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'Because we can': Pluralism and structural reform in education

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This article revisits a major paper published a decade ago by the political scientist Christopher Pollitt about the highly activist approach to the reform of public services taken in England in recent years. In education, the pace has accelerated since that paper appeared.

The weaknesses of the current structures and processes resulting from this reforming zeal are enumerated. A particular focus is placed on the technocratic and market-oriented features of the current context, and their significance in the light of the moral, social, and cultural issues that lie at the heart of schooling. It is argued that analysts of educational governance pay insufficient attention to the distinctive characteristics of the British constitution and their impact on changes in structure and process within education, leading not just to a democratic deficit but also to a paucity of pluralism.

Keywords: structural reform; educational governance; British constitution; pluralism; inclusiveness

Introduction

A decade ago, in a magisterial article, the political scientist Christopher Pollitt coined the term 'redisorganization' to denote the serial restructuring that had been a characteristic feature of the government of public services in various jurisdictions over the previous 20 years or so (Pollitt, 2007). Although the process of redisorganization had also affected other countries, it was especially pronounced in England and had been applied there particularly to education and health. Comparative studies showed the UK to have been among the most activist, hard-driving of comparable countries with regard to public management reform. The pace since then has not slackened. If anything it has accelerated, despite changes of government. This article will consider the implications and suggest an alternative perspective on future reform.

Do structures matter?

The principal focus will be on the reform of structures. Of course structures are not the only targets of reformers. Thus the Finnish educationist Pasi Sahlberg includes in his identification of the key elements of what he calls the 'Global Educational Reform Movement' (GERM): standardized teaching and learning, a strong focus on core academic subjects, and test-based accountability and control. The only element in the list that is explicitly focused on structures is 'borrowing market-oriented reform ideas', which according to Sahlberg involves aligning schools and systems to the 'operational logic of private corporations' (Sahlberg, 2011: 103).

From this it might appear that structural reform is relatively insignificant. In fact, it is often claimed that structures are of little consequence and that outcomes depend essentially on high-quality teaching and leadership, rather than structures. In the terminology frequently employed in

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England, standards matter far more than structures. What appears to be meant by this assertion is that working to improve teaching and leadership is likely to have a more significant impact on performance than changing structures (Wiliam, 2010). That is very different from arguing that structures are unimportant. Indeed, mandating the non-structural elements of Sahlberg's GERM – those to do with teaching, learning, and assessment – depends on having the structures in place to achieve this.

The significance of structure for improving public education should not be underestimated. A study of reform and its implementation by the OECD (2015: 50) has concluded that system design features can have both positive and negative effects on educational equity. In this connection taking a 'whole system' approach to reform is regarded by many as particularly important (Glatter, 2012; Burns and Kőster, 2016). For example, Munby and Fullan (2016: 4) argue that 'You can't run a whole system for students in a region, state or country by relying entirely on exceptional leadership in each school'. That way, they claim, you get 'change in small pockets … with exceptional schools attracting the best talent and the rest left struggling in comparison'. They also describe the uncomfortable position in which school leaders in GERM-type contexts find themselves caught between heavy top-down accountability that fails to motivate people and that can distort the purposes of education, and having to react to government's emphasis on autonomy and diversity at school level that can breed isolation and excessive variability in performance.

A related view, focusing specifically on England, has been presented by Paul Cappon, a senior Canadian educationist with wide international experience, who was a Policy Fellow at the Department for Education in England in 2014/15, with a remit to examine the preparedness of English young people for life and work. In his report to the department (Cappon, 2015) he noted England's relatively unimpressive performance in international educational comparisons and particularly in the decline of adult skills across recent generations, as shown by the OECD's Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). Cappon attributes much of this to structural weaknesses in the schooling system. He claims that there is too much focus on individual schools and too little on the wider system, resulting in great inconsistency. He refers to the 'curious combination of centralization and decentralization, and to the fragmentation of delivery that characterizes the English system'. There are strengths, but these 'occur despite – rather than because of – systems and structures that are currently in place. Sustainable improvement is infrequent in a context of incoherence' (Cappon, 2015: 53–4). In his view, the 'system appears to be inherently unstable, changeable with bewildering speed' (Cappon, 2015: 21).

