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Letters to the Secretary of State for Education

Manchester Institute of Education (MIE)

May 2015

Introduction

During 2014 and the early part of 2015, as part of its commitment to engagement with Greater Manchester schools, the Manchester Institution of Education ran a series of free public debates on schools policy. We wanted to ensure that the voices of people working in education in the city region were heard in public debate about what should happen to schools, and to provide opportunities for experiences and opinions to be shared. We also ran two youth debates in the run-up to the General Election, in two disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Manchester. Videos of the debates and follow up blogs and briefing papers can be found at www.manchester.ac.uk/educationdebates

Following the debates, but before the General Election, we invited people who attended to put their thoughts in writing to the Secretary of State for Education, whatever political party s(he) turned out to be from. We asked them to be constructive and specific – what should the new Secretary of State do, based on the writer’s practical experience or research?

A sample of the letters is contained in this collection. They include letters from academics, teachers, school governors, former HMI, parents and young people. None of them have been edited. They represent the writers’ original work and do not necessarily reflect the collective views of the Manchester Institute of Education.

The letters cover a wide range of themes:

- Curriculum and Pedagogies
- Assessment and Examinations
- Inspections and targets
- Inclusive education
- Multicultural Education
- Teachers and Teacher training
- Accountability and Autonomy
- Leadership in schools
- Higher education and fees
- ‘Commercialisation’ of education & the finance
- Closing the socio-economic attainment gaps & structural problems of poverty
- Thinking towards ‘complexity’ & learning from what works

We hope that you enjoy reading them and that they provide food for thought as policy develops under the new administration.

Professor David Hall (Head of MIE)

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24th July 2014

Dear Education Secretary,

The future of teaching and the school curriculum

I write as a teacher and school leader of many years' experience of working in maintained schools in the West Midlands. I continue to work as an adviser to schools and am chair of governors in a sponsored academy. I am also studying for a professional doctorate at the University of Manchester; my research theme is school leadership.

I am greatly concerned by the way in which Secretaries of State have used their powers to dictate, or to change at short notice, the content of the curriculum and the way in which it is taught. Whether a government minister wishes to send every school a copy of the King James Bible or The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists, it is an unnecessary intrusion into a school's right to determine what is appropriate for the communities that it serves.

In the last twenty years, politicians in Conservative, Labour and Coalition governments have appeared to be convinced that the only way to improve the quality of provision in public services is to introduce market principles developed in the private sector. That in itself is worthy of challenge, when numbers-driven performance measures are unquestioningly given precedence over professional expertise and judgement. But even within that context, education is at particular risk of political intervention. Transport ministers do not personally instruct the construction industry as to which material it should use to build a new motorway. Health ministers do not tell doctors which medical procedures to use to treat liver disease. Yet successive Secretaries of State for Education have increasingly taken upon themselves the powers to dictate to professionals how they should teach and what children and young people should learn. The value of subjects is judged by their economic functionality. The staging of learning is determined by the apparent belief that if this country is below another country in whichever league table is currently fashionable, then the solution is to teach children more things, earlier. I recently attended a conference for teachers at which a senior official of your Department talked about the latest version of the history curriculum. With commendable honesty, he said 'there's nothing about progression or skills development, it's 'teach this, teach that': it's just a list of stuff'.

I hope that during your term of office you will talk of teachers' responsibility rather than just of their accountability. I hope that you will trust those with training, experience and a research base to develop a curriculum that is not 'a list of stuff', but that is designed to prepare young people to become active and critical citizens of a complex world. As Dr Terry Wrigley put it in a recent paper: *'A century of research into children developing knowledge has taught us how much this depends on their personal engagement with the realities they experience, and reflection on that experience mediated by language and other cultural tools. This involves shifting fluently between different levels of concrete experience and abstract representation, applying ideas and skills from the past, collaborating with others, and stepping back to evaluate and re-plan the learning process. There are serious limitations to what can be acquired through rote learning, memorisation and behaviourist conditioning'*.

In my work with secondary schools I am aware of considerable frustration among head teachers and their staff that not only are they regularly criticised for not 'meeting targets', but that those targets are constantly changing without warning or explanation. For example, in September 2013 the then Secretary of State announced a change to the ways in which GCSE results would be reported in performance tables. This directly affected students who were already in the last of their five years at secondary school. The Secretary of State said that the change was to prevent schools 'gaming' the system. Leaving aside the slur on teachers' integrity, the reality was that schools had to inform students and their families that examination entries had to be changed at the last minute, to announce that courses had to be cancelled or amended, and to explain why they could not sustain an exam entry policy that might give students a better chance of achieving the best possible qualification. I would urge you as the new Secretary of State to avoid making such moves that disrupt young people's learning and disrespect teachers' professionalism.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Rayner

Teacher, education adviser, school governor and educational researcher

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West Midlands

24th July 2014

Dear Education Secretary,

Please think about how best to support education and teacher professionalism.

There must be something very liberating and exciting about being the education secretary; there are so many chances for you to make a real difference and to change some of the unhelpful things that have been happening in education over the last few decades.

I have been working as a teacher and manager in schools and colleges for over twenty years now: for ten of those years I have been involved in teacher education too, in a number of Universities. I am now a doctoral researcher in education, investigating teacher professional identity. I talk to teachers in all kinds of schools who are working with our young people on a daily basis, and I see the lived realities of teachers' lives. My work and research with teachers in secondary schools and colleges has established some important facts.

