Afterword
Polyvalent and incoherent: the academies programme and the English educational apparatus

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As I have written before, the English academies programme is a policy condenstate (Ball, 2007). That is to say, the programme, as first conceived in 2000 and through its various subsequent iterations, ‘carries’ and brings together a set of diverse policy goals and discourses. The 2000 Learning and Skills Act introduced what was called the City Academies programme. Initially part funded by a private sponsor, academies were intended ‘to improve pupil performance and break the cycle of low expectations’ (David Blunkett). For New Labour it also served as an experiment in and a symbol of education policy beyond the welfare state and is an example and indicator of more general shifts taking place in governance and regulatory structures. Innovation, inclusion and regeneration were tied together in the initial academies rhetoric and, to some extent, at least, were realised in practice. The programmes were intended to address local social problems and inequalities and histories of ‘underachievement’. These first academies were also meant to enact a new set of potential relations between education and the economy, within which schools were required to take much more responsibility for fostering ‘knowledge cultures’ as part of economic regeneration programmes in ‘entrepreneurial localities’ and in relation to the requirements of the digital workplace.

In a later version of the programme, it was intended that the schools should become the hubs of local school networks geared to relevant sectors of the local economy. They were also to stand in open relation to their communities and provide community facilities of various kinds. Finally, they were intended to blur welfare state demarcations between state and market, public and private, government and business, and introduce and validate new agents and new voices within policy itself and into processes of governance; they were indicative of a ‘re-agenting’ (Jones, 2003) of education policy.

Specifically, the first set of academies drew in and on the ‘energies’ of entrepreneurial and policy ‘heroes’ and social entrepreneurs and mobilised business philanthropy – with ARK being the most prominent example.
In various ways through the academies programme, specialist schools, Teach First and other means philanthropy became reincorporated into state policy as a way of avoiding both bureaucratic and market difficulties in bringing about change, and facilitating ‘faster’, less durable and often very personal policy action.

However, the academies programme is also a polyvalent policy. Much of the initial New Labour modernisation agenda has ‘worn away’ over time – and is perhaps now more focused on studio schools and UTCs, and academies have provided Conservative secretaries of state with a vehicle for a restorationist agenda. The programme has even become a haven for private schools struggling to survive in difficult economic circumstances and most grammar schools (140 of 163) are now academies.

The programme has put philanthropy, voluntarism and faith schooling very much back on the education policy agenda (see below). The concomitant sidelining of Local Authorities arguably signals the break-up of the ‘national system of education locally administered’, alongside a steady increase in powers held and used centrally. The geographies of power within which education policy is constructed have shifted. The places that matter for policy are both more focused and more dispersed – focused in the powers held by the Secretary of State but also dispersed, locally, nationally and internationally, to different kinds of people; like parent groups and academy chains, edubusinesses and EdTech companies, philanthropies, faith groups, contractors and consultants. Boundary-spanning policy gurus, ‘thought-leaders’ and policy entrepreneurs move between national systems carrying with them policy solutions and stories of ‘what works’. All of this constitutes a move towards a ‘polycentric state’ and a ‘bloated market state’ (Gray, 2010). These new actors are the state and are doing statework. What is going on here in terms of new governance cannot be reduced to a matter of party politics or ideology. These changes and moves are part of a generic global shift in public service policy discourses – in language, ideas, organisation, technologies, practices and experience. The education experience is remade as part of this shift. Keast et al. (2006: 27) argue that: ‘This situation leads to governance complexity and what is contended to be a “crowded” policy domain in which differing governance arrangements, policy prescriptions, participants and processes bump up against each other to cause overlap and confusion...’. However, it is important not to misrecognise what is happening here. This is not a ‘hollowing out’ of the state; rather, it is a new modality of state power, agency and social action – a form of metagovernance (Jessop, 2002: 242). Public services are increasingly delivered through a mix of ‘strategic alliances, joint working arrangements, networks, partnerships and many other forms of collaboration across sectoral and organizational boundaries’ (Williams, 2002: 103)
based upon relations involving mutuality and interdependence as opposed to hierarchy and independence.

The programme is one example amongst many of a developing alternative infrastructure of policy and provision in education, what Wolch (1990) calls a ‘shadow state’; that is, a space in which hierarchical and bureaucratic relations are being replaced by complex and opaque heterarchical relations. These changes are not simply about who does what; they are also changing the forms, purposes and values of public service and the form and modalities of the state itself. One indication of value changes is the proliferation of cases of ‘corruption and corrupt practices’ in these schools (Thomson, 2020). Thomson’s book *School Scandals* carefully documents ‘the ways in which systemic and systematic changes in the cultures and structures of schools, and the education bureaucracy, have led to an ongoing series of ‘unpublic’ practices which produce and reproduce a highly uneven socio-economic playing field’ (2020: 5).