It is noteworthy that these characteristics have been accentuated in recent years. Perhaps as a result of this, there has also been growing recognition of their existence and implications within the system and among legislators. Thus the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2015: 3) has referred to 'a complex and confused system of external oversight'. The outgoing Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw (2016), has said 'We will struggle to embed reform if oversight remains confused and inconsistent'. The House of Commons Education Committee (2016: para. 23), charged with scrutinizing the system as a whole and its effectiveness, has made an even more pointed assessment: 'The landscape of oversight, intervention, inspection and accountability is now complex and difficult for many of those involved in education, not least parents, to navigate'.

Similar conclusions are arising from research. For example, a research-based review of the capacity of primary schools to respond to growing population diversity has concluded that the increasing fragmentation of the system has led it to reflect and reproduce substantial social segregation (Ainscow *et al*., 2016). It has also meant that:

> The provision available to support schools' development is incoherent and patchy, whilst central direction and accountability mechanisms focus schools on only a narrow range of educational tasks. However, we have also suggested that some schools find their own way through this fragmented system in order to develop creative responses to diversity.
>
> (Ainscow *et al*., 2016: 29)

The latter point indicates once more that some schools and school leaders are able to overcome barriers imposed by problematic systems and structures and manage to find a way to succeed in spite of these, but that does not mean such arrangements are beneficial for the system as a whole.

Attention must be paid to improving teaching and leadership, of course, but excellent teaching and quality leadership cannot be fully effective in a capricious and dysfunctional framework. In England there is evidence that school leadership is suffering increasing recruitment problems because the role is becoming less appealing. This appears to be due at least in part to the impact of structural reforms, the perception of heavy accountability demands, and inadequate support provision (Earley, 2013; The Future Leaders Trust, 2016). Similar problems afflict the teaching profession as a whole.

The high-stakes accountability processes, notably public grading by the inspection agency Ofsted, are popularly known as 'naming and shaming'. As Wettlaufer (2015) has noted, institutionalized shaming has become fashionable again, but its efficacy in modern conditions is questionable: 'Shaming with the positive intention of reformation works best in small face-to-face groups, where everybody knows everybody and values are shared' (Wettlaufer, 2015: 39). This is far from the situation in English education today.

Michael Fullan wrote an article in 2000 headed 'Infrastructure is all'. In this he argued, on the basis of his substantial international experience, that 'The key reason why reform fails to become widespread and sustained is that the infrastructure is weak, unhelpful, or working at cross-purposes. By the infrastructure, I mean the next layer above whatever unit we are focusing on' (Fullan, 2000: 15). More recently, he identified fragmented strategies, instead of integrated or systemic ones, as one of four evidence-based 'wrong drivers' for whole-system reform (Fullan, 2011).

Understating the role of structure by comparison with teaching and leadership may relate to a perspective on reform that focuses on individual school units or small groups of schools rather than taking a 'whole-system' approach in the interests of promoting coherent support structures and consistency in provision (Glatter, 2012; Cappon, 2015). That perspective aligns closely with the quasi-market model, which views schools as largely separate units competing with one another, a distinct feature of the GERM (Sahlberg, 2011). Studies in a variety of countries have provided little cause for optimism that this model yields the educational benefits that its advocates claim (Waslander *et al*., 2010; Jensen, 2013).

