

Barely under Control

Jenny Turner on the privatisation of schools, **London Review of Books**, Vol. 37 No. 9 , 7 May 2015

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Pride, Vision, Ambition, says the pop-up video that recently appeared on the website of Park View Academy in Birmingham. On it, there's netball, djembe drums, electronics, football, textiles, computing, plus a couple of dissolving-in-hopeless-giggles bloopers, one with pupils in it, one with staff. 'I've been at Park View for many, many years,' one staff member says. 'Happy times, elation times, difficult times, and most recently, challenging times ... But I think now with an inspiring leadership, we can look forward to a bright, bright future.'

HROC, the school's website says at the bottom, which stands for Heightening Return on Communication, the Edgbaston-based PR agency that has been working on Park View's rebrand. HROC has done campaigns for schools before – for the Priory, a local private school, and the Birmingham Ormiston Academy, part of a big chain – and for products such as Roundup, the weedkiller that KILLS the ROOTS. It didn't, I would guess, advise Park View on the shot on the front of its spring 2015 newsletter: a girl wearing a mask with the Union flag painted on it, her eyes half-shut behind the eyeholes, her mouth unsmiling under the little slit. She looks as though she has been forced by agents of an authoritarian, anti-individualistic ideology to cover her face in a way she doesn't want to, but is putting up with it because she doesn't think she has a choice. At least she's wearing the right flag.

Last spring, Park View was in the news for what the report subsequently commissioned by the Department for Education called its role as the 'incubator' in a sinister plot, 'carried out by a number of associated individuals, to introduce an intolerant and aggressive Islamic ethos into a few schools in Birmingham'. The so-called Trojan Horse scandal spread until it took in more than twenty schools – and that was only 'the tip of the iceberg', according to the report's author, Peter Clarke. Last summer, when he was still secretary of state for education, Michael Gove floated the idea of requiring schools to teach British values. In November, the DfE issued what it called 'strengthened guidance' on 'promoting British values in schools' – a necessary move, according to Lord Nash, the schools minister, 'to improve safeguarding and ... strengthen the barriers to

extremism'. The British values to be promoted are defined as 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance for those of different faiths and beliefs', and are taken from Prevent (2011), a document that outlines the hearts-and-minds aspects of the government's counter-terrorism strategy. Straight into schools it went, staplegunned all over the regulatory framework, and onto the all-important list of what Ofsted needs to see 'evidenced' when it comes to inspect your school.

Bad things happen to schools if Ofsted turns up and doesn't like what it sees. Up goes the report online and everybody reads it: parents, would-be staff, local media and business, all of whom want to know why the school hasn't been judged Grade 1, Outstanding. Rumours spread, parents withdraw their children, some staff leave and others go on the sick long-term; energy, goodwill, funding all start dropping away. Head teachers disappear, pushed out by angry governors, and silenced by compromise agreements, so no one can talk openly about what went wrong: one union rep I talked to reckons these deals cost the public between £10,000 and £20,000 a time; in his local authority alone he thinks that £250,000 a year of public money is spent this way. Schools judged Grade 4, Inadequate, can be closed down, as happened to the Durham Free School recently. Or they can be taken over by a government-approved sponsor – this could be a university, an education charity or a business – and reopened with a naff new name and colourful uniform and most of its key staff members mysteriously replaced.

So all in all it isn't surprising that instead of pointing out that this British values stuff is a crock of nonsense, schools do their best to comply. One school near where I live in South-East London has an intake of British, African, African-Caribbean, European and Asian children: it put up an enormous Union flag mural, with 'Democracy, the Great British Value', emblazoned on it, the 'V' of Value done as a tick. Other schools have made governors ask questions about British values in meetings, so they could show the minutes to the inspectors when they came. As well as taking a snap of the girl wearing the Union flag mask, Park View recently hosted a visit from the Royal College of Defence Studies and a

Harry Potter Trivia Evening; it had a Christmas card competition, and one girl was picked to meet Prince William. The school leadership is new, the trust that oversees the running of the school has a new name and the school itself will shortly get a new name too; the most recent monitoring visit from Ofsted showed definite progress. But schools know they are in competition with one another for praise, resources, Ofsted ratings; they know they are being watched and appraised and reported on. Will appointing a smart new PR agency be enough to get the school through the 'challenging times' it has experienced to the 'bright future' every one of its staff and pupils deserve?

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The Trojan Horse scandal began late in 2013 when an anonymous letter was sent to the leader of Birmingham City Council and he passed it on to the police and the DfE. Four pages were attached to the letter, purporting to be instructions sent to a 'brother' in Bradford on how to infiltrate the governing bodies of state schools in Muslim areas, wearing down the head teacher until they 'just give up'. The letter was well-informed about problems in several Birmingham schools going back to the 1990s, all of which, it claimed, had been orchestrated. The method, it claimed, was 'tried and tested ... fine-tuned ... invisible to the naked eye'.

So invisible, in fact, that many authorities, including most recently the House of Commons Education Committee, have concluded it was a fantasy: 'There was no evidence of a sustained plot,' the committee said in a report published before Parliament dissolved. The affair, in its view, epitomised 'many of the questions and concerns expressed elsewhere about ... the overlapping roles of the organisations responsible for oversight of schools'. This, of course, was less exciting to journalists than the tales of Christmas being banned, girls veiled and genders segregated; taxpayers' thousands squandered on a tannoy used to issue the call to prayer. 'Once you scrutinise you will always find something, however small it may be,' the anonymous author of the Trojan Horse letter wrote. 'By that time the damage is done.'

Michael Gove had already vented his views on sinister Islamic plots in 2006, in his book *Celsius 7/7*: 'There are many Muslims across the globe, within Europe and in Britain, who share the basic ideological assumptions behind the jihadist worldview,' he wrote in Chapter 8, which is called 'The Trojan Horse'. Ofsted inspected Park View twice in March 2014, just before the story broke and just after, but Gove demanded lots more inspections, and fast: by May Ofsted had visited 21 schools in Birmingham and in June it put five of them into Special Measures, basically a fail, including Park

View and the other two schools, Nansen and Golden Hillock, which made up its academy trust. Birmingham City Council had already ordered an inquiry, to be headed by the education consultant Ian Kershaw. Gove nevertheless announced his own inquiry, bigger and certainly more inflammatory, as a result of his decision to select Clarke, a former head of counter-terrorism for the Metropolitan Police, to lead it.

