

WHO CONTROLS OUR SCHOOLS?

Part 1: The Current Mess

This was the title of the first of two webinars organised by Reclaiming Education, a consortium of educational pressure groups, on March 16th. The speakers were Warwick Mansell, Meg Hillier, Louise Regan and Melanie Griffiths.

Warwick Mansell, a journalist who has spent much time investigating the “academies” movement in English schooling, spoke of the lack of democratic control which characterises academy schools and trusts. He began with an account of the control structure of The Mellor Educational Trust, a now defunct academy trust set up by David Mellor, a former Conservative minister. The governing body of the trust was overwhelmingly made up of governors appointed by the sponsor, with only a tiny minority of governors representing any other interests than those of the sponsor. This structure gave the sponsor complete control over the decisions of the trust.

In 2018 Mellor's involvement in a scandal had led to the trust being wound up and its schools being transferred to the Future Academy Trust controlled by Schools' Minister Lord Nash and his wife, Caroline. Futures had already attracted considerable criticism for its unbalanced approach to curriculum: 19 lessons per week in English and Latin but no computing, no R.E. and only two science lessons.

Warwick illustrated the point further by referring to the Harris academy chain, whose trust deed allows control of the chain to pass from Lord Harris to Lady Harris and then to their son and on to other family members.

In contrast with Local Authority maintained schools, which are accountable to the public through their elected representatives and which have mechanisms that allow local people and parents to join their governing bodies, academy schools are accountable only to governors most of whom are privately appointed and whose relationship to their trusts is more like that of shareholders than of public representatives. Yet academy trusts are financed from the public purse with the express purpose of raising standards, a purpose that all available evidence suggests is not being achieved.

Warwick concluded by pointing out that the lack of democratic accountability of academy schools and chains has led to abuses and scandals which the government's own accountability structure of Regional Schools Commissioners has been unable to prevent. He felt that there needs to be far greater awareness of these issues and that the commentariat has been guilty of not taking sufficient interest.

The second speaker was Meg Hillier, Chair of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) and a Labour MP. She pointed out that now over 50% of schoolchildren attend academy schools, of which the great majority are secondary schools. Originally academy schools were conceived of as autonomous institutions, free from LA “control” and able to use this freedom to experiment with alternative approaches. However, the growth of multi-academy trusts (MATs) – greatly encouraged by government – has put paid to autonomy. Compared with LAs, MATs have no geographical identity: one MAT has schools in both Cumbria and Cornwall. Since 2017, both MATs and the few remaining stand-alone academies have been funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency, a Whitehall body that, in the case of MATs, requires accounts to be filed only for the MAT as a whole. MATs are not required to furnish the agency with accounts for their individual schools, the dangerous implications of which are obvious. Moreover the governors of schools within a MAT are effectively “puppets”, having no power to take decisions, other than those sent down from the MAT's headquarters. Because MATs are free to reject “failing” schools, as indicated by poor

academic performance and/or financial problems, there now exists a body of "orphan" schools which are unable to find sponsors but are unable to revert to LA status under current regulations (Editor's note: there were 92 such schools in 2019).

Meg also spoke about "free" schools, a subset of academy schools based upon an idea imported from Sweden. These are brand new schools set up by individuals and groups regarded by the government as legitimately interested parties. Originally the government had a target of 500 such schools. The PAC had found that, in its eagerness to launch this idea, the government had allowed the ESFA to overpay for prospective school sites. Moreover the earliest "free" schools had been given public money to purchase the freehold of a site, although later ones had been obliged to purchase a 25 year lease, suggesting that the government had little confidence in the longevity of such schools. In Meg's view the "free" school initiative had been characterised by enormous incompetence, which had resulted in the closure or take-over of many schools.

The government's belated strategy for exercising public control over academies – the creation of Regional School Commissioners – was hopelessly inadequate and huge sums of money have been wasted. Meg agreed with Warwick that, although there are some very good academy schools, MATs are inherently prone to corruption. Some of this has now been reined in, notably the practice of awarding contracts for materials and services to "related parties," but not before huge sums of public money have gone to waste. One outcome of all this wastage has been a real terms decline in per pupil funding from which the greatest losers have been children from the most deprived backgrounds.

The third speaker was Louise Regan, a National Officer of the National Education Union. Louise pointed out that academy schools were a descendant of the Major government's Grant Maintained schools but that, whereas parents had been able to vote about GM status, academy status had simply been imposed. The NEU was opposed to the principle of academy schools but continued to support those of its members who worked in them. She went on to outline some of the untruths promulgated by government about academy schools:

That such schools improve attainment – research by UCL and others demonstrates that this is not so.