The purpose of this section has been to suggest that the debate about structures has become confused and has seemed to promote the conclusion that different structures would produce similar educational outcomes. This does not appear a tenable position in the light of the discussion so far, and there is indicative evidence in England that growing structural fragmentation is associated with increased social segregation and an intensification of local school hierarchies (see Glatter, 2014). However, providing relevant evidence is problematic because, as Pollitt (2007) pointed out in his seminal article referred to earlier, governments now tend to initiate so many interlocking changes that evaluation is hardly possible. He concluded, however, that overall there was a striking lack of convincing evidence of the efficacy of the approach to reform referred to by Moran (2003: 181) as 'hyper-politicization and hyper-innovation', whether in England or elsewhere. Moreover, the substantial transition costs, both financial and human, are

rarely made explicit. There are huge unknown costs relating to disruption, distraction, the loss of organizational memory, and so on – what Pollitt calls the 'dark side of reform', which for obvious reasons is hard to research and illuminate. These would include, for example, the impact on morale and motivation and the consequences for recruitment and retention, and hence capacity, alluded to above.

We turn next to exploring some of the dynamics of the system of governance, which have led to the heavy emphasis on structural change or 'redisorganization', again focusing on England.

A paucity of pluralism?

The English school reforms are closely aligned with the GERM principles identified by Sahlberg (2011). Key features include a quasi-market model linked to parental choice of school (more accurately, the expression of parental preference) and a heavily technocratic accountability model (Wilkins, 2016) based on national inspection, with public grading of schools and published performance tables of examination results. Recently, strong emphasis has been given to a corporate model of schooling, with chains of schools known as multi-academy trusts (MATs) controlled by private charitable 'sponsors'. Within such a structure the individual units become in effect sites for the delivery of education, rather than self-standing schools.

This model derives from the academies programme. Academies, first announced in 2000, represent a new type of school in England, with distinct connections to an earlier model known as City Technology Colleges (Whitty *et al*., 1993). Academies are 'sponsored' (that is, controlled) by a range of different 'providers' (for example, commercial companies, philanthropic bodies, universities, schools rated as outstanding) and are set up as charitable trusts. They encompass both separate schools and small or larger groupings or 'chains' of schools, and their number has greatly increased since 2010. They operate on the basis of a 'funding agreement' or contract between the government's senior education minister (the Secretary of State for Education) and the sponsoring body and, while subject to various forms of national regulation, they have a significant degree of autonomy and no formal accountability to elected local authorities. They are thus essentially schools controlled and regulated by central government, but contracted to a highly diverse range of private not-for-profit companies.

At the time of writing, the majority of publicly funded secondary schools are academies, a much smaller proportion of primary schools have that status, and more than half of all academies are in MATs. The latter chains or groupings of schools under a single governance board have produced highly variable performance, yet current plans are to create hundreds more of them (Glatter, 2016; Kirby *et al.*, 2016). This is a radical structural change on a very large scale, and it is creating a school system – in a country with a population of over 53 million – in which the only significant democratic input is at central government level, in sharp contrast to the preceding century when local government had a significant role. Consequently, the centre has been able to secure ever greater control to impose its often controversial and sometimes idiosyncratic preferences about school structure, curriculum, and assessment, generally with minimal trialling, on this large and complex system under the cloak of 'reform'. But this is often of little concern to politicians and professionals: democracy does not matter, it is claimed, as long as the results are good. However, against this view it can be argued that the governance of publicly funded schooling should be far more than a technical matter of which 'provider' can get the best test and examination results: moral, social, and cultural issues lie at the heart of schooling. This is even more the case when, as now, there is a heightened emphasis on markets and competition: 'The more markets extend their reach into noneconomic spheres of life, the more entangled they become with moral questions' (Sandel, 2013: 88).

A former senior adviser to government, Mathew Taylor (2015), has distinguished between 'communitarian' and 'technocratic' approaches to public and social policy. In the technocratic perspective, he writes:

> the search is on for scalable solutions. Once the right intervention is identified, it is then a matter of arranging things so that the solutions can be delivered as reliably and uniformly as possible … In recent decades, the top-down approach has been supplemented by the favouring of market mechanisms.
>
> (Taylor, 2015: 14)

By contrast, in communitarian approaches:

> it is the quality of engagement among front-line service providers, clients and citizens that is crucial … Power in this model is decentralised and the boundaries between the bureaucratic rationality of the state and affective domain of civil society are deliberately blurred.
>
> (Taylor, 2015: 16)

In English schools policy, the technocratic and market-based approaches have recently dominated and communitarian processes, whether elective or more broadly representational, have fallen into serious decline.

