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Education in England – a testbed for network governance?

Geoff Whitty*, Bath Spa University, UK & University of Newcastle, Australia, and **Emma Wisby**, UCL Institute of Education, UK

*Corresponding author: Professor Geoff Whitty, Bath Spa University, Newton Park, Newton St Loe, Bath BA2 9BN, UK. Email: g.whitty@bathspa.ac.uk

Abstract

Since devolution in the late 1990s, education policy in England has diverged further from that in Scotland and also from policy in Wales and Northern Ireland. In this paper we review the roots and trajectory of the English education reforms over the past two decades. Our focus is the schools sector, though we also touch on adjoining reforms to early years and further and higher education. In so doing, we engage with various themes, including marketization, institutional autonomy, and accountability. Changes in governance arrangements for schools have been a defining feature of education reforms since devolution. This has been set against an evolution in national performance indicators that has put government priorities into ever sharper relief. In theorising the changes, we pay particular attention to the suggestion that the English education system now epitomises the concept of ‘network governance’, which has also been applied to education in a global context. We question the extent to which policies have in practice moved beyond the well-established mechanisms of ‘steering at a distance’ and undermined the very notion of an education system in England. We conclude by considering possible futures for education policy and how they may position England in relation to other parts of the UK and the wider world.

Keywords: education policy; England; schools; social democracy; marketization; network governance

Introduction

English and Scottish education policies were markedly different well before parliamentary devolution in 1998, especially in relation to schools policy, which had long been a devolved responsibility in administrative terms. Education policies in Wales and Northern Ireland had hitherto been much more similar to those in England, although with some distinctive characteristics of their own. However, a peculiarly English approach to education reform had already begun to emerge since the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) and 1992 Education (Schools) Act. Although other jurisdictions had their own watered down versions of the ERA, devolution in 1998 allowed them to break free and follow their own paths. England, however, continued to follow the direction set by the Thatcher government in the 1980s.

During the 1970s there had been growing antipathy in England towards the ‘swollen state’ of the immediate post-war years. This was largely for economic reasons concerning the level of public expenditure. But under the 1979 Thatcher government it became coupled with a market choice critique of public sector management. In the case of education this focused increasingly on the role of the so-called ‘educational establishment’—principally left-leaning teaching unions, inspectors and teacher trainers—who seemed to favour what the Conservatives saw as highly questionable ‘progressive’ or ‘child-centred’ approaches to

teaching. Local Education Authorities (LEAs) were also implicated, their central role in the allocation of school places seen as stifling the need for schools to innovate or to respond efficiently, if at all, to parental concerns (Shleifer, 1998). Taken together, the Conservatives argued, 'progressive' teaching methods and state allocation of places had brought a dull uniformity to the system and a levelling down of standards. Accordingly, throughout their time in office, the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major acted to increase the power of the 'consumer' and reduce that of the 'producers'. They did so through the introduction of greater parental choice over the school their children would attend, and increased differentiation of the types of schools parents could choose from. This was achieved in part by introducing new types of school, such as grant maintained schools and city technology colleges, autonomous from local authorities. Another new type of school – the specialist school – was permitted to select up to 10 per cent of pupils on the basis of aptitude for the school's specialism. These schools also had greater freedoms in relation to the curriculum. This was coupled with per capita funding and the devolution of many LEA responsibilities, including funding decisions, to virtually all schools so that they could respond to the market.

However, while the Conservatives were enthusiastic about making schools more receptive to parents' wishes, they were unwilling to relinquish control over the outcomes that schools should achieve. In this, Conservative education policy provides a clear illustration of the tendency for liberal democracies to develop along the lines of the 'strong state' and the 'free economy' (Gamble, 1988) and the associated shift in the way the public sector is co-ordinated and controlled by government, to what can be characterized as 'steering at a distance'. While devolution of responsibilities to individual organisations appears to offer them greater autonomy, the state retains overall strategic control by setting the outputs that providers need to achieve and publishing details of their performance against them (Neave, 1988; Whitty et al., 1998). These indicators arguably influence the priorities of service users, who in turn reinforce the pressure on providers to work to them (Adnett and Davies, 2003). Examples of such central steering mechanisms under the Conservatives included the establishment of the National Curriculum and its associated system of assessment, and the introduction of a new and more intensive approach to school inspection through the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), a new non-ministerial government department. Given the relationship between the profile of a school's pupil intake in terms of prior ability and its performance in league tables, these policies made the issue of school autonomy over admissions one of growing significance within the English system.