Overall, the polyvalency and diversity of the programme in some ways mirrors the Local Authority system it has been replacing. In his speech to the Social Market Foundation in 2002, David Blunkett, then Secretary of State, asserted:

Far too many schools are under-performing in terms of the outcomes for their pupils. Many of these schools are working very hard and doing good things in difficult circumstances. But that is not enough if the outcomes for the young people do not fit them for further education and the world of work. No single approach will solve all problems, but radical innovation in the creation of new schools is one option. City academies will provide for this.

However, research evidence on the performance of academies is confusing and contradictory. For example:

New research released today by the Department for Education shows the staggering impact of academy status on some of the poorest schools in the country. It shows that, between 2005/6 and 2010/11 results for Sponsored Academies improved by 27.7 percentage points – a faster rate than in other state-funded schools (14.2%) and at a faster rate than in a group of similar schools (21.3%). (Michael Gove, speech, 26 June 2012)

The Annual Report of 2015/16 by Ofsted commented that: ‘inspection evidence, research and analysis continues to find that, while becoming an academy can be beneficial for some schools, there is not a clear or substantial difference between the performance of academies and schools maintained by local authorities.’

Education company SchoolDash found that most primary academies are ‘converter’ academies, which tended to be high-achieving before becoming academies. The research found ‘no evidence’ that academy status brought
improvements to these schools or that such schools were any better than their local authority counterparts. The smaller number of ‘sponsored’ academies, more likely to have been previously under-achieving, made more progress when they became academies.²

Significant differences in terms of exam performance, progress improvement and inspection grading are not simply apparent between academies and non-academy schools but also between academies, between trusts and between academies in the same trust. Furthermore, a Datalab study found that nine Multi-Academy Trusts closed or had all of their schools re-brokered in 2017–18. This includes Bright Tribe, Wakefield City Academies Trust and Perry Beeches the Academy Trust.

Wakefield City Academies Trust (WCAT), which was paused between 2012–13 and 2013–14 took on 11 more schools, only to announce in September 2017 that it was going to give up all its academies.

Since 2011–12, the government has formally paused the growth of 58 academy trusts, with the expansion of 13 still officially blocked.

TES has identified a number of trusts that received official warning or pre-warning notices about standards, or financial notices to improve, after having their pause lifted – or that were never formally paused in the first place.³

A 2018 National Audit Office Report also concludes with some comments that gesture towards a recognition of the systemic disarray that the academies programme has brought about.

There is substantial variation across the country, in the relative proportions of maintained schools and academies and in the availability and capacity of sponsors to support schools most in need. This complicated position means that it is incumbent on the Department to clarify its policy and make sure that the school system is coherent with all of its parts working effectively together. This will be crucial to secure value for money and provide children with access to good end-to-end schooling.⁴

In the current system of education in England, the sort of school your child may attend and their experience of education depends on where you live. Regional and local variations in access to schools of different types are stark.

Over and against all of this, by far the greater part of variance in student performance is explained by factors not related to school but to social background.⁵ Poor performance is strongly related to the conditions of family life and problems of poverty, nutrition, homelessness and unemployment but also to parental education and aspiration and support. In this sense it would be reasonable to argue that education policy is looking at and working on the wrong place and is bound to fail if the socio-economic conditions of students’ home lives remain dramatically unequal.
Bearing this in mind, and looking across the enormous variety of very basic reforms in the ways in which education is governed, structured and organised that have been introduced over the past 25 years, it is possible to see the contemporary traces, and re-emergence, of social patterns and organisational forms and political preoccupations within education policy that have been inherent in the English education system since its beginnings in the nineteenth century. In particular, the social differentiations that were part of the basic building blocks of state education in the nineteenth century, especially those involving social class, continue as significant features of the policies and politics of education. Over and against the rhetorics of meritocracy and social mobility, selection and segregation are an insistent sub-text of post-1988 education policies. This sub-text is evident now in the increasing diversity of types of schools and diversity of schools of the same type, in the re-establishing of separate vocational and non-school-based curriculum routes for some students post-14, in the defence and celebration of grammar schooling, in schemes for gifted and talented children, in setting by ability, in the continuing regional disparities in school performance and university entrance, and in the processes of educational ‘triage’ which have been brought into play by competitive performance requirements and benchmarking.

Alongside this, the increased ‘fuzziness’ of the system as a whole creates new possibilities for relational choosing and opportunity hoarding for some social groups who are able to navigate the systems using their particular class capitals. The variations in provision and performance are difficult for many parents to navigate, which calls up tactical behaviour, and on occasion deception and bad faith – on both sides (choice on the one hand and recruitment on the other – as suggested earlier). The education market is rife with gaming (Foley and Goldstein, 2012), and allows agile and well-resourced middle-class parents to seek out and maintain social advantage in educational settings where there are others ‘like them’ (Ball and Vincent, 1998).

Differences between schools in terms of both intake and relatedly performance are maintained and exacerbated by an economy of student worth that gives high value to those from homes with supportive and informed parents and with high prior attainment, and where they are able schools will seek to recruit such students. And low value is given to others, with special educational needs or histories of behavioural difficulty, low prior performance or English as a second language, who are avoided if possible.

