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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on school reform in England and in particular on the attempts to increase diversity and choice through specialist schools. It examines the extent to which diversity and choice have been introduced into the state (public) education system and then presents key findings to emerge from an evaluation of the flagship government program designed to increase diversity into the state system, namely the Specialist Schools Programme. By September 1999 there were over 400 specialist schools in local education authorities across all parts of England. This represents over 12 percent B a significant minority B of all eligible secondary schools. The Programme enables schools to develop their strength in either technology, modern foreign languages, sports, or the arts. The various types of specialist schools all provide the full national curriculum. Section 2 provides an overview of the structure of the state education system in England and the reforms that have been introduced over the past 15 years or so. Section 3 focuses explicitly on specialist schools and the Specialist Schools Programme in particular and Section 4 presents key findings to emerge from the first evaluation of the Specialist Schools Programme commissioned by the Department for Education and employment. Section 5 concludes the paper with a discussion of the extent to which the Programme can be considered to have increased diversity and choice. (Includes 16 references and 4 figures.) (Author/MLF)

School reform in England:

Increasing choice and diversity through specialist schools?

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1 Introduction

This paper focuses on school reform in England and in particular on the attempts to increase diversity and choice through specialist schools. It examines the extent to which diversity and choice have been introduced into the state (public) education system and then presents key findings to emerge from an evaluation of the flagship government programme designed to increase diversity into the state system, namely the Specialist Schools Programme.

Section 2 provides an overview of the structure of the state education system in England and the reforms that have been introduced over the past 15 years or so. Section 3 focuses explicitly on specialist schools and the Specialist Schools Programme in particular and Section 4 presents key findings to emerge from the first evaluation of the Specialist Schools Programme commissioned by the Department for Education and Employment. Section 5 concludes the paper with a discussion of the extent to which the Programme can be considered to have increased diversity and choice.

2 Reform of the education system in England and Wales

The market reforms of the educational system in England and Wales were developed between the late 1970s and the late 1980s and culminated in the Education Reform Act 1988. Originally, the idea of vouchers for compulsory schooling had considerable appeal for the Conservative government that came into office in 1979 but a voucher scheme was never implemented (see Chitty, 1989)[1]. The abandonment of the voucher proposals led the Conservative government to look at new ways to tackle educational reform (Chitty, 1989) and the result of this was the Education Reform Act. The Act created a 'quasi-market' in education (see Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993) by encouraging competition between schools through the introduction of new types of schools, the introduction of delegated budgets to schools, and by increasing the powers of parents in relation to choice of schools. In effect a 'quasi-voucher' was introduced with schools being funded predominantly on the basis of the number of students recruited and being required to admit pupils up to the physical capacity of the school (open enrolment). The philosophy underpinning these reforms was that by increasing choice and diversity and encouraging schools to compete with one another educational standards

[1] Vouchers for pre-school education were introduced for a short period in the 1990s (see Sparkes & West, 1998).

would be raised (see West & Pennell, 1997a; West et al., 1997b). In addition to these market-oriented reforms, a national curriculum was introduced together with associated national assessment/testing.

One of the Conservative government's main aims in the education reforms was to increase the diversity of schools from which parents could choose[2]. The 1988 Education Reform Act allowed for the creation of grant-maintained schools that were funded directly by central government, through an agency, instead of through local authorities. These schools were a central element of the Conservative government's reforms. They were entirely run by their governing bodies body (consisting of parents, teachers and members of the community served by the school) and headteachers who became the legal owners of the school site, its buildings and the employer of its staff. Recurrent costs, related to pupil numbers, were met by the government. In order to encourage schools to become self-governing, there were financial incentives for schools to become grant-maintained. The Conservative government also sought to increase the diversity of schools by introducing city technology colleges and later specialist schools (see Section 3).