Clarke's report was published just as Gove himself was unexpectedly moved from the DfE last July. It found lots of things out of order at schools in East Birmingham – poor financial controls, missing paperwork, rude governors, bad-tempered meetings – and contained a couple of spicy details: a technician caught ripping jihadist DVDs on school property, and what Clarke called his 'golden nugget', nasty WhatsApp chitchat about gays and women and Lee Rigby and postings of an image of a toilet roll imprinted with the Israeli flag. But even Clarke concluded that none of this amounted to 'terrorism, radicalisation or violent extremism'. The Education Committee's inquiry found another incident it deemed 'unacceptable' – Ian Kershaw told it he had evidence that 'a film promoting violent jihadist extremism had been shown to children in one classroom and the teacher had not been disciplined' – but even so, the committee's report maintained that 'a single instance does not warrant headline claims that students ... are being exposed to extremism by their teachers.' And it saw no evidence at all of 'an organised plot to take over English schools'.

But by then the soundbites had gone round the world and back again – Fox News claimed Birmingham was a 'no-go zone' for non-Muslims, and that Birmingham's schools were in crisis, especially Park View. Trustees resigned, staff resigned, others are still suspended pending disciplinary hearings. Pupils had cameras stuffed into their faces when they turned up to sit their GCSEs: results, which in 2013 had been excellent, dropped sharply from 75 per cent getting five GCSEs at C or above to 65 per cent last year.

Before the scandal, Park View had been one of the most popular schools in Birmingham, the first in the country to be judged Outstanding under the tough new 2012 Ofsted framework, praised for its 'very high' academic standards and 'exceptionally caring and supportive environment'. The school's intake is 99 per cent Muslim, the majority of Pakistani origin, and many come from families in which English isn't the first language. The school achieved its success, its former chair of governors told me, by focusing quite hard on core subjects and qualifications. It didn't ignore the students' background but took it seriously. To many of these children religion really matters, as does your family's views on how it should

be observed; wars abroad feel much closer than stories about the Milibands' kitchen; most of what you're told most of the time from most sources is that you're in a minority on these things, and not much liked or trusted as a result. 'Our school respected the ethnicity and faith background of our pupils,' the governor told me, 'so they could be comfortable in their own skins.'

This governor, Tahir Alam, is a former Park View pupil, and has lived in Birmingham since he arrived from Pakistan with his family in 1978 as a child of ten. He trained as an engineer at the former Birmingham Poly and was working in telecoms when he started volunteering as a school governor, driven, he said, by a deep frustration with the way that local schools seemed to be letting children down. In 2007 he co-wrote a pamphlet on the topic, *Towards Greater Understanding: Meeting the Needs of Muslim Pupils in State Schools*, for the Muslim Council of Britain: 'All children ... whatever their background, should be educated in the fullness of their being ... in a spirit that values their multiple identities (faith, cultural and British). This will contribute to nurturing self-esteem and self-confidence, forming the basis for understanding and appreciation for the heritage and beliefs of others.' Of course there will be clashes and conflicts, but when they come up you try to resolve them with 'mutual recognition, understanding and flexibility'.

Alam was the only person mentioned by name in the original Trojan Horse letter: he was responsible, it stated, for all the fine-tuning and rendering of the 'plot' as invisible to the naked eye. In the Clarke report, Alam is described as 'a prime mover behind the plan', and is represented as a dinky icon in a blue jumper in two full-page sociometric diagrams that supposedly represent his relationships with others involved: teachers, governors, schools, mosques, Muslim charities and so on. Alam says there was no plot, and that the letter describing it was a malicious fake. It is true that Alam was, until 15 July last year, the chair of trustees of the Park View Educational Trust, the charity that ran Park View and Nansen and Golden Hillock; it's also true that on that day, he and all his fellow trustees resigned, in the hope that if they did so, the DfE would lift the threat it had made to pull the plug on the charity's funding. If you want to read Alam's very thoughtful and interesting 2007 booklet, you won't find it on the MCB website any more (you can find it, sandwiched between slabby redacted wedges, at the end of the Kershaw report).

Since 1 September last year, Park View has had a new executive principal, Adrian Packer, who was previously the head of Everton Free School in Liverpool, which is sponsored by the football club. Before that, he was head of music theatre at the Brit School in Croydon, where he taught Amy Winehouse

and Jessie J. When I talked to him in February, he was upbeat and cheerful, as school heads must always be: to be any less, ever, is to let down your staff and children. Things don't seem so good at Nansen, the primary school that is also part of the Park View trust. Its most recent Ofsted monitoring report says teaching has got 'weaker' and that pupils were seen 'hitting, punching and thumping' one another in the playground; there were also reports of pupils hitting staff. The third school in the trust, Golden Hillock, is being taken over in September by Ark, which has Lord Fink, the former Conservative Party treasurer (the one who recently said that everyone does tax avoidance) on its board.

Before the scandal, Alam worked as a trainer of school governors for Birmingham City Council and a part-time inspector for Ofsted. Now he feels he is 'tainted', 'unemployable' – 'people Google you, you know, first thing they always do.' He does some tutoring and consultancy work, and when I last spoke to him, at the beginning of April, was beginning to edge back into public life: he'd just done an interview on local radio, and was about to chair a public meeting at a local community centre, provisionally entitled 'The Trojan Horse Hoax'. East Birmingham has been 'trampled', he thinks, in the scandal: 'It did so much damage, and the damage is still going on.'

Last summer, at the height of the affair, Park View's assistant principal, Lee Donaghy, vigorously defended his school's leaders to the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee. In January, he launched a recruitment campaign for the school, on his blog and on Twitter: the lack of staff, he wrote, is 'beginning to affect the life-chances of pupils, and that is the tragedy lost in headlines about plots'. He left his job the next month, 'to be a full-time dad for a while'. 'Beginning to hear some of the allegations my ex-PV colleagues having to answer,' he tweeted at the beginning of March. 'Witch hunt doesn't really do it justice ... Some things that if true, I would be guilty of too. But then I'm not a Muslim, am I?'

The Sunday Times claimed last month that as many as a hundred teachers and teaching assistants in Birmingham 'could be prevented from working in schools for life'. I asked the DfE about this figure, and was told that the National College for Teaching and Leadership, the arms-length body that runs disciplinary hearings for teachers, never gives out information until it has made a full judgment, at which time a report goes up on its website. 'The NCTL is understood to be examining thirty cases with an expectation that many more will follow,' the Sunday Times continues. So where did it get those figures? 'I suppose you'd have to ask them.'