Firstly, and I know this is something that you, the rest of the government, and every parent will be pleased about: the majority of the teachers in our schools are motivated by a genuine desire to do their best for children. Teachers are not always happy that what their experience shows is 'best' is the same 'best' or 'outstanding' as Ofsted's definitions, or as league tables measure. However they try, for children's sake, to satisfy the league table requirements as well as to meet the needs of our young people.

Secondly, we know from the findings of the teacher workload survey, which were published in February 2014, that teachers work long hours. They work 50 or more hours a week (more for head teachers). It's because of that fact that teachers get fed up with the jokes about twelve weeks' holiday a year, and finishing at 3pm every day. My own work has found that as well as working these long hours, teachers spend much of their own money on schools. A head in a primary school was telling me recently that she had spent over £5000 in one year to buy necessary equipment for her school. That was paid out of out of what is already a relatively small salary. There is no chance of ever claiming that back.

Thirdly, teachers also reported their worry about being micromanaged. They reported that they were unable to be creative and responsive to the needs of students because of the constraints of tests and examination specifications. They also felt that there were frustrating constraints placed on them by managers who were trying to enact government policy in meaningful ways. Some teachers are concerned that performativity, and performance related pay, are used as sticks. They are concerned that policy 'games' mean that education is moving out of the control of those who know about pedagogy and education, and into the control of commercial enterprises, often with their own commercial agendas. Teachers feel that their professionalism is undermined and eroded, that their creativity and judgement are ignored, and that they are not valued. You will have seen the strength of this

feeling on the recent strike day, on social media and in feedback from constituents and other MPs, and it must be a concern.

There are a number of things that would help. First of all, finance education properly. We need smaller schools, small class sizes, and teachers who have the time to do their jobs and the pay which reflects the responsibilities they have as professionals. We need well-resourced schools and classrooms. Secondly, accept and understand that learning is not linear. It is the nature of learning that it isn't linear; rather, it is a multifaceted process which is affected by factors which are both close to and at a distance from an individual student's life. Their background, their relationships, family support, their friendships, all impact on learning, in complex and often surprising ways. Please accept that, and acknowledge it in some of the measures of performance and success which are often used, and which at the moment are often low in validity: they may not be measuring what you think they are measuring. As well, please don't measure the unmeasurable. In thinking about this you might want to remember the letter from the head of Barrowford Primary School, in Nelson Lancashire, to the year 6 leavers. That letter went viral for a reason. Children are so much more than the sum of their test results; we should celebrate the fact that they do other things that make them into fully rounded, responsible human beings: they are not just the products of test factories. Finally, value teachers' professionalism. Teachers train hard for a long time to become professionals, and subsequently engage in many hours of continuous professional development. A theme that comes out in my research is that teachers always say that they never stop learning, in, about and for their classrooms. They are experienced in pedagogy, in teaching, in learning, in developing our children. Please listen to them; accept that at the moment they are underpaid and devalued, and change that. It would be foolish to suggest that every teacher is great. In my experience and research however, I have found that the very large majority are indeed great. Many are unsung heroes. Some who are less than great need support and time, not punitive performance management regimes, micromanaging and increasing levels of stress. Believe and trust teachers. Support and reward teachers. Please. Doing that could be the start of the most important period of office a Secretary of State for Education has ever had.

Yours truly

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North West England

4th August 2014

Towards more democratic forms of school leadership

Dear Secretary of State for Education

I would like to raise with you the problem of what the standards agenda is doing to school leaders and leadership. Successive Secretaries of State have pursued policies which have encouraged 'relentless leadership' in schools. Head teachers are told to pursue relentlessly their ambitious visions for change; this language is everywhere, from the Ofsted inspection framework to what Heads say when I interview them for my research. On the face of it, you might argue that this is a good thing, but my research is showing that it is having a damaging effect on school leadership in England and importantly, on the school workforce. I remember when scholars of leadership were reasonably content to understand it as a relational process of influence and persuasion. The school vision was seen to be better if it belonged to, and as far as possible came from members of the school community. Now, visions are the property of the Headteacher or Principal, who is authorized and encouraged to ensure that everyone contributes to it. These visions are almost always about raising standards. We are seeing many instances of teachers being sacked, or re-structured out of schools because they don't agree, or because their practice demonstrates the truism that teachers cannot overcome the structural problems of poverty that mean that their students don't attain as 'expected'. This problem is made all the worse by the ability of academy-type schools to set their own pay and conditions for staff. In other words, we are seeing the end of school leadership as we have understood it, and the rise of autocracy. This is damaging morale in schools; damaging children through disrupting their relationships with teachers who understood them and their wonderful complexity, but who have been dismissed; and damaging leadership in England. Who, after all, would want to apply for a job that requires you to be relentless all day? This is a culture which has been created by the pressure that the DfE has put schools and their leaders under over many years to succeed, where what counts as success doesn't predict future economic success whatever policy-makers think, but only predicts children's level of skill in taking tests. My advice? Focus on reducing poverty instead of strengthening school leadership. You'll find that outcomes improve and equalise. This is a tough one, I know, and will require you to collaborate with colleagues elsewhere in government, but research shows that tackling the structural cause of inequality/poverty is more effective than tackling its symptom - unequal educational outcomes, especially through strengthening the 'quality' of school leadership. And linked to this: Promote more democratic forms of leadership through your policies. Strong leadership doesn't have to be / shouldn't be autocratic. Surely we want our children to be taught in schools where people are not generally miserable, stressed and in fear? Good luck!