The Labour government was elected into office in May 1997 with education having a high political profile. Under the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act, many changes have been introduced. Of significance in the present context is the fact that grant-maintained schools have been abolished (they are now mostly categorised as foundation schools and are funded through local education authorities, but still maintain control of student admissions). There have also been changes designed to improve the operation of 'parental choice'[3], school admissions and planning of school places which had become problematic as a result of the market reforms (see West & Pennell, 1997a; West et al., 1998). Most other reforms introduced by the previous governments have not been changed substantially; there is still a quasi-market in operation and schools are funded largely on the basis of pupil numbers.[4]

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[2] It is important to note that this process had begun before the Education Reform Act with the introduction of the Assisted Places Scheme in 1981; this has been abolished by the Labour government.

[3] Parents are allowed to express a 'preference'. They do not have a right to 'choose' a school for their child.

[4] School examination performance tables, first produced in 1992, continue to be published (albeit with a some additional performance indicators).

Notwithstanding these policy changes it is important to note that most students in England attend state (publicly-funded) schools. Only seven per cent attend private, fee-paying schools. Secondary schools, in general, cater for students between either 11 and 16 years of age or 11 and 18 years of age. Whether 'community', 'foundation' or 'voluntary' (mostly religious schools), they are predominantly comprehensive and do not select on the basis of students' ability (but see West et al., 1998). Only around 5% of schools are academically selective 'grammar' schools. All state-maintained including city technology colleges and specialist schools are obliged to follow the national curriculum and carry out national tests/assessments of students at specified stages in their school career. This is not the case for private, fee-paying schools.

In the next section, we examine in more detail the notion of specialist schools and in particular the Specialist Schools Programme. This is a particularly interesting initiative from a policy perspective at is was introduced under a Conservative government but re-launched by the Labour government. It is the most important attempt that has been made to introduce diversity into the state education system and is set to expand over the next three years so that around a quarter of all secondary schools are eventually specialist.

3 Specialist schools

Many of the recent educational reforms in England were originally introduced with the stated objective of giving parents 'more choice in deciding the education they want for their children, and to promote more diversity among schools as a means of broadening that choice' (DfEE[5], 1996a, p. 36).

The notion of 'specialist schools' has had particular salience in England since the introduction of city technology colleges in 1986. City technology colleges have a special emphasis on technological and vocational education. There are just 15 such schools and all have been established by a partnership of government and private sector sponsors. In practice, the contribution from business was far less than expected and the government was 'by far the major shareholder in the enterprise' (Whitty et al., 1993, p. 59). Other recurrent costs which

[5] The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) was created in 1995 when the Department for Education and the Department of Employment were merged. The Department for Education (DfE) was created in 1992, succeeding the Department of Education and Science (DES).

are related to pupil numbers are met by the government. Although they are classified by the government as 'independent' secondary schools, they do not charge fees, and are mainly located in deprived urban catchment areas.

There have also been a range of other initiatives to increase the diversity of schools. The previous government encouraged existing schools to specialise in particular curriculum areas such as music, art, drama and sport (DfE, 1992). A model for this development is provided by a special music course that was established many years ago (before the Education Reform Act) in inner London which 'exists to provide an intensive musical education for students who want music to be a specially important part of their lives' (City of Westminster, 1994). The setting aside of a small number of places[6] for students with a particular aptitude has been taken up by a number of schools around the country with specialist places being offered in a variety of subjects such as modern foreign languages, music, arts, sport and drama.

The Technology Colleges Programme, introduced in 1993, was an extension of the policy of encouraging specialisation. This was designed to help maintained secondary schools to specialise in technology, science and mathematics. The programme established 'technology colleges'. At first, only grant-maintained and voluntary-aided schools were eligible to apply, but in the following year all state-maintained schools became eligible. The programme was also extended in that year to cover modern foreign languages. It was further extended in 1996 to cover sports and arts.