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The Education Committee's report concluded that the Trojan Horse affair made clear not the danger of extremists or terrorists or Islamic plots, but the problems associated with the 'changing school landscape', the exceptionally fast growth of academies and free schools in England since the coalition passed the Academies Act in 2010. The old way of running schools was that one big hub – central government – sent out money and laws and regulations to 152 smaller hubs, the local authorities, who then passed them on to clusters of little cogs, the schools. It was all fairly orderly. The new system, on the other hand, is chaotic. Central government throws out cash and laws all over the place to towers – the academy trusts – of all shapes and sizes; the local authorities are sidelined. It's exciting and dynamic, as markets are meant to be. It's also barely under control.

In 2010, when Michael Gove became secretary of state for education, England had 203 academies. Most of them were developed under Andrew Adonis's academies programme for New Labour: the Richard Rogers-designed Mossbourne Community Academy in Hackney, which opened in 2004, is one of these, as is Zaha Hadid's Evelyn Grace Academy in Brixton. The programme was launched in 2000 by the then education secretary, David Blunkett, who explained that if sponsors put up £2 million, or 20 per cent of the capital costs, such 'businesses, individuals, churches or voluntary bodies' would get 'considerable freedom over management structures and processes', and of course a chance at least to try 'breaking' what Blunkett called 'the cycle of underperformance and low expectations'. They also got to pick the school's name: Mossbourne is named after the father of its late sponsor, Clive Bourne.

Adonis and Blunkett saw academies as a way of kick-starting the regeneration of struggling schools, usually in economically depressed areas, which had become so overwhelmed by so many problems, that the best thing seemed to be to Hoover out their innards and transplant them with what Adonis called private-enterprise 'DNA'. The old Hackney Downs School, for example, was bulldozed and Mossbourne built in its place, with its jazzy new building and superhead, Michael Wilshaw, now the head of Ofsted. Academies described as being 'sponsored' are mostly schools like Hackney Downs that were judged to be failing and handed over to a sponsor to be made over in whatever image the sponsor wanted.

Gove arrived in government eager to 'put rocket boosters' under the academies programme, with funding carrots for successful schools (those judged Outstanding and, as time went on, also Grade 2, Good) that became self-sponsoring 'academy converters' and regulatory sticks to push supposedly failing schools into being taken over by a stronger

trust. He also made provision for 'brand-new schools set up by charities, universities, business, community or faith groups, teachers and groups of parents', which he snappily called free schools. Legally, the structure of academies and free schools is identical: a charitable company limited by guarantee, with trustees and no right to make a profit. It's only the wrapping that varies. Academies replace schools that were there already. Free schools – and studio schools and university technical colleges, which are 14-19 free schools with an industrial focus – are set up from scratch. By January this year, according to the Commons Education Committee, 4200 of the 21,500 state-funded schools in England were academies, including more than half of all secondary schools; the pace is picking up briskly on primaries. The final figure released before Parliament dissolved was 4580 academies and 255 free schools, with lots more on the way.

On one measure at least, the transformation has been incredibly successful. For a flourishing school to convert into an academy – and lots do, because then they get to keep a top-slice of money that previously got passed to their local authority – it has to set itself up as a charitable trust. For a sponsor to take over a failing school – and lots do, because businesses, as we know, like spreading their 'DNA' – that sponsor has to set up as a charitable trust as well. The result is that there are now hundreds and hundreds of these odd organisations: big and tiny, local and global, some responsible for only one school, some for hundreds (the Church of England is still the biggest sponsor by far, with nearly five hundred schools to look after), backed by faith groups, universities, private schools, arms manufacturers (BAE Systems has recently taken over the Furness Academy in Cumbria), and international edubusiness flying under flags of convenience. The Swedish free-school provider Kunskapsskolan, for example, calls itself the 'principal sponsor' of the Learning Schools Trust, which currently has four academies and uses its sponsor's 'unique personalised learning model', KED. Sabres, the educational trust in Suffolk that set up the IES Breckland free school, appears to outsource its operations to another Swedish company, Internationella Engelska Skolan, which includes the school on its website as part of its 'highly successful family'. Gems, the Dubai-based company that runs fee-paying schools in lots of countries, including this one, has registered the Gems Learning Trust with the DfE and is due to open primary schools in Twickenham this year, Surbiton and Didcot next.

The chains generally seen as the most successful are Ark, which currently has 31 academies and another ten in the pipeline (including Golden Hillock and another Trojan Horse school, Oldknow), and Harris,

which has 36 academies and another four on the way. A less successful chain is E-Act, which had 31 academies in 2013. Last year, Ofsted inspected 16 of its schools and found that ‘an overwhelming proportion of pupils ... were not receiving a good education.’ Last September, eight E-Act schools were handed over to new sponsors. Last time I looked, the chain was down to 23.

Legally, all these trusts are charities, and the basis on which the DfE funds all schools, academies or not, is the same. But their approaches seem to vary wildly. Quite a few schools around where I live in Southwark have since 2010 converted to become stand-alone academies. They look much the same as they always did, but they have less to do with the council, and some of their governors are now also trustees. The edubusinesses, surely, must consider at least the possibility that a future government may allow them to turn a profit in this country.

Ark Schools is a branch of Ark International, a charity run by global-elite finance whizzes who consider themselves better at ‘leveraging intellectual, financial and political investment’ than any government could ever be. Ark stands for Absolute Return for Kids. (And there was me thinking it was named after its founder, the glamorous hedge-funder Arpad ‘Arki’ Busson. My mistake.) Some of its trustees turn up in politics: the Conservatives’ Lord Fink and Paul Marshall, a Lib Dem and chairman of Marshall Wace, a large hedge fund. Marshall is also the chair of the DfE’s board of non-executive directors. Until recently, Sir Theodore Agnew of the Inspiration Trust, which runs 12 schools in Norfolk, was also a Ned – as they call them – at the DfE. He stepped down last month. The DfE has been pushing hard for the Hewett School in Norwich to become an Inspiration academy, despite legal threats from the local council and furious public protests. Last year the trust’s chief executive, Rachel de Souza, was cleared of allegations that she had been given warning that Ofsted was on its way to inspect two Inspiration schools.

A self-improving system is what avant-garde educationalists call this free for all. The idea is that government can give the trusts a lot of freedom because competition with one another, coupled with their own integrity and high-mindedness, are enough to keep them in shape financially, and to keep them getting top returns for the kids. Regulation is minimal, and ties them in at three main strategic points. Financially, the trusts are overseen by the Education Funding Agency, which distributes government funding on a contractual basis and keeps half an eye on the trusts and their annual accounts; it can launch investigations when it thinks it needs to, and issue its own version of Special Measures, called a Financial Notice to Improve. Educationally, they

are checked on their nationally benchmarked performance data (more commonly known as the school league tables), which rank exam results at GCSE and A-level for secondary schools, and National Curriculum tests for primary (these are the ones that everybody calls SATs, though it turns out that no one really knows what SAT is meant to stand for). And, finally, a more in-the-round picture of a school’s quality is provided by the Ofsted report.

