‘Building Schools for the Future’: ‘transformation’ for social justice or expensive blunder?

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Introduction

We begin this paper with a summary of the ‘Building Schools for the Future’ (BSF) programme and the main issues arising from it before focusing on the social justice impacts of BSF and its withdrawal by the Coalition government. Our paper draws on research funded by the British Academy and Roehampton’s Centre for Educational Research in Equalities Policy and Pedagogy. The research comprises documentary analysis, case studies in six Local Authorities (LAs) and semi-structured interviews with national and local policymakers and educationists.

The former Labour Government launched BSF in 2003. Directed at refurbishing or rebuilding all 3,500 secondary schools in England over 18 years, BSF was extremely ambitious in scope and intent with an estimated cost by 2023 of £55bn. BSF was intended to play a key part in New Labour’s overall educational/social policy trajectory. It combined the ideas of formidable expansion in the infrastructure of social/educational provision with quite explicitly ideological themes of economic, social, educational and community transformation. For example, all BSF bids had to include a statement as to the involvement of local businesses and the generation of apprenticeships. Similarly, as was continuously reiterated, the Programme was never intended to be just about buildings – important though this was – but also about an overall notion of community transformation (we shall return to this later). Initially BSF focused on areas which were seen to express high levels of deprivation and social need. In this crucial sense it was intentionally redistributive, albeit in a stealthy and gradualist rather than revolutionary sense. There was also a requirement that each LA project was to be highly consultative and that determinations of local visions and designations should have been debated and discussed by governing bodies, LAs, parent groups, and school communities, including students. So transformative, redistributive, regenerative and participative principles were all intended to play their part in the BSF initiative.
Cross-cutting the debates which accompanied the introduction of BSF were questions about the tight frameworks within which the central state laid down the parameters of the Programme and the unquestioned ‘delivery’ through a partnership with private sector providers who were absolutely key to the structure, material basis and governance model of each and every project. Also many questions were raised about the boundaries which were placed around the whole process of ‘consultation’, the extent to which its outcomes were accurately reflected, the educational terms which were defined as necessary (eg. ‘personalization’) and the steady creep of (Labour) Academies into the Programme. As with many other aspects of New Labour’s social provision there was also concern about the nature of the ‘social inclusion’ agenda within which BSF was located. This forms the central part of our argument in this paper. Whilst strongly supporting the material investment in schooling and communities, as our research progressed a number of criticisms emerged about the BSF policy (Mahony, Hextall and Richardson 2011a). These are summarised below.

The purposes/objectives of BSF were unclear
Improved standards and pupil motivation, local community involvement in design and use of schools, the potential of BSF to transform education and communities, new models of funding allocation and procurement, state-of-the-art facilities for teachers and learners are all present in the original ‘vision’. On 15th July 2009, Ed Balls former Secretary of State for Education highlighted the importance of BSF in supporting local jobs and businesses in a time of recession (http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2009_0134, accessed January 20, 2010). Both the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee (2007) and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC, 2009) commented on the slippery nature of all these different aims and the precise role of school building in achieving them.

The link between buildings and standards is not proven
In 2003 the DfES had claimed that their research and case studies showed ‘... a clear link between capital investment and improvements in school standards’ (DfES, 2003, p. 4) but Higgins et al. (2005) conducted a literature review of over 200 publications dating from 1970s onwards which revealed a ‘paucity of clear, replicable empirical studies’ that could be used as a resource to guide policy makers (Woolner et al., 2007, p. 48).

The ‘implementation’ of BSF
This was deemed by the PAC (2009) and National Audit Office (2009) to be expensive,
bureaucratic, overly-complicated and wasteful. The 7 stage process developed to ‘roll out’ building projects was widely regarded as ‘horrendous’. Project delays allegedly led to frustration on the part of headteachers (PwC, 2010) and concerns over whether Local Education Partnership (LEPs) established to ‘deliver’ BSF really did offer value-for-money (VfM) lent weight to the Coalition Government’s decision to close the BSF programme in 2010.