Yours faithfully,

Steven Courtney

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March 2015

Poorest Kids, Richest Teaching

Dear Secretary of State for Education

I know that one of your main objectives will be to improve the quality of teaching, and especially to make sure that the most disadvantaged young people have access to the very best teachers. Based on my research over the last fifteen years, I'd like to suggest three things that you could do.

First of all, you could start from the premise that teaching in a tough school is a demanding and emotionally challenging job. If you want to recruit and retain people in these settings, you need to value them, not just in terms of pay but in terms of recognition, support and time for professional development. Don't shame them for lower results. Recognise their substantial achievements in keeping some of the most troubled young people engaged, supported and making progress. Let them support and advise teachers in more advantaged areas. I don't mean there should be no accountability of course. But start from thinking about motivation, support, development and reward, not from the positions of blame, disrespect and reliance on crude incentives that some of your predecessors have adopted.

Linked with this, allow teachers to develop pedagogies that actually work. Teaching that is based on a relentless focus on 'delivering' curriculum to maximise test scores might work in some places, but research shows that it can be seriously disengaging in others. Where all the messages conveyed to young people in their real worlds tell them, that they are powerless, disrespected, and facing limited choices and constrained futures, teachers have to work in different ways: allowing choice and control over learning, making curriculum relevant, creating more equal relationships, building confidence in achievements. Such 'productive' pedagogies are not an alternative to academic rigour or the acquisition of powerful knowledge. They provide a pathway to it. But teaching like this demands that teachers spend time doing and reading research, working collaboratively with colleagues, developing new methods and materials. The Finnish system is a good example. Teachers in very tough schools in England don't have the time, or level of trust, and league table targets mean they are driven towards short term fixes. You need to change what teachers' work, training and careers look like, if you really want good teachers.

Lastly, I think you'll need to look hard at school funding. Our school system is currently loaded towards schools with disadvantaged intakes, but not really enough, especially when you consider what it costs to educate the most privileged young people in private schools. Can you really talk seriously about 'level playing fields' and 'closing gaps' unless you are prepared to back this with substantially more resources to enable intensive support and rich experiences for the young people who enjoy the fewest advantages at home? The current government is working towards 'fair funding', but this is based on crude indicators. A more difficult but ultimately better approach would be to look at what schools actually have to do in different contexts and fund them on that basis. Ask yourself, and ask professionals who

know, what it would take to give the poorest children the same educational experiences and chances that the richest have, and design your funding system from there.

These things are risky, I know! You'll need to step back from this repeated testing and reporting of performance. You'll need to take money from somewhere else to give it to the poorest. You'll be the bravest Education Secretary for a long time, but you'll make the most difference.

Ruth Lupton,

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10th April 2015

Dear Secretary of State,

Proposed changes to inspection and the accountability framework

I have been a teacher since 1979, had experience of headship at two contrasting primary schools and was the architect, as a senior HMI, of the two most recent school inspection frameworks. My teaching experience is not unique but my time with Ofsted probably was, or at least few others would have been charged with the task of developing an important pillar in the accountability framework. I have a firm belief that inspection, when done well with a school that has a secure understanding of its strengths and weaknesses, can be a constructive and helpful process. There comes a time, however, when an inspection system that was designed for all schools needs a radical overhaul. I believe that time has arrived.

I would urge you to consider withdrawing the expectation that all schools will be inspected within a predetermined period. This pressure on schools is intense and increases as the date of the anniversary looms. It also seriously affects recruitment into senior posts of schools at or close to the time of the inspection. In addition, there is a sense that the system will not give sufficient time for real improvement to be embedded and effective school leaders are wary of taking on what they may describe as 'a disaster waiting to happen'. I know that change in school performance can be dramatic and improvement secured quickly but there are circumstances when this is achieved and it is simply not sustained. Ofsted's evidence of slippage back into a category of concern proves the point. Getting 'real' and sustained improvement takes time and a fair dose of talent and energy. We need to create the time but not lose the accountability.

My proposal is that a stratified sample of schools are identified for inspection each year. The number of inspections would be relatively small and would perhaps mean that schools had a 1 in 10 chance of being selected. These odds would be sufficient to maintain a certain level of healthy pressure on schools but would provide sufficient evidence for the chief inspector to report on the quality of education each year. Where a school was found to have been inaccurate in its self-assessment then a warning notice would be issued providing a window for reflection and reassessment. A follow up inspection within six months would have the power to judge a school as 'requiring special measures to provide a satisfactory education'. Inspection would continue to have bite but it wouldn't jolt the system so heavily and would encourage school leaders to embark on sustained improvement rather than 'quick wins'. Two additional benefits of a system that relies on less inspection are the cost savings that it would produce but also it would require fewer inspectors.

I was fortunate in joining as HMI in 2001 at a time when I benefited from a year-long induction programme. I had previously been trained in the mid 1990s as an Additional Inspector so I was reasonably familiar with the inspection process but I was still given a mentor for the entire year. My mentor shadowed me on inspection and checked that my

judgements were sound and secure. I benefited greatly from inspecting abroad, in prisons, secure units, private schools and universities. The purpose was to make me a more rounded and reliable judgement maker. The current programme of utilising existing school leaders to undertake inspections for a relatively short period of time and with relatively little in-house training seriously jeopardises the quality of the evidence gathering and judgement making. I don't think I am alone in believing that not all outstanding leaders always make strong inspectors. The skill sets required for both roles are different so let's have some current school leaders involved but let's do it in such a way that their judgements are reliable and the system is not damaged by removing some of the great leaders from front-line work at a time when there are clearly not enough to go round.

