

Conclusion

- *Academy status does not lead to higher attainment for disadvantaged students, greater improvement or solid academic achievement. Neither the length of time for which academies have been established, nor management of chains of academies by the growing edu-businesses, make a significant difference to this.*
- *There are substantial dangers in driving more and more schools into the hands of major academy sponsors whose track record is problematic or unproven.*
- *The academy strategy has been a diversion from the pressing need to focus on improving the school curriculum, providing a better quality of education for disadvantaged young people, and tackling child poverty and high rates of youth unemployment.*

No statistical analysis can fully evaluate patterns of achievement and improvement, let alone the quality of school experience, in different schools and communities. Even when prior attainment patterns and deprivation statistics are taken into account, there are inevitably qualitative factors such as parental aspirations and involvement which are almost impossible to reflect in a statistical evaluation, let alone the impact of academies' new buildings or the media and political attention they have received on their students' engagement and morale.

Despite these limitations, we believe this analysis has demonstrated that many of the claims made on behalf of the academies' project are unjustified. Taken across the board, academy status does not lead to any significantly higher attainment for disadvantaged students, greater improvement, reliability of support to prevent very low attainment, nor a solid core of achievement in academic subjects. Neither the length of time over which academies are open, nor management of chains of academies by the growing edu-businesses makes much of a difference.

The elusive 'academies effect'

The 'academies effect' sought by the early PriceWaterhouseCooper evaluations on behalf of the government of the day, and by various later evaluations, continues to prove elusive, and even the possibility that specific chains might have their own effect is not supported by the data.

This report has also pointed to a *major contradiction in Government policy*. The present Coalition Government and its ministers are forcing large numbers of schools into academy status, arguing that this will raise standards - yet the existing academies depend heavily on *alternative qualifications which the same ministers regard as suspect*. As we have shown, claims for the superiority of academy status depend on these schools' *zealous exploitation of these 'equivalents'*, including those which count as two, four and even six higher grade GCSEs.

None of this, as we stated in our introduction, is intended to take away from the achievement of pupils and their teachers in existing academies, including a few remarkable schools. That is not the issue, but rather the generalised claim that academies are a better way of running schools. There are many

factors which result in high standards of attainment , with even greater complexity of cause and effect in areas blighted by poverty; it remains important to gain a richer understanding of how schools can improve beyond the narrow imagination of the high-stakes surveillance systems operating in England. There is little that appears distinctive, separate or generalisable in academy status and governance as such.

The dangers of sponsorship

There are also dangers of various kinds. Firstly, the heavy exploitation of ‘equivalent’ qualifications, regardless of the risk to a broad and balanced curriculum, may derive in part from the pressures of business-oriented sponsors with limited educational understanding who demand better ‘bottom-line’ results. The pressures on academies from Government agencies such as the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (now re-branded) may have added to pressures from the accountability regime of league tables and Ofsted inspections. Academies have also led to increasing emphasis on some qualifications and courses of study which, arguably, require the demonstration of basic procedures and remembered facts rather than more complex problem-solving or creativity. This could have a serious negative impact nationally on social and economic development.

Local authorities were never a perfect form of democracy, but did in many cases help schools to relate to their local areas and the needs of young people and their families. Before recent reforms, they formed an umbrella linking together education of different kinds (nurseries, schools, colleges, youth and community education) and connecting it with other services for children and the wider community. None of this is likely to emerge from academy governance and competing chains, however large the edu-business and the academy chain.

A sense of purpose

This report has necessarily been limited in focusing overwhelmingly on attainment. Much else has been written on the problems of the academy programme, including a special issue of *Forum* (2008), the scholarly book edited by Professor Helen Gunter *The State and Education Policy* (2011) and a sharp critique by investigative journalist Francis Beckett (2007). There is no space here to recapitulate their arguments but they provide stimulating reading.

Recent decades have also seen an imbalance in education policy between the different purposes of schooling, with dominance given to preparation for employment and the neglect of other aims of education such as personal development and wellbeing, democratic citizenship, and culture and leisure interests.

Within policy, education is now regarded primarily from an economic point of view. The social and economic purposes of education have been collapsed into a single, overriding emphasis on policy making for economic competitiveness and an increasing neglect or sidelining (other than in rhetoric) of the social purposes of education. (Stephen Ball: *The Education Debate*, 2008, pages 11-12)

There is a serious danger that this trend is being exacerbated by academy governance, including control by the growing education businesses. (Even ‘charity’ status is unlikely to exempt major sponsors from this culture, given the high salaries of many executives and the revolving doors between various kinds of organisations.)

Young people in England face serious and unprecedented challenges, which raise complex issues for school development. The difficulties for young people and their teachers are particularly intense given the extent of child poverty and the appalling waste of talent brought about by youth unemployment. This requires fresh thinking about education in schools as well as about the future development of society. *The conversion of schools to academies is at best a distraction and at worst a tragically false direction.*