In the 1997 general election the Conservative party was heavily defeated by New Labour, under the leadership of Tony Blair. There was, however, a good deal of continuity between the two parties' education policies in England. Indeed, in some respects, the New Labour government took both competition and central steering much further than the Conservatives had. Under New Labour this basic policy framework was presented in terms of furthering social justice through a modernized public sector. This reflected New Labour's founding commitment to the 'Third Way', a concept that Tony Blair adopted enthusiastically as part of his modernisation of the Labour party and abandonment of what were regarded as outdated ideologies (Blair, 1998). Formulated by the sociologist Anthony Giddens, the

Third Way was a pragmatic approach that sought to marry social democracy and the market.

In schools policy there were major new investments intended to raise standards, under the banner of 'a high quality education for all'. These supported a significant extension of early years provision, successive area-based interventions to address poorly performing schools (e.g. Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, London Challenge), as well as efforts to improve the wellbeing of children and young people – delivered through a constellation of policies known as *Every Child Matters*. In New Labour's second and third terms of office there was a shift in emphasis, from that of simply raising standards to also narrowing the socio-economic attainment gap between pupils from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. The result was the introduction of more targeted interventions in order to focus additional resources on pupils who needed greater support, one example being the literacy scheme Reading Recovery. A notable feature of this policy landscape was the way in which New Labour worked through a number of existing and new 'quangos' to take forward its policies, including the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, Training and Development Agency for Schools, and the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency. All this sat, though, against the backdrop of a continued push for a greater diversity of autonomous schools, publication of performance data, and parental choice. Meanwhile, building on the National Curriculum, a series of 'national strategies', first for literacy and numeracy and then for the primary and secondary phases as a whole, provided the basis for further shaping the work of schools in a marketised system. Early years provision received the same treatment, including the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage and related standards.

In higher education policy New Labour placed a strong emphasis on widening participation, the 'flagship' target being to achieve a 50 per cent participation rate in higher education among the 18-30 age group (see Whitty et al., 2016, chapter 5). This was combined with the dramatic development of introducing tuition fees for UK first degree students. The latter was based on the principle that students were as much a beneficiary of attending university as wider society and should therefore make a direct contribution to the costs of their study; the funding of higher education through general taxation was presented as being regressive. When Scotland subsequently abolished fees for its own students, English and Scottish higher education policy diverged, while the other UK jurisdictions adopted variants of the English approach albeit with limited enthusiasm.

In post-compulsory education the New Labour administration will be most remembered for its rejection of the Tomlinson Report of 2004 and the recommendation to create a single diploma qualification for the 14-19 phase. The later 'compromise' of introducing a 14-19 Diploma to sit alongside A-levels was short-lived, though the policy to raise the participation age was more positively received. More generally, New Labour's governance of the further education and skills sector often appeared to lack coherence: in particular, in many instances it was seemingly unable or unwilling to steer the sector more decisively – not least in relation to the repeated calls for a better fit between provision and economic and employer need (Lupton et al., 2015).

Overall, in the immediate years following devolution, education policy in England was characterised by a continued shift away from two long established planks of social democratic thinking about education that remained more firmly intact in many other parts of the UK – comprehensive secondary schooling and free higher education. But there were many tensions, compromises and nuances in this drift away from the other UK nations under New Labour. These centred first and foremost on selection and school autonomy, especially in relation to admissions. The tuition fees policy arguably generated somewhat less overt soul searching within the Labour party at large, even though it led to one of the largest revolts in the Parliamentary Labour Party during the passage of the 2004 Higher Education Act. Higher Education policy is covered in detail in another contribution to this special issue (Hillman, 2016), so will not be addressed further in this article. In schools policy, the effects of successive Coalition and Conservative education policies after 2010 would pose a fresh challenge to the Labour party's commitment to social democratic principles in schools policy and even conflict within the party as a whole.

The demise of social democracy?

