

Lucy Powell calls for greater accountability of academy chains; More red tape or....?

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During her first speech in post, Lucy Powell told her party's conference in Brighton that academy chains would be made accountable¹. In her speech she doesn't say what this accountability would look like, but obvious proposals would include inspections of the trusts in charge of academy chains and a greater monitoring role of the Regional Schools Commissioners.

Greater accountability, for many of us, often reeks of red tape, paper work and rubber stamping. In short, a waste of time and energy that could have been spent on improving the quality of teaching, driving up standards and strengthening the collaboration between schools in the chain. Accountability can however also lead to greater transparency, greater insight into quality, and improvement of services. Greater accountability of chains can have such benefits, but we obviously need to get the accountability right to achieve such benefits, not just add another layer of inspections, performance league tables or monitoring to an already overloaded system.

So how can we 'get the accountability right'? Answering the question starts with a good understanding of what the ultimate outcome of the accountability should be: in the case of individual schools that would be improved quality of teaching and learning in a particular school. When we look at academy chains the outcome shifts to the network and the intended results from collaboration between schools. Such outcomes can range from shared high quality professional development, shared teaching provision in specialized subject areas, shared school-ground facilities, or shared support services. The list can go on and on as there is no limit on what schools can collaborate on. In general one would of course want to see that the collaboration contributes to some 'common good', which (in the context of education) would be the improvement or sustaining of the quality of education and overall well-being of children.

How should we design the accountability of academy chains to promote such outcomes? As the current system has a clear structure in place of (focused) Ofsted inspections, monitoring of Regional Schools Commissioners and the Education Funding Agency, it makes sense to shape up these roles, responsibilities and the working methods of these agencies to improve the accountability of academy chains. In a recent paper² Jane Perryman and I outlined some suggestions of what such accountability may look like: looking at conditions of effective networks (e.g. reciprocity, transparency, continuity and regularity in the collaboration) and the quality of the joint outcomes they produce (such as the shared provision or effective transfer of students from primary to secondary education). New frameworks need to be developed to evaluate these network-level conditions and outcomes and more effective collaboration between Ofsted, regional HMI and Regional Schools Commissioners is needed to implement such effective accountability, instead of relying primarily on very narrow data-drive measures of performance of individual school quality.

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-34404517>

² <http://schoolinspections.eu/polycentric/england/introduction-of-the-study/>