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THE SCHOOLS BLOG



Choice is not divisive

Why the new technology colleges provide Britain's school children with a much-needed choice that could transform our society.

If there is one dominant theme to the last thirty years of global history, it is that educated societies always seek to be allowed to exercise the intelligence they have accrued. People expect to have choices, and to be allowed to make them freely. They are not always so willing to accept the consequences when those choices prove unfortunate, but in general most people prefer to feel that the important decisions in their lives have been made by them - not for them.

Apposite though this may be to recent events in the middle east, where hopelessly detached dictators fail to understand the natural inclinations of their own people, I am actually thinking about Christine Blower, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers. This week, Ms Blower proclaimed with the shrill indignation assumed by teachers' union leaders when anyone questions the status quo, "It is unacceptable to force pupils into specific learning routes at such an early age which could restrict their future career or educational choices."

What could she have been referring to? Forcing every boy and girl to study Latin, Shakespeare, or, heaven forbid, grammar and spelling? Or has she

found a secret Michael Gove directive, insisting that by 2012 we must prepare our less able seven year olds for a life sweeping chimneys?

In fact, the object of her ire is the government's promotion of UTCs - university technical colleges. In this week's budget, George Osborne stated his intention that the number of technical colleges was set to double to at least 24 by 2014.

The "early age" she refers to is 14, just two years before the end of compulsory schooling, and the "specific learning route" which these poor boys and girls are about to be marched down is that of a vocational or practical education. Except they are not being marched anywhere. They are not being made or forced to do anything. What Christine Blower is actually terrified of is certainly anathema to her kind: children and their families are about to be given a choice.

No wonder she is reeling. For the last forty years, the only people with choice in our schools system are those who can afford to live in prized catchment areas or those who can afford to pay for independent education. It is one of the great ironies of the comprehensive system that it has failed the poor and the disadvantaged more than it has failed any other sector of the population. But Ms Blower perhaps belongs to the great tradition of teachers' leaders who, when told that there is some light at the end of the tunnel, call urgently for more tunnel.

Under the new plans, it is now possible to envisage a system in which children who have no real interest in pursuing notionally academic study until they are in their early twenties, can see a real alternative opening up before them. Not in the form of pseudo-vocational qualifications that are all too often pointless and watered down academic tasks, but real, exciting practical work that can help shape not just careers, but lives. I think we can be sure the syllabuses in the UTCs will go far beyond a personal empowerment course I read about recently and whose main feature appeared to be the section entitled "How to claim unemployment benefit".

In fact, the new colleges for pupils aged 14 to 19 will teach a wide range of vocational skills in such subjects as engineering, product design and health sciences. The first UTC has already opened - in Staffordshire. No one has been "forced" to go there. I suspect that none of those who have applied feel that at the age of 14 they were "too young" to make their choice. And, of course, it is oversubscribed.

Those who support the new technical colleges look back with bafflement over the post-war years when the country whose industrial revolution transformed the world sank into a skills and training morass. Just why are we so unwilling to accept that not all children are the same? That some not only don't want to read Shakespeare, they don't even want to "study" sport, accountancy, or golf course management. Why should they - and in whose interest is it that they do?

Unfortunately, it is in many people's interest that the new UTCs fail. Just consider the response from Sally Hunt, general secretary of the Universities

and Colleges Union. She says, "We have real concerns about the increase in number of UTCs...We fear they will divert money away from further education colleges..." No reference to what might be best for children, or the future of this country - just barely-concealed terror at the thought of money diverted away from her own sector.

That is just another compelling reason why the new UTCs must be given the chance to rescue tens of thousands of British children from an educational oblivion that leaves them untrained for anything - except of course how to claim unemployment benefits.

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