After Labour's failure to end academic selection at 11+ during its periods in office in the 1960s and 1970s, the extent of its continuing commitment to comprehensive education had by the 1990s become a vexed issue. Party sound bites from the 1992 general election suggested a renewed commitment to the abandonment of any selection within the state education system and the re-assertion of LEA control over maintained schools (see, for example, *The Independent*, 26th February 1992). It was following Labour's fourth successive general election defeat that the party moved towards a position that accepted, and then embraced, a version of the diversity and choice policies that were being pursued by the Conservatives. These were often based on – or certainly accepted – elements of overt selection across the secondary schools system; in other respects, this policy also raised concerns about covert selection.

Although the New Labour government did not support the creation of new state-funded grammar schools (and abolished the Assisted Places Scheme that had provided support for children of modest means to attend academically selective private schools), it was in the name of parental choice that the party side-stepped the so-called 'grammar school question' (Crook et al., 2000). As Blair told an audience in Birmingham during the 1997 general election campaign, 'so far as the existing ... grammar schools are concerned, as long as the parents want them, they will stay. ... We will tackle what isn't working, not what is.' (Blair, 1997). Accordingly, immediately after its election victory, New Labour published proposals to allow parents to decide the fate of existing grammar schools or of area-wide selection where it still existed. The 1998 School Standards and Framework Act thus included provisions by which local communities could petition for a ballot to end academic selection. Several petitions were launched but only one received the signatures of 20 per cent of eligible parents, the threshold needed to trigger a ballot. In this ballot, which was for Ripon Grammar School, parents rejected an end to selection by a ratio of 2:1. There therefore remained 164 grammar schools in England, located in 36 of the 150 local authorities; of these 36, only the 15 fully selective local authorities had substantial numbers of pupils attending grammar schools.

New Labour went on to implicitly endorse the principle of overt selection in other ways. The 1997 White Paper, *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997), and the aforementioned 1998 School Standards and Framework Act that followed it, continued the previous administration's

support for specialist schools; while the Act placed rather less emphasis on these schools' selective character, it nevertheless permitted any school to select 10 per cent of pupils on aptitude if the governing body was satisfied that the school had a specialism. Coldron et al. (2009) note that although the great majority of specialist schools did not use selection, the potential was there for them to do so.

There were continuing calls from organisations like the Campaign for State Education (CASE) and Comprehensive Future throughout the period of New Labour government – and beyond – for the Labour party leadership to tackle the remaining grammar schools. However, the more ambiguous territory of 'choice and diversity' had won out. Some in the party went so far as to dismiss the comprehensive school altogether as 'an institution of the past – part of the social democratic agenda of the Sixties and therefore of no relevance to the world of the Nineties' (cited in Chitty, 1994, p.89). Other contributions from centre-left writers at this time saw benefit in overt selection: in their 1997 publication, *A Class Act*, Adonis and Pollard argued that 'for all the good intentions, the destruction of the grammar schools...had the effect of reinforcing class divisions' (p. 61).

Accordingly, the amount of differentiation among schools grew under New Labour, and its rhetoric increasingly emphasised a supposed link between school diversity and higher standards. This was made clear by Tony Blair in a 2006 speech, where he commented that 'over time I shifted from saying "it's standards, not structures" to realising that school structures could affect standards' (Blair, 2006). As under the previous Conservative government, the key ingredient for linking differentiation to standards and excellence remained choice; this was illustrated by the 2005 schools White Paper, which had argued against ignoring 'the reality that the vast majority of parents want a real choice of excellent schools' (DfES, 2005: 8). New Labour chose to maintain something of the Conservative distinction between local authority and grant maintained status, albeit under the new titles of 'community' and 'foundation' schools. In addition, it retained the city technology colleges (CTCs), to which were added (city) academies, and trust schools. Many of these schools were also specialist schools, and so the number and proportion of these schools increased significantly; others were also faith schools. A new Schools Commissioner would act as a 'champion' of increased diversity and choice.

Academies in particular became a totemic policy for New Labour (and for the Coalition and Conservative administrations that followed). Their origins lay in the aforementioned CTCs, a new form of state-funded secondary school for the inner-city that sat entirely outside the influence of LEAs. The plan was for CTCs to be run by independent trusts, with capital funding coming from the private sector and the state providing recurrent funding. In practice, however, few business sponsors came forward, the Thatcher government covered virtually all funding, and the number of CTCs remained small (Whitty et al., 1993). Under New Labour, academies were introduced explicitly to tackle failing local authority run schools, which were typically in deprived areas (NAO, 2007). Some academies were new schools; others were existing schools that had not responded to earlier 'turnaround' initiatives. All had sponsors, typically with business connections, who in these early days of academies were required to contribute to capital costs.