**Governance and accountability**

Questions were raised about whether LEPs (in which private sector had an 80% share compared with LAs’ 10%) had established adequate mechanisms of governance and accountability (NAO, 2009). This was important given that LEPs could be accorded ten-year exclusivity contracts for on-going service provision and arguably represent a ‘more radical version of PFI’ (Aldred 2008: 23). Continuing trends towards private involvement in public services (Ball and Youdell, 2008; Hatcher, 2008), BSF involves considerable sums of money being paid to private sector supply chains such that it is extremely difficult to ascertain who has been contracted by whom, at what cost, to do what for whom. In the current economic climate, the capacity of some sub-contractors to sustain their commitments within a much reduced BSF is in doubt. Tensions sometimes emerged between the demands of confidentiality required by commercial sensitivities and local democratic engagement underpinning initiatives of ‘community transformation’.

‘Strategy for Change’

So what about the ‘equality’ agenda? How are we to understand this element of BSF; to what extent was it a discourse within which BSF was intended to operate and/or was it being redefined and recalibrated for its place within a 3rd way, neo-liberal agenda. In order to attempt to get some purchase on these questions and to understand what might have been lost in relation to social justice by the withdrawal of BSF, let us now turn to what might have been achieved had the programme continued. In order to do this we now move on to discuss Local Authority (LA) Strategy for Change (SfC) documents which set out their educational vision, describe the transformations envisioned and the process for their realisation. We focus on these on the grounds that, in the first formal component of the BSF approvals process, LAs were required to receive formal Departmental approval of their SfC before they could proceed and it is within these key statements of strategic direction that one would expect to find an account of social justice priorities.

The format for LA SfC submissions was laid down by Partnerships for Schools (PfS)
which in the words of Michael Coleman, one of its Regional Programme Directors, was established in 2004 to deliver BSF which, ‘aims to transform educational opportunities by facilitating the creation and implementation of local visions that meet the national need for fit for purpose, flexible facilities for the 21st century (http://www.publicarchitecture.co.uk/knowledge-base/files/bsf_the_role_of_pfs___the_lep.pdf, accessed 9/8/2011).

In its Guidance for Local Authorities in BSF Wave 5, PfS (2007) sets BSF in the context of other policies such as the White Paper Higher Standards, Better Schools for All and Every Child Matters: Change for Children, paras 6 and 7) and also makes it clear that:

Projects will not be approved unless Ministers are content that plans are transformational. Local authorities must ensure that schools can transform the learning experience of pupils and achieve a step change in educational outcomes for children and other learners. As local authorities plan their BSF strategy with schools they will be seeking to secure:

- outstanding designs in a school estate rationalised and fit for the 21st century;
- improved standards in all schools;
- innovative, high-quality teaching and learning for all;
- increased diversity of provision to meet parental choice and secure improved educational outcomes for all young people – including through Academies and Trust Schools where appropriate and the expansion of successful and popular schools;
- the removal of surplus places;
- school buildings and grounds that support the principles of sustainable development through their design, construction and operation;
- schools relevant and accessible to local communities; and
- extensive local collaboration and parental involvement.(para 9, p. 4)

The Department set for each participating LA ‘high level, ... locally specific objectives and challenges ... that reflect their circumstances, rather than a set of generic requirements’ (para 12, p.5) and identified the focus of ‘Ministerial and Departmental expectations’ as including:

- strategic objectives, e.g. school organisation, diversity of provision, providing choice and fair access, removal of surplus places;
- targets for school improvement;
• improvements to provision and outcomes as they relate to particular policy areas, e.g. integration of children’s services, 14–19, school underperformance, inclusion, SEN, extended schools; and

• delivery capacity and leadership expectations. Para. 13 (p.5)

Later (para 27), the Guidance asks LAs to briefly answer 10 key strategic questions of which two are particularly relevant to this paper:

(i) Where is the local authority now in terms of educational outcomes, diversity of provision, fair access and choice, and sustainable development?

(viii) How does the local authority propose to champion the needs of all pupils, including those with SEN, underperforming groups and those who are vulnerable or at risk?

Taken together the Guidance document constitutes a strongly framed set of parameters within which LAs were expected to submit their SfCs. As a Google search using question (i) above will demonstrate, LAs conformed very tightly to central expectations.

