

Education after the elections – a fast changing landscape

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On 10th June 2010, I attended the BERA Social Justice Seminar on *The future of education after the elections* at Birmingham University. This paper aims at summarising and analysing the findings of the conference, based on the speakers' contributions and papers, and my own understanding of the current shaping of the educational landscape.

I will first look at the rhetoric underpinning the government's choices on education, then go beyond the headlines to what is really happening to our education system and the potential consequences of current policies, and conclude by exploring what the future holds and by offering some possible alternatives.

The political landscape

One only needs to open a newspaper or listen to the news to realise that everywhere there is talk of radical changes in the education landscape, particularly with the Academies programme and the Free Schools reforms. Should we be worried or does this herald a brand new, exciting start for education, with real power to the stakeholders, away from central government? Education Secretary Michael Gove tells us that the new system will bring increased autonomy, thus liberating the teaching community from Labour's bureaucracy; encouraging interested groups (e.g. teachers, parents, charities, corporate philanthropists) to set up better schools in disadvantaged areas; giving schools more choice over the curriculum and promising a less stringent regime of school inspections. It will also bring increased choice for parents disappointed by the quality of their local state schools and more importantly will close the achievement gap between rich and poor students, as shown by the Swedish Free School model and the US Charter School model (Gove 2010).

Historically, however, none of this is new. The current trend of freedom from central government and of marketisation started in the 1970's, continued during the Thatcher years and beyond and was pushed forward with renewed energy by the Labour government, underpinned by their four mechanisms for the reform of public sector: increased users' choice, solid top down performance management, increased market efficiency and workforce development (Cabinet Office 2006). We therefore live in a transformed education landscape, where the number of players (such as charities, private sector organisation, faith groups, philanthropists, trusts etc) has hugely increased in an effort by the state to use them to deal with very difficult issues such as failing schools or behaviour issues in disadvantaged areas. An example of this would be the 'Teach First' initiative, aimed at encouraging exceptional graduates into becoming outstanding teachers and leaders in challenging schools. The scheme is supported and

funded by a number of foundations, trusts and banking groups and promotes a very entrepreneurial philosophy of the curriculum. We are thus witnessing the creation of an increasingly opaque network of organisations – both for- and non-profit – working in an uncomfortable (and almost untraceable) partnership with the State, and with often diverging agendas (Ball 2010).

Current policy choices

Beyond the Government's rhetoric, Richard Hatcher, a speaker at the conference, analysed the real drivers behind the dismantlement of the state education. The motivation for the government to develop market relations within schools is to first and foremost create a more competitive environment underpinned by the right labour market. Other drivers include:

- pursuing a social justice agenda that encourages social mobility in the work place while also maintaining the middle class's privileged position with regards to access to education;
- developing opportunities for 'edubusiness';
- consolidating the government's electoral support;
- carrying out conservative ideologies and, ultimately, seeking re-election (Hatcher 2010).

These do not always sit comfortably with the above mentioned concepts of autonomy, increased parents' choice and reduced inequality; and let's not forget that this is happening within the backdrop of drastic cuts to the public sector as a whole.

The future of education

The consequences of the marketisation of education are many, with some still to be seen as the system takes shape. Hatcher, citing Lubienski (2009) states that increased market competition tends to create a return to more traditional methods of education and a general standardisation of the system. David Cameron has described his unashamed preference for a traditionalist view of the curriculum, 'with children sitting in rows, learning the kings and queens of England, the great works of literature, proper mental arithmetic, algebra by the age of 11, modern foreign languages. That's the best training of the mind and that's how children will be able to compete' (*Times* 6th March 2010). This could be seen in direct contradiction with the promised increased autonomy of schools which might want to pursue more progressive teaching methods such as the ones proposed in the Rose and Cambridge Primary Reviews (Rose 2009, Alexander 2009). Schools in Sweden and the US run by for-profit companies tend to adopt a standardised model of delivery to maximise their profit. Standard sets of books and resources are provided for all schools and can be delivered by less qualified – and thus less expensive – staff (Lindhal 2010).

Additionally, in breaking away from local authorities, schools are able to curtail the

essential support services that they would normally offer, in an effort to save money. Services such as counselling, dyslexia support, speech therapy will now have to be bought by schools – either from local authorities or direct providers – and it is unclear whether these services will remain even though they provide a vital service for a large number of vulnerable students who rely on them to remain in education.

Ultimately, the question is whether or not an opening of education to the market economy raises standards. While Michael Gove tells us in no uncertain terms that there is a strong correlation between a rise in standards and the Free School / Academy system, research has so far shown that this is not necessarily the case. Harper notes that ‘some academies have registered above average levels of improvement, but the principal factor is that they have admitted a higher proportion of children from better-off families, who are statistically more likely to succeed academically. The percentage of free school meal pupils in Academies has fallen from 45% in 2003 to 29% in 2008’ (Harper 2010). PricewaterhouseCoopers’s 2008 report concluded that ‘there is insufficient evidence to make a definitive judgement about the academies as a model for school improvement’ (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2008). Similar findings are reported for the Charter School system in the US. According to Bendor et al (2007), ‘numerous studies have shown that the average charter school performs no better, and in some cases performs slightly worse, than the average public school’. Lindhal, when reporting on attainment in Swedish schools, found little evidence of increased standards in Free Schools; ‘we do not find any impact on medium or long-term educational outcomes such as high school GPA, university attainment or years of schooling. We conclude that the first order short term effect is too small to yield lasting positive effects’ (Bohlmark and Lindhal 2008). These findings cast a shadow over Michael Gove’s optimistic view that the opening of the school system will reduce the attainment gap. As things unfold in front of our eyes, we will have to see whether the system does bring improved standards and reduces inequality or whether schools need to be closed because they cannot meet their targets.

By the end of the day, I was left with the question of what is worse, a local authority-run school which is indeed overburdened with bureaucracy and ever expanding targets, or a local school run by an obscure religious group or a banking group with interests in dubious businesses? The answer might lie in a possible alternative in which academics, unions, parents and schools come together, not necessarily to stop the tidal wave of changes proposed by the government, but to at least have an honest debate about the current state of education and what is best for children and young people. Alasdair Smith, General Secretary of the Anti-Academies Alliance made a passionate speech at the conference about the importance of maintaining the state system of education to preserve jobs and essential services and to ensure accountability (Smith 2010). Patrick Ainley also supports this view and warns of the consequences for HE and FE if the government’s preferred policies are adopted, such as an increased gap between the ‘Russell’ and ‘New Universities’ that will ‘serve to soften up the system for a free-market in fees differentiated by subject and institution’. He also argues that there will be an even bigger separation between academic and vocational institutions, thus creating a two-tier

system where FE colleges are left to prepare for work an increasing number of working class or disadvantaged students who do not 'fit' the academic profile, and to offer 'apprenticeships without jobs' as the number of jobs decreases with the current economic recession (Ainley 2010). The current cohort of pupils and young people might not be a 'Lost Generation' as Ainley's book suggests, but the picture is certainly bleak and will require a relentless scrutiny and debate by all stakeholders. I will be watching.

References

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