As Education Minister, Estelle Morris (2001) stated that specialist schools were 'only modern comprehensive schools', implying that they had no special advantages. But at least until they became the majority of secondary schools, the specialist school label clearly differentiated them from what Tony Blair's official spokesman, Alastair Campbell, termed 'bog-standard' comprehensive schools (Campbell, 2007). While the apparently superior performance of specialist schools added impetus to the policy of differentiation (Jesson and Crossley, 2006), the fact that this performance may have been partly due to the nature of their pupil intakes was not always acknowledged (Sutton Trust, 2006). Although it had always been the case that all sorts of schools that were nominally comprehensive lacked balanced intakes, either socially or academically or indeed both, the charge was that school choice and school autonomy, including over admissions, would now make it possible for far more schools to select covertly as well as overtly (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Newsam, 2003). Academies became an important category of school in this regard, while selection by faith schools also came under the spotlight (Penlington, 2001).

So, for a time, the debate about overt academic selection took second place to a debate about whether covert social selection, and by implication covert academic selection, was taking place in the new diverse school system. A major issue of contention between the proponents and opponents of diversity was the effect of some but not all schools being their own admissions authorities. For example, Tough and Brooks (2007) found that schools that were their own admissions authorities had intakes that were far less representative of their surrounding areas than schools where the local authority was the admissions authority. In 2005 and 2006, the Sutton Trust looked at the social composition of the 'top 200' comprehensives in England and identified a group of high attaining schools that were more socially exclusive than the national average and other schools in their areas (Sutton Trust, 2006). It concluded that this mismatch could be explained by a number of factors, including covert social selection.

Such covert selection was an area of concern for the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee in its review of the 2005 schools White Paper, and its report to government prompted some significant concessions on admissions policy, mainly around the status of the admissions code (DfES, 2006; House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006). In an attempt to address covert selection (whether intended or unintended), the new code prohibited schools from giving priority to children on the basis of their interests or knowledge, and this was combined with free school transport to open up choice to less advantaged families, and 'choice advisers' to assist these families in negotiating their child's transition to secondary school (DfES, 2005). Later research by Allen et al. (2012) has suggested that the 2003 and 2007 admission codes did reduce social segregation between schools to a limited extent.

Left of centre opponents of New Labour continued to argue that such measures would not be enough to overcome covert selection and 'playing the system' by knowledgeable middle class families, so they united around a call for 'good schools in all areas, for all children' (e.g. Education Alliance, 2006). However, any attempt to return to traditional catchment areas after two decades of choice was unlikely to be attractive politically. An attempt by one local authority, Brighton, to run admissions lotteries as an alternative way of dealing with covert

selection proved even more contentious (see Laville and Smithers, 2007) – as well as relatively ineffective in changing pupil sorting (Allen et al., 2010).

In June 2007, Gordon Brown replaced Tony Blair as leader of the Labour party and prime minister. There were some initial signs that the Brown government might have been willing to confront some of these issues —with talk of an ‘egalitarian project’ even being heard in the Brown camp (Wilby, 2007). As Fiona Millar pointed out at the time, ‘the words “diversity” and “choice”, the mantras of education policy through the Thatcher, Major and Blair years’ did not even feature in the first Commons statement by Ed Balls, Brown’s Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families (Balls, 2007a; Millar, 2007). Furthermore, that same minister’s first major speech outside parliament indicated that a wider children’s agenda would be as important as the standards agenda in his newly-created department and highlighted the important links between them (Balls, 2007b). In particular, the new government also signalled a greater role for local authorities in the planning of new academies and indicated that such schools should be seen as part of their local family of schools rather than lying outside them. This change of focus appeared not to be merely rhetorical, backed as it was by Public Service Agreement delivery targets for the Department for Children, Schools and Families that related in large part to narrowing the gap in educational achievement between pupils from different backgrounds (Baker, 2007). Nevertheless, little substantive change in policy or outcomes could be detected. It was unclear how far a stronger social justice agenda could be reconciled with the electoral logic that had so influenced the policies of the Blair government. As Peter Wilby (2007) put it, ‘a Brown government will need courage and ingenuity to reconcile egalitarian ambitions with political realities’, and, in the end, it proved unable to do so.

