

No country for the young: Education from New Labour to the Coalition

Richard Hatcher and Ken Jones

Introduction

All but two of the chapters in this book are based on papers given at two seminars which took place in 2010: the first, 'Education after the Election', on June 10 at Birmingham City University; the second, 'Changing the Landscape? Education and the social in the policies of the Coalition government', on November 26 at Goldsmiths, University of London. The seminars were held under the auspices of the British Educational Research Association Special Interest group on Social Justice, and we are grateful for their support and that of its convenor, Ruth Boyask of the University of Plymouth. The purpose of the seminars was to provide the opportunity for an initial discussion of the education policies of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government which came into office in May 2010. In our view their programme for education, in the context of their wider policy agenda of public sector cutback, represents a fundamental challenge to social justice in education. It is likely to provoke widespread opposition, in education and beyond. The extent to which opposition is translated into active resistance, including popular campaigns and industrial action, remains to be seen.

In this context we see an urgent and continuing need for exploration and analysis of the emerging, contested terrain. Engaged academics have a part to play in this intellectual labour; so do other groups, notably those who are most likely to be involved in collective, terrain-changing opposition to Coalition education policies. Activists in the student movement have already produced such work, which combines accounts of the experience of organising opposition, with reflections on the direction that educational and social conflict is likely to take (Hancox, 2011). The scope and tone of our collection is somewhat different. For the most part, the contributions of Alasdair Smith and Kevin Courtney aside, it has not been composed in the 'heat of struggle', and its efforts to engage politically with new agenda are expressed through the medium of research and theory, more than through the special kind of perceptiveness to which activism can give rise. Chronologically, it addresses a longer timespan—the New Labour period as

well as that of the Cameron government. In terms of topic, it is concerned with issues of governance as well as contestation, networks of rule as well as those of opposition, ideology as well as policy, 'Europe' as well as England. Inequality and the continuous reshaping of education in terms of 'economic' need are its constant themes.

Nico Hirtt is a school teacher in Belgium, the author of several books on European education policy, and one of the founders of APED, the Appel Pour une École Democratique. His chapter outlines the European Union's policy for the school system. The impact of the economic crisis on its policy objective of creating the future labour force for the European economy has been to open up education to capital investment and to reform education to meet the changing labour market. In spite of the rhetoric of the knowledge economy the workforce is being polarised into a high-skill high-qualified sector and low-qualified jobs requiring basic skills. There has been a shift from education based on knowledge and qualifications to one based on competences and employability in order to produce a flexible adaptable workforce.

Richard Hatcher is Professor of Education at Birmingham City University and an activist in the Anti-Academies Alliance. He examines the Coalition's policy of increasing supply-side autonomy in the school system in the forms of internal school policies, in particular curriculum, admissions and management of the workforce; and new types of schools free from local authorities, including new providers—academies and free schools. Market forces however remain subject to centralised state regulation, in particular through performance evaluation and accountability. He assesses the likely impact of marketisation on school performance, social inequality and local government in the school system, and discusses the factors affecting the implementation of Coalition policy.

Lisbeth Lundahl is Professor of Education at Umeå University, Sweden, and a former Secretary General of the European Educational Research Association. She sets Sweden's independent 'free schools' in their historical context before outlining their characteristics and describing their consequences. They were introduced by the Conservative-Liberal coalition government in 1991-4, supported by the Swedish Employers Federation which was championing freedom of choice in the market as against state monopoly. Originally they were set up by groups of parents. No-one expected that many would be run by private companies for profit. Independent schools have had considerably more freedom than public schools, including over the curriculum, but this ends on July 1st 2011 when they come under the same regulations. Free schools run by

private companies have proved profitable, attracting better off parents in spite of fewer facilities and fewer qualified teachers. Lisbeth summarises the evidence on attainment, segregation, costs, and the effects of competition.

Stephen Ball is Karl Mannheim Professor of Sociology of Education and director of the Centre for Critical Education Policy Studies (CeCeps) at the Institute of Education, London, and **Carolina Junemann** is a Research Officer in the Department of Educational Foundations and Policy Studies at the Institute. Their chapter uncovers the role of corporate philanthropy in the reform of state education, providing a new set of actors for policy networks, straddling private organisations, including business companies, and government agencies, in the context of state governance of a new architecture of bureaucratic hierarchies, markets and networks.

Pat Mahony is Professor of Education at the University of Roehampton where **Ian Hextall** is Senior Research Fellow. They report on their research in progress into Building Schools for the Future, a Labour government programme to rebuild and refurbish all secondary schools, with wider aims of achieving educational and community transformation. The programme has been withdrawn by the Coalition government on the grounds of excessive bureaucracy and cost. This decision provoked a Judicial Review in six local authorities (LAs). Although BSF work continues in some 700 schools, the massive reduction in the programme has created an unstable policy context which poses schools, LAs and other stakeholders with contradictions and dilemmas which remain unresolved.