In his landmark article, Pollitt (2007) drew attention to Britain's distinctive constitutional processes as a key factor explaining what he regarded as politicians' hyperactivity over reform. This is not an area to which writers on school governance, policy, or leadership have given much attention, perhaps understandably since it appears a relatively fixed feature. However, it seems important to recognize its significance, if only as a key aspect of the context. Pollitt argued that:

> in international terms, the British system affords its majoritarian governments almost unequalled capacity for intervention in the structures and processes of most types of public sector organisation. Compared with, for example, most continental European countries, there are very few constitutional or legal constraints on a determined Prime Minister or Secretary of State … [T]he British system simultaneously maximises the temptation to re-organise and minimises the political penalties for so doing.
>
> (Pollitt, 2007: 534)

He points out that in the US 'Presidents have nowhere near the untrammelled authority of British Prime Ministers to tinker with organisational structures' (Pollitt, 2007: 534), due in part, of course, to the constitutional autonomy of the individual states. Given the devolution settlements with Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, Pollitt's analysis relates primarily to England, where the lack of constitutional protection for local government is particularly significant in relation to the structural reforms in education.

The reforms have generally been preceded by legislation in parliament, of which there has been a great deal in recent years. Dan Gibton recounts how, during his detailed study of recent schools legislation in England, one senior member of parliament involved in such activity told him: 'Do you know why we legislate? Because we can. New education legislation is somehow embedded in the DNA of administrations and secretaries of state. We simply have to come up with a new education bill every second year or so …' (Gibton, 2013: 1–2). In the absence of a written constitution – Britain is the only significant country apart from Saudi Arabia without one (Robertson, 2016) – there are no formal arrangements that:

> delineate and entrench the powers of other sources of authority: the courts; the permanent civil service; local government and indeed Parliament itself. … As a result the executive is able to rearrange the architecture of the state at will, irrespective of the views of other state institutions, and at short notice.
>
> (le Roux, 2014)

According to Stein Ringen, the British constitutional system has many problems but one basic defect: the concentration of power in Downing Street. 'Too much power is a recipe for mistaken policies'. It deprives decision-makers 'of the caution that comes with the awareness that their decisions will be checked and double-checked and scrutinised by others with independent authority' (Ringen, 2013: 22). Indeed, King and Crewe have analysed a series of recent policy failures in various fields in Britain under different governments and concluded that the defects uncovered were essentially systemic: 'It is the British governing system, and the ways in which people function within that system, that needs to change' (King and Crewe, 2013: 397).

This discussion may seem distant from the specifics of structural change in English education, but it is more relevant than might appear. Reference is often made to a 'democratic deficit' (Glatter, 2013), but it might be equally germane to refer to a paucity of pluralism – power and control in education should arguably be dispersed rather than concentrated as they are at present, on grounds of effectiveness as much as of civil rights. The principle of subsidiarity – 'that decisions on public policy should always be taken at the lowest practicable level of government' (Marquand, 2004: 143) – could be invoked to achieve this, and it would begin to attend to current defects not just of structure but also of process, to which I turn in the next section.

Legitimacy and consent

Two issues of process seem especially significant in this context: governance by contract and style of decision-making. As mentioned earlier, in England over recent years there has been a significant and unprecedented development of 'governance by contract' (Feintuck and Stevens, 2013), whereby a substantial proportion of schools funded by the taxpayer are contracted out under the academies programme by the Secretary of State to an extremely diverse range of third parties via so-called 'funding agreements'. This has placed increased focus on the process of 'commissioning' the provision of schooling. Such a process is likely to emphasize the specification and achievement of 'technical' standards, rather than the less tangible qualities relating to the broader social and moral purposes of schooling. In addition to the direct educational implications, because the contracts are with central government the process raises fundamental issues of ownership, democracy, and pluralism. Pring (2013: 157) has put the position in stark terms: 'What is being created is the most personally centralised education system in Western Europe since Germany in the 1930s – each school contracted directly to the Secretary of State…'.