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition 2010-15

At the time New Labour left office in 2010 the socio-economic attainment gap remained very real. The Coalition government that was elected to replace New Labour set an ambitious goal of ‘closing’ this gap as part of a wider commitment to increasing social mobility, which it claimed had stalled under New Labour (HM Government, 2011). The general thrust of its policies was to continue and accelerate the emphasis on seeking improvement through school autonomy, competition and choice that, as we have seen, had been pioneered by Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government and continued by New Labour under Tony Blair if not with quite the same enthusiasm under Gordon Brown (Whitty, 2008).

While the academies policy of the Blair government had sought to use academy status mainly to prioritise the replacement or improvement of failing schools in disadvantaged areas, the Conservative-led Coalition potentially extended this status to virtually all schools. Schools highly rated by Ofsted, a disproportionate number of which were in more affluent areas, could be granted academy status automatically if they so desired. Meanwhile, parents, teachers and others were encouraged to open publicly funded ‘free schools’, which, like academies, were outside local authority jurisdiction. Neither academies nor free schools are bound by statute to teach the National Curriculum, nor do they have to employ qualified teachers (though most do both at the moment). They are their own admissions authorities. This policy has been reinforced by a wider emphasis on establishing a ‘school-led system’ in which improvement is fostered through school-to-school support.

It remains an open question whether such policies (subsequently continued by the majority Conservative government elected in 2105) will help to 'close' the attainment gap or, as some critics have suggested, effectively 'open' it up again. So far, around 60 per cent of English secondary schools and nearly 10 per cent of primary schools have academy or free school status, and an increasing number of them are being linked in academy 'chains'. Recent attempts to assess the evidence have come to no firm conclusions about the impact of these policies. The House of Commons Education Committee argued that 'current evidence does not allow us to draw conclusions on whether academies in themselves are a positive force for change' and 'agree[d] with Ofsted that it is too early to draw conclusions on the quality of education provided by free schools or their broader system impact (House of Commons Education Committee, 2015; see also McNally, 2015). What is clear is that, although some of these new schools are in disadvantaged areas or where there is a shortage of school places, others are in middle class areas and where there is already a surplus of places, while those free schools located in disadvantaged areas have not necessarily attracted disadvantaged children (Green et al., 2014; Morris, 2015).

Nevertheless, some of the other policies adopted by the Coalition reflected the social justice agenda of the Liberal Democrat party whose votes gave the coalition a majority in parliament. Among the policies that were strongly influenced by Liberal Democrat thinking was a commitment to address the attainment gap through a 'pupil premium' to be paid on top of the normal grant for every school age pupil in receipt of free school meals in state schools. This was consistent with the earlier trend under New Labour of linking resources to individuals in need, regardless of the neighbourhood in which they are receiving their schooling. The premium was subsequently increased and extended and, although the money was not ring-fenced or mandated for particular purposes, monitoring of its use by Ofsted was intended to ensure that it was used to benefit the education of the disadvantaged. Early surveys were not particularly encouraging in this respect, and suggested that too little of the money allocated through the pupil premium was being spent on activities known to boost attainment (Sutton Trust, 2012; Ofsted, 2012). However, later surveys were somewhat more positive about its role in narrowing the gap (Ofsted, 2014). Unfortunately, the pupil premium was introduced at a time of expenditure cuts in other areas, which is likely to undermine its potential impact (Lupton and Thomson, 2015). Ultimately, the level of the premium was never such that it would act as an incentive for schools, in a marketised system, to enrol a more diverse intake of pupils in terms of socio-economic background or prior attainment.

There was also considerable controversy about whether the Coalition government's curriculum policies would help to close the gap. As well as admissions, this is another area in which the effects of marketization have been evident within the English system. One Coalition policy was to reduce the number of 'equivalent' qualifications that are permitted to be used in school performance tables as alternatives to the GCSE qualifications at age 16. Schools' use of these qualifications, many of them poorly regarded, had mushroomed under the New Labour government, particularly so among academies (de Waal, 2009), and particularly to the detriment of more disadvantaged pupils. The Coalition's intention was to reverse this trend and place a much stronger emphasis on a return to conventional academic qualifications – for all pupils. Following the Department for Education-commissioned Wolf review, the Coalition removed a large number of vocational qualifications deemed to be of poor quality and in little demand among employers. It also