The decision to remove the expectation that schools complete annually an electronic self-evaluation form was misguided. Suggesting that this was an attempt to reduce bureaucracy signified a complete lack of understanding of the form and the process undertaken by senior leaders and their governors.

In addition, I find the current stance on 'outstanding' schools difficult to stomach because from my extensive experience of inspection these schools tend to be less strong than the external data often suggests. I urge you to adopt an approach that treats all schools in the same way and helps to eradicate some of the professional arrogance that can emanate from an 'outstanding' judgement. We also need to do more to create an expectation that all schools will support others and not just those deemed to be effective. I have gained as much from visiting schools what were deemed to be weak as those judged by someone else to be 'outstanding'. I have always found effective practice in schools in 'special measures' and the opportunity to put myself in the shoes of others has always been a humbling experience. Some of the most brilliant and dynamic school leaders are in the most challenging of schools and we need to support and challenge them through less inspection rather than more. School self-evaluations need to demonstrate how expertise is being shared across the school system and inspectors need to drill down into these relationships so that we can get a real sense of how effective and sustainable they are. The Secretary of State needs to know whether we are deluding ourselves that school-school support is feasible. You are no doubt told regularly that it can work but I am not convinced we have a picture of this working in all of our communities. Making school-school support work in the far reaches of Cumbria is very different from a London or Manchester Challenge scenario. I would urge you to expect every school to undertake confidential annual surveys of staff, pupils/students and parents/carers views. The analysis of these surveys needs to be undertaken by an independent body or group and must be reviewed by governors as part of the self-evaluation process. I have considerable experience of this work and would be happy to chat to you about it. The current approach adopted by Ofsted with its Parent View questionnaire is scandalous and I would suggest that this is closed down with immediate effect. It provides little in the way of qualitative information and is open to misuse. I have many other issues about accountability issues that I would love to discuss with you. I don't suppose you will have much time as you take up your role but if you are near to Manchester I make a decent coffee.

Yours faithfully,

Frank Norris (frank.norris@co-operative.coop)

Director of the Co-operative Academies Trust, Manchester

15th April 2015

Dear Education Secretary

Character Education in Schools...Again?

March 24th, 2015 Character Education in Schools. I would like to draw your attention to the issue of Character Education in schools. This is once again featuring heavily in the media and we are seeing many commentators calling for a greater emphasis to be placed on character education. I have no doubt this is in the main well-meaning and progressed with good intentions but I fear that it is becoming a simplistic and meaningless answer to a range of complex problems. An answer that furthermore is ultimately damaging for many children and communities. I speak as a teacher and education researcher who has spent the past decade developing and evaluating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programmes (what we previously called Character Education) with children, teachers, parents and education professionals. These programmes were driven by the same conversations that are currently happening; our children are at risk, they are unprepared for the world of work, they don't have the life skills necessary, rates of mental health in young people are too high. Similarly these programmes were introduced as a way of inoculating our children from the ravages of modern society. The SEAL programme was the major initiative and cost the Government over 40 million pounds between 2005 and 2010. The research from Manchester Institute of Education identified that it had null results. Even more importantly I am concerned that once again we find ourselves in a place where adults are deciding that children's inner selves should be socially shaped in a certain way; a way that many adults would refuse to accept and would in most likelihood not achieve if they were willing to do so. When we talk about character we use the terms resilience, reciprocity, social skills, motivation yet these are not universally understood and accepted. They are complex terms meaning different things to different people at different times in their lives. If we are building resilience in schools what is it we are making our children resilient to, the rampant free market? Lack of full time employment? If it is these things is it not the core issue we should be tackling rather than again developing a school sticking plaster that will just leave children confused and further labelled? In conclusion my research with children suggests that young people are consistent in what they see as important to their development and it is not character. It is free space to play not controlled by adults or under surveillance. It is having the space to participate in non-measured open activities with family and friends. It is free play, conversations, time with those they feel close to. My advice would be to focus on the bigger picture, offer young people a future that delivers security in housing, education and health. One that reflects their true needs (not what business says their needs are), trusts them, stops constantly measuring and labelling them and gives value to the important things in life that cannot be measured economically. If you do that you will see what you understand to be character grow and grow in young people freed from the tyranny of fear and anxiety over their future.

Yours Faithfully,

Carl Emery, Manchester Institute of Education

April 2015

Dear Secretary of State for Education

Resist Quick Fixes, and Prioritise Addressing Disadvantage

Congratulations on your new job! You are the steward of the hopes of young people for their future, no less. A role for a brave and humble heart. I wish you well.

My reason for writing is to offer you some thoughts as you decide on your priorities for education policy; on what is important and what is less so. My qualifications for doing so are twofold: I was a teacher and headteacher for over 20 years and a school inspector for a similar period.

First, I hope you will try to put aside party politics. Schools have had a bellyful of overtly political initiatives recently. Think bigger picture: you are a member of Her Majesty's Government. This is one nation. The government should act to secure the well-being of all its people, not just the ones that voted for it.

Second, do nothing in haste. Better still, do nothing for the first year! Early years, schools, post-16 providers, universities, initial teacher training institutions, local education authorities, Ofsted – every phase and aspect of publicly-funded education has been subject to an unprecedented level of change over several years. The pace has been relentless. Nothing will be lost and much gained by letting the system settle for a year, allowing the profession time to adjust to several far-reaching continuing initiatives. In addition, there is no need for haste. Schools have never been in better shape than they are now – standards are higher than they have ever been.