A drop in performance is one of the things that can trigger an Ofsted inspection, and being judged Inadequate by Ofsted can trigger takeover or closure. But within these parameters, academies can more or less do what they like. They aren’t bound by national pay agreements: Dan Moynihan, the chief executive of the Harris Federation, earned more than £375,000 last year, almost twice as much as the chief executive of NHS England. Academies don’t have to follow the national curriculum, and are free to develop their own materials – Ark, for example, is a partner in Mathematics Mastery, a programme that aims to bring East Asian levels of maths brilliance to the UK – or to import them from elsewhere. The West London Primary Free School, for example, the junior arm of the classical-education empire founded by the Spectator journalist Toby Young, bases its learning schemes on the Core Knowledge UK ‘sequence’ published by the think tank Civitas on its website, an anglicisation of the fact-based, ‘knowledge-rich’ work of the American E.D. Hirsch’s Core Knowledge Foundation, said to be a major influence on Gove. So long as your performance data look good and you did well in your most recent Ofsted inspection, the DfE doesn’t worry too much how you got there. (Both measures looked great at Park View until recently, which may be one reason things were allowed to get so out of hand.)

There’s some evidence that the academies shake-up can be good for groups of children who traditionally have not done well at school: in its research paper ‘Chain Effects: The Impact of Academy Chains on Low-Income Students’ (2014), the Sutton Trust found that both Ark and Harris seem good at closing the gaps you often find in attainment data between advantaged and disadvantaged children, a finding that echoes work done on the best of the US charter schools, which appear to do notably well by their black and Hispanic students. It may be that the sharp-suited way academies have of doing things can jolt some teachers out of bad habits, such as the common, unconscious and destructive tendency to lower one’s expectations of groups of children according to cultural stereotypes. Something like this, Tahir Alam thinks, used to happen to Muslim children in Birmingham.

Beyond this useful jolt, though, there is, as the Commons Education Committee put it, ‘a complex

relationship between attainment, autonomy, collaboration and accountability' – in other words, nobody really knows whether the academies movement has been good for education or not. 'The government should stop exaggerating,' the committee continued, complaining about the 'paean of praise' the DfE had sent them. 'Academisation is not always successful nor is it the only proven alternative for a struggling school.' Most, the Sutton Trust found 'are not achieving distinctive outcomes compared to mainstream schools, and there are actually more that perform significantly worse than there are chains that perform significantly better.' The study also noted 'a trend for proponents of the academies programme to highlight sponsored academies' faster-than-average improvement (when of course this is to be expected given that so many sponsored academies start at a low base); whereas opponents cite their lower-than-average attainment (when again that is to be expected given their low starting points and pupil demographic)'. In other words, the data can be spun either way, depending on your fancy. Even the shiniest academy is embedded in a society characterised by grotesque economic inequality, in which children have very mixed life-chances. The best of schools can do a little to even out such unfairness, but even the best of schools is never in itself going to be enough.

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Thinking about such things is painful, and so people have instead become obsessed with performance data, using it as if to fight a proxy war. Performance data aren't necessarily a bad thing: it can be extremely helpful for teachers to look in the abstract at what their classes have been doing, so that instead of the usual jumble of humanity they see gaps and trends. The humungous datasets of the DfE's National Pupil Database are made available to all schools in a secure online database called Raise Online, on which teachers can look at the grades attained by their own pupils as opposed to local and national standards, and are given all sorts of useful options on how you make use of the information, down to examining national performance on individual SAT questions.

But the trouble with attainment data is that when you get up close, at the level of individual schools and children, they are extremely abstract and reductive: seven years of a child's experience at primary school reduced to 4+RWM; 11 years to get to GCSE reduced to %A*CEM. And then, these figures aren't just used for research and for working out how best to support your children's learning. They're published in newspapers and handed out to heads and teachers as performance targets, and if they don't hit those targets, sometimes they don't get their payrise and sometimes they're out of a job. You can point out

all you like that on a small scale such data become increasingly unreliable, that the way they're used is irrational and stupid and even cruel. You don't hit your targets, you know what happens. So, obviously, you are going to make sure those targets are hit.

Imagine you're a primary teacher with a difficult Year 6 class in a struggling school. Your career, and maybe that of your headteacher, depends on how many of that class you can nudge over the threshold from 3 (just below what is expected) to 4, which is bang on: obviously, you'll focus your energy on that nudging. This is what Janet Downs and Melissa Benn, in their e-book *School Myths*, call 'pseudo-improvement' – the data look good, but the quality of the learning isn't. At school level, as Downs and Benn say, it leads to a 'narrow, impoverished curriculum' based on an analysis of past exam papers, raising the question of whether such 'teaching to the test' can be said to be a proper education. If it's only results you're after, why would you even bother trying to teach the majority of children? Schools have a million ways of manipulating their admissions arrangements to attract highly motivated and supported children and keep the riff-raff out – complex catchments, selection by aptitude and so on.

And then there's cheating. SATs are invigilated by classroom teachers, and although there are strict procedures for cross-checking, moderation and random inspections, it isn't failsafe. Last month, one man was banned indefinitely from teaching after he 'personally amended a range of pupil answers'. Sit in the pub with a group of teachers and sooner or later, you'll hear about many more such cases. Regulators come down hard on primary schools when they conduct random checks of papers – I've heard of a case where a single indentation discovered when a light was shone behind a paper was enough to nullify a whole roomful of pupils' maths scores. But they can't get round everybody, and some schools feel under such pressure to show improvement, they may be willing to take the risk.

This isn't the only way the Education Funding Agency's light-touch regime provides schools with ways to get themselves into trouble. Last year, Jo Shuter, the former head of Quintin Kynaston Academy in St John's Wood, was banned from teaching after admitting to widespread misuse of public funds – using school money for taxis, phones and a great many flowers, plus £7000 for her 50th birthday party and £8269 for a boutique-hotel jolly for senior staff. The school was 'a wonderful inspiration', Tony Blair had said in 2006, and whatever her errors, Shuter talked to the Today programme in March with exemplary tact about her former pupil Mohammed Emwazi, who'd just been identified as 'Jihadi John'. Shuter has the right to

apply for a rethink on the ban after two years.