Pat Thomson is professor of education and Director of the Centre for Research in Schools and Communities at the University of Nottingham. Her chapter examines the neglected dimension in education policy research of the local—the local authority and the sub-local level, where the global and the national shape everyday life. She tracks the history of government intervention to restrict the ability of local authorities to mediate national policy. She contrasts Labour's rhetoric of local empowerment with the reality of centralised governance, transforming local authorities from providers of services to commissioners and purchasers, and conduits for state regulation. She ends by calling for the defence of local authorities in education in the face of Coalition government's threats to their existence.

Alasdair Smith is national secretary of the Anti-Academies Alliance, a broad united front set up to support local campaigns against Labour's academies and now campaigning against the Coalition government's policy of wholesale

conversion of local authority schools to academies. He begins his account of the anti-academies movement with a dystopian vision of what the landscape of school might look like if the Coalition's supply-side revolution comes to fruition. He rejects its claims for the effectiveness of academies and free schools in raising standards, insisting that school improvement depends on the quality of teaching, not marketisation, but notes that their advocates eschew debate and consultation. Few headteachers are ideologically convinced by the academies policy but the government's offer of extra money for conversion to academies is difficult to resist, while free schools open the door to for-profit companies.

Martin Allen is a teacher, writer and researcher, and an activist in the National Union of Teachers. **Patrick Ainley** is Professor of Training and Education at the University of Greenwich. Their focus is on upper secondary schooling and beyond. Under New Labour performance and participation both increased, but 'the project of a new form of certification, the Diplomas failed, FE was ignored, professional autonomy was curtailed, social mobility remained static and inequality grew. The growth of low-paid service sector jobs has created a pear-shaped class structure, with high levels of graduate unemployment and under-employment and high youth unemployment. Against notions of a new correspondence between the labour market and Labour's vocationalism in schools and FE, they argue for an explanation in terms of social control in the context of a collapsing youth labour market. They end by noting the rise of student resistance and calling for education to be linked to job guarantees.

Jacky Brine is Professor of EU Education Policy at the University of the West of England. She analyses the role of the European Union in the construction of a welfare to work discourse and linked to the emergence of Active Labour Market Policies where benefit is conditional. This policy, adopted by Labour and extended and strengthened by the Coalition government, includes a highly restricted version of vocational education and training that constructs the unemployed/inactive person as someone in need of only basic, social and low-level vocational skills. The work programme functions as a disciplinary technology for the 'undeserving' unemployed and a source of profit for private providers.

Kevin Courtney is Deputy General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers in England and Wales, and former teacher and union branch secretary in London. For more than twenty years, teachers have experienced a torrent of policy innovation that has meant ever-closer regulation of their work and a gathering threat to the principle of comprehensive education to which the union

has been committed since the 1960s. In a wide-ranging interview, Courtney discusses these issues, alongside others that, with the formation of the Cameron government, have resurfaced: reduction in pensions, a virtual freezing of pay, job cuts on a large scale. He reflects on the possibilities of a broad trade union opposition to the policies of cutback, and the place that teachers might occupy within such a movement.

Joyce Canaan is Professor of Sociology at Birmingham City University. Her paper explores the possibilities of the English student movement. Since November 2010 these young people have organised demonstrations, flashmobs and teach ins/outs, occupied university buildings, and begun to build links with other public sector workers facing cuts and privatisation. The wider trade union movement has been rhetorically utilising the student movement to mobilise members' resistance to privatisation. This paper frames students' action in the context of recent and growing protests/occupations against threatened collective bargaining rights and public sector cuts in some U.S. states, themselves partly inspired by successful, predominantly youth-led demonstrations and occupations across Middle East and North African states. The paper asks if/how these 'cracks' in the neo-liberal logic globally are further impacting on the English student movement.

Ken Jones is Professor of Education at Goldsmiths, University of London. His chapter 'Justification, Contestation' discusses some of the differences between the education policies of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government and those of its Labour predecessor. He argues that these differences are significant, not least in the way that policy is presented, elaborated and justified to professional constituencies and within the wider space of educational debate. He suggests that the Coalition's discourse of justification is notably weak. In particular, the rhetoric of empowerment and meritocratic achievement which the government addresses to students is at odds with their experience of the inequalities which scar the social and educational landscape. The British student movements of 2010, which Jones discusses in a wider European frame, were a response to this discrepancy. In the concluding chapter of the book, 'Continuity, Difference and Crisis', Ken situates the education debate in the wider context of the present crisis, stressing its cultural as well as political and economic dimensions, and ends with the question that will dominate the remainder of the Coalition government's period of office: will the experience of unprecedented cuts in public services give rise to effective opposition and resistance?

Reference

Hancox, D. (ed) (2011) *Fightback: a reader on the Winter of Protest*, London: OpenDemocracy, felixcohen.co.uk/fightback.pdf