Avoid further structural upheavals. On the whole, structural changes to education are not the developments that lead to sustained improvement. The inescapable key to improvement is to secure good leadership. It's hard work. It takes a long time, building a team of teachers/practitioners/lecturers and developing them to achieve their best. Be wary of 'system leaders', executive headteachers, national leaders in education and governance and all those who have filled the void as the traditional forms of support, notably local education authorities, have been starved of resources. These people are not the solution. They know only what worked for them, and then they move on, when the real solutions are within and must be sustained. Over time, their own schools and institutions suffer because they are absent and/or no longer focused on improvement there. It is true that entrepreneurial leaders have made their mark in a chaotic and fragmented landscape, but only in the same way drowning people will clutch at straws to save themselves. Simple is best. Every school should have its headteacher as its single point of reference, entirely responsible and accountable for the school's performance.

Leave the curriculum. Stop tinkering with the examinations system. A generation of students in secondary schools already feels that what it has studied to date has not been valued. There will be a time to look again at the curriculum and its assessment. In the short

term creativity and vocational subjects are under-rated in relation to other subjects and the nation will be worse for this if allowed to go on for too long.

Ofsted will be a tempting target for intervention from any new secretary of state. It is continually under attack by the profession and by think tanks of the right and left. Its inspection teams are forever being accused of inconsistency and more recently of acting politically, as an agency of government. Ignore the temptation to interfere. Ofsted has proved the single most effective driver of improvement in education since it was formed. The teaching profession and schools are the better for Ofsted inspections. There is simply no comparison between the quality of teaching and standards children achieve nowadays and those pertaining when I first became an inspector. We have a proportion of world-class maintained schools now. Ignore those demanding complete consistency in inspection. Education is a human business, as is inspection. No two schools are the same and no two inspection teams either. An alternative, to avoid the human factor, by holding schools to account on their data alone would, I imagine, be thoroughly unacceptable. The Framework for Inspection must be applied to all schools but it does not exactly fit any. It is up to inspectors to use their experience and judgement to ensure an accurate fit within the context of the school.

You will have to decide whether to keep schools and Ofsted out of the political limelight. All other governments before yours have failed to do so, albeit with some justification, in the case of community cohesion and the promotion of British values. Ofsted is, after all, a government department. When both the far left and the far right attack an organisation, as they do Ofsted, perhaps that organisation is pitched just right!

If the temptation to tinker with Ofsted gets too great to resist, then look to beefing up the judgements on pupils' personal development: their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC). Think as a parent. Most want their children to be happy and safe at school as well as achieve well. Currently Ofsted inspectors undervalue SMSC in their reports and are cursory in their evaluations.

The single most important issue you face is the continuing underachievement of children from socially and economically poor backgrounds. It is a national disgrace. Mainly by virtue of their family circumstances, millions of children are unable to overcome the barriers to learning that stem from a poor social and economic background, ultimately leaving the nation performing below its potential. Inequality is growing. The country is polarising into the haves and the have-nots. Education provides the means to arrest inequality but only if government provides the will.

Experience has taught me not to rely entirely on schools to compensate for and raise the achievement of children from poor backgrounds. So one guiding principle is 'start early'. Poor money into the early years; get primary schools thinking 0-11 years, not 5-11 years. Post statutory, remember the axiom 'it is never too late'. If the school system fails a young person there is still time and teachers who will turn things around for the better. Give them the resources to do this. Work with the parents. Encourage schools to do so. An outstanding school does not just raise the expectations of its pupils, it raises expectations for the whole community. Don't accept that there isn't the money to do all of this. Find it. The cost of failure to invest in education for the disadvantaged is far higher than that of doing so.

Judge schools by the positive difference they make for disadvantaged children, not what they do for the advantaged. Affluent families don't need schools to the same extent as the poor do. The affluent ease their children's path through education through choosing independent schools, by buying houses near grammar schools and comprehensives in 'good areas', by giving their children a broad range of extra-curricular experiences and paying for their children through university. If all else fails, they arrange and pay for extra tuition to prepare the way to examination success. It is unfair to blame parents for giving their children a 'leg up'. However, a government cannot just allow the children of the wealthy and privileged to do well and take the plum jobs. It must step in, intervene, and provide a level playing-field of opportunity for those children born to poor families. The pupil premium is doing this. It should be continued and enhanced.

I hope this advice is of use to you. The post is one of daunting responsibility. How will you be judged? Looking back over my time in education, the secretary of state who gave me the most sense of having the greatest vision for education for all children was Estelle Morris. The secretary of state who left me feeling the most disconnect from the centre was Michael Gove. I do hope your tenure in this great engine for future prosperity and well-being will be reviewed positively. Make sure it is.

Yours sincerely

Brian Padgett, former teacher, headteacher and HMI.

North West

April 2015

Dear education secretary

Enhance children's learning through extra curricular activities

Congratulations on your new post! You must be feeling overwhelmed. I am writing to you as you are the new Secretary of State for Education, not just the Secretary 'of Schools'; because my first suggestion to you relates to 'education' in its general sense of learning in the form of acquisition of knowledge and skills, beliefs and values, and healthy socialisation; and this extends beyond the official school day.