For superheads, acclaim from a senior politician often seems to spell trouble. Patricia Sowter, the executive head of the Cuckoo Hall Academy Trust in Enfield, was so admired by Gove that she's quoted at length, in a special box, in his 2010 Education White Paper, on the subject of the 'new academy freedoms'. In February, the EFA sent the trust a Notice to Improve letter after an investigation found irregularities in criminal-record checks, poorly managed conflicts of interest and a lot of 'purchases from Ikea and high-end supermarkets'. 'As with any organisation that grows rapidly,' Sowter says in a little video on the Cuckoo Hall website, 'sometimes it's a struggle to make sure that back-office functions keep pace.'

But the big daddy of over-reaching superheads is the remarkable Sir Greg Martin, executive head of Durand Academy in Stockwell, south London. As Margaret Hodge noted in a spectacular Public Accounts Committee session in January, Martin was until recently running a dating agency from the school premises, advertised on Twitter by @saffrone5, who, Hodge said, 'was semi-nude with all sorts of black underwear all over the place'. (Saffron was still there the last time I looked, though she hadn't tweeted since 11 March, when she'd been delighted by an article in the Independent critical of Hodge.)

But the dating agency was only a sideshow. Martin had built a leisure centre and flats on the school grounds, to raise money for the school, he said, and for the non-fee-paying boarding school he has just opened for Durand children in Sussex. In the olden days, Durand was a foundation school, which meant its land was owned not by the local authority – in this case, Lambeth – but by the school itself. In 2010, just before it became an academy, Durand gifted its land to a new charity, Durand Education Trust, then set up another charity, Durand Academy Trust, to run the school in the usual way.

'The establishment of DET appears to be a deliberate attempt to prevent either the local authority or central government from retaining any interest in or control over publicly funded assets, effectively transferring state property into private hands for free,' Hodge wrote to Chris Wormald, the permanent secretary at the DfE, at the beginning of February. She added that she was also worried that Durand might not be the only academy with such tangled affairs. 'We remain concerned,' she went on, 'that this leaves open the possibility that others could be tempted to follow the example set by Durand.' On 25 March, Wormald replied to reassure her that the land and any money made from it 'cannot be used for any purposes other than the purposes of the school'. Durand's assets are protected 'for the sole and complete benefit of

delivering free education, in terms of boarding, for the children', Martin told the Public Accounts Committee. 'This is a fantastically good thing, and I would say to you that this should be replicated throughout the whole country ... Now you say, after I have been successful, that this is crass. Surely this crassness should go around the whole country, do you not think?'

Durand's management of conflicts of interest is a problem too. Last November, the National Audit Office disclosed that the school had been doing business with several companies in which its own governors had financial interests: Judicium, a legal-services company; PLMR, a PR and lobbying company; and London Horizons, which in theory runs the leisure centre in the school grounds but, as the NAO discovered, has been outsourcing that job to GMG Educational Support (UK) Ltd, of which Martin is the sole director. In 2012-13, he received a £161,000 fee for his work at London Horizons on top of his executive head's salary of £229,000, including pension contributions. 'This is pretty gobsmacking stuff,' Hodge said. Martin was unperturbed. 'Not only am I proud of our record, but I believe it is absolutely essential that we don't discourage innovation like this in the future,' he told the committee in January. 'For me, it's all about driving aspiration and expanding choice and opportunity for children.' In March the EFA sent Durand a Financial Notice to Improve letter, demanding that it completely restructure its governance. It's expecting to see an action plan this month.

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Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell thinks 'account books form a narrative as engaging as any tale of sea monsters or cannibals.' Account books, and policies and procedures, and agendas and scatterplots and laws: all these things tell stories about an organisation, and they are the sorts of story that school governors need to understand. An example, from the Ofsted report that flung Park View into Special Measures:

The substantive principal, who was appointed in spring 2012, is currently seconded to Golden Hillock School as acting principal. A Park View vice-principal is currently the acting principal. The former academy principal is now the executive principal of the trust, she is due to retire at the end of the spring term 2014. She is being replaced by the substantive principal of Park View, who will continue in this capacity in addition to the post of executive principal of the trust.

Spring 2012 was when Park View had the Ofsted inspection that graded the school as Outstanding, the atmosphere 'harmonious', the students 'fully engaged'. The school had achieved that, Alam told

me, without the help of Birmingham City Council, which had for years 'tolerated failure on a grand scale'. So when DfE officials suggested the school dump the council and take academy status, it seemed like a good idea. Shortly afterwards, the DfE suggested that the new trust take on Golden Hillock and Nansen as well; shortly after that it might have noticed that its new creation wasn't coping well. Except it didn't, because the DfE remit was to set up more and more academies, not to worry about the stability of those it had bagged.

Unsupported and unchecked, the trustees of the Park View schools seem to have got carried away. The Islamic assemblies, the gender segregation for RE and sex education, would have passed without comment had Park View been a Muslim faith school, but it wasn't. The sloppy book-keeping, the sexism and alleged anti-gay remarks, the hiring of friends and family members – it's possible that, as Alam said to me, 'these things happen in lots of schools,' but they meant that Park View was an easy target. If it had had a competent local authority behind it, officials would have been overseeing its policies, giving warnings and advice. But Birmingham's school improvement team had been cut to bits and had no jurisdiction over academies anyway.

'The system demands too much of local governors,' Tim Brighouse told me. Brighouse was Birmingham's chief education officer in the 1990s before overseeing education in London for New Labour. 'No other developed country relies so much on such an unreliable systemic link.' Local worthies, Gove used to call governors, only doing it so they could get a 'badge'; 'sherry-pouring, cake-slicing,' he said, 'and singing "Kumbayah"'. But somebody needs to do what governors do, checking up on what school heads are doing and supporting them, setting aims and targets, scrutinising the accounts; in any case, to put it baldly, these worthies came to have these responsibilities because of laws passed by the Conservatives in the 1980s: they were a cake-slicing, sherry-pouring army designed to attack the local authority stronghold of education.

'I know I daren't mention LEAs, people call you a dinosaur,' Brighouse said. 'But schools need some sort of locally based governance above them. Parish councils? Old-style police authorities? Something like that.' Between 2003 and 2007, when he was running education in London, Brighouse set up the London Challenge project: groups of schools worked together in 'self-improving systems', supposedly jump-starting the virtuous spiral that took London schools from being among the worst in the country to the best. Before that, he'd done something similar when he worked for Birmingham City Council between 1993 and 2002. He knows the Trojan Horse schools well, and some of the 'prime movers' too.

