

Jane Coles (UCU London Region, HE Chair) explodes the myths behind the government's rhetoric about 'diversity' and 'parental choice' in schools.

Back in 1997, when Blair summed up his government's priorities as 'education, education, education', I presume we were meant to take it as a promise, not a threat. However, we need look no further than Blair's own constituency in the north east for confirmation of his intention, where parents in Hurworth-on-Teesside are fighting to keep their local comprehensive open. Under the latest New Labour policy drive, Hurworth School is to be merged with a nearby Darlington school and reopened as a partly privatised academy, thereby removing Hurworth parents' rights to send their children to a local authority run secondary school. Academies are a key feature of Blair's latest push to 'modernise' state schooling. So much for parental choice, so much for 'diversity' - two of the key planks of New Labour's education manifesto.

Yet if you believe the New Labour spin, any parent can choose the type of school best suited to their children's individual needs. No more old-fashioned 'one size fits all' comprehensives, but a plethora of modern alternatives - shiny new city academies, City Technology Colleges (CTCs), grammar, community, foundation, voluntary-aided or controlled religious schools. For the particularly discerning parent, separate 'specialist' schools offer opportunities for children with an identified 'aptitude' in, say, computing, modern foreign languages, or - presumably for 11 year old entrepreneurs - business. We are meant to regard our children's schools rather like supermarkets. Shop around and decide whether you are more of a Waitrose consumer, an Asda shopper, or you feel more comfortable buying from a cut-price range of items in Netto.

Democratic control

Since coming to power, the Blair government has ruthlessly pursued an anti-comprehensive agenda. 'The day of the bog-standard comprehensive is over,' declared Alistair Campbell, Blair's then right-hand man, in 2001. Blair himself promised a 'post-comprehensive era' in his 2002 conference speech. Such statements are predicated on the false notion that the 'comprehensive ideal' has failed. The classic 1996 study by Caroline Benn and Clyde Chitty, *Thirty Years On*, demonstrates that comprehensive schools, although far from perfect, actually represent an extraordinary success story, raising academic aspirations for the mass of the population. For example, in the 1960s only 16 percent of the school population achieved five O level passes and 47 percent left school with no qualifications, yet by 2000 over 50 percent achieved the equivalent of five O levels and less than 10 percent left without qualifications. Forty years ago less than 10 percent of the population went on to study in higher education. In 2000 approximately 40 percent were taking up college/university places. The key difference is that in the 1960s the majority of young people were educated in the grammar/secondary modern system, whereas by the late 1990s 90 percent attended comprehensives. The current political obsession with dismantling the very system which has achieved so much for ordinary people's children has been cloaked in the rhetoric of parental choice. Blair's version of choice, however, is illusory. As the example from Hurworth indicates, greater diversity can mean less, or even no, choice.

New Labour has pledged to establish 200 academies over the next four years at a cost to the public purse of £5 billion. Academies are modelled on the US Charter Schools and the Tories' CTC initiative, where private business is encouraged to fund and run inner city schools. At least John Major's government originally expected private companies to raise the full cost of a CTC. As ever, New Labour have not only embraced Tory policies, but taken them one stage further. Blair and Kelly are prepared to hand over control of the school in return for as little as 6 percent of the start-up costs. So, for a school which might cost somewhere in the region of £25 million to £30 million to build or refurbish, a businessman need only officially contribute £2 million - and this sum can be paid in instalments or even in kind. The rate of return for this paltry investment is truly extraordinary: the sponsor assumes the powers to appoint the headteacher, the chair of governors and a percentage of the governing body; he or she has a say in the selection of teachers, and has the right to establish the school's ethos and influence the curriculum (for example, two out of the first 17 academies are run by creationists, the Bexley Business Academy is dominated by a mock-up stockmarket). To add insult to injury, the sponsor can make a profit selling back to the school goods and services linked to their line of business. Meanwhile, the taxpayer continues to pick up the annual bill of several million in running costs, despite having waived all rights to democratic control. Local Education Authorities (LEAs) are even expected to pay off a school's outstanding debts (in some cases of around half a million pounds or more) before transfer. This is asset-stripping on a grand scale.