Our expectation as we analysed in detail 12 LA SfC documents, specifically selected for their demographic variability and political complexion was that some references to social justice would be expressed within familiar terms such as ‘disability’, ‘race’, ‘gender’, ‘religion’, ‘social class’ and ‘sexuality’. Having achieved almost no ‘hits’ in relation to these terms we then decided to try the terminology used by PfS of ‘vulnerability’ to see if this proved more revealing of both discourse and strategy. It did.

It then became clear that that the SfC documents were written in accordance with a set of assumptions and terminologies in which one set of discursive terms had literally been displaced by another. All of the documents began with some form of analysis of the social and economic complexion of the LA and linked this to patterns of educational performance and outcomes. These initial statements were couched in terms of patterns of relative deprivation and comparisons were drawn with their ‘statistical neighbours’ both in terms of deprivation indices and measures of education. However what became increasingly interesting was to see the ways in which the patterns of ‘underperformance/achievement’ were described and the forms of strategies that were proposed in relation to these patterns. We began by identifying sections of the documents which focused upon ‘vulnerable groups’ and then refined our searches using the terms which were most prevalent within these sections. As we got further into the documentation we realised that ‘vulnerability’ was being defined predominantly in terms of educational outcomes (underperformance) and that the resolution was defined in terms of ‘closing the gap’. Although
each SfC is different in detail, as would be expected given geographic and demographic variability, certain common threads were apparent. Each document refers to data on SEN provision and outcomes, similarly with Pupil Referral Units. All of them also make reference to Children in Care or Looked After Children although these may be given slightly different names by different LAs. Most also use patterns of Free School Meals as a differentiating factor in educational performance and in addition there is generally, but not always some reference to ‘boys’ underperformance’ frequently linked to ‘white, working-class’. Once one moves to questions of ‘race’ or ‘ethnicity’ the accounts become more fragmented and disparate. There are references to ‘Black Caribbean’, ‘Black other’, ‘Indian’, ‘Turkish’, ‘Pakistani’, ‘Bangladeshi’, ‘East European’, ‘Roma’, ‘Gypsy’, ‘Traveller’, ‘Somali’, and other particular cohorts of pupils in relation to patterns of underperformance but the form of these references and their particularities depend entirely on the LA. One LA officer whom we interviewed seemed to adopt a pragmatic position, in relation to this discursive shift:

I think this is written somewhere in the Strategy for Change, is that the picture is moving very quickly so there may be pockets of change so new vulnerable groups would appear from Somalia for example or Roma children or whatever it might be and they might be vulnerable but for a very short period of time so that Eastern European groups that come in, come in vulnerable and don’t speak the language but within two years they are doing as well as everybody else. It wasn’t as easy as saying it was an ethnic minority issue it was an issue of vulnerable groups that changed very quickly in some cases.

The closest approach to a systemic response was in terms of programmes for English as an Additional Language (EAL) provision. Only one LA in our sample made reference to existing or pre-existing structural, authority-wide provision of ‘minority ethnic achievement’, EAL programmes and they went on to say:

As these programmes have now come to an end …. Schools have been supported to identify their underachieving groups and provide appropriate class based interventions to narrow the identified gaps. … [which] focuses on use of data to identify and monitor progress within underachieving groups.

We could detect no reference to proposals with regard to gender discrimination or anti-homophobia policies to take but two examples. In short, we found a discourse which focused quite specifically on certain designated groups and defined the ‘vulnerability’ of others in highly fragmented and particularistic terms. Janet Newman (2001: 154) expresses this shift in the following way:

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It is possible to trace twin strands running through Labour’s approach to civil society. The first was based on an image of modern society in which inequalities had largely been overcome ...; in which the old divisions around class, ‘race’, and gender had been reconciled; in which old prejudices (eg. around disability or gay lifestyles) had been overcome; and which was characterised by mutual understanding and tolerance. ... The second strand of labour’s approach was, however, based not on overcoming inequality or celebrating diversity but on the attempted installation of a homogeneous, consensual representation of the people.

