.

Keywords: outcomes; inequality; inaccessibility; autonomy; public utility; common good; participation; community

Introduction

What are the characteristics of statutory education in England currently? There are a number of issues that teachers, schools and educationists identify as obstacles to a fair and equable education system. These seem to be: the embedded inequality of outcomes; the systemic absence of an accessible and locally autonomous system; the elimination of community participation in the ownership of schooling; the focus on transactional outcomes of productivity, materialism and competition. Lying behind all this appears to be a loss of moral purpose; a view of education – and statutory schooling in particular – as a public utility. Instead, we need to focus on schooling as a public – and a community – good.

What is the evidence for the moral vacuum into which schooling has fallen? I want to summarise four key features of the English school landscape. I believe that the country can address this by reorganising the governance of education into elected single-issue local boards overseeing *all* schools providing statutory education, accountable to government and to the community served.[1] But in this article, I raise the issue of how individual schools, academy trusts and their staff and communities might resist the current trends working within the existing structures.

Inequality

Inequality is rooted in private and selective education but infects the entire structure.

DOI 10.3898/FORUM.2022.64.2.11

Professional associations should be pushed to advocate for, at the very least, the removal of charitable status from private schools unless they can produce clear evidence of significant charitable activity. The neglect of non-A-level further education for 16-18-year-olds by local authorities needs to be highlighted by schools. Post-16 non-A-level provision and outcomes are relevant to more than 50 per cent of the student population. Comprehensive tertiary education should also be much more widely available (see, for example, the Augar review).[2]

As American philosopher Michael Sandel writes, we do not expect to achieve equality of outcome merely through the school process. But as Sandel told delegates at the 2012 Labour Party conference: 'Democracy does not require perfect equality. But it does require that citizens share a common life. What matters is that people of different social backgrounds bump up against one another. Because this is how we come to negotiate and abide our differences'.[3]

As Diane Reay, Cambridge professor of education, says:

> There are predominantly middle class comprehensives and predominantly working class and ethnically mixed comprehensives … pupils in the more working class comprehensives get less money per head. They get less qualified teachers. They get higher levels of teacher turnover and more supply teachers. Even if they are in the same schools as middle class children, they are in lower sets.[4]

Why do we accept this?

Inequality of class and income, and therefore of educational outcome, bedevils our schools. The systems in place, especially with increasing academisation, exacerbate the problem.[5] Staff and governors can work to ameliorate this by, for example, resisting in-school and cross-school segregation and enabling positive discrimination for the disadvantaged. Anything else operates against the UN goal 'to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all', and Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.[6]

Inaccessibility and lack of autonomy

The academisation policy since 2010 offers systemic opportunities for venality to and beyond the point of criminality.[7] But at an everyday level, the procedures for openness and lucidity built into the maintained system have been at best diluted, at worst eliminated entirely from the independent state-funded schools.

Oversight of the governance of around 10,000 schools has been removed from the local authority with its community representatives and elected parents and staff, and handed to non-accountable self-perpetuating trust boards, many of them led by businessmen and hedge fund investors with no educational background. Each

academy chain and single academy trust has different funding and governance arrangements imposed by the Department for Education and the Education and Skills Funding Agency, making the accountability of such schools hugely less accessible to the public.

The much-lauded 'autonomy' sold to senior school leaders has proved to be largely a chimera.[8] Minutes of significant governing board minutes are not made available.[9] Meanwhile, quite unacceptable liberties are allowed to be taken – the blatant disregard of conflicts of interest not, we might guess, deleteriously affecting the principal's salary.[10]

Elimination of community participation in school leadership

At a very rough estimate, there are probably around 70,000 fewer school governors in English state-funded schools than there were in 2010. Take, for example, the role of local so-called 'governing' boards. At 'Parkside Academy' (not its real name) studied in depth by Salokangas and Ainscow:

> The governing body was seen at best, as a minor player. Their tasks mostly included: monitoring of strategies, providing assistance when required, and marketing. The evidence … suggests that, in reality, the role of the local governing body was even more peripheral, as the governors themselves were not quite sure how they actually could contribute to decision making in the Academy and over what matters.[11]

The influence or power given to local governing boards (LGBs) is a matter for leadership – senior leaders and trustees. It is an internal decision, open to internal influence, as to whether these bodies have any authority. Nevertheless, despite Department for Education (DfE) rhetoric, there is evidence of creeping unaccountability sponsored by the DfE, which has removed the need for schools to be 'answerable' to communities and parents from its governance handbook.[12]

