



A 'Perfect Storm'

by Mary Tasker

A perfect storm is an expression that describes an unusual coming together of happenings which when combined will have some disastrous effects.

In England the school system is reaching a point when the developments of the last fifteen years are combining to seriously damage the education of children and young people. This brief paper carries a warning for other European countries who may under pressure from the education for economic growth lobby be tempted to adopt similar policies.

Since the Coalition Government assumed power in 2010 the English system has been fragmented into a chaos of different kinds of schools and methods of funding. The dismantling of democratically accountable local authorities which were formerly responsible for schools in their own area has reached fever pitch in the last four years. The new secondary academies and free schools now outnumber the local authority schools. Academies and free schools are state schools centrally funded by tax payers but they are 'independent' in the sense of being freed from the democratically elected local authority. They are managed by the chains of companies and trusts which have signed contracts individually with the Secretary of State for Education who ultimately controls them. One government minister is in effect controlling thousands of schools whereas in most European countries it is the elected councils of cities and towns that have the responsibility of providing schools to meet local needs.

It is now becoming clear that the contracts between academy chains and the Department of Education are proving unenforceable and inefficient, hence the increasing numbers of schools that are losing teachers and students, closing down and, in an extreme instance of social fragmentation and alienation in Birmingham, are alleged to be hothouses of radical Islamic indoctrination. The effect of such confusion and hysteria on teachers, students and their parents is damaging to say the least.

The reshaping of then English system was carried out - with astonishing speed - by the then Minister of Education, Michael Gove on the grounds of providing a range of different types schools for parents to choose from. Parental choice is dear to the hearts of many parents who wish their children to experience an education that is centred on their interests and needs and not those of the state. For advocates of alternative theories of education – Freinet, Montessori and Steiner amongst them –the opportunity to set up their own publicly funded free school was immediately attractive.

However, the complexities of applying for free school or academy status and the high stakes testing regime to which all state schools are subject deterred many alternative groups from applying and only a few of them are pursuing progressive educational philosophies. Most of the new schools follow the traditional model of a standardised curriculum, didactic pedagogy, teaching to the test and a rigorous top down discipline structure.

These are also the key elements of schools committed to GERM, the Global Education Reform Movement, which Pasi Sahlberg described in his book 'Finnish Lessons'. GERM has introduced into schools the managerial concepts of the market. School markets, competition, outsourcing, deregulation, accountability and choice are



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now accepted by many as effective and desirable in the essentially humane processes of educating children. Parental choice is used as a mechanism for promoting competition between schools. Where before there had been collaboration under the aegis of the local authority, now schools are in the market competing for students. Test and examination results are the metrics by which a school's 'success' is measured and the national league tables which make public the results of every schools' results provide the mechanism whereby parents make their choice of school.

In England the whole thrust of social policy since the 1980's has been to force the public services – hospitals, schools, prisons, the social services – into the market economy. The outsourcing of more and more basic elements of their work to private firms must be seen as the precursor of privatisation and is profoundly undemocratic. The largest academy chain in the country is seeking to outsource to a for-profit organisation with no experience of running schools many of the major aspects of the school's work including curriculum development, professional development and the hiring of IT staff and business managers. These academies are state funded and in that sense are owned by the taxpayer but the public has not been consulted in a move which would give a globalised corporation the ability to shape the character of the school and influence directly of all members of the school community.

The ultimate logic of transforming schools into for-profit businesses may make sense to those who believe that this is the only way to compete in the globalised commercial world and some right wing opinion-shapers in England - for example, Policy Exchange and Bright Blue. While this apparent trend may be on the wane with the cracks showing in the Swedish model of privatisation – Sweden has allowed up to 25% of its school age population to be educated in privatised *friskolors* some of which have gone bankrupt - nevertheless privatisation and the business model still holds out great dangers.

As the economies of the world come under increasing pressure to elevate economic growth as education's prime purpose, as indeed is stated in the Lisbon Treaty, then the interests of the child need bringing to the fore. Businesses have as their central purpose the need to make a profit. If the values of the market are to prevail then the prospects for every child to experience education as a liberation of talent and a gateway to happiness and self fulfilment is threatened. It would indeed be a perfect storm.