In 1997, the new Labour Government re-launched the programme with a focus on the sharing of specialist expertise and facilities by specialist schools with other schools and with the local community. Schools wishing to specialise in this way have to submit development plans setting clear objectives and measurable targets for extending their teaching and raising the standards in the specialist areas. When the initiative was first launched they were required to raise about £100,000 of sponsorship towards the cost of a capital project to improve their facilities for the specialist area(s) (this amount was reduced to £50,000 in July 1999). Specialist schools are eligible to receive additional capital and current grants from central government to complement business sponsorship.

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[6] 10% until 1996 (DfEE 1996b, Circular 6/96) when it was increased to 15%. Since 1998, schools with a specialism have been able to select up to 10% of pupils by aptitude in the relevant specialism.

By September 1999 there were over 400 specialist schools in local education authorities across all parts of England (DfEE, 2000). Of these, 266 were technology colleges, 71 were language colleges, 37 sports colleges and 29 arts colleges. This represents over 12% – a significant minority – of all eligible secondary schools. Ministers have set a target of 800 specialist schools by September 2003, at which stage around 25% of secondary schools will be specialist. The Specialist Schools Programme thus enables schools to develop their strength in either technology, modern foreign languages, sports or the arts. It is important to stress that the various types of specialist schools all provide the full national curriculum. However, the specialist subjects vary:

- Technology colleges place particular emphasis on teaching and learning in technology, science and mathematics.
- Language colleges place particular emphasis on the teaching and learning of modern foreign languages and the development of an international ethos throughout the school.
- Sports colleges place particular emphasis on the teaching and learning of physical education and sport in schools.
- There are three broad areas of the arts in which arts colleges may specialise:
  - the performing arts (e.g. music, drama, dance and related technology);
  - the visual arts (e.g. drawing, painting, photography, film, video, computer-assisted graphics and design, and three-dimensional work – sculpture, pottery, jewellery, textiles etc);
  - the media arts, including the artistic, technological and production aspects of the communications industry required in, for example, film, video, television, radio, journalism and advertising.

The Programme is competitive, with two competitions each year for technology and languages and for arts and sports (DfEE, 2000). Nearly all existing specialist schools are comprehensive schools that accept students across a wide range of ability. However, under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, there is provision for schools with a specialism (and this includes specialist schools) to select up to 10% of students by aptitude in the relevant specialism as long as this is not misused to select students on the basis of general academic ability (DfEE, 2000).

The objectives of the Specialist Schools Programme have evolved over the years. From 1997 onwards the objectives changed; in particular, one new objective refers to the specialist school benefiting other schools in the area.

For each type of specialist school there are three broad objectives:

- To raise the standards of teaching and learning of the specialist subjects.
- To benefit other schools in the area.
- To strengthen the links between schools and private or charitable sector sponsors.

Specialist schools are required to set their own targets in order to achieve these objectives. These targets are required to be measurable, and guidance from the DfEE for schools considering applying for specialist status has suggested that targets should relate to provision (for example the number of hours timetabled for specialist subjects), participation and examination results in specialist subjects, and also to school popularity and school attendance. Meeting targets (or accounting for not doing so) is also identified as a key criterion for continued funding and re-designation. There is also a Mission Statement (see Annex) for each type of school (see DfEE, 2000).

It is important to understand the Specialist Schools Programme in relation to other educational policies. Specialist status should be seen as, at least in part, an instrument for pursuing other government policy objectives. Thus, the initiative was originally restricted to schools that were grant maintained and so provided an additional incentive for schools to opt out of local authority control. Further, under the 1997 White Paper issued by the then Conservative Government, specialist schools would have been able to select 50% or 30% of their intakes (depending on whether they were grant-maintained or LEA maintained). The programme could then have been seen as an element of the incremental reintroduction of selection.

In contrast, the Labour Government has given schools within disadvantaged areas of the country (e.g. inner city areas), priority in the competition for specialist school status. Therefore, the policy should now be seen not only as a means of promoting diversity but also for channelling more resources into areas of concentrated disadvantage and underachievement. And as noted in the DfEE's Departmental Report (2000): 'Specialist schools are an important part of the Government's strategy to raise standards of achievement' (p. 49).

