Can the changes to the structure of the state-funded school system in England enhance social mobility?

The headline from the most recent state of the nation report on social mobility in the United Kingdom, published at the end of last year, is that there is no overall national strategy to tackle the social, economic and geographical divide that the country faces. The report from the Social Mobility Commission (November 2017)[i] decried a 'lamentable social mobility track record' and demonstrated that individual chances for young people to achieve adult success were overly reliant on where they were born or lived. The government response has been to publish a plan for improving social mobility through education[ii]. I will argue in this blog that the ability to enact aspects of that reasonably well funded plan in England may be compromised, however, by changes to the structure of the state-funded school system and because of the motives for bidding for such funds.

Changes to the structure of the school system in England
England has its own school system, which differs in structure from the other three countries that together form the United Kingdom (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). Since 2010 there has been a determined attempt by central governments to shift the locus of power and control away from local democratic control in England, mainly through a process of academisation. For those readers not familiar with the notion of an 'academy' these are state maintained independent schools which formerly were run by elected local authorities. Following their introduction in 2002 as a designed intervention in parts of the country where schools exhibited chronic student underperformance, they grew steadily in number through the rest of the decade to a total of 207 academies by 2010. [If you want to find out more about the genesis and subsequent growth of academies I refer you to a background briefing paper I published in December, 2017 - http://www.lcll.org.uk/publications.html].
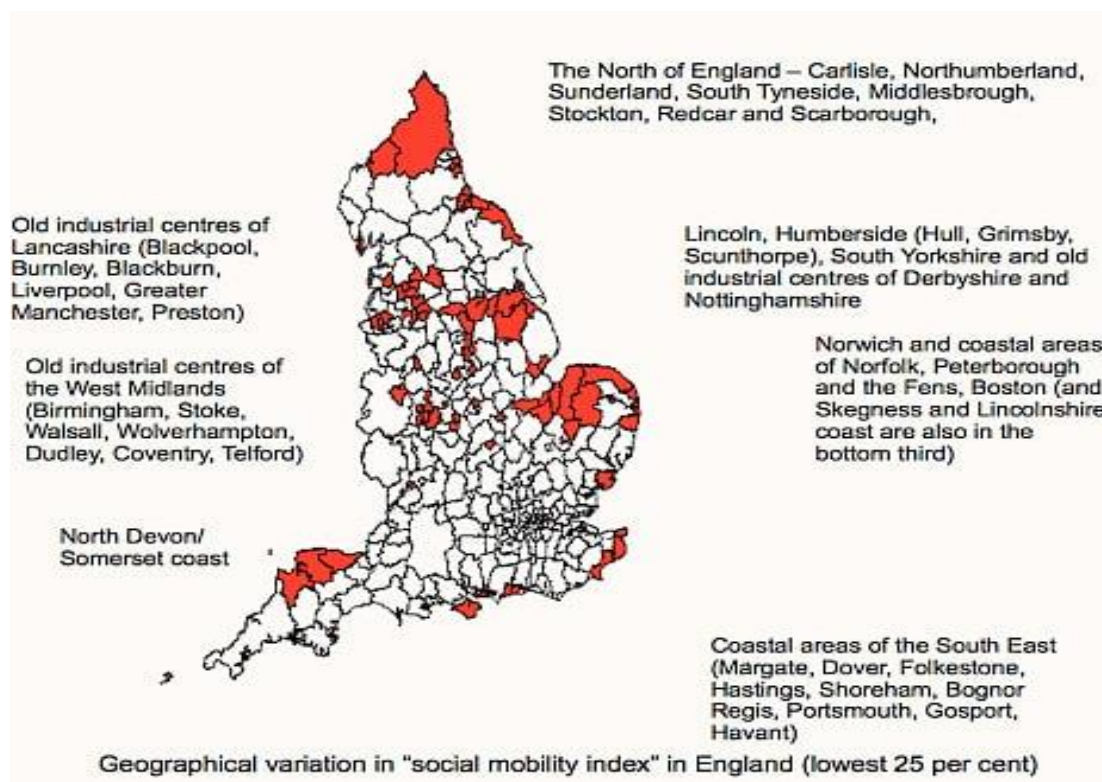
In 2010, however, we saw a new coalition government formed which demonstrated a determination to turn as many schools as possible into academies under the guise of developing a school-led improvement system. By 2015, and following the election of a Conservative government, the move to academisation was deemed to be the major education policy, with all state-maintained schools expected to become academies by 2020. Whilst this requirement has subsequently been dropped due to there being a less stable Conservative government in power following the 2017 election (triggered by the vote for Brexit in 2016), nevertheless it remains the preferred government outcome for all state maintained schools to become academies. By the beginning of 2018 the number of academies open, or in the pipeline, were just over 8000 out of a total of some 21,000 schools in the country. The number of schools disguises the impact, however, with 65 per cent of secondary schools now being academies. There is a good chance, therefore, that approximately half of the school population is within academies. Whilst those numbers are not clear, what is apparent is that we have a dual system of state funded schools in England, comprising academies and maintained local authority schools.