According to a colour-coded 'timeline of behaviours' in the Clarke report, problems were spotted with Birmingham school governors as long ago as the mid-1990s. It wasn't really to do with Islam, Brighouse remembers, but with 'some men behaving badly – groups of men used to functioning in a male-dominated society who didn't understand that what they were doing was inappropriate'. Brighouse saw it as his job to sort the problems out. He and his officers sat in on meetings, they listened a lot, they read up, they met those involved in restaurants and attempted to find common ground. 'I saw my job as being to listen to all the different groups, hear what they had to say. And the common denominator among all of them was that they thought their kids could and should do better, and so we started from that.'

Most of the time, according to Brighouse, this was enough to pull troublesome governors back into line, but at one school it didn't work, and they had to replace the governing body with an appointed board. 'And do you know who we put on it?' Tahir Alam. 'He was a great help. In Birmingham in that period, we knew damned well that education was a race against time, you're wasting people's lives if you aren't trying your hardest to make them better. Tahir, certainly at that time, very much shared that view.'

Brighouse has a theory that all leaders, sooner or later, succumb to hubris, unless there's somebody or something to stop them. It's a particular problem for community leaders and for volunteers in general, because it's passion that gets them doing what they're doing, and passion is unpredictable and difficult to control. When he was in Birmingham, Brighouse wrote a wonderful paper called 'Passionate Leadership'. The successful headteacher, he wrote, is optimistic and intellectually curious and enjoys all forms of crisis and complexity; he or she also displays 'a complete absence of paranoia or self-pity'. That's a lot to ask, but if you've ever watched a school in action, you'll know that Brighouse is right. Schools are incredibly complex and delicate ecosystems, wonderful in a good patch, but easily upset. People hand over the care of their children to strangers, their beautiful babies, their main and maybe only source of hope: no wonder relations between parents and school staff can get difficult, and that's before you factor in the children themselves, bursting with hormones, crammed into smelly classrooms; or the huge variety of family backgrounds you get in 21st-century Britain, the religions and ethnicities and polarities of capital, the ridiculously entitled princesses and princelings with classmates who may not get enough to eat. It's not impossible to get such differences working to the benefit of everybody – that's the idea behind comprehensives, and the London Challenge, and

even the self-improving system. But it's hard, and needs talented leaders, and it's when one of them retires, or gets sick, or is pushed out because someone doesn't like them, that things start going wrong.

In my early days as a governor, I used to walk round my school and marvel: the displays, the little chairs and tables, the smiling faces and hum of learning, the record-keeping and assessment systems and maintenance of the boys' toilets, the constant flow of IT and finance and tricky children and demands from parents. How could a mere human keep track of all this stuff? Wouldn't you need a supercomputer for a brain? I'd been reading *The Craftsman* by Richard Sennett, in particular the bit about the decline of Stradivari's workshop after the master's death: 'Missing ... is the absorption into tacit knowledge, unspoken and uncodified in words, that occurred there and became a matter of habit, the thousand little everyday moves that add up in sum to a practice.' Teaching, it seems to me, is a craft in exactly that sense, a matter of brain and language and body and emotion, and school leadership takes all of that and lots of other things, squared.

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Last year, I went to a one-day conference in London organised by Pearson, the global conglomerate which has interests in, among other things, Penguin Random House, the FT, the Economist, a couple of think tanks (Open Ideas, Pearson Thinks) and a goodly proportion of the world's reading schemes and textbooks, e-learning (Connections, Fronter), qualifications and exam boards and testing infrastructure (BTec, Edexcel, Pearson Vue), and whole chains of schools and 'learning systems' in 'emerging markets' such as Brazil. The main speaker was Robin Alexander, the chair of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, which began in 2006 as an inquiry into the 'condition and future' of primary education. The CPR Trust now receives core funding from Pearson. The topic was the new primary school curriculum, which schools started teaching last September. 'This is a new approach to education, one that gives ... schools far greater freedom,' said Liz Truss, then still a minister in the DfE. 'We know that many will grab it with great gusto.' In other words, the DfE wasn't going to publish lots of stuff to help them. So Pearson, and lots of others, have been stepping in.

I met an interesting young teacher at that conference, an alumnus of the Teach First scheme that fast-tracks high-achieving recent graduates into underachieving schools. She told me that she really was looking forward to having the freedom to write her own curriculum, and was planning to visit the British Museum in the holidays to help with her unit on Mesopotamia. She'd already had to rewrite the maths

schemes at the school she works in: the children were learning about money long before they knew about decimals and place-value, so it really wasn't surprising that they got confused. I told her I didn't think most people could sustain her workload. She looked grim, and said she didn't know how much longer she could manage it either.

Teach First doesn't take graduates unless they have 2:1 degrees or better, and instead of the usual postgraduate certificate, there's a mixture of own-brand business-school-type seminars and training on the job. You work for two years, paid, then you qualify as a Teach First Ambassador, at which point around half of those in the scheme leave, job done, and get a job with a City law firm, phone packed with useful contacts, conscience clear. Actually, as this teacher corrects me, about as many Teach Firsters stay on in teaching as do all the other sorts of teacher, and she has no intention of leaving. Teaching is all she's ever wanted to do.

She was 28, she told me, and teaching had changed completely even since she was a pupil. The way schools are watched and judged and managed, in her view, is not wholly a bad thing. Teachers have had to become more methodical and reflective, to expunge personal prejudice from their practice and to think hard about how best to use every scrap of classroom time. And for that, she thinks, using data is essential, though she agrees that the way schools use such information can be crass. Which is the reason she has devised an information-gathering system of her own, using an app called Idoceo, which runs on iPad and has a customisable spreadsheet with seating plans and thumbnail photos of every child in her class. She puts an update in the appropriate row and column every time she sees a child learn something new.

I asked her to recommend two books that would let me see how teachers are thinking these days. Her first choice was Doug Lemov's *Teach like a Champion*, a popular grab-bag of pedagogical techniques presented with Dale Carnegie-like headings: No Opt Out. Right Is Right. Name the Steps. Stretch It. The book comes with a DVD so you can watch the moves repeatedly – stance, posture, voice, hand-actions – as you try to learn them.

Her second choice was *Outstanding Formative Assessment: Culture and Practice* by Shirley Clarke. Formative Assessment – also known as Assessment for Learning or AfL – is a way of teaching that attempts to gather as much information as possible from children about what they're learning, so you know exactly what to teach them next. The idea is that you feed what you've learned about their learning straight back to the children, so that over time they become more aware and in control of that learning.