In all of this, rather than a system, we have and have had since its inception a rickety, divided, unstable and often ineffective but nonetheless over-bearing educational apparatus currently held tenuously together by a regime of testing and league table reporting that puts pressure on schools.

English education remains mired in its history. The current educational apparatus bears more than a passing resemblance to the system pre-1870,
inasmuch that there are costs (direct and indirect)\(^8\) to parents, issues of uneven attendance (or exclusion), marked regional variations and a diversity of providers working within a system of ‘payment by results’. This is a new ‘patchwork’ full of gaps but with churches and philanthropists as major providers.

All that being said, there are always ‘gaps’ between policy and practice, between policy fantasies and quoditian enactments. The diversities noted above suggest some aspects of those gaps. Policies are conceived in policymakers’ heads in relation to schools and circumstances that rarely exist in the real world. Enactments vary by context, commitments, resource availability and chance factors. The questions raised by the realities of enactment, and the gaps between policy and practice, formed a point of entry into the sociology of education for me and several of my peers. For myself, my PhD thesis, later published as *Beachside Comprehensive* (1981), was an attempt to understand the practice of comprehensive education in one school, a school that took the idea of comprehensive education seriously. Many schools and many Local Authorities did not take comprehensive education seriously and submitted plans to government (in response to the Department of Education Circular 10/65) that were merely satisficing. But even at Beachside the enactment of *comprehensivism* varied between departments in relation to differences in subject cultures and their attendant ‘philosophies’ of education. Beachside was intended to ‘get inside’ the comprehensive ideal, to understand its possibilities ‘on the ground’ within the everyday demands of school life – rather than within the fantastical imaginings inside the heads of government ministers. Other researchers undertook similar case study investigations in other comprehensive schools, like Bob Burgess (1983), Phil Carspecken (1991) and John Abraham (1995), all of us building on Colin Lacey’s (1970) grammar school study, and David Hargreaves’ (1967) and Peter Woods’ (1979) secondary modern school case studies. More recently, in the same ethnographic tradition, Christy Kulz (2017) offers a close-up view of how one academy school ‘works’. Working at a different level Ehren and Godfrey (2017) and Salokangas and Chapman (2014) have done case studies of academy trusts. And there are many, many other examples. The value of such research is its ‘otherness’ to policy, that is, ethnographic insight into the messy, contested, difficult and cluttered world of teaching and learning and school organisation as experienced by ordinary children in ordinary schools.

One recurring theme of these accounts is the inequities and exclusions that abound within the differentiation of subject possibilities and social intelligibility that school offers to learners, and how those possibilities make up students from different backgrounds with different capitals available to them, in different ways. In a sense, the more things change the more they stay the same. From Hightown Grammar, to Beachside, to Dreamfields Academy, we
see the unchanging institutional and disciplinary epistemology of schooling. The school is a particular site, a point of concatenation, at which the subject is concentrated and enacted, through patterns, clusters and models – we call them levels, sets, streams, bands, specialisms, withdrawal units, etc. The school hails and labels the learner as a social fact (of competence, level, qualification, score, achievement). In sum, the school is a ‘bundle of relations which tie … power, the truth, and the subject’ (Schmidt, 1996: 37) together. The origins and rationale of modern schooling and its pastoral disciplinary procedures are the production of nation-state subjects, productive and useful workers and moral and responsible learners – a ‘moral orthopaedics’ as Deacon calls it: ‘Schooling taught not only punctuation, but also punctuality, and not only reading, but also hygiene; it taught that learning should not only entail gratification but also requires chastisement’ (Deacon, 2005: 89). We misread the school if we attempt to reconcile it with socially radical concepts like inclusion, equality, critical thinking, solidarity or self-flourishment. And in particular the school experience for those deemed as failing or underperforming: those ‘with behavioural difficulties’, who are ‘hard to reach’, who lack character or resilience or aspiration, who have special needs, is the experience of not being truly and properly human. The dark side of the school experience – punishment, exclusion, abuse, assimilation, shame, civilisation, etc. – are related to this moral displacement and the failure to fit within the school universal (see Ball and Collet-Sabé, 2021).

In a sense then, ethnographies of schooling tell us things we do not want to know, things policy-makers do not want to hear. They make schooling intolerable.

Notes

7 This may be changing; data released (18 January 2018) by the Department for Education (DfE) shows that children who grow up speaking a language other
than English now have a higher attainment score than their native-speaking peers by the time they are 16.

8 A NASUWT survey conducted in 2017 based on almost 4,000 responses found that almost one in five parents in the UK is being asked to set up payments to their children's schools; 18% of parents have been asked to sign up for direct debits or standing orders for their children's school, typically of about £50 per year; more than one in 20 parents with children in state schools were paying £400 or above; a further 13% of parents had been asked to make donations in cash or cheques, see: www.nasuwt.org.uk/article-listing/access-education-increasingly-parents-ability-pay.html (accessed 1 December 2021).

References