4 Evaluating the specialist schools programme

The first evaluation of the Specialist Schools Programme has just been completed. A quantitative survey of 238 specialist schools that were operational in September 1997 was carried out by the London School of Economics and Political Science (West et al., 2000) and case studies of a sample of specialist schools were carried out by Leeds University (Yeomans et al., 2000). Selected findings are presented here, based on the responses of questionnaires sent to headteachers, heads of specialism and chairs of governing bodies[7].

Key findings

In this section we have identified eight dimensions of specialisation and presented them in terms of 'inputs', 'processes', 'outputs' and 'outcomes'. Key findings related to each are presented below. Each dimension focuses on the ways in which specialist schools may be differentiated from non-specialist schools. In relation to 'input' characteristics, we have identified three dimensions, namely responding to demand; selection by aptitude and additional resources. In relation to 'process' characteristics, we have identified: curricular specialisation, business involvement and community involvement. In relation to school 'outputs' and 'outcomes' we have identified examination results and a range of other effects related to the Programme.

Inputs

Responding to demand Our findings suggest that specialist schools are popular with parents as demonstrated by the increasing ratio of applicants for places in the schools. This may not be a direct result of the school being a specialist school, but over half of the headteachers reported that they attributed changes in their popularity, at least in part, to their specialist school status.

Selecting by aptitude We found little evidence that specialist schools were selecting pupils by aptitude in the specialist subject. In ten comprehensive schools (7% of the sample) selection

[7] The response rate to each of the questionnaires was 60% for the headteacher questionnaire, 57% for the head of specialism and 51% for the chair of governors. The overall 'school response rate' – that is, where at least one questionnaire was received from the school – was 82%. The schools from which questionnaires from headteachers, heads of specialism and chairs of governors were received were broadly representative of all specialist schools in operation in September 1997.

by aptitude in the specialist subject was reported[8]. Of these, nine provided details of the proportion of students selected – seven schools selected between 1% and 15% whilst two schools selected 20% and 30% respectively. Thus, specialist schools cannot be said to be 'special' by virtue of selecting 'special' students.

Resources By way of contrast, specialist schools are quite clearly 'special' in that they receive additional resources from the DfEE and money from sponsorship and funds 'levered in' from elsewhere (mostly the European Union and businesses). Indeed, the requirement that specialist schools (included in this study) raised £100,000 in sponsorship as a prerequisite for inclusion in the scheme perhaps made the scheme less accessible to schools lacking good contacts with potential sponsors. It is however important to note the policy context in which the Specialist Schools Programme has operated since its inception. Initially, specialist status was, at least in part, a means of further encouraging schools to 'opt out' of local authority control and become grant maintained and also to develop the notion of competition between schools (either through diversity of provision or increased selection). However, specialist schools need to be understood in the context of specific government initiatives to improve education in disadvantaged areas (where academic performance is in general lower) and as a way of targeting resources on schools in poorer areas.

In virtually all cases, the additional resources had resulted in an increase in the number of teaching and non-teaching staff employed. Interestingly, the item of expenditure accounting for the highest average spend was information and communications technology (ICT) equipment followed by teaching staff; there appeared to be a trade off between these two items with schools tending to spend either on ICT equipment or on teaching staff. The main beneficiary of the specialist school expenditure was, unsurprisingly, either the specialist area or the specialist and other areas. Text books were the item most often only benefiting only the specialist area, closely followed by teaching staff and materials. ICT equipment was most likely to benefit other areas of the school as well as the specialist area.

Process

Curriculum specialisation A majority of schools had increased the hours timetabled for specialist subjects. In addition, most schools had introduced new specialist subjects into the

[8] In addition 14 schools were academically selective and four were secondary modern (these are mainly for pupils

curriculum for pupils at different stages of their school career. It is noteworthy, however, that in the majority of cases, the headteacher did not feel that the specialist area was the strongest in the school, a point to which we return later.

