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Choice and diversity : the case for small specialist schools

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Introduction

There has been much discussion recently about school diversity and modernising the 'comprehensive principle'. The White Paper 'Schools achieving success' proposes the expansion of the specialist schools programme, city academies and faith schools. In addition, interested parties – community, groups, faith groups, LEAs, other public, private or voluntary bodies – are to be invited to publish proposals where an LEA identifies a need for a new maintained school.

The policy agenda surrounding each of these initiatives is different. Indeed, only city academies are specifically aimed at overcoming the problems associated with disadvantaged, low achieving schools in inner city areas; these require substantial financial contributions from sponsors (around 20% of capital costs). They are designed to be all-ability schools but will be able to select up to 10% of pupils on the basis of aptitude for the school's specialism; although they will be required to adhere to the law and Code of Practice on school admissions, the incentives will be such that these new schools may well seek to recruit more able children to maximise their league table positions (and indeed maintain their commercial reputation). There is thus no guarantee that they will improve the quality of the education on offer for those children who most need it – that is those who are low attainers, who have learning difficulties, who are disaffected and at risk of social exclusion with all that that entails.

In this paper, a more radical way forward to improve the quality of the education for young people who are, for whatever reason, not achieving their full potential is proposed which could also provide increased choice for parents who wish to see a greater diversity of school types within the state sector. It is argued that the current situation only provides limited choices for the majority of parents and their children. On grounds of both equity and social justice, policy makers need to consider whether more diversity should be introduced to make for an education system that above all enables children's needs to be met but also enables more parents to make genuine choices. However, it is important that the opportunities for social cohesion are maximised; what is proposed

is a state-supported system where there is diversity but without selection by ability, aptitude, ethnicity or social class.

The following sections examine the notion of diversity and its current limitations; how diversity could be accomplished within a new structural framework of state-supported schools; and the curricular diversity that could ensue. A discussion of the potential problems associated with increasing diversity and how these could be minimised concludes the paper.

Diversity and current limitations

Diversity of schools

The issue of parental choice has had increasing prominence since the 1980 Education Act. With the market-oriented reforms introduced by the 1988 Education Act, choice of school has become a key policy issue (although in fact parents only have the right to express a 'preference' for a school). A key corollary of choice is diversity - without different schools or educational providers to choose from authentic choice is not possible.

Is the notion of diversity worth pursuing? In relation to school choice, there is no doubt that different parents want different things for their children. We know from the research that has been carried out that parents opt for particular secondary schools for different reasons. Diversity, however, is severely constrained. Within the state-maintained sector there is some diversity in terms of whether schools are mixed or single-sex, religious (mainly Church of England or Roman Catholic) or secular, or comprehensive, grammar or secondary modern.   However, in many cases whilst there is diversity, the choice is that of the school not the parent – this is clearly the case with both selective and religious schools but also with some other schools (whose admissions criteria provide for covert or social selection).

In recent years there has been further diversity with the introduction of specialist schools and a small number of state-maintained schools catering for different minority religious groups. There are also city technology colleges – officially independent, but state-maintained.   New city academies, modelled in many ways along the lines of city technology colleges are being set up by predominantly private sector sponsors. In addition, there are independent schools that include both the élite, academically selective, private schools and smaller, less prestigious schools some of which cater for particular religious groups. Around 6 per cent of the school population in England is

enrolled in independent schools – and this has remained fairly static over recent years. This is an important point to stress, as there appears to be a view that the middle-classes have increasingly been leaving the state sector in recent years. Finally, there is the option of home schooling which is used by a small minority of parents.

Diversity and the curriculum

In terms of school 'processes' and more specifically the school curriculum, there is little diversity within the state-maintained sector in that there is a national curriculum and national testing that takes place at the ages of 7, 11 and 14 years of age. This is not the case for schools in the independent sector, which make their own choices about whether they follow the national curriculum and carry out national testing.

The regulations surrounding the national curriculum mean that there is little room in the school day for other more innovative curriculum areas to be addressed - although there is now a little more flexibility than previously. Moreover, whilst the White Paper suggests further relaxation of the national curriculum this is only for schools that are 'successful'. Ironically, it is likely that those pupils most in need of a more highly focused and specialised curriculum will be in schools that are not so 'successful'; thus, their needs may well not be met by this proposed relaxation of regulations.

There is also little diversity in terms of the emphasis given to GCSE examination results in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Young people in the UK are virtually unique within the European Union, the European Economic Area and North America in having so many high stakes examinations at this stage.

So what sort of diversity might there be? On the one hand there could be more diversity on the structural side and on the other more in terms of school processes.

Increasing structural diversity

If structural diversity is to be increased, what sorts of additional providers might be encouraged? And how might the processes be adapted to meet the needs of young people whose needs are not currently being met – be they low achievers, disaffected – or even to meet the needs of parents who seek new or different visions for the education of their children that they cannot find in their local area?

What would small specialist schools look like?

The model advocated here involves establishing small specialist schools that are proposed by community groups such as parents or voluntary organisations. The main objective of these schools would be to provide a high quality education for children in a given locality. They would be different from current state-maintained schools in that they would be run and organised by the proposing body, although funded by central or local government. The schools would be distinctive in terms of their small size and the specialist themes that they would adopt. These might include environmental or 'green' issues, citizenship, social sciences, humanities, ICT and key skills to enhance later employability. Small specialist schools may also deliver innovative curricula using web-based materials to meet the needs of particular groups of pupils, with 'virtual schools' being set up. However, it would be up to proposers to decide on the particular focus. Because the schools would be small they would be manageable for proposers to set up and run. In addition, more than one could be housed in the same building – perhaps renting or leasing unused school premises or community buildings - so avoiding the need for massive capital expenditure.