That the financial scales are weighted so scandalously in favour of private business interests is one thing - the knock-on effects of academies on other school provision in a locality are quite another. Government ministers' repeated claims that academies are a necessary step in their crusade against persistently failing

schools have been exposed as a sham. A recent investigation by the *Times Educational Supplement* found that only two of the 28 schools so far closed down to make way for academies had been identified by Ofsted as having 'serious weaknesses' at the time of closure. Newly built academies are preferentially resourced by central government. Not surprisingly, evidence from existing CTCs and academies is that parents are initially attracted by the dazzling architect-designed schools, packed full of state of the art electronic gadgetry. In 2004 such schools were on average oversubscribed by 64 percent, enabling them not only to overtly select 10 percent of their intake, but also to adopt covert selection policies to the detriment of the intake of neighbouring schools. Despite boasting of a carefully balanced 'comprehensive' intake, several popular London CTCs and academies, for instance, are able to exploit the seemingly fair system of 'banding' by only admitting students who perform at the very top of each ability band. One east London academy tests potential candidates on a Saturday, thereby ensuring a self-selecting pool of keen families to choose from. Other unofficial selection strategies commonly include the use of parental interview, a way of ascertaining whether parents are likely to be actively supportive of their child's education. Some academies deliberately leaflet only the leafier parts of their 'catchment' areas with promotional material. Only about 1 percent of pupils are on free school meals (used as a crude indicator of social class) in one high-achieving inner London CTC, compared with the struggling community comprehensive I regularly visit a mile down the road where it's consequently disproportionately high at 50 percent.

The scales are yet further artificially weighted, so desperate are New Labour ministers to make the academy programme work. LEA schools incur financial penalties whenever they permanently exclude troublesome pupils. Academies can 'deselect' as many students as they like without penalty. Indeed, the two academies in Middlesbrough expelled 61 pupils in 2002, compared with a grand total of 15 pupils from all of the other LEA schools put together. LEA comprehensive schools are forced to take pupils rejected by academies on board - there is no reciprocal arrangement.

PFI fiascos

Far from ending selection, New Labour has increased it dramatically, both covertly, as described above, and overtly (the number of grammar school places in England has actually risen since 1997). This flies in the face of a mounting body of evidence which indicates that selection depresses educational attainment overall in a locality, particularly for middle to low band pupils. The latest OECD study (an international comparison of educational standards) reveals that those countries with wholly non-selective systems achieve the highest educational standards overall. Recent research into the effect of US Charter Schools points to the creation of a socially segregated two-tier system. In that Orwellian way New Labour has of redefining terms, as schools become more unequal through market forces, more choice from a parent's perspective actually means less. Increasingly privileged schools exercise choice over pupils, not the other way round. Currently more than one third of London parents fail to get their first choice of secondary school. In some boroughs it's as high as 50 percent. Compare this with the old Inner London Education Authority which ensured some parity of intake across the capital - nearly 90 percent of parents got their first choice.

Given that the corporate sponsors are not exactly digging deep into their own pockets to subsidise academies, what exactly is the magic ingredient that Blair and his adviser Andrew Adonis believe business will add to these schools? Private sponsors are meant to have better ways of working, better management practices, better ideas. Private is best - competition is good. Blair's prime ministerial swansong to forcibly privatise existing comprehensive schools epitomises New Labour attitudes to public services. Even the Labour-chaired Commons Education Select Committee called for a halt to the academies project on the basis that 'it is more about politics than education'. It is this intensely ideological nature of the project which needs to be exposed. If private is best, how come the school meals service has been such a disaster since being contracted out? And what about the numerous examples of PFI fiascos nationwide, in transport, health and schools? Significantly, several damning Ofsted reports into the first wave of academies have proved beyond doubt that part-privatisation is no guarantee of quality.

The backlash against the comprehensive system has until now been largely confined to the secondary sector. With the creation of 'all-through' academies (catering for 3 to 19 year olds on one site), the ideological battle-front has moved into the primary sector too. With a curriculum emphasis on enterprise culture, the corrosive effect on primary education hardly bears thinking about (Sir Alec Reed, sponsor of the all-through West London Academy, reportedly said that he wants every child to think of her/himself as 'Me, plc'). Ark, an education company set up by venture capitalists, is raising academy down-payments from charity dinners for the super-rich. The obscenity of surrendering state education to corporate benefactors reeks of Victorian attitudes to the poor. However, Blair's project is vulnerable. Although parents in inner city areas starved of decently resourced schools may be attracted by the promise of a

new academy, campaigns by parents and teachers against proposed academies in Doncaster, Waltham Forest, Islington and elsewhere have successfully countered the government spin. Corporate sponsors have pulled out of academy plans in several instances when faced with a well orchestrated barrage of negative publicity (fat cat suits are particularly photogenic!). Doncaster teachers notoriously put up their school for sale on eBay to illustrate just how easily children's education can be sold and bought. Potentially there is a rich vein of dissent to be tapped into, which includes opposition from high-profile mainstream Labour commentators such as Roy Hattersley and Fiona Miller. The main teaching unions are opposed, as are some parents' groups. The breadth of this opposition is encouraging, but all strands of it need to be coordinated if it is to match up to the scale and ferocity of attack coming from the Downing Street ideologues. Our children's futures depend on it.

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