If publicly funded schools can be conceived as civic institutions, with citizenship at their heart (Glatter, 2017), then it becomes questionable whether the ownership of such an institution can legitimately be transferred from civil society to a third party by means of a commissioning and contracting process. For example, the issue arises of whether such processes delegitimize citizen stakeholders, including parents and pupils, who are not party to the contract. A similar perspective has been proposed by Robert Tinker, namely that publicly funded schools should be regarded as 'public interest institutions' founded on a principle of 'shared ownership' in which citizens, employees, and all other stakeholders 'have a sense of belonging and control' (Tinker, 2015: 11), requiring inclusive democratic and participative forms of decision-making. The reference to 'public interest' indicates that such institutions have purposes not just for themselves and 'their' students: they also have a wider remit in relation to their local communities and society as a whole. Such a conception appears incompatible with the system of government-issued contracts that has been introduced in England extremely rapidly. The radicalism of this change appears to have largely escaped notice, although Thorley and Clifton (2016) have reviewed it and proposed alternative options for its reform, including returning to a system whereby all schools

are governed through a system of statutory relationships rather than many operating on the basis of an individual contract.

Regarding styles of decision-making, as indicated earlier the predominant approach to reform in England in recent years has been central diktat, with potential countervailing forces such as local government and local communities progressively diminished, while central bodies such as the inspection body Ofsted, the Education Funding Agency, and the new government-controlled Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) have increased in strength. A cross-party parliamentary committee feared that the latter bodies would come to be seen as 'undemocratic and opaque' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2016: para. 138). The review by the Canadian specialist Paul Cappon referred to earlier concluded that 'there are in England few moderating influences, brakes, structured feedback mechanisms, and social partnerships that might reduce the impact of short-term empiricism of central decision-makers' and that 'a balance between legitimate political responsibility and accountability and the deep engagement of stakeholders' (Cappon, 2015: 64) needs to be achieved. Without securing 'buy-in' through genuine partnerships, policy options were likely to fail because of resistance (Cappon, 2015: 69).

Such messages were aligned with and drew from conclusions by the OECD. A review of international research and experience about how to achieve reform successfully in education emphasized the importance of engaging stakeholders, in particular ensuring that changes resonate with teachers' thinking and involving teacher unions in reforms (OECD, 2015). It also stressed that a long-term perspective is needed when implementing reforms, especially where these involve a different philosophical approach to teaching methods or changing the governance structure of schools. Such a perspective involves significant tensions with political pressures. Leadership is required to establish 'how alignment, consistency and a long-term perspective can be reconciled with the needs of politicians to promote an understandable and popular policy agenda on a day-to-day basis' (OECD, 2015: 167). Another OECD study, on governing education in a context of complexity, concludes that trust 'is an essential element of educational governance and is required for good system functioning' (Burns and Köster, 2016: 227).

These are lessons that arguably need to be taken on board much more firmly in England than they have been in the recent past. They extend beyond education to the whole realm of government in any context. '[T]he authority that springs from power is crude and fickle. It rests, ultimately, on force, threat and sanction … The authority that sits on legitimacy is something else … This is the jewel in the crown of governance that makes for stable, strong and reliable authority … People obey not because they must but because they want to. It *pulls* followers into a settlement which they see as rightful' (Ringen, 2013: 51), yielding a measure of ownership and consent. Ringen considers the recent failures of public sector reform in England to be largely due to the way professionals such as doctors and teachers have been treated. Instead of being rallied for reforms they have been put under command and subjected to crude technocratic measurement: 'Rigidly schematic targets, controls and performance indicators present themselves to workers as oppressive disincentives' (Ringen, 2013: 21). This is counterproductive because 'Governing is a power business, but never only a power business. It is also, and always, a people business' (Ringen, 2013: 50). Nor has the wider population been mobilized for the reforms: 'The government *did,* everyone else was *done to*' (Ringen, 2013: 22).