This orientation inevitably led to proposals for ‘closing the gap’ to take very specific forms. There is discussion of ‘personalisation’; improving diversity of provision and access; development of extended school provision; improving communication for parents; using ICT provision to more fully integrate the system; changes in forms of pedagogy and grouping; ensuring that ‘change management and programme delivery’ are fully built into schools’ management strategies; and, in some cases, using schools as ‘hubs’ within which other provision such as health, library, leisure and other community facilities can be located. It is in all of these ways that BSF provision was precisely intended to underpin a programme of ‘educational and community transformation’ and was also designed to meet the Ministerial and Departmental remit of expectations identified previously. This much is clear. What then needed to be clarified was how it fits within the sets of political and ideological assumptions within which it was located and what it tells us about the discourses with which New Labour was operating.

Fairclough’s illustrates the discursive shifts which underpin the developments in social policy and the circle of in/equality which it attempts to square. He argues that New Labour’s language is located within 3rd way politics which attempts an impossible reconciliation between social justice and neo-liberalism. New Labour’s discourses, he argues, work to repackage policy through the repetitive use of eg ‘transformation’, social inclusion/exclusion and community.

As Janet Newman (2001: 146) reminds us:

Labour’s policies on unemployment, ill-health, poor educational achievement, crime and community safety, were underpinned by a focus on ‘persuading people to think, believe, care and behave differently’ (Perri 61998b: 52). All of this highlights the significance of discourse and ideology to Labour’s political project.
Addressing the important issue of the technologies of intervention which New Labour attempted to bring into play Bryson and Fisher (2011) say:

… New Labour “reinvented the legitimacy of state intervention … in part through a revision of the concept of ‘social justice’”[Finlayson 2009:404]. This involved attempts to change individual orientations and dispositions towards diet, to parenting and to health, enabling the state to extend its control at the ‘atomic level’ while at the same time professing to believe in the extension of choice and individual empowerment. (205)

In the course of our interviews within LAs we encountered various comments about the expectations and hopes of participants about the possible impact of BSF on the lives and opportunity structures for students and communities. This was perhaps most vividly summarized by the Head of a newly opened new-build BSF school as follows:

... for a lot of our youngsters school is the most stable thing in their life. Add to that a lovely building which means you know we’re saying “you matter.” … in some of these run down estates why should you look after something that’s just disgusting? But they look after school…. if you go from those run down estates to a school building that’s run down and disgusting and you know your libraries not going to be rebuilt either, and there’s no jobs.

It was also echoed by this architect:

one of the things that’s come out really strongly from the consultation processes that we’ve done is that kids want to be respected and taken seriously and one of the things, one of the ways they judge that is not only the buildings and the environments that you give them to be in but the ICT, and if they walk into a classroom with a crappy old computer that takes 10 minutes to start up they’re just turned off immediately.

This was the context in which the General Election of 2010 took place. Elsewhere we have explored in greater detail the consequences of this election (Mahony and Hextall 2011b)

The 2010 General Election and subsequent policy developments

Well before the 2010 General Election the Conservative Party had announced that ‘funding for New Academies [and subsequent ‘free’ schools] should come through a new fund, established by re-allocating the money available within the Building Schools for the Future programme’ (2007 para. 2.1.3, p. 39). Hence, it was little surprise that after that May 2010 election Michael Gove,
the new Coalition Government’s Secretary of State for Education, cancelled on July 5th over 700 BSF school projects which were at various stages of planning. Midst a flurry of embarrassing mistakes in the announcement Gove announced a Review of Capital Spending chaired by Sebastian James. The James’ Review was established to clarify the criteria and priorities within which capital expenditure would be located and was eventually published in April 2011. It was clear from the remit given to the Review that the Government intended to move towards a ‘building-based’ orientation based on efficiency and VfM, and to remove any emphasis on educational and community transformation. One of the first of the Review’s recommendations stressed that: ‘Capital allocation should be determined … on the need for pupil places and the condition of the local school estate’ (James 2011: 6). Other recommendations focused on efficiency, speed, standardised drawings and specification, and centralised procurement and management. In all of its recommendations the Review denotes a clear shift away from any sense that capital spending on education should be socially redistributive, consultative or transformational in any significant sense.