strengthened the requirements for English and mathematics, asking all young people to achieve GCSE grade C or above by age 18. But perhaps the flagship curriculum reform under the Coalition was the 'English Baccalaureate' (EBacc), which was introduced in 2011. This is an award to pupils, but also effectively a new performance measure for secondary schools, based on the percentage of pupils achieving high grades in specified subjects, i.e. English, mathematics, sciences, history or geography, and a foreign language. This seems, initially at least, to have affected socially disadvantaged students adversely as they are more likely to have been exposed to alternative curricula than more advantaged students on a university entrance track (DfE, 2014). For example, Gillborn (2014) has suggested that the introduction of the EBacc, 'restored White odds of success to 2.20 (more than double the Black rate), a rate not seen since 2003'.

Alongside, Coalition and subsequent Conservative government ministers have claimed that they are encouraging the development of high quality vocational qualifications and that this is reflected in their championing of apprenticeships as an alternative (and/or an alternative route) to university. In its governance of the further education sector, aside from ring-fencing funding for apprenticeships, the Coalition removed any role for central planning and funded provision on the basis of student demand and outcomes alone. In adult skills, it discontinued central funding and introduced the expectation that employers and individuals would co-invest, including through income-contingent loads as per the funding model for higher education. Alongside, the Coalition introduced new performance indicators to inform the 'consumer'. The Conservative government has continued this approach. The priority since 2015 has been to expand apprenticeship at scale, for which the government intends to use a new levy on employers. On paper, this would appear to offer a more coherent set of policies than has been the case in the further education sector for some time.

A new era of network governance?

In recent evidence to a House of Commons committee, Stephen Gorard stated that 'there is strong evidence that diversification and fragmentation of what is intended to be a national system is linked to higher socio-economic segregation between schools, and all of the dangers that this entails' (House of Commons Public Bill Committee, 2015).

At the end of the period of Coalition government, the socio-economic attainment gap certainly remained a defining feature of the English educational system. There were plaudits for the success of education policy in London in this regard (albeit debate continues as to the relative significance of the apparent contributory factors – see Whitty et al., 2016, chapter 4), as well as for those academy chains that have built their names on turning around the performance of the schools with which they work (Hutchings et al., 2014). But there were also continuing concerns about the lack of progress in narrowing the gap elsewhere in the system (Wilshaw, 2013). The question that, not only Gorard, but many commentators are now raising – after three decades of policy underpinned by diversity and choice agendas – is whether England still has an education system in place in the sense that had existed between the landmark 1944 Education Act and the 1979 Thatcher government.

David Bell, a former Permanent Secretary at the education department under New Labour and the Coalition, has offered his own reflections on the English school reforms of recent decades. He has suggested that, with the ever reducing role of local authorities, we are probably moving towards a 'system of many small systems':

'Messiness' in terms of structures will be a natural by-product of radical structural reform as we move from a standardised national system to a system of many small systems. I don't have a single solution to offer, nor do I necessarily think there should be one, as the end-point of these school reforms hasn't been reached yet (Bell, 2012).

He was thinking here of small systems of schools in particular, with academy chains, a few effective local authorities, and federations of schools led by teaching schools or successful individual school leaders. Interestingly, his use of the term 'messiness' resonates with Stephen Ball's characterisation of postmodern education systems as 'untidy' (Ball, 2011).

Greany (2015) regards the new landscape of education, particularly as it developed under the Coalition government, as 'more fragmented, and yet more networked' (p. 125). This applies both at the level of schools and the new policy players that have been encouraged by successive governments. Ball and Junemann (2012) discuss such trends in the governance of education in England in terms of 'network governance'. In particular, they channel our attention to the range of actors now involved in the governance of education in England, including the growing influence of business and philanthropy. Drawing eclectically on various types of network theory, Ball and Junemann show the links between leading individuals and institutions involved in debates around and the formulation of education policy. We can see in their account evidence of new actors sometimes steering policy, setting directions and influencing the terms of debate in a way that arguably was the province of government and just a few key partners in the past. These actors do so directly, contributing to the debate, but they also have influence through their involvement in sponsoring and running schools.