I am writing to you as a mother of school age children and a previously PTA (Parent and Teacher Association) member. I would like to urge you to consider co-ordinating with other ministers to provide accessible and affordable after school 'education' in its general sense, in the form of extra-curricular activities that a lot of children miss out. By allowing children to access safe, stimulating and creative after school activities can provide a number of benefits for children and their families: it boosts their confidence through learning new skills, allows them to socialise and develop friendships, explore their environment and learn through less structured activities and under no testing/assessment, provides role models for children and especially girls. Finally, it allows mothers to access work and enhance the family's income (today, women, especially mothers, are still lagging behind in payment equality; A nine-to-five working day and the increase of zero-hours contracts rarely fits with the reality of mothers of children of school age). I know there are not cheap ways to do this, but maybe the economic costs of mothers not working and the impacts of reduced family income on children, are worth considering. Some steps have been taken so far but more needs to be done. Ideas would include after school clubs at school premises, where there is less disruption at the end of the school day, where they feel safe, and allow them opportunities to learn a sport, dance, art, or even have free-play. These places should include all children!

The school that my children go is 'good'; despite a very mixed socio-economic and ethnic intake. We take the view that a mixture in terms of socio-economic status, ethnicity and ability / 'dis'ability enrich our children's lives. What I have come to believe is that 'blaming and shaming' attitudes are least helpful, whether these refer to teachers or parents. Parents and teachers need to be supported, to do even better what they do best and what is in their heart of their very being: support the children. Punishing them for 'low results' is not the answer. Neither the answer is in short-sighted initiatives punishing teachers for 'not meeting targets' determined by league tables, or parents who 'misbehave' (eg. fines paid by parents who take children out of school at term time because they cannot afford it during school holidays).

I hope you will consider the inequalities that families face in educating their children when you are thinking of your new policies. Take any level of education, from early years to the university. One does not have to try hard to see that children from private schools do better compared to children who attend schools in economically deprived areas. Whilst blaming affluent parents for sending their children to 'better' schools is not my intention, I believe that any government could do more to raise the standards of the state education (without

changing its ethos and status, eg. forced academisation). And whilst education for 5-16 is still mostly accessible to all - even though unequally - and still mostly 'not-commercial', equal access to post-16 opportunities is not. The high fees for University mean that children have to make very early decisions of immense consequences as to whether is 'worth' continuing their education. Education post-18 is becoming a luxury; it should be a 'right'!

Thank you for reading,

A mother

Manchester

24th April 2015

Dear Education Secretary,

Towards a More Inclusive Education System and Society

Although the following recommendations mainly reflect my interest in special needs education, they have to be seen in the wider context of policy and practice for all children and young people, particularly those who are living and learning in areas of poverty and disadvantage.

1 Because policy-making has to be inclusive, responsibility for special needs education children must be an integral part of the brief of the minister responsible for teaching and learning in schools. It should not be segregated in an under-resourced and professionally isolated section of the Department or allocated to a Parliamentary Under-Secretary, alongside schools meals and transport.

2 The Department for Education must become a proactive contributor to a radical inter-departmental policy review to improve transition from school to further education and training leading to employment and full citizenship, consistent with the UK ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The outgoing government was the first since 1997 to begin their term of office with a major review of special needs education, resulting in Part 3 of the Children and Families Act which came into force in September 2014. Although most of the proposals for change were welcomed in principle (e.g. continuity to age 25 and improved partnerships between parents and professionals) there has been widespread and evidence-based concern that too little thought has been given to how these aspirations were to be implemented.

3 The time is ripe not only to review progress and problems in the implementation of the Children and Families Act but to give much deeper consideration to ways in which inclusive education can be advanced within the UK, in the light of developments in research and practice and the experience of other countries. The future role of special schools is an essential element of such a review.

4 To this end, I recommend the immediate appointment of a high-level Advisory Committee to prepare a brief for Ministers on steps that can be taken in the short, intermediate and longer term to bring about significant improvements in the education and life chances of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and the supports now necessary for their families and the teachers and other professionals responsible for their development and support.

In my opinion, the best informed and most widely respected Chair of such a Committee would be Professor Brahm Norwich of Exeter University. Whoever is appointed should have an agreed brief and direct access to ministers.

5 Ministers and senior officials should study recent synoptic reviews of policy and practice in both mainstream and special needs education, as well as ensuring that relevant research commissioned by the Department is not consigned to the archives but systematically scrutinised in the process of policy development. Examples are given below.

6 In order to develop stronger links between research and practice across the board and to return to evidence-based policy making in place of ministerial whims, the Department for Education should belatedly appoint a Chief Scientist.

Yours faithfully

Peter Mittler, Hon. Research Fellow and Emeritus Professor of Special Needs Education, University of Manchester; UN consultant in disability and education and former government adviser.

Peter.Mittler@manchester.ac.uk

Critical general studies of recent policy and practice

Mortimore, P. (2013). *Education Under Siege: Why There is A Better Alternative*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Ball, S. J. (2013). *The Education Debate* (2nd edn.) Bristol: Policy Press.

Review of SEND policy and practice

Norwich, B. (2014) Changing policy and legislation and its effect on inclusive and special education: perspectives from England. *British Journal of Special Education*, 41(4), 404-425. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8578.12079/epdf>

26th April 2015

Grammar Schools

Dear Education Secretary

Would you consider reintroducing Grammar Schools nationwide to help pupils whose parents are not able to afford private education and who may not be able to move location to be in the boundaries of the state school of their choice. To make the grammar school system fairer, exams could be taken by children who had failed the 11 plus and were late developers so could move to the Grammar School later on, at 14 for example.