As well as the James Review, the Comprehensive Spending Review resulted in a reduction of £15.8 billion (60%) in the DFE’s budget, seeming to legitimate the argument that expenditure should be on school places and school maintenance. The restructuring of School Finance Regulations contained within the Schools White Paper (DfE 2010b: 82, para. 8.13) set up a new Education Funding Agency (which as we have seen had been telegraphed in 2007) with responsibility for the direct funding of Academies and Free Schools and all 16–19 provision (Hatcher 2011). Our research is suggesting that schools which previously had not considered academy status are now doing so in order to get more money (they believe) so as to retain teachers or refurbish buildings. A local councilor from the North of England had told us in our first interview with her that ‘there’s no appetite for academies up here’. During our second interview she told us that a number of schools had changed their minds because of the financial incentive.

Following Michael Gove’s truncation of the BSF Programme six LAs (Nottingham, Luton, Newham, Waltham Forest, Sandwell and Kent) applied for judicial review of the DfE’s decision to withdraw BSF. The Local Government Association had at the time estimated that more than £203m had been wasted by LAs on preparatory work for cancelled BSF projects. These applications were granted and the High Court judgement handed down in February 2011. The councils lost their claim that the government’s decision was irrational and that there had been a promise or expectation that the projects would definitely proceed. However, Michael Gove was judged to have failed to consult properly before stopping school building schemes in the six
councils and, most significant for this paper, had failed to take adequate account of equalities implications. The judge (Justice Holman) said that way projects were stopped ‘must be characterised as being so unfair as to amount to an abuse of power’ and that the absence of an equality impact assessment was ‘glaring and very telling’ (The Guardian 11/2/2011). An equality impact assessment is a mandatory analysis of a policy designed to ‘help organisations to, eliminate discrimination, tackle inequality, develop a better understanding of the community served, target resources efficiently and adhere to the transparency and accountability element of the Public Sector Equality Duty’ (http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=8017174, accessed August 9, 2011). That the Minister for Education should have failed to take full account of such equalities implications is, as the judge suggested a serious omission and is particularly interesting given that the Department had conducted an overall Equalities Impact Assessment (2010) of the truncation of the programme. As a Trades Union Congress, Touchstone report (2010) showed, this had revealed that the statistically significant differential impacts included:

Mainstream schools

- 17 per cent of the pupils in the schools where BSF investment has been stopped qualify for free school meals, compared with a national average of 13 per cent.
- 17 per cent of pupils in BSF stopped schools have English as an Additional Language, compared with a national average of 11 per cent.
- 76 per cent of pupils in BSF stopped schools are white, compared with a national average of 82 per cent.
- 24 per cent of pupils in BSF stopped schools have Special Educational Needs, compared with a national average of 21 per cent.

Special schools

- 39 per cent of the pupils in the schools where BSF investment has been stopped qualify for free school meals, compared with a national average of 32 per cent.
- 12 per cent of pupils in BSF stopped schools have English as an Additional Language, compared with a national average of 10 per cent.
- 80 per cent of pupils in BSF stopped schools are white, compared with a national average of 82 per cent.

Following the judgement Michael Gove agreed to follow through the judge’s instructions to return to the LAs concerned for further consultation and we know from our research that this process has taken place. As yet, however, we have no clear idea as to the overall pattern of final decisions although it appears unlikely that Gove will shift from the clear distinction he draws
between the ‘transformational’ agenda as envisaged in BSF and a ‘VfM’ model of expedited building and refurbishment of ‘dilapidated’ buildings. As Luton Council have said in their official media response:

> The Council is deeply disappointed that the Secretary of State is not minded to proceed with the much needed building work at Stopsley High School and Cardinal Newman Catholic High School. We welcome his recognition of the need to act fairly in meeting the costs which were incurred as a result of his original decision and believe that this vindicates the Council's decision to seek judicial review.