A lamentable track record on social mobility
Meanwhile, the UK is a deeply divided nation in terms of class, income, gender and race, but the factor receiving greater focus through the work of the Social Mobility Commission is geographic in nature. Through the application of an index which assesses the education, employability and

housing prospects of people living in each of England's 324 local authority areas it shown that large parts of the country remain 'cold spots' in terms of social mobility, with no evidence of that having changed over previous decades. The most recent report shows five million workers – mainly women – in a low pay trap with only one in six of those workers having managed to find a permanent route out of low pay in the last ten years. At the other end of the labour market professional staff continue to be unrepresentative of the public they serve, with only 6 per cent of doctors, 12 per cent of chief executives and 12 per cent of journalists coming from working-class origins. The Social Mobility Index reveals a growing gulf between major cities (especially London) and towns and other areas that are being left behind economically and socially limited.

The initial government response has been the identification of Opportunity Areas, for which funded strategies have been established[iii]. The 12 areas identified so far are in a variety of settings - rural, historic market towns, post-industrial towns and coastal areas - but all feature a common theme: young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face far higher barriers to improved social mobility than those who grow up in cities and their surrounding area. The areas most affected can be seen in the following figure:

The North of England – Carlisle, Northumberland, Sunderland, South Tyneside, Middlesbrough, Stockton, Redcar and Scarborough,

Old industrial centres of Lancashire (Blackpool, Burnley, Blackburn, Liverpool, Greater Manchester, Preston)

Old industrial centres of the West Midlands (Birmingham, Stoke, Walsall, Wolverhampton, Dudley, Coventry, Telford)

North Devon/ Somerset coast

Lincoln, Humberside (Hull, Grimsby, Scunthorpe), South Yorkshire and old industrial centres of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire

Norwich and coastal areas of Norfolk, Peterborough and the Fens, Boston (and Skegness and Lincolnshire coast are also in the bottom third)

Coastal areas of the South East (Margate, Dover, Folkestone, Hastings, Shoreham, Bognor Regis, Portsmouth, Gosport, Havant)

Geographical variation in "social mobility index" in England (lowest 25 per cent)

More funds have now been found since the identification of opportunity area, however, to expand the response through education. The range of central government grants now available totals c£800m which is being made available to parts of the school system over the next two the three years. Certain conditions are applied to each grant application which are designed to ensure funding is appropriately targeted, but in the main the response to continued disadvantage is to be through school-led improvement mechanisms rather than through the local authorities.

The challenges of addressing social mobility through education

Although there are obvious logistical issues associated with the management of multiple grants, the critical concern is the lack of strategic oversight of the state-funded school system that is a product of successive government policies since the introduction of the Education Reform Act of 1988. Following the second world war there was an intention to establish a social welfare state in the UK which provided health, education and social care to all its citizens. The 1944 Education Act was a part of that overarching policy and set up a national system of education that was to be delivered locally and, originally, through a system of local authorities who were elected democratically. The first break in that pattern of intermediate government was in 1988 when, as part of the legislation, schools in England were given direct control over their student related funding. This process was known as the Local Management of Schools (LMS), with some schools also being allowed to leave local authority control completely and become Grant Maintained Schools (GMS) and receive their school funds directly from central government. What has followed for the next 30 years has been an inexorable erosion of the control and contribution of the local authority to school improvement, coupled with a reduction in their capability to sustain their remaining schools effectively.

This is a significant factor as the 150 local authorities no longer have the capability to be strategic in relation to the support, advice and guidance they give to state-funded schools. The process of academisation has atomised the national system, meaning there is no longer much in the way of local delivery. Instead, a system of Regional School Commissioners (RSC) was established in 2014, with a national commissioner to oversee their work following two years later. There are eight RSCs whose principal job is to coordinate the academies within their region (and across the country), but as things stand until very recently they were the only government mechanism to have any overview of the coherence of the state-funded school system. Clearly the work of 150 local authorities could not be covered by the eight commissioners, so other mechanisms have been devised to provide the necessary strategic management of the school system. We now have 33 sub-regional improvement boards (comprised of RSC, local authorities, diocesan boards and teaching school alliances) which are expected to ensure consistency across their part of country, especially in terms of identifying where support is needed for schools which are not performing to expectations. There has also been the appointment of Regional Directors of Delivery (RDD) from the Department for Education and Coordinators for Opportunity Areas. What is notable is that none of these intermediate government structures have been elected, effectively stifling local democracy. The question that emerges, however, is whether such a system can have any effect on social mobility?