The desire to create a new ethos within the school was mentioned by over a quarter of headteachers as a reason for applying for specialist school status. A similar proportion identified it as an advantage of participating in the programme. In addition, our findings identified many examples of curriculum innovation and new teaching methods to enrich the curriculum. Respondents frequently referred to the use of electronic 'white boards', video conferences (for example to enable students to converse with study partners at schools abroad), graphic calculators, data logging, internet links with schools in other countries and use of independent learning materials.

In the majority of cases, there had been initiatives within the specialist area attempting to address underachievement with improved identification of underachieving students combined with target setting, mentoring and tutoring. Other developments within the schools included the introduction of supplementary classes in specialist subjects, Saturday schools and homework clubs.

Business involvement We found that in almost all schools at least one sponsor had an on-going role in the school (most often as a governor) and most headteachers reported that businesses used specialist facilities as a resource. In some cases the support of sponsors/other employers was targeted on particular groups of students (e.g. through a mentoring scheme for African Caribbean students) although in the majority involvement was not targeted in this way.

Community involvement This was demonstrated in several different ways. Work with 'feeder' primary schools was the most common form of outreach and involved for example, the provision of training for primary school staff or in some cases joint curriculum projects. Primary schools were also often allowed to make use of specialist facilities by teaching some classes on the secondary school site. In some cases specialist staff (such as foreign language assistants) provided teaching at the primary schools. Co-operation with other secondary schools was somewhat less common. Although some schools reported making facilities and

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who are not selected for grammar school).

expertise available to other local schools, co-operation was often with more distant schools (e.g. other specialist schools, those with common sponsors or schools in other countries). Other forms of outreach work were also reported, for example, work with universities; English language classes for refugee families; foreign language classes and ICT training for adults and families.

Outputs, outcomes and wider benefits

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 'high stakes' public examinations are generally taken by students at the age of 16. These are GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examinations that are taken in a variety of different subjects. We were able to compare the GCSE results of specialist with non-specialist schools over the years that the Specialist Schools Programme had been in operation. The schools included in this study were, in general, already higher performing schools in terms of examination results and across the country such schools were more likely to show less improvement over time. Nevertheless, we found that the average annual improvement was higher for specialist schools than for non-specialist schools over the comparable period.

However, on the basis of the data available, we were unable to say how far these improvements arose from the effects of participation in the programme or how far the competitive specialist school bidding process identified improving schools that would have made improvements with or without the Specialist Schools Programme. Indeed, other possible explanations may be related to additional resources attracted from either the DfEE or from other sources. Given that the first specialist schools were grant-maintained (and so received additional government funds) it may be that these resources, for example, could have contributed to the gains made by at least some of the schools.

The higher levels of improvements could be understood as positive spill-overs – that is, for example, the school sees improvements in non-specialist subjects as well as specialist subjects as a result of, for example, increased resources and motivation throughout the school. Alternatively the improvements may arise primarily from specific improvements in examination results in specialist subjects. One of our findings was that more students entered examinations in specialist subjects in specialist schools compared with all schools and that attainment in these examinations was higher (see West et al., 2000 for details).

In addition to these 'hard' measures of the effects of the programme, there were a number of 'soft' measures that should not be overlooked. In a high percentage of schools, pupil and teacher motivation were perceived to have improved as a result of specialist status having been gained and in around a fifth of schools, pupil attendance was also reported to have improved. In the context of future employability, it is interesting to note that nearly two-thirds of the schools reported increases in the number of students continuing with specialist subjects post-16 and over a quarter increased in the numbers continuing with the specialism post-18. In a minority of schools higher numbers of students were reported to have gained employment related to the specialism.