> The Secretary of State has asked for responses to his letter by the 19th August and we are considering our position. We will be working with the schools and our partners to determine the best way forward. (Media response sent by Communications Officer 14/8/2011)

The truncation of the BSF programme has very different implications for different LAs. As Pat Thomson (2010: 2-3) has pointed out in her analysis of cuts and restructuring of LA provision within the ‘localism’ agenda of the Coalition Government, proposals such as these could result in:

> … a reduction in support for children with special educational needs and disabilities in schools, [including the deletion of] … posts in Inclusion Support …, including specialist teachers and teaching assistants of deaf, visually impaired, learning disabled and autistic children.

Although our interviews in LAs are not as yet complete, a range of concerns are unfolding which have important reverberations on patterns of social justice and differentiation.

> … if there is, on a personal level, one school that deserves [resources] … you have got such a compassionate head teacher, passionate about the education of all her pupils who are quite extreme autistic and physically handicapped pupils how unsuitable her buildings are and they really, really are, she is working under the worst set of circumstances you can imagine with these pupils. … just as an example, they have a sort of mobile class rooms and they have a girl who had a bit of an episode who threw herself against the wall of this mobile class room and dislodged it all off its base and now the temporary class room is at an angle, all the doors and door frames are at an angle and that is just not suitable accommodation for the pupils that she has got. … I think it has hit her really hard and her staff really hard because they were going to a brand new school that would have been
purpose built for her and obviously she has lost that... there are lots of health and safety issues, she has got panes of glass that have come down and stuff and you know if she is not careful they just slide out and smash on the ground

Such illustrations forming a central part of our further empirical investigation. Our point is that the contexts are quite different for different LAs; they differ in terms of their demographic patterns and overall levels of resource. This is not to assume that there are LAs with no stresses and strains but rather to recognise that they differ in their levels of resilience and in the extent to which their services will be affected by cuts in funding. This example of specific stresses in one LA was sited in an area of the country which would be seen as prosperous, however:

… take [Name School] for example, has very high numbers of asylum seekers and Eastern Europeans coming in very, very, very high numbers. … going round say one of the schools in [the area] what was really clear was that they were trying to develop specialist facilities that would support, say, Caring qualifications and they were going to have a suite where they were going to do NVQ or something and they would have the facilities in order to support those courses and that’s what they were developing through BSF and that’s all been taken away from them and they can’t provide that without the new buildings. They just don’t have those facilities and they can’t put them in, in the buildings they have got.

The extent to which there exists massive intra-authority variability between different areas and communities is evident from our research. As one Education Officer put it:

So it [the truncation of the BSF Programme] has had a negative affect on equalities and it is targeted in the xxx area - one of our most deprived areas …, so that’s a knock on effect.

Asked which equalities she was referring to, she replied

Well:

- community,
- cohesion,
- equalities in terms of deprivation.

What you are doing is adversely affecting an area of the population in the borough that’s the most deprived but have [now] got increased costs to travel.
This interview was in an LA in which some BSF schools were completed, others were under construction or refurbishment and in others the programme had been cancelled. A similar pattern is emerging in many LAs and the differential impacts within and between communities is clearly something which generates distress, despair and conflict. As we noted in an earlier paper (Mahony and Hextall 2011b), there are many implications which flow from these inequities of provision. Sue Learner in the Education Guardian (11 January 2011: 5) recently highlighted the impact of differential provision of ICT facilities.

One of Michael Gove’s first acts … was to abolish Becta … and to cut by £100m the Harnessing Technology Grant, designed to help schools pay for broadband connectivity and computer hardware. In addition, schools are losing out through the scrapping of the BSF programme, which … also funded IT equipment.

Her article drew a stark contrast between a private school in which all pupils have access to iPads and a secondary school which has bought 2 iPads for use amongst 1500 pupils. The e-Learning Foundation has warned that ‘two million children in Britain have no internet connection at home and said that it feared the gap between rich and poor pupils’ performance at school would widen.’ (The Guardian 28 December 2010).