The issue goes beyond simple human relations, important though they are. It raises the question of the identity of publicly funded schools. Are they privately provided commodities or, as Tinker (2015) proposed, should they rather be conceptualized as 'public interest institutions', with significant implications for ownership and also for accountability based on 'ethos' and institutional qualities, not just short-term performance (Glatter, 2017)? That would imply a

strengthening of the community voice in school governance to balance the increasing emphasis in England on professional skills in finance and management (Baxter, 2016; Wilkins, 2016).

Conclusions: New perspectives on reform

An issue to which Pollitt (2007) drew particular attention in his critique of English-style public service reform was the instability associated with the approach. He pointed out that structures and procedures tend to be changed before the full results of the previous reform, whether positive or negative, are known. In his view, this leads to 'a general loss of faith in stability' and 'a sense of the temporary-ness of everything' (Pollitt, 2007: 539), which can significantly affect service users (and, it might be added, staff as well), enhancing their anxiety about possible resource reductions under cover of promised improvements, or at least about the intelligibility of the new dispositions. Of course, it is a commonplace observation that the pace of change has greatly increased in recent decades, and reform implies significant change. The question is how to pursue reform in a well-founded and sustainable way. In their review of research on successful leadership, Leithwood and his colleagues observe that 'Stability and change have a synergistic relationship. While stability is often associated with resistance and maintenance of the status quo, it is difficult to leap forward from an unstable foundation' (Leithwood *et al*., 2006: 11).

This implies an approach to educational reform that puts more emphasis on stability, pluralism, and inclusiveness and less on command and confrontation. King and Crewe (2013: 395) advocate 'the practice of deliberation – of weighing up, proceeding without haste and taking counsel together'. While they apply this specifically to the process of policymaking, it appears equally relevant at institution level: 'Agreements reached by way of deliberation also stand a good chance of being widely accepted, not least because more individuals and organizations will have had their opinions and interests taken into account' (King and Crewe, 2013: 395).

Such a philosophy should arguably also extend to the level of the wider school system and to reform processes within it. This would require the creation of a new framework in which trust and collaboration were emphasized and in which ownership was spread to local communities and stakeholders within a pluralist multi-level system. The current emphasis on individual units, whether stand-alone schools or small or larger groupings, competing against each other breeds fragmentation and segregation instead of a coherent, intelligible, and equitable system. This focus, together with widespread government contracting of schools to a huge and, to many stakeholders, bewildering array of third-party 'providers', restricts pupils and parents to the role of consumers rather than citizens, with limited rights and scope for influence. A strong and consistent infrastructure of support would also be needed to counter the patchiness of provision that has been a historic feature of schools in England.

This discussion has identified a neglected aspect of analytical work on educational reform in different national contexts. It is generally recognized that within countries 'policy developments and school system changes reflect unique histories and cultures as much as international trends' (Glatter, 2012: 570). However, more attention should be given to specific constitutional provisions and traditions in different jurisdictions, since these can have a major impact on the distribution of power, and hence on who is able to control the character of publicly provided education and its responsiveness to a variety of needs and conditions.

As Hallinger has argued, educational leadership scholars should give greater attention to the sociocultural context in which practices are embedded because 'Different socio-cultural contexts evidence different value sets and norms of behavior' (Hallinger, in press: 12). Constitutional frameworks are an important part of such contexts, as are structures of governance and reform processes, yet until recently 'scholars paid insufficient attention to the broader system or national

education context as a "given", relegated to the shadows' (Hallinger, in press). The tumultuous and disruptive reform activity in England over the past 30 years (see, for example, Woods and Simkins, 2014) has forced researchers and analysts to bring these dimensions out of the shadows and into the light. In doing so they have hopefully contributed to a productive international discourse.

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