What should not be open to internal influence, but often is, is whether a trust board complies with DfE regulations:

> The government's favoured multi-academy trusts are routinely failing to follow Department for Education rules stipulating that there should be at least two parents within their schools' governance structures … Fewer than one in four academies controlled by England's largest 10 chains comply with a stipulation, in the Academy Trust Handbook, that there should be at least two parents either on the 'local governing body' associated with each school, or on the trust board itself.[13]

Non-compliance – in the heavily compliance-reliant cultures of the DfE and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) – must be challenged from within, by parents, staff and communities.

It is not uncommon for trusts to routinely ignore regulations and the law itself,

unless they are held to account. Ironically, an academy trust running primary schools in south London and Sussex, 'has a staff conduct policy which seems to ban employees from unapproved engagement with the media, with no mention, in the relevant section of the document, about whistleblowing protections', which might illegally make staff challenges potentially dangerous.[14]

The DfE, local authorities and diocesan boards, though, have found their plans defeated, or at least delayed, by community action, sometimes backed by the law. In Swindon, the Conservative council had to drop plans to convert all schools to academies after the then new education secretary softened the department's position.[15] Individual schools found their governors' plans to academise so strongly opposed by a combination of staff and parents that they were forced to drop them.[16] The coalition was able to find 'good evidence to show that schools remaining within the local authority are more likely to remain good or outstanding than those which convert to academy status'.[17] For schools that feel forced to follow the academisation trend, there are more and less civilised ways of doing so. Some trusts commit themselves to reflecting and accounting to their communities (see, for example, Dartmoor Multi-Academy Trust), while others have nationwide structures that embody a vision of cooperation.

A key feature of cooperative schools, as well as academies, is the belief that schools and academies must respond to the needs of the local context and therefore have a commitment to the local community and stakeholders.[18]

StopWilliam TorbittAcademy (@AcademyStop)

17/01/2019, 21:06

Redbridge has just passed a motion to support our community to prevent our school being forced into becoming an academy. The vote was unanimous! We want to thank Councillor Norman who Moved the Motion, all the councillors who supported and voted.

@antiacademies @warwickmansell

All is not lost when the community – particularly the staff and parents in unison – resists.

A renewed focus on transactional outcomes

The true nature of the current and recent Conservative-led governments' beliefs about education have been, perhaps uncharacteristically, verbalised by Gavin Williamson during his inglorious spell as secretary of state for education: '… we must never forget that the purpose of education is to give people the skills that will lead to a fulfilling

working life'.[19]

A further thing that has changed since the 1960s is the preoccupation with economic efficiency as an educational goal. In 21st-century England, arguments that favour redistribution and public ownership have been overshadowed by political perspectives that accept growing social inequalities and support the free market and privatisation.[20]

This focus on performativity in basic skills has been aided by Ofsted with its simplistic linkage of processes and outputs.[21] So 'raising attainment' became the major, or even only, preoccupation of schools, stifling experimentation and problem-solving, and neglecting to engage with the evidence-lite dogmas propounded by apparently immovable politicians such as Nick Gibb at the DfE. Once he had finally been removed, even the hitherto immutable creed of synthetic phonics as the only route to reading began to be questioned.[22]

Schools need to look closely at what and how they teach to ensure that they are not practising a narrow, unbalanced curriculum founded on spurious but officially approved evidence. The decline of music, art and drama in schools, often at the expense of student learning, can be indicative of a fear in schools of confronting the rigid powerbase of a dictatorial government.

Conclusion

But it need not be so. All of these factors I have raised above can be at least partly addressed and ameliorated by internal action of staff, leaderships and trust or governing boards, by: providing a truly broad and balanced curriculum; avoiding social and academic segregation; engaging the community in school leadership; employing comprehensive principles throughout the school; making extended provision for community learning, social and leisure activities.

Education has been treated as a public utility – a government provision designed to underpin the country's infrastructure and enable its economy. But we have a duty to restore its place as a common good – an entitlement to ensure citizens' rights to personal wellbeing and growth, to enrich our culture and to work towards enabling citizens to share a communal life. For most of us who have been raised and educated in state schools, that social life may be our most valued possession. The primary purpose of our schools must be to enable the building of those communities.

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2021) records the corporatisation of English schooling since 1988.

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Notes

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