This particular instance could be replicated widely in terms of the withdrawal and reduction of resource and support facilities. Furthermore, the overall attack on the school building programme is a frame within which many more specific inequities will occur. BSF was founded on notions of educational and community transformation and one of the policies with which it was strongly associated was ‘personalisation’ (a discussion of this can be found in Mahony and Hextall, 2009). In addition, important assumptions are evident in the policy documents about the role of ICT and the changes in patterns of teaching and learning, modes of social control and support, and notions about the interaction between schools and their local communities. In short, BSF was presented as having transformative possibilities for both the social relations of education and social relations in education. Although inevitably grounded within an economic competitiveness agenda, BSF was also intended to point forwards to educational and social visions for the 21st century.

As we have stressed these assumptions were formulated within a New Labour neo-liberal agenda. They presented serious issues in terms of the role of the private sector in schooling and the implications this had for the role of teachers, for the material basis on which schooling was grounded and for the conditions of labour for all who worked in schools. However, BSF was
presented as constituting a ‘progressive’ agenda. In the light of recent developments within Conservative-led educational policies (including the truncation of BSF, and the promotion of Academies and ‘free’ schools) we have to ask what is residually defensible within this ‘progressive’ agenda and how it can be politically evaluated against the socially divisive formulations currently emerging from Whitehall. As an alternative strategy for education is debated we would do well to take note of the ways and extent to which Labour did ‘make progress towards the objective of “a more equal society”’ (Hills et al. 2009) and to heed the words of Larry Elliott writing in The Guardian (24 January 2011):

[The challenge for Labour] … is to come up with an overall critique of the economy in which … individual policies can sit. … We are not all in this together, and when it comes to choosing between bankers with their multi-million pound incomes and the young unemployed, between VAT for the many and tax havens for the few, Labour knows which side it is on.

Coalition Policy on Social Mobility
At present it is unclear precisely what the Coalition Government’s social mobility strategy amounts to (see Richard Riddell’s paper which follows in this session). The recent paper “Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: a strategy for social mobility” (Cabinet Office 2011) does little to clarify what would be involved in such a strategy. However, it does help to underscore some differences which exist with the New Labour discourse we have illustrated above. Taken together with the James Review it is clear that it is not intended to be redistributive, consultative nor transformational in any significant sense. In education there is a repetition of the support for Academies and Free Schools – launched under the twin banners of increasing standards and enhancing autonomy for parents and schools. Whilst reference is made to ‘disadvantaged areas’ in terms of the creation of new Free Schools there is no specificity as to what this means nor any sense of the feasibility or evidence base which supports such schools. Similarly, although much has been made of the Pupil Premium in relation to narrowing attainment differentials this sits uncomfortably alongside the withdrawal of Education Maintenance Allowances, cuts in SureStart provision and a general reduction in LAs’ resource base.

What this approach to social mobility achieves is a yet further step away from discussion of structural and structured patterns of inequality and discrimination. The post-1997 Labour Party had already shifted to a discourse of social inclusion but the Coalition’s policy represents a further move. If it were possible to describe the New Labour approach as a ‘equality by stealth’ then what is now taking place is an explicit expression of a hegemonic bloc reasserting its
interests, attacking any ‘downward redistribution’ and rejecting the role of the state in a ‘big society’. As one of our northern LA interviewees put it: “They’ve got it in for us. They’ll do us in.”! One elected member we interviewed clearly saw the truncation of BSF funding and Coalition policy as a form of regional redistribution:

It’s meant really to help Southern schools, it’s got nothing to do with us particularly up here. … most of the policies, I believe have been driven by what goes on in the South anyway. A lot of Academies, there was no hunger for the likes of Academies or Free Schools up here until their hands were forced.

In this context it appears that Ken Jones et al (2008) pan-European perception is highly relevant and timely:

Urban education is thus shaped by two broad forces. On the one hand, a process of social polarisation that creates a large peripheral class; on the other, a middle-class pursuit of new strategies of educational advantage. Uneasily positioned among these tendencies are a variety of class fractions. The public school system is a site for the display of tensions within and between such groups: between for instance, members of the less stable fractions of the working class and immigrant groups on the one side, and members of the more stable fractions of the working class and from the lower middle-classes on the other side. (p. 95)
References


MacMillan.


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1 For a detailed analysis of the impact of Labour policies on inequality since 1997, see Hills, Sefton and Stewart (2009).

*This document was added to the Education-line collection on 9 September 2011*