

In place of academies

Where next for democratic school governance?

Michael Pyke

Abstract

In spring 2022, the campaigning group Reclaiming Education organised two webinars to explore the impact of academisation and consider alternatives, principally a return to local authority oversight or the establishment of local education boards. Speakers at the second event included Nigel Gann, Georgia Gould, Anntoinette Bramble and John McDonnell MP. Upwards of 100 people attended. This article outlines the main points made.

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Nigel Gann, former headteacher, educational consultant and author of *The Great Education Robbery*, drew attention to a fundamental flaw in the academies programme. Its governing structures are often in the hands of people who are not suitably qualified to supervise the education of children. This raised the urgent question of whether publicly provided education should be regarded as a common good or merely as a public utility – an important distinction because the notion of a common good implies that all recipients have an equal entitlement to be well-educated, regardless of their social position. The idea of a public utility, by contrast, implies a set of outcomes that are largely transactional. This attitude of mind was exemplified by former education secretary Gavin Williamson when he stated that the purpose of education is to instil into children the skills necessary for a fulfilling working life. Such an approach treats children unequally. It deprives the community of engagement with, and control over, the institutions in which their children are educated. And it removes from the workforce their professional autonomy. These are all characteristics of the model of education favoured by government since 2010.

Nigel suggested a four-point framework for reform:

1. the development of a national education service based upon common standards and principles
2. the introduction of local education boards with a duty to oversee all statutory provision
3. the designation of schools as membership charities owned by the community

4. the introduction of a curriculum which, as well as being broad and balanced, is responsive to local, as well as national, needs.

Georgia Gould, leader of Camden Borough Council, reminded everyone that there had been a disastrous real terms fall of 9 per cent in education funding since 2010. In spite of this, Camden had worked hard to develop a successful model of local authority (LA) stewardship, as shown by the fact that no Camden schools had chosen to become academies. Central to the model was the principle that education should develop the whole person. To put this principle into effect, Camden had developed a joint venture between the LA and its schools called 'Camden Learning'.¹ This scheme brings together representatives from schools and the LA in a series of 'hubs' designed to produce a collaborative approach across Camden's schools to a wide variety of issues and matters of concern. Camden Learning has developed collaborative policies for knife crime, the avoidance of pupil exclusions and ensuring that ethnic minority children see themselves properly reflected in the curriculum. There are, among others, hubs for maths, English, oracy and the arts. Among its other achievements, Camden has developed an in-house school maintenance service, offers free instrumental tuition to children eligible for free school meals and has established a number of youth opportunity programme centres.

Like all local government, Camden had suffered financial problems caused by the decline in funding from central government. Poverty was forcing some families to relocate out of the borough. Nevertheless, Camden offered a successful model of LA governance. In the light of the new White Paper, it may be forced to set up its own academy trust but will do so only as a last resort.

Anntoinette Bramble, deputy mayor of Hackney council, reinforced the message that LAs continue to have a valuable role in the education service in spite of government attempts to downgrade them. Anntoinette had played an important part in developing for Hackney schools 'the diverse curriculum' – an approach which ensured that ethnic minority children were properly represented within the school curriculum, both currently and historically.² This was important because the standard curriculum tends to ignore the contribution of ethnic minorities to UK life and avoids uncomfortable but essential discussions around race and ethnicity. A major aim of the diverse curriculum was to bring to light 'untold stories': for example, that in Roman Britain there were black dignitaries. The diverse curriculum was taught in units which were directly linked to the national curriculum. More than 2000 schools (including some in foreign countries) have now signed up for the programme and its associated training. The success of the programme has led to the development of plans for expansion, particularly in the field of 'untold stories'.

Anntoinette was at pains to emphasise that the diverse curriculum should not be seen as 'for' any one group. It was for everyone. She felt that initiatives such as the

diverse curriculum would be much less likely to develop within a multi-academy trust (MAT) and that the White Paper's ambition to move all schools into MATs was unhelpful and would lead to further fragmentation of education provision in the state sector.

John McDonnell MP paid tribute to the achievements of Camden and Hackney in the face of massive reductions in funding from central government – £100 billion since 2010. He argued that public institutions must be under democratic control because, for the majority of people, democracy is the only available source of power. The academy programme has allowed private interests to exercise control over public services and could lead to the full privatisation of our schools. The White Paper was crushingly disappointing in its desire to hand over all schools to MATs: 63 per cent of primary schools had resisted 10 years of pressure to become academies so the government was now planning to force them to submit. To restore schools to democratic oversight, Labour should plan to:

- end the academies programme
- develop the national education service promised in the 2019 manifesto
- ensure that parents and teachers are fully involved in planning and development
- ensure that education is properly funded
- integrate schooling with other public services and end the practice of 'outsourcing' ancillary services
- end 11+ selection and integrate private schools into the state system.

Current Labour policy looked to avoid these difficult issues by disinterring the Blairite slogan of 'standards, not structures'. John felt Labour should learn from the good practice of some of its own councils, who engage properly at community level. An ethos of collaboration between schools offered a far more effective approach than did the competitive model favoured by the government. As an organisation, Reclaiming Education needs to make every effort to engage with the Labour front bench in order to strengthen opposition to current policy.

In considering the question of which structure might best restore local democratic accountability to the education sector, everyone agreed that the current model, whereby academies are directly responsible to Whitehall via regional schools commissioners, was not working. Nigel Gann defended his idea of elected school boards by arguing that local government was currently overwhelmed by the breadth of its responsibilities, and that school boards would have a better focus. Perhaps unsurprisingly in view of their public roles, the other speakers favoured the restoration of LAs.

As for how schools might build better relationships with the parents of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) children, and who makes the strategic decisions which determine the context in which this can be done, Georgia and

Anntoinette described the practice in Camden and Hackney. They noted that strategies are developed collaboratively by teachers and parents. These strategies are successful up to a point, but are handicapped by inadequate finance.

So what is the best way forward? Nigel Gann argued that a major impediment to reform was that parents and the community generally do not have a good understanding of the intricacies of the education system. This needs to be remedied in order to achieve full democratic participation. Anntoinette stressed the importance of working through Labour councils at grassroots level. Georgia stressed the importance of collaboration rather than competition and also suggested that multi-academy trusts could be made accountable to local authorities.

As stimulating and productive as the webinars were, one aspect vital to the discussion was not adequately addressed. In presenting an alternative to the academisation programme, now reinvigorated via the recent White Paper, a detailed account of how the obvious faults of academy governance actually affect children's learning must be put forward, along with a properly argued account of how a different structure will benefit that learning. Drawing attention to poor governance structures, financial waste and the potential for corruption may not, in the end, be effective if parents are unaware or unsure of how much better their children's education might be within an improved structure.

Also missing was a realistic political strategy for restoring democratic control over our schools. As John McDonnell pointed out, local government has lost £100 billion of direct grant since 2010. Many councils are simply not in a position to revert to the kind of LA structures that existed before that date, even if there were a government in power with the necessary political will to bring such a restoration about.

Perhaps future webinars might focus on these issues?

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Notes

1. See: <https://camdenlearning.org.uk>
2. See: www.hackneyservicesforschools.co.uk/extranet/hackneys-diverse-curriculum