**The State and Education Policy: The Academies Programme**

**HELEN GUNTER EDS, 2011**

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*The State and Education Policy: The Academies**Programme* represents a comprehensive collection of short articles covering all aspects of the academies programme (Gunter 2011b). It focuses on the academies programme under the successive New Labour governments between 1997 and 2010. The articles present different perspectives, methodologies and levels of analysis that range from the experiences of individual schools, the wider policy making system in England and the international context.

The book provides important information about both individual academies and the programme as a whole. It highlights the difficulties of generalising about academies in the face of a confusing array of funding agreements and obligations relating to exclusion policy and special educational needs. It also exposes the lack of transparency surrounding individual academies’ policies and the processes involved in proposing, commissioning and setting up academies in general. The collection highlights the inconclusive, and in some cases misleading, evidence on the effectiveness of academies that has frequently been used to justify the expansion of the academies programme. Chapters Eight and Fourteen in particular, demonstrate that such evidence often omits crucial data on levels of exclusions and socio-economic intake over time (Gleeson 2011; Gorard 2011). In putting forward these points, the book asks us to reflect critically on what we understand by success in assessing the relative performance of the academies programme; arguing that our conclusions depend greatly on the measure of success we use. For example, on criteria such as attainment and the level of improvement from predecessor schools, academies can be seen to have failed. However, they can be seen as more successful in terms of repositioning schools in the market and setting new ground rules for funding, accountability and governance (Gleeson 2011).

Overall, the collection highlights some of the central tensions that are at the heart of the New Labour project. These tensions are demonstrated in the inconsistencies between the discourse used by New Labour and the policies pursued: in other words, the difference between rhetoric and reality. Conflicts between discourse and policy are illustrated in three ways in the book. First, the book highlights the tension between New Labour’s avowed commitment to local democratic renewal and the reality with which the academies programme has been implemented. The administration and management of the academies programme as a whole has been characterised by high centralisation and alongside this there has been an apparent diminishment of parental and pupil rights in questioning academies’ policies (Elliott 2011; Hatcher 2011).

Second, the book demonstrates that New Labour’s consistent justification of academies on the grounds of increasing choice and diversity can be questioned in the face of evidence that suggests that academies are actually restricting choice of schools and subject in some areas. Indeed, the failure of academies to increase choice in some areas of the country, alongside our witnessing of the speed with which academies were set up and rolled out, challenges significantly New Labour’s expressed commitment to evidence based policy. Such evidence suggests policy based evidence rather than the former (Purcell 2011).

Finally, at the heart of all of the tensions outlined in the book is the apparent discord between the objectives of social justice and economic competitiveness in education. The reconciliation of these two goals forms a central part of New Labour’s approach to education (Kenny 2010). Academies can be understood as an attempt by New Labour to reconcile social justice with economic competitiveness and thus “marr[y] together” the old values of the left with the efficiency and value for money of the new right (Labour Party 1997; see also Stedward 2003). Such reconciliation was seen by the Party to be essential to achieve success in the new knowledge based economy (Jessop 2008). It is New Labour’s apparent failure to adjust the two objectives, whether through inadequate policy choices, implementation or the impossibility of such a task, that leads the book to concur with critics arguing that education under New Labour was completely directed towards the demands of the economy (Ball 2001, 2008; Cole 1998; Hatcher 2008; Hay and Watson 1999; Hulme and Hulme 2005; Lunt 2008; Mulderrig 2003, 2008; Selwyn 2008). Thus, the academies programme can be understood as a “direct and logical educational consequence of the neoliberal values and strategies… underpin[ning]… Labour party policies” (Gunter 2011a: 17).

In conclusion, the edited collection presents an informative and critical assessment of the academies programme. This provides both an overview of the programme as a whole and a valuable insight into how this programme has been translated on the ground in individual schools and areas. It also offers a few suggestions on the prospects of the academies programme under the Coalition government. With its over-emphasis on using international examples for the direction of education, prospects look grim with little likelihood that many of the problems and difficulties highlighted under New Labour’s approach to the programme will be addressed. Indeed, the book contends that such issues may be exacerbated by the new administration. Consequently, those interested in education will be watching this area with increasing anxiousness.

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