The breakthrough for such ideas in Britain came with the publication in 1998 of a booklet called *Inside the Black Box* by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam. The black box – the metaphor is borrowed from engineering – is the classroom, and what’s inside it is a mystery. Input comes from children, teachers, money, government wheezes, untested ideas good and bad. Output comes in the form of children whose learning has – one hopes – increased. But can you be sure of that? How do you know? What can you do to improve it?

Here people veer off in several directions, and the two main routes are opposed. One is the keep-it-outside-the-gates philosophy you hear a lot from academies and free schools: to get on in life, you have to escape the mean streets, and to escape those mean streets you, as much as your sink school, need a snazzy badge and a complete refit. The other, closer to what I heard from Alam and Brighouse, agrees about high academic standards, but thinks the way you get them isn’t by forcing people do things your way but by responding to them as they are. ‘They want you to leave your heritage outside,’ Alam said to me at one point. ‘They want only your chemical and biological being.’ I sympathise with him, but I think he’s wrong. Sometimes, it seems that the system doesn’t even want that much, but only a decent show of data come the end of term. When the data get high-level and abstract, they stop being about actual human behaviour, and deal only with economic units.

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On the blog he started after resigning from Park View, Lee Donaghy described how it was possible to see the same school in completely different ways, with only small changes in timing and slant. In one version, the school is underpowered, bumping along and passing under everybody’s radar. In another, it’s vibrant, high-achieving. And in another, the inspectors have descended, and come down on the school with no mercy. All these descriptions are of Park View, at a different moment in its recent history.

Let’s try the Donaghy treatment on another school. In one telling of the story, it’s a school in central London, close to Parliament and the corridors of power, an area that looks rich but has a huge estate, with many refugee families, just behind the main roads. ‘A large majority’ of its pupils are from ‘minority ethnic backgrounds’ with ‘a mother tongue other than English’, Ofsted said in 2009, and the school has a specialist speech and language unit. It’s ‘a happy, harmonious and cohesive community’, according to Ofsted, but went through a bad patch when the previous head was ill; even so, ‘ethos ... remained as a major strength.’ The new leadership is able and well liked, and in 2012 Ofsted found the school to be ‘improving’. ‘You’d see everybody in

the playground,’ a former staff member told me. ‘The Somali mums in their headscarves, the mums from the global elite. You’d think, this is the opportunity for world peace.’

In a second telling, in 2009 the school was rated Satisfactory by Ofsted, the second from bottom grade. The standards pupils reach in English and Maths are unimpressive: less than 60 per cent achieved Level 4 in the Year 6 SATs in 2010. But the nearby secondary has a Raising Aspirations Programme, and is offering to expose the children to ‘cultural and academic institutions such as museums and universities from a young age’.

In the third version, the school is part of a multi-academy trust with the secondary, and two other primary schools (one of them was in the papers recently because it calls its reception class Oxford and its Year 1 class Cambridge). All four schools are ‘pioneering a project’ that gets businesses ‘working with children from the age of seven’. Consider aspirations raised.

The school is Churchill Gardens Primary School in Pimlico. In 2013 it was taken over by Future Academies, run by a charity founded and largely funded by the prominent Conservative Party donors John and Caroline Nash. Caroline is a former stockbroker and a governor at all four of Future’s schools: she’s chair at two of them, Millbank and Pimlico Primary Free School, and co-chair of the big one, Pimlico Academy, along with her husband. John, the founder of Sovereign Capital LLP private equities, made millions from companies such as Care UK (healthcare outsourcing), ESG (employment training) and Alpha Plus, the private school chain that includes Wetherby, the alma mater of Princes William and Harry. He resigned from Sovereign in 2013 when he was given a life peerage and promoted from being a mere Ned on the DfE board to parliamentary undersecretary of state for schools, a role he discharges unpaid.

The Nashes set up Future in 2006, its object ‘to help young people succeed’. That winter, Pimlico School, then run by the London Borough of Westminster, was put in Special Measures (for two terms in 2007, Jo Shuter was shuttling between Quintin Kynaston in St John’s Wood and Pimlico, where she was interim head, which may or may not have been the start of the taxi habit that got her into trouble). In spring 2008, Future set up a trust called Future Academies. That September, in spite of fierce resistance from governors, pupils, parents and staff unions, Pimlico became its first school.

Westminster is a strange borough, even for London: its population is unusually rich and mobile and disconnected, and perhaps for that reason its council has never not been Conservative. ‘Oh yes, there’s

been a deliberate policy of pushing the academies agenda,' Jeff Bates, an officer with the Westminster branch of the National Union of Teachers, told me. 'And a long-term plan to privatise as much of the education service as possible. Westminster would admit that themselves.'

Future brought in a smart uniform (navy with daring pink bits), a house system (Hera, Athena, Apollo, Zeus) and a nice new building (nothing to do with Future actually, but a Building Schools for the Future project already well in hand). In 2010, Pimlico Academy was judged Outstanding by Ofsted. Nash was sprung into government: he became a Ned at the end of 2010. Caroline Nash's big interest is curriculum reform: she's one of the neo-traditionalists who think children spend too much time in undirected exploring and nowhere near enough learning facts. She founded the Curriculum Centre in 2012 to further what she expects to be 'a rigorous campaign [that] will require great tenacity of purpose, perseverance and patience'. In 2013, the centre published Daisy Christodoulou's Seven Myths about Education, a well-written and pugnacious attack on topic work, group activities, the pseudo-scientific obsession with identifying children's learning styles and so on. (Christodoulou, said in the press to be 'Britain's Brightest Student' after a stellar performance on University Challenge in 2007, is currently sitting on the DfE's assessment commission, and works as head of R&D at Ark.)

The Nashes got to know the 'extremely tall, oozing charisma' – so I'm told – Annaliese Briggs, who was then working for Civitas. In March 2013, Future hired Briggs as headteacher-designate of the primary free school it opened inside Pimlico Academy later that year. She had not yet finished her teacher training – she did complete it eventually, we know, because Toby Young helpfully tweeted a photo of her certificate. But you're not fully fledged as a teacher until you've worked for a full year. In the event Briggs resigned as head after only a few weeks. A couple of months later, up she popped at Policy Exchange, the think tank co-founded by Michael Gove, where she co-authored a report arguing that all primary schools should be turned into academies as soon as possible. She's now curriculum manager at Floreat Education, which has been given permission to open four primary free schools and is developing what it calls the Floreat Programme, a 'pioneering' curriculum 'focused on cultivating children's virtues in the infant phase'. Floreat has been advertising for a researcher whose job will be to find children's stories 'that explore and exemplify character virtues'. If they can't find enough virtue in these stories, they will be expected 'to re-engineer' them to put in more.