This idea is not altogether new as in parts of England there are specialist alternative providers – many in the voluntary sector – that cater for young people who are non-attenders, who are disaffected and whose needs are not being met by the traditional school system. Indeed, one school in Birmingham for disaffected pupils became state maintained in 1997.

Moreover, in addition to disaffected young people, there are also those who are unable to cope with mainstream school for other reasons – they may have low levels of attainment or emotional or psychological problems. In short, for some pupils, classes with 30 pupils or so, with the full national curriculum, do not appear to be the most appropriate form of provision. They may instead need small classes, a high level of literacy and numeracy support, a need to develop relationships with a 'significant' other who will offer pastoral support. However, in addition to children's needs not being met there are also parents' wishes that are not being fulfilled – recent campaigns have revealed that there is a clear demand by parents for comprehensive, mixed, non-religious schools; for the parents concerned, their choice is not realised as such schools do not exist in their local area. This is the case in parts of urban England and particularly in inner London. In addition, parents may want to set up different types of schools, perhaps realising alternative visions of education.

Funding small specialist schools

There is then a good argument for diversification of the school system to include some additional innovative small specialist schools which would be set up with government funding, using a demand-side financing approach for revenue costs – much as happens at present with the pupil-led funding of state schools (via the Fair Funding formula). Obviously, if the schools had a particular focus on meeting the needs of disadvantaged young people costs would inevitably be higher than in mainstream schools. There could also be the option of business or other sponsorship – but it should be sponsorship that was clearly designed to meet the needs of pupils *not* the sponsoring company. There are already examples of such altruism and these could be built upon (see Kleinman et al., 1998).

Given that the voluntary sector has a tradition of providing much of this form of education - for example, units for non-attenders, Saturday schools and so on – this sector would seem to be the logical type of provider to run small specialist schools. However, there is also a case for parents' groups to be able to set up and run such schools given the increasing concerns shown by parents for community-oriented schools.

Curricular diversity

Regulation of curriculum in small specialist schools

The curriculum of the small specialist schools would be regulated by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and schools would be required to set objectives and targets – much as with the current specialist schools programme. In contrast, however, the curriculum would be more focused on meeting the specific objectives of the school. There is an opportunity for some real curricular diversity. Clearly, some core subjects would need to be included – but there would be considerable scope for additional subjects to be introduced and innovative models of teaching and learning.

Education, small specialist schools and socialisation

In this context it is important to acknowledge that the education system in England is intensely output oriented. Although we would all acknowledge the importance of examination results in terms of future employability, English young people are the most heavily examined in the European Union at the end of compulsory schooling, and one of the negative effects of this is that certain other aspects of education are not necessarily given the credit that they merit. For a cohesive society a strong case can be made for individuals to be well socialised, to accept responsibility for their actions on others, on the environment and so on. Values such as tolerance, integrity, honesty, compassion and co-operation are important for society to function well and do not always appear to be given the priority they deserve within the current education system. In addition, attributes such as self-esteem, self-confidence and team working are not necessarily fostered. Whilst schools may inculcate such values and attributes as well as focusing on standards, the agenda continues to be one where headteachers, governors, LEAs and government are all focusing continually on schools' outputs and in particular maximising 'league table' positions. Such an approach is likely to result in individualistic as opposed to community-oriented approaches taking precedence.

Can this sort of model work?

The American experience

The model proposed here bears similarities to American charter schools. These schools come into existence through a contract with a state agency or a local school board (broadly similar to an LEA). The charter or contract establishes a framework within which schools will operate and provides public funding for a specified period of time. It gives schools considerable autonomy in their operation and there are fewer regulations to adhere to than for other publicly-funded schools, but the school is held accountable for achieving certain specified goals including pupil performance. These schools tend to be very small (on average 137 pupils per school) but are increasing in number within the US (RPP International, 2000). The bodies that set up such schools are diverse and include non-profit agencies and community groups of various types.

An early concern about charter schools was that they would 'lure the best and the brightest pupils away from existing public schools'. However, research suggests that they serve a diverse pupil population (Education Commission of the States, 1998).

Equity and quality

Basic guidelines and regulations to ensure equity, quality would need to be in place. In the US very clear guidance is provided on what is and is not acceptable in terms of admissions for example. In the English context, admissions would need to be based on criteria that do not relate to ability, aptitude, social class or religion to ensure equity and social justice. Pupils would thus be recruited on the basis of parental choice – or indeed pupil choice in the case of older pupils – with priority being given to those living in specific localities. However, a lottery system could be used if there were more applicants than places available, to ensure equity in terms of who is admitted and overcome many of the problems that are to be found with admissions to secondary schools in England. With clear guidelines, appropriate regulation and lotteries being used if schools are oversubscribed there is a real opportunity to address the educational and social needs of inner city children.

How do these proposals fit with government policy?

Finally, the proposals in the White Paper could very easily be extended to include small specialist schools as advocated here – highly innovative schools could be set up in disadvantaged inner city areas. Instead of setting up one city academy for example, two or three small specialist schools could be established to meet the needs of particular communities. The trust that the Government has in the private sector to deliver where the state sector is perceived to have failed could also be extended to voluntary groups. It is surely a venture that is worth piloting – and of course, evaluating.

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