That adopting academy status will result in greater approval by OFSTED – it doesn't.

That disadvantaged pupils benefit from their school's adopting academy status – in fact the opposite is the case.

Louise repeated the problem, alluded to by Meg Hillier, of "orphan" schools and that alluded to by Warwick Mansell that MATs ignore the views of parents and the local community. She listed other problems: that academy schools are much more likely than LA schools to employ unqualified teachers; that LA schools had much better financial protection than academy schools (although this is diminishing), and that pay differentials in academy schools were much greater than in LA schools.

Louise concluded by contrasting her very positive experience of working with a good LEA with an example of current malpractice: a "free" school which had been opened in a factory building. This school not only had no playing fields but did not even have any outdoor play space for the children. In an attempt to ensure good academic results, the school had organised a catchment area which included only high attaining primary schools.

The ensuing discussion tended to focus on the general sense of disappointment that Labour seemed to have no plans for reforming the current educational structure and was implicitly repeating the mantra of the Blair government: "standards, not structures".

The event concluded with a brief address by Melanie Griffiths of the SEA. Looking forward to part 2 of "Who controls our schools?" she made four brief points:

Much of education had been taken away from publicly accountable institutions and

handed over to private, corporatised bodies.

It was simplistic just to blame recent government because the seeds had been sown by the 1988 Education Reform Act.

The tide of de-regulation needs to be reversed.

Labour's belief, which it has clung to since 1997, that structural reform is unnecessary as long as "classroom standards" are addressed, is profoundly mistaken.

The event was attended by 116 participants.

Part 2: The Remedies

The second of the two webinars organised by Reclaiming Education took place on Wednesday, March 30th. The speakers were Nigel Gann, Georgia Gould, Anntoinette Bramble and John McDonnell MP. 87 people attended.

Nigel Gann, former headteacher, educational consultant and author of *The Great Education Robbery*, began by reminding us of a point made in the first webinar: that the governing structures of the academies programme are often in the hands of people who are not suitably qualified to supervise the education of children. This raised the 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, an attitude 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, deprives the community of engagement and control and deprives the workforce of 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.

Nigel was followed by Georgia Gould, Leader of Camden Borough Council, who reminded everyone that there had been a disastrous real terms fall of 9% in education funding since 2010. In spite of this, Camden had worked hard to develop a successful model of 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" (<https://camdenlearning.org.uk>)

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 and poverty was forcing some families to re-locate out of the borough. Nevertheless, Camden was 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.

The third speaker, Anntoinette Bramble, Deputy Mayor of Hackney, reinforced the message that LAs continue to have a valuable rôle 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.

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 but for everyone.

Anntoinette 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.

John McDonnell MP paid tribute to the achievements of Camden and Hackney in the face of massive reductions in funding from central government - £100bn 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% 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 control Labour should plan to

- a) end the academies programme;
- b) develop the National Education Service promised in the 2019 manifesto;
- c) ensure that parents and teachers are fully involved in planning and development;
- d) ensure that education is properly funded;
- e) integrate schooling with other public services and end the practice of "outsourcing" ancillary services;
- f) end 11+ selection and integrate private schools into the state system.

Currently, Labour policy was to avoid these difficult issues by disinterring the Blairite slogan of "standards, not structures."

(At this point John McDonnell was obliged to leave the meeting in order to take part in a parliamentary vote. He very kindly returned, following a short Q&A session, and offered the following additional thoughts):

- g) Labour should learn from the good practice of some of its own councils, who engage properly at community level.

- h) Collaboration between schools is a far more effective approach than the competitive model favoured by the government.
- i) Reclaiming Education needs to make every effort to engage with the Labour front bench in order to strengthen opposition to current policy.

The Question and Answer session itself focused upon three issues:

1. **What is the best structure for restoring democratic accountability?** All the speakers agreed that the current model of academies being directly responsible to Whitehall via Regional Schools Commissioners was not working but there was not unanimity about the best structure. 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 but the other speakers favoured the restoration of LAs.
2. **How can schools build better relationships with parents of SEND children?** 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, in which strategies are developed collaboratively by teachers and parents. Although successful up to a point, these strategies were handicapped by inadequate finance.
3. **What is the 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 education system and that 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 MATs could be made accountable to Local Authorities.