ACADEMIES AND THE RISE OF A NEW STATE-LED PATERNALISM

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Academies represent a fundamental aspect of the government’s policy for English schools. As such they combine a desire to replace local government control with mechanisms of parental choice, a reconfiguration of accountably, and the opportunity to ‘brand’ a specific and geographically located institution (as this particular Academy). Critical to the development of the Academies has been a strong sense of shared values concerned with the need to reform the sector, and the development, at the leadership level, of ‘communities of practice’. Given that the programme has been led by ‘early adopters’ (natural evangelists for the movement) and senior managers of previously excellent and outstanding schools, this is not unexpected. As Pearson-RSA, 2012, noted, however, the actual picture of success is less convincing than its political image would suggest.

In this paper I am not concerned with the educational success of Academies, nor am I concerned with the specific nature of those values. Rather I am concerned with the implications, for students, of Academies that hold and institutionalise a strong set of values. Accepting that this might not be all Academies, I refer to this sub-set as ‘Strong Values Academies’ (SVAs) which I define and argue are not fictional ‘straw dolls’.

The 1980s saw a series of articles in the Journal of Philosophy of Education on the conditions for ‘open-mindedness’. Largely re-ignited by Hare (1979), the debate centred on the meaning, and legitimacy, of ‘open mindedness’ as an education aim (see JOPE). In this debate Hare was supported by MacLaughlin and opposed by Gardener. Central to the debate was the logical possibility of being both open minded and holding firm convictions. The central stimulus was primarily with faith-based schools, were the values are strong and institutionalised. I begin the paper by drawing on my co-presenters’, and others, empirical data on Academies to justify such SVAs as ‘faith-based like’, and as such in need of the same consideration as has marked previous debates in ‘open-mindedness’. I go on to locate SVAs, often secular, faith-like commitments at the door of central government, as a new from of arms-length paternalism. In conclusion, I argue that Academies ought to hold a policy supporting the development of students’ open mindedness with respect to their school experience.

Hare, W. (1979) Open mindedness and education