Yours Sincerely

Michele Lusack

michelelusack@hotmail.com

26th April 2015

Dear Education Secretary,

Education that nurtures aspiration

When you take up your new role I would like to ask that you put equality of opportunity to the forefront of your decision making. I would like to see an education policy that means that all students have the opportunity to benefit from the best quality education with intellectual rigour and also opportunities for personal development. The University of Manchester takes great pride in being a great melting pot of people from different backgrounds and cultures. The city of Manchester has some of the highest child poverty rates in the UK and outreach programmes from the University provide vital opportunities for first-in-family students to take advantage of a world class education. When the greatest barrier to pursuing education at higher levels is poverty of aspiration rather than an unenquiring mind, I would like to see schools encouraging their students to be ambitious, develop self-confidence, and aim for the top, whatever their chosen path might be. I would also like to see subjects that are not overtly vocational given the same prestige and recognition in the skills training they provide. Humanities subjects do not teach you how to build a bridge or treat a patient but what they do is equally valuable: they develop critical, independent thinking; finely tuned communication skills; and foster lifelong passions.

I wish you all the best in your role and thank you for your attention.

Yours sincerely,

Ruth Rushworth (ruth.rushworth@manchester.ac.uk)

Development Officer at The University of Manchester

26th April 2015

Manchester Institute of Education

Dear Education Secretary

Learning from what works

Like you, we want to support the creation of an education system which offers better opportunities for all children and young people. We know that achieving this will be hugely challenging, not least because children's lives are complex, and changing them for the better is more complex still. But this challenge can be met, and the key lies, we believe, in building on 'what works'. To create a better education system for all, we have to find out what works, where, for which learners, and to improve a wide range of outcomes.

Finding what works cannot, therefore, be a matter of simplistic mantras, quick solutions, and one-size fits-all interventions. We would urge you, instead, to look to the wisdom that exists within the education system, and the encouraging practices being developed locally despite the most unpromising of circumstances. These practices are focused on what happens within schools, between schools, and beyond schools in the rest of children's lives. Together they offer a new way of thinking about how to create a better education system for all.

We believe these practices can create the basis of an education system which is much more capable of thinking about and responding to the real complexities of schooling than the one we currently have. We detail these in our report 'Learning from what works', which draws together a decade of research by the Centre for Equity in Education, including our involvement in the Greater Manchester Challenge, the Coalition of Research Schools, and the Save the Children 'Children's Community' initiative. (The url address for the report is at the end of the letter so you can read it at your convenience). To provide a brief summary here, our research shows that:

- *Within schools*: Teachers and other school staff can be supported to understand the complexities of the situations in which they practise. By exploring how their students experience school, the challenges those students face, and the ways in which changes in their practices help or hinder students, teachers can learn how to develop more effective practices based on 'what works here and for these learners'.
- *Between schools*: Schools can be helped to develop through the critical friendship of other schools. This creates a supportive dialogue between schools, and, crucially, it supports the imperative to improve with resources – most importantly, human resources – to make improvement possible.
- *Beyond schools*: Schools can also play an important role in tackling the wider social issues that impact on their students' learning. Schools can be supported in understanding the complex contexts within which education takes place and in tackling the challenges which students face in their home and community backgrounds. A focus on these issues recognizes the interdependence of educational and other outcomes for children and young people, and so the crucial importance of schools working closely with other child, family and community agencies.

Because we work actively with schools and their partners to develop such practices, we can vouch for the fact that these are 'real world' practices. They are happening somewhere in the country – and almost certainly, in more places than we know about. This is important

because it seems to us much more likely that educational change will come from what is already happening, rather than engaging in yet another wholesale system reform.

There is much work to do to build on the foundations which are already in place, and to make best use of the resources already within the system. The wider use of the practices we have outlined will require:

- Policy makers who can shift their thinking away from simplification towards a recognition of complexity
- Accountability mechanisms that avoid blaming schools for what they cannot control, but that reward them for contributing to a wider range of outcomes
- Governance frameworks that offer schools both leadership and developmental support, and that actively promote a common purpose
- The creation of local networks that enable schools to play a wider social role and draw on wider resources to support their educational mission.

All of these things are, we believe, achievable. But they demand the kind of deep educational thinking that has been driven out of the education system for the past three decades, and replaced instead by simplistic mantras about what needs to be done. At this juncture, we believe the way forward lies in recognising that there is more wisdom within the education system than it has been given credit for by previous governments. Our strong advice is to work with the system to learn about what really works.

Yours faithfully

Mel Ainscow, Alan Dyson, Sue Goldrick, and Kirstin Kerr

Centre for Equity in Education, University of Manchester

Our report, *Learning from what works. Proposals for the reform of the English education system from the Centre for Equity in Education at The University of Manchester*, can be accessed at:

<http://www.seed.manchester.ac.uk/medialibrary/Education/research/cee/learning-from-what-works-2015.pdf>