In our view, however, it is questionable that Ball's and Junemann's examples of network governance constitute a step change in education policy making and one that is here to stay. For example, it is unclear how far and in what sense network governance and multiple partnerships have actually replaced, as opposed to complemented, older ways of governing or even the so-called new public management. Ball and Junemann themselves warn of the dangers of overstating the case. It may be that we are seeing an increasingly complex version of the 'steering at a distance' framework that we identified earlier in this paper as the emergent mode of governance under Thatcherism and New Labour. Furthermore, new actors who fail in the eyes of governments do not survive as key players for long: the dramatic decline of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust/The Schools Network as a significant voice provides just one illustration of this. The 'partnering state' can change its partners and reassign contracts as it wishes.

It can also close its own 'arm's length' agencies. Very soon into the Coalition administration, very little of the architecture of the New Labour years remained: all of the quangos we listed earlier were, among others, swiftly closed. Other agencies were merged, including, for example, the Training and Development Agency for Schools and the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services. Some of these organisations' functions were taken back within the education department itself. The jury is perhaps still out on whether these changes reflected a genuine desire to remove unnecessary bureaucracy and hand power to the people or an audacious attempt to centralise it in the hands of the secretary of state.

With the increasing marginalisation of local authorities in education policy making and delivery, together with this ‘bonfire of the quangos’ (or NDPBs), direct government control does appear to have increased. The question is then how the state retains sufficient capacity to manage what is left of the ‘system’. Accountability in the form of performance indicators and tables remains the primary lever – the only lever – through which the centre can direct and shape the focus of autonomous schools. We have indicated how use of these indicators has evolved. In addition, it became apparent early on that the centre cannot manage tens of thousands of schools alone. Whether for reasons of ‘efficiency’ or ‘local democratic accountability’, there have been mounting calls for the recreation of a ‘middle tier’ of education governance in England (e.g. Blunkett, 2014). To date, the Conservative government’s response has been to establish Regional Schools Commissioners, although how they fit in to the overall system of accountability is still unclear (see, for example, House of Commons Education Committee, 2016). The English approach is a far cry from the still significant role of democratically elected local government in Scotland or Wales (West, 2015).

Future policy

2015 saw the replacement of the Coalition with a majority Conservative government and, accordingly, a more clear-cut policy agenda on schools: moving even more to a system of ‘autonomous’ and competing schools/chains, working to stronger accountability levers.

At the centre of schools policy remains the further acceleration of the academisation of secondary – and now primary – schools, including through the free schools policy. There will be forced conversion to academy status for ‘coasting’ or ‘failing’ schools. All ‘good’ schools will be allowed to expand, including grammar schools. In October 2015 the secretary of state authorised the expansion of a Kent grammar school – the first such expansion in 50 years – once again putting the grammar school question and overt selection centre stage in education policy.

The possible brakes on schools’ and chains’ enthusiasm to expand include a dearth of effective sponsors, and the risks of expanding (for chains and individual schools) under the new accountability measures. These measures include baseline tests and tests for pupils who do not reach expected levels in English and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2; the requirement that virtually all pupils take GCSEs in the EBacc subjects; compulsory resits for those not reaching Level 4; Progress 8 (pupils’ progress across eight subjects, including at least five EBacc subjects); and performance measures and inspection for academy chains. The party’s manifesto pledge was that Ofsted would be unable to award its highest ratings to schools that refused to teach the EBacc subjects.

The aforementioned recent decision by Nicky Morgan to allow the Kent grammar school to expand by opening an annex in a nearby town is of considerable symbolic importance. Seen by critics as effectively opening a new grammar school, this move sits in stark contrast to the politics of Jeremy Corbyn, the newly elected leader of the Labour party, who reportedly separated from his then wife due to her decision to send their child to a grammar school. Corbyn’s position also stands in contrast to that of New Labour ministers who sent their children to a variety of new types of school, including in the case of Harriet Harman, a grammar school a considerable distance from her home.

It is therefore possible that the strong sense of continuity in policy and practice between successive governments of different political hues has run its course and we are witnessing a return to sharp differentiation between the parties of a sort we have not seen since the 1980s. If this is the case and a Labour party under Corbyn's leadership were to be elected to government in 2020, it is possible that England might return to a more social democratic approach to education governance, and therefore once again have more in common with other UK jurisdictions. Labour's education spokesperson has already suggested that local authorities in England would be given greater powers over all their local schools under a Labour government.

At the time of writing, it seems more likely that England will continue along the trajectory favoured by all its governments since the 1980s and the question will be whether it remains an outlier or sets a precedent for the rest of the UK and perhaps the world beyond.

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