

## BOOK REVIEWS

**A good school for every child**, by Cyril Taylor, London and New York, Routledge, David Fulton Publishing, 2009, 201pp., £19.99 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-415-48253-0

It was once put to Cyril Taylor that he had ‘seen off a lot of Secretaries of State’.<sup>1</sup> Remarkably, by the time his role as a government advisor had ended in 2007 with the arrival of Ed Balls, Taylor had worked with 10 consecutive Secretaries of State, Conservative and Labour, from Kenneth Baker to Alan Johnson. This was a period of increasing marketisation in the British education system, enshrined in the landmark 1988 Education Reform Act and continued by the New Labour government from 1997. Taylor was often involved in these developments, at times very much at the forefront of change.

His latest book, *A good school for every child*, looks at various aspects of education. The 17 relatively short chapters can be grouped into the following, often overlapping, themes: standards and ‘good’ schools; greater autonomy for schools and increased power for head teachers; diverse school types (such as specialist schools and academies); helping children from backgrounds that tend to be more likely to underperform (including pupils from Black and minority ethnic groups and looked after children); the use of information and communication technology in schools; and vocational education, particularly in an international context.

The book’s main preoccupation is with improving standards in schools generally, including raising the attainment of pupils from disadvantaged groups. This, in many respects, mirrors New Labour’s approach to education, with its emphasis on standards, choice and social justice. Taylor certainly adopts similar rhetoric, championing social justice as well as the standards agenda, for example: ‘social justice clearly demands that steps should be taken to improve genuinely low-attaining schools’ (45). However, like New Labour, there is an emphasis in the book on creating ‘good’ schools that often overlooks what happens *within schools*, and takes precedence over social justice. For example, in the chapter on ‘gifted and talented’ schemes, Taylor is critical of the assumption that such initiatives are dominated by middle-class children (140), but does little to disprove the claim.

Taylor does not miss the chance to critique policies that have emerged since his government role ceased, most notably the National Challenge. The National Challenge is the most recent (and first post-Taylor) government initiative aiming to raise secondary school attainment. It identifies schools where at least 30% of students do not achieve five or more GCSEs A\*–C (including English and maths). Taylor rightly condemns the programme’s highlighting of low attainment in certain schools without considering their pupil composition. He believes that, once other factors are taken into account, almost half the National Challenge schools are unjustly labelled as failing.

The subject in the book that is perhaps of the most contemporary interest to academic audiences is academy schools, a programme Taylor has been closely involved in. There is not a great deal of space dedicated to academies, mainly one short chapter, although they also crop up in other chapters as potential solutions to issues such as the integration of pupils of different

faiths within a single school (multi-faith academies) and assisting vulnerable children (boarding academies). Taylor repeats the claims that proponents of the programme often make, including that attainment in academies has risen at a much faster rate than the national average (61–3). Yet the performance of academies does not come under as much scrutiny as it might do. Issues such as whether the improvement in attainment may have been driven by the changing composition of academies, with their free school meal rates on average declining, is not properly considered.

However, Taylor does criticise recent developments in the programme. Most significantly, he asserts that only the most low attaining and disadvantaged schools should become academies, especially if the programme is limited to 400 schools: ‘what must be resisted is the temptation to give into pressure from prospective sponsors and to create academies from schools which are performing well’ (67).

If academies do not take up as much of the book as perhaps might be expected, it is because, seemingly, they form just one part of what Taylor sees as his main work – specialist schools. He traces a schools movement in England that started with City Technology Colleges (CTCs), vastly expanded with specialist schools and continued with academies. But it is, after all, specialist schools that have become omniscient in the landscape of English schooling, with around 90% of secondary schools now having specialist status. Taylor makes much of the rise in attainment nationally at GCSE level over the last decade coinciding with the increasing numbers of specialist schools. Yet other studies have suggested that specialist schools’ superior performance is relatively modest and not uniform across specialisms.<sup>2</sup> So, once again, there is perhaps insufficient scrutiny of the performance of a school type that Taylor champions.

Taylor remains a fascinating character, but the type of education policies he advocates, many of which are now embedded in the English education system, appear to do little to address deeply rooted problems, such as the attainment gap between the least and most disadvantaged pupils (see Whitty 2009). Despite the rise in attainment overall, this gap remains similar to a decade ago. It is tackling this that should be the priority of any education policy that is truly committed to social justice.

## Notes

1. See the exchange with Barry Sheerman (House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills 2006: Q418).
2. See, for example, Levacic and Jenkins (2004).

## References

- House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills. 2006. Minutes of evidence, volume II. *Hansard*, 12 December 2005, HC 633-II.
- Levacic, R., and A. Jenkins. 2004. Evaluating the effectiveness of specialist schools. *CEEDP*, 38. London: Centre for the Economics of Education, London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Whitty, G. 2009. Evaluating ‘Blair’s Educational Legacy?’: Some comments on the special issue of *Oxford Review of Education*. *Oxford Review of Education* 35, no. 2: 267–80.

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