3rd May 2015

Dear Education Secretary,

Intercultural opportunities and responsibilities for education in c21st

As a consequence of a complex history, the UK is culturally and linguistically diverse in ways starkly contrasting with current discourses and related policy-making including English monolingualism + foreign languages in decline and UK citizenship discourses. The evidence of hundreds of years in cities such as Manchester is that immigration and migration are not phenomena to be feared but great resources contributing to the dynamism of our society and representing a sadly under-valued economic and cultural connectivity with many other parts of the world. Education policy needs to more firmly grasp the intercultural opportunities but also responsibilities arising from this long and continuing experience of society-building through diversity. Rather than seeing pupils who have English as one of their languages as being deficient (children with EAL), we need educational practices which value the multilingualism they bring to our schools and society and which will subsequently contribute to the skills-set of our workforce. Rather than seeing the diversity of cultural backgrounds and identities as being a battleground of identity (in which a constructed indigenous culture is threatened by recent arrivals who do not integrate), we need educational policies and practices that help our youngsters become Interculturally competent individuals able to participate in social processes locally, nationally and also globally. The narrowness of current debates greatly saddens me when I think of the scale of the opportunities and responsibilities and I invite you to lead a policy repositioning that recognises the value of cultural and linguistic diversity so evident in our country, value for all who live here but also of value to us as we continue to find our place in a world-order characterised by transnational flows of people, ideas and products and rapidly changing currents of economic, political and cultural power.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Richard Fay,

Manchester Institute of Education, The University of Manchester

richard.fay@manchester.ac.uk

Dear Education Secretary

The provision of Counselling in Schools

Educational providers are commonly placed on the front line of mental health and psychological support services. They encounter a full range of presenting issues from the children, young people/adults that they come into contact with. Despite this, as indicated in the recent Carter Review, mental health issues receive little attention within the initial teacher training and schools often rely upon the input of additional professional support (e.g. counsellors and psychologists). Such support feeds into broader educational agendas to support young people's broader wellbeing and can, as a consequence, impact upon behaviour in classrooms, improve mental health, contribute to safeguarding procedures and improve academic attainment. Such sentiments are echoed in recent reports such as the 'Future in Mind' report which identifies schools as potential arenas for providing mental health services. The Department for Education 'Counselling in Schools: a blueprint for the future' goes further and concludes:

"Our strong expectation is that over time all schools should make counselling services available to their pupils"

This is based upon the following rationale:

"For schools this can result in improved attainment, attendance, reductions in behavioural problems, as well as happier, more confident and resilient pupils."

Presently recent surveys conducted indicate that presently between 64 and 86% schools provide access to counselling services. The provision also varies greatly in delivery. My request to you, in the role of Education Secretary, is to work to address this. I would ask that counselling in schools is adequately invested in so that it can be rolled out to all schools as indicated in the report noted above.

Yours faithfully

Dr Terry Hanley AFBPsS FHEA
Senior Lecturer in Counselling Psychology, Manchester Institute of Education

Manchester

Email address: terry.hanley@manchester.ac.uk

6th May 2015

What trainee science teachers know

Dear Education Secretary,

Firstly, congratulations on your appointment to this important post. I'm writing to offer a concrete suggestion on a matter which I consider to be of great importance. Young people are sometimes seen as a list of attainment grades, but the trainee science teachers we work with know differently. They are training for a role in which they will have the privilege of helping young people to grow and develop as people who can engage with science and think scientifically. Getting good exam results is important, but as part of a process which should support young people's development and growth, rather than narrowing them down to a row on a spreadsheet. Could it be that the relentless focus on 'improving standards' - interpreted in terms of attainment in examinations - is working against the engagement and enthusiasm of young people for science and other disciplines? I am hoping that you may be prepared to sponsor an independent review to address this vital issue. You would have widespread support for such a move, and I am personally willing to help in any way I can.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Andy Howes, Subject Leader for Secondary Science PGCE

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April 2015

Letters from high school students - Manchester Enterprise Academy (MEA)

Student 1

Dear Education Secretary

I am a *student from MEA*

I think it is important that you *reduce tuition fees for University.*

This needs to be done because *it's ridiculous we have to pay for education.*

Thank you for reading this ☺

Student 2

Dear Education Secretary

I am a *student from MEA*

I think it is important that you *lower university tuition fees to between £3,000 – 5,000.*

This needs to be done because *there are people who cannot afford to pay back the debt.*

Thank you for reading this!

Student 3

Dear Education Secretary

I am a *student from MEA*

I think it is important that you *teach us better life skills rather than knowledge in subjects that we may never use again.*

This needs to be done because *it will give young people a better start in life.*

Thank you for reading this

Student 4

Dear Education Secretary

I am a *student from Manchester (MEA)*

I think it is important that you *should reduce University fees.*

This needs to be done because *most people cannot afford this!*

Thank you for reading this.

Student 5

Dear Education Secretary

I am Hayley, a *student from MEA*

I think it is important that you *make lessons more engaging and practical for more or all our lessons. Longer breaks and dinners.*

This needs to be done because *more students are complaining about not be proactive or motivated in lessons.*

Thank you for reading this.

Letters from University Postgraduate students

Postgraduate Student 1

Dear Education Secretary,

Recent initiatives declare an opportunity for loans to be provided for postgraduate students. However emphasis needs to be placed upon further scholarship and funding opportunities instead. These financial opportunities increase the desire for postgraduate study, particularly for those from a low socio-economic background.

Although it can be argued that loans will increase participation and opportunity, it also raises concern over associated educational debt. This in itself is a severe deterrent as many students will already carry debt from their undergraduate study.

Having received a scholarship myself, the pressure lifted from a financial point of view was extraordinary. It largely enabled me to focus upon my academic study, which is necessary for success, as oppose to working part time to fund this schooling.

Yours sincerely

Ermione Baimas, HEFCE Scholar, MA Educational Leadership at the University of Manchester