5 Conclusions

This paper has outlined the school reforms that have taken place in England over the past 15 years or so. From a policy perspective the continuation of the notion of specialist schools as a means to increase diversity in the education system and to improve educational standards by both Conservative and Labour administrations is of interest; the Specialist Schools Programme is one that has been adapted to meet particular policy objectives.

On the basis of the first evaluation, the Programme can be considered to have broadly met its objectives. Schools are clearly responding to the challenge of meeting the government's objectives in relation to the Programme. However, there are questions about the type of specialisation that should be encouraged and it may be that in order to ensure a match between schools' specialist areas and the Programme that the specialist areas could be expanded (see West et al., 2000).

Finally, to what extent can the Specialist Schools Programme be considered to be providing increased diversity and choice? Given that there is a national curriculum in England the Programme can be considered to be offering increased diversity in terms of the increased range of subjects offered by schools for students to study. However, the constraints imposed by the national curriculum must be borne in mind.

In terms of increasing parental choice, in urban areas, the existence of specialist schools may well offer an increased *choice of school*. However, in rural areas, whilst choice of schools

likely to be constrained, the existence of specialist schools is likely to offer an increased *choice of subjects* for students.

Moreover, specialist schools located in deprived urban areas offer an opportunity for these schools to obtain a more socially and academically balanced intake. This is because improved resourcing and facilities may well result in such inner city schools becoming more attractive to parents with high aspirations for their children[9]. It is hoped that future evaluations of specialist schools and other associated initiatives will examine this issue.

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[9] Indeed, research carried out by West et al. (1995) found that 'subjects offered' and 'facilities' were spontaneously mentioned as 'important' factors by around a fifth of parents when considering secondary schools, compared with good academic results, atmosphere/ethos and proximity to home (all mentioned by somewhat more parents). Interestingly, David et al. (1994) found that pupils, who are generally involved in some capacity in the choice process, are more likely to show interest in school facilities; they found that over eight out of ten pupils thought that good art facilities, science facilities, computing facilities and sports facilities were important in secondary schools (with boys rating computing and sports facilities more highly than girls).

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Annex – Mission statements for specialist schools

Figure 1 Mission Statement for Technology Colleges

Technology Colleges will raise standards of achievement in technology, science and mathematics for all their students across the ability range. They will be active partners in a learning society with their local families of schools and their communities, sharing resources and developing and sharing good practice. Colleges will promote an educational culture which is scientific, technological and vocational. They will raise the post-16 participation rate in the specialist subject area, and provide young people with the skills needed to progress into employment, further training or higher education according to their individual abilities, aptitudes and ambitions.

Figure 2 Mission Statement for Language Colleges

Language Colleges will raise standards of achievement in modern foreign languages for all their students across the ability range. They will be active partners in a learning society with their local families of schools and their communities, sharing resources and developing and sharing good practice. Language Colleges will promote an educational culture which is international, technological and vocational. They will raise the post-16 participation rate in modern foreign languages, and provide young people with the skills needed to progress into employment, further training or higher education according to their individual abilities, aptitudes and ambitions.

Figure 3 Mission Statement for Sports Colleges

Sports Colleges will raise standards of achievements in physical education and sport for all of their students across the ability range. They will be regional focal points for excellence in physical education and community sport, extending links between families of schools, sports bodies and communities, sharing resources; and developing and spreading good practice, helping to provide a structure through which young people can progress to sporting careers. Sports Colleges will increase participation in physical education and sport for pre and post 16 year olds and develop the potential of talented performers.

Figure 4 Mission Statement for Arts Colleges

Arts Colleges will raise standards of achievement in the arts in schools for all their pupils across the ability range. They will be active partners in a learning society with their local families of schools, arts bodies, local arts organisations and communities, sharing resources and developing and spreading good practice. Arts Colleges will raise the participation rate in the arts for pre and post 16 year olds and provide young people with the skills needed to progress into employment, further training or higher education according to their individual abilities, aptitudes and ambitions.

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March 2000

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Lawrence M. Rudner, Ph.D.
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