In 2012 Future 'registered an interest' in taking over Churchill Gardens with the DfE and Westminster

City Council. Churchill's governors weren't keen – 'despite shared commitment to improving the education and life-chances of the children they support,' as a consultation report prepared for the governors put it, 'differences in ideology remain' – but they could see that Westminster didn't really want to keep running the school, so they looked around for another sponsor. But this wasn't really feasible, given what the document called 'very positive support for Future by the local authority and the DfE academy broker'. The governors voted in favour of Future by a majority of one.

The process highlights a serious weakness with England's system of school governance. Governors in local authority-run schools are drawn from the various interest groups around a school: parents, staff, people from the local community, people 'associated with the local authority'. The advantage was that such groups were likely really to care about what happened to the school. But Gove's 'local worthies' are poorly equipped to withstand a sustained campaign run by people for whom that campaign is their main job, and who are backed to the hilt by central and local government. 'They made us feel we were silly for asking so many questions,' one former governor remembers. 'We should have seen it coming but we didn't. We were worn down. We felt we'd been given no choice.'

Once Future had Churchill Gardens in its portfolio, presumably the Nashes felt they had the set – 'a small family of local schools ... a walk from each other in south Westminster', as it says on its website. 'When they visited our school,' the former governor said, 'I felt they weren't really interested in it and I found that really offensive.' The head at Churchill Gardens, Jane Thomas, retired at the end of the summer term in 2013; her deputy, Susan Rankin-Reid, took over, but soon left the school herself. In the Guardian Rajeev Syal reported that Rankin-Reid had been 'bullied by academy managers' and that 'parents ... blamed the academy for forcing her out': the people I talked to who knew the school thought this was fair. 'They'd say, "Oh dear, these data aren't what we'd hoped"' and so on ... They said Susan would be "mentored" by the fantastic people from Future: she didn't need mentoring, it was a way of asserting power over her. It was humiliating and belittling and the way they spoke to her was demeaning.'

With Rankin-Reid's departure coming so soon after Briggs's, Future suddenly had to find two acting heads. 'There is no one in full-time, day-to-day control,' Paul Dimoldenberg, the leader of the Labour group on Westminster Council, wrote to Gove that December. Children were in tears, staff morale was 'at rock bottom'. It didn't help, he added, that teachers were having to rewrite the curriculum as

they went along since the old one had been 'scrapped'. 'It was a really beautiful little school,' one Churchill Gardens parent told me, 'but we could see that things were getting messier and messier, and they weren't going to end well.' After Rankin-Reid's departure, she took her children out of the school.

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'If you liked rail privatisation, you'll love the Education Bill': that's the headline on a clever piece written in 2011 by Laura McInerney, at that time a citizenship teacher in East London. She is now the editor of *Schools Week*, which in a nice reversal, was called *Academies Week* when it started, less than a year ago. 'Since the mid-1990s,' McInerney wrote, 'the government has kept control of the railway network but it asks companies to bid for permission to run the services on this network. This reflects the current trend for the government to "own education" but ask other groups to run schools.' The question is not whether education privatisation is going to happen. It is happening, but it looks different from what people were expecting. There's nothing grand or monolithic about it. It's uneven and piecemeal.

Education, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills reported in 2013, is the second largest industry in the world after healthcare, with growth particularly strong in the emerging economies. ('We have identified eight priority countries and one region for international education. These are China, India, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Colombia, Turkey, Mexico, Indonesia and the Gulf'). But particularly in the richer countries, according to a report from Pearson, 'the current paradigm of school education' is under pressure. Its 'foundations' are being shaken by digital technology – Moocs and 'flipped classrooms', sophisticated personalised algorithms – while at the same time there is evidence of an international 'performance ceiling': schools in high-achieving countries are so skilled at getting pupils test-ready that the learning curve is beginning to tail off.

The Pearson document, *Preparing for a Renaissance in Assessment*, was written by Peter Hill, a former education official in Hong Kong, and Michael Barber, who ran the Delivery Unit in Tony Blair's government then led McKinsey's education research before becoming Pearson's chief education adviser. It sees two ways of overcoming the problem of the performance ceiling. One is via sophisticated software. The other involves 'the transformation of teaching from a ... heavily unionised, bureaucratically controlled "semi-profession" into a "true profession with a distinctive knowledge base"'.

Michael Parker, secretary of the Westminster branch

of the NUT, wouldn't be happy about this prospect. Over the past twenty years or so, he says, he's seen a profession that used to be unified, collegiate, becoming divided. There are the classroom teachers, teaching for the love of it, and there are the superheads and education leaders who see classroom work as a 'stepping stone', as he puts it, to something else. 'This is only my opinion, but it feels as if teaching is becoming two professions, teachers and school leaders.' The leaders might well look like professionals, but it seems likely that classroom teachers will become deskilled and deprofessionalised, delivering a bought-in product – very possibly one of Pearson's. 'The vision of education as a vocation has been diminished,' Parker says. 'It turns into just another career to be pursued.'

When I started out as a school governor, one of the first books I read was *The School Report (2000)* by Nick Davies. The copy I have is second-hand and stamped 'Withdrawn' from the library of the Department for Education and Employment. It's a pity they didn't keep it. Davies was writing in the early years of New Labour, which is to say he was writing about the consequences of the Education Reform Act 1988. Kenneth Baker, the Conservative minister responsible for that legislation, set out to create a market and certainly achieved it: once you enforce a fixed curriculum and standardised testing, it's easy to turn education into lots of little economic units, and to trade them, brick by brick. The book contains a very interesting interview with Baker. 'I was not going to take on the comprehensive system head-on. I'd had the teachers' strike, the national curriculum, you can't take on yet another great fight. So I believed that if I set in train certain changes, they would have, er, a cumulative beneficial effect ... In order to make changes, you have to come from several points.'

Towards the end of my time as a governor, my governing body, like every other one in England, had to restructure as a result of new guidance that came into force in 2012. Governing bodies should be 'no bigger than necessary to secure the range of skills they need'; small groups tend to be more 'cohesive and dynamic'. Membership should focus not on stakeholder groups but skills. Only one local authority governor; only one staff governor. A cull may be necessary to achieve this: it may be 'an uncomfortable process'. The National Governors Association has produced a skills matrix you may find helpful. Nothing too aggressive; it's all very nice and suave. Of course if you see schools as being for children, people, communities, you'll be feeling quite discouraged. If, on the other hand, you're looking for a nice board to get a seat on, it sounds like you'll fit right in.