The Jury Is In

Reflections on the March 2022 ‘Opportunity for all’ government white paper from WCSQM Director, Miranda Perry.

The most recent Schools White Paper\(^1\) announced that, in a decade’s time, all schools will either be in a ‘strong’ multi academy trust, or must have plans to join or form one. This announcement has not been without controversy. Last time this direction of travel was proposed, in 2016, when in fact the DfE ultimately u-turned, there was little evidence to prove a MAT’s inherent efficacy above any other system. For example, the Education Policy Institute found the picture to be mixed.\(^2\) The Sutton Trust\(^3\) found that the impact of joining a MAT was not beneficial to disadvantaged pupils, and its subsequent reports have found similarly.\(^4\)

Perpetuating injustice

It would seem, and it is certainly the NEU’s opinion\(^5\), that six years later, the evidence base for MATs is no stronger. The White Paper, and its accompanying document ‘The Case for a fully trust-led system’\(^6\) defends its advocacy of MATs by stating ‘the best MATs transform outcomes for pupils’ which clinches the argument as convincingly as the proposition that you should eat the best food, because the best food tastes better than the worst. Of course, at WCSQM we endorse the best MATs unconditionally. But we are interested in taking the trouble to prove what ‘best’ means. We are not interested in perpetuating the injustice of categorising the best MATs alongside all MATs.

\(^1\) https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/opportunity-for-all-strong-schools-with-great-teachers-for-your-child
No convincing evidence

In my opinion, there is no convincing evidence to suggest that the organisation of our education system into MATs is a better way to deliver educational outcomes for students than alternative systems. MATs are not better per se. If schools cut and cherry picked data to prove their pupils’ achievement in the way that the White Paper does to endorse MATs, choosing certain top and bottom percents and only measuring like with unlike, they would be failed by Ofsted.

Stating the obvious

The White Paper advocates ‘strong’ MATs without really saying what they are. The authors’ explanation that a strong MAT has ‘strong leaders focusing on improving outcomes’ is rather a glaring statement of the proverbial obvious. It could equally apply to ‘strong’ standalone schools, as to any organisation or company in the world. I always find it helpful to look at the opposite of an explanation, in this case, ‘weak leadership focusing on deteriorating outcomes’ to reveal its speciousness.

Period of volatility

The School White Paper introduces itself by saying ‘The school system has undergone significant change over the last decade’ a statement which should have alerted the authors to the flimsiness of the defence the Paper contains. Given the fact we have a state education system which statutorily requires children and young people to be in education from 5 - 18 years, and that the Paper acknowledges the state sector has been in a period of volatility for the last ten, there is no context of longevity or continuity from which anyone can draw reliable evidence of an organisational system’s impact on students’ outcomes. It is interesting to me that the authors of the Paper define ‘strong’ MATs as ones that ‘capitalise on the best evidence,’ without seeing the need to do so themselves.

It is no coincidence that those familiar countries whose education systems against which we compare ourselves invidiously, and which achieve consistently highly in OECD rankings, are often those which have simply left their state education system alone for long enough to measure impact effectively.

Refusing apathy

When I was a young teacher in the staff room, I never wanted to be like the older practitioner, next to whom I sat, apathetically bemoaning that she had seen it all before. Now, after 30 years in non-selective
I have seen it all before, but I am refusing to be apathetic about it. I was recently drawn to a quote on LinkedIn, something along the lines of ‘The system may keep changing, but serving young people should always be the focus.’ This is the focus we strive for at WCSQM, and the anchor we will use to steer us through this latest, though rehashed policy direction.

A research consensus

At WCSQM we base our processes on the extensive evidence base which proves that students whose educational outcomes are the strongest, and who go on to succeed in life beyond statutory education, demonstrate certain characteristics, with regard to attitudes and self-regulation. There is a research consensus that children and young people with certain characteristics are more likely to learn best and live best.

Brand new programme

At WCSQM then, we support ‘strong’ learning institutions, be they standalone schools or MATs, and we are in a fortunate position of knowing what ‘strong’ means to us. We support non-selective state

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Examples of evidence

What makes a good student? How emotions, self-regulated learning, and motivation contribute to academic achievement.

Student Characteristics and Learning Outcomes in a Blended Learning Environment Intervention in a Ugandan University https://academic-publishing.org/index.php/ejel/article/view/1754


Building a Community of Self-Motivated Learners

The Effect of Student Planning and Self-Competence

Self-Motivation for Academic Attainment: The Role of Self-Efficacy Beliefs and Personal Goal Setting
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/00028312029003663

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institutions that develop student characteristics proven to impact positively on achievement. We have over 120 schools in our network, individually accredited as World Class. In order to show our commitment to a hybrid education economy, we are rolling out a brand new accreditation programme accrediting MATs as World Class, which runs alongside our individual school accreditation process.

We are working, in the first instance, with seven MATs across the country, that exhibit a tremendous diversity in the way they operate, but have the consistency of developing the characteristics of children and young people so they flourish in an ever changing global economy.

The quality of the students counts

We will not define ‘strong’ or ‘World Class’ through platitudes, be swayed by ideological caprice, or be lured to ‘I’ve seen it all before’ apathy. We will stick to what we know, and what has long been proven; that it is the quality of the students that count in determining the quality of the institution that serves them.