A school led response to social mobility
The direction of travel favoured by the Department for Education and its component parts, such as the RSCs, is to persuade schools to collaborate and federate through the supporting the development of multi-academy trusts (MATs) and teaching school alliances (TSAs). Normally a MAT will have a lead academy which will set up a trust by which all member schools will be governed. Currently these vary in size between a single academy (with permission to expand to become a MAT) to the largest which has 81 schools. The promotion, and to some the extent the management, of academies is a responsibility of the RSCs who are now seeking for MATs to have a local, rather than national, footprint[iv]. Teaching school alliances are normally led by a school deemed 'outstanding' which is a designated teaching school (i.e. it can run its own teacher training programmes which lead to recognised professional qualifications). Again, they vary in size, but are more of a soft federation than a formal structure, with each school retaining its own identity and governance structures.

As indicated above, by December 2017 the government had issued a plan for improving social mobility though education with a report entitled 'Unlocking talent: Fulfilling potential'. This was statement of policy based on the personal statement of Justine Greening, Secretary of State for Education, that "everyone deserves a fair shot in life and a chance to go as far as their hard work and talent can take them". Whilst this is a laudable ambition it is undermined by two key factors: the (probable) inability of a school-led system to effect endemic improvement in student attainment and achievement and the longevity of government ministers. In fairness to Justine Greening it was not her fault that Theresa May, Prime Minister, decided to remove her from post as part of a government reshuffle triggered by Brexiteers, but it is an example of short-term political gain overcoming a desire for long-term substantive change. The consequence, however, is that the policy may not be championed by the new incumbent who is likely to have other priorities. That accident of political history aside, the fundamental question, remains as to whether the new dual system of state-maintained schools evident in England can deliver on this social mobility agenda.

Can a school-led improvement process lead to systemic change?
The early signs are not promising with evidence of multi-school organisations frequently seeking to address chronic situations by either changing the school population or reducing the intensity of public scrutiny. The most common approach to dealing with challenge in terms of student engagement is to remove them from mainstream schools, either through a process of exclusion or through restructuring of the school federation to relocate students to alternative provision. Exclusions, either permanent or resulting in home education, are rapidly increasing with one local authority (ironically in a 'cold spot') reporting a five-fold increase in the last year[v] from a typical figure of 80 to over 400 students. Another, perhaps more subtle way of avoiding the challenge of overcoming sustained underperformance, and thereby lack of social mobility, is the reorganisation of the multi-school organisation to remove the outcome of some students from the public accountability gaze engendered by the focus on student attainment. In keeping with most countries, especially those seeking valediction of their school system through international league tables such as PISA, England is seemingly obsessed with equating 'good' schools with outcomes of student attainment as measured by standard tests. To sustain high proportions of success it is possible for multi-school organisations to remove the scores of lower performing students from their average scores through relocation to other types of provision. New types of schools, created by the Academies Act, 2011, is one such way of shifting the accountability focus. The introduction of University Technical Colleges (UTCs), for example, could allow for a less scrupulous interpretation than intended by the legislation whereby troublesome teenagers are directed toward vocational education rather than traditional academic qualifications.

The final question that emerges, therefore, is why should any federation of schools wish to engage in improvement activities in the quest to enhance social mobility through education when recent history has shown individual schools and multi-school organisations demonstrating self-interest rather than holistic strategies for equality of opportunity? There is no doubt that the policy of enhancing social mobility through education is clearly an objective underwritten by high moral values, with which few members of the school workforce in England would disagree, but is it likely? It is still much too early to be anything other than cynical at this stage, but early indications from the round of bids that have been submitted for the various funding sources now available show two

trends. The first is that the bids are led by the usual suspects, the perennial harvesters of additional funds, and the second is that favoured bids are those that focus on STEM subjects rather than more esoteric aspects of education of a young person that affects their motivation and attitude towards learning. Let us hope my cynicism is unfounded.

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[i] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/662744/State_of_the_Nation_2017_-_Social_Mobility_in_Great_Britain.pdf

[ii] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-social-mobility-through-education

[iii] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/plans-launched-to-drive-social-mobility-in-opportunity-areas

[iv] Some of the early academy chains were entrepreneurial in nature and exhibited a national footprint. These have been seen to be problematic in terms of cohesion and consistency, producing overly demanding managerial responsibilities. Some chains are resizing or regionalising to counter these issues.

[v] The name of the local authority remains anonymous in this paper, but follow-up questions are welcomed from readers.