

## **Policy tensions being played out in practice. The Specialist Schools initiative in England.**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores policy tensions inherent in the development of Specialist Schools in England under the New Labour Government. It outlines the dual agendas currently at play in the Specialist School policy, which is central to the government's moves to transform secondary education and raise standards in teaching and learning. Schools achieving specialist status are automatically recognised as being different from other schools, but at the same time, inherit a remit to work closely with neighbouring schools in the drive to raise educational standards and spread innovative practice. The expectation is that Specialist Schools will be proactive in collaborative activity, yet they continue to be publicly judged by their ability to outperform other schools. Data and experiences from a project focusing on Specialist Sports Colleges within England is used to illustrate the ways in which these collaborative-competitive tensions are being played out in practice. Recent observations made in Adnett and Davies' (2003) analysis of the contemporary policy context in England provide a framework for discussion. Particular attention is drawn to the partnerships that colleges have been inclined to pursue and have yet to firmly establish. Links are demonstrated between the collaborative-competitive tensions and the government's ongoing concern with 'standards' amidst an increasing focus on the reform of 'structures'. In conclusion discussion addresses the scope for researchers to challenge the dominant reference points used in evaluations of performance and thereby facilitate compatibility between currently oppositional policy agendas.*

## **Introduction**

This paper focuses on a development that has become one of the centre pieces of the Blair government's endeavour's to 'transform' secondary education in England and raise standards in teaching and learning within and beyond that sector. The Specialist Schools initiative was inherited by the New Labour government when it took office in 1997. Perhaps to the surprise of some observers, it was embraced, adapted and has since repeatedly been accorded a high profile in education policy debates and development. It remains an initiative that is being rapidly expanded amidst many claimed benefits, some probing questioning, and a lack of sustained, 'in depth' investigation of the effects that it is having within and beyond those schools designated 'specialist'.

In this paper I aim to explore arguably key tensions inherent in this policy development that seem yet to be acknowledged by government, far less alleviated. Indeed, I contend that they are being openly expressed and reproduced within and beyond government circles. The tensions that I refer to relate to the mix of values and interests that the New Labour government has been variously grappling with and promoting since it has been in office. Stated simply, competitive and cooperative / collaborative agendas have been openly combined in policy developments and the combination treated as non-problematic. From another angle we can observe that cooperative / collaborative agendas have entered into policy contexts dominated by competitive discourses, with the dominance of those discourses then being openly reaffirmed and reinforced by New Labour. I will argue that it is this latter characteristic of contemporary policy development in England that may well be the most problematic – if, that is, one is interested in promoting collaborative and cooperative interests in education.

Adnett and Davies (2003) have pointed out that “Market-based reforms have generally sought to increase inter-school competition, neglecting its impact upon the nature and extent of co-operative behaviour in local schooling markets” (p.393). They also stated that “The extent to which the current policy mix represents a complementary and effective package is not immediately clear” (p.393). The Specialist Schools initiative vividly illustrates the policy tensions at play in government arenas but also brings to the fore the ways in which these are now being

expressed in the actions of schools. It is an initiative that I have been engaged with in two years of co-directing a collaborative research project concerned with one of the categories of Specialist School; Specialist *Sports* Colleges (1). This paper draws on insights and data from that project together with other research focusing on Specialist Schools. It necessarily begins with a brief historical commentary on the Specialist Schools initiative.

### **Specialist Schools: an adopted and adapted centrepiece in the transformation of secondary education.**

The Specialist Schools initiative dates back to 1993 and the Conservative government of John Major. Any maintained secondary school in England may apply to be designated as a Specialist School, signalling ‘expertise’, innovation and a commitment to a particular ‘identity’ and ethos. The identity and ethos is intended to permeate the school, its curriculum and pedagogical developments, and shape ‘partnership’ activities with community groups and other schools. Under the Blair government the number of possible specialisms has been progressively increased to now include ten specialisms: arts, business & enterprise, engineering, humanities, language, mathematics & computing, music, science, sports and technology and also now enable schools to combine any two specialisms (DfES, 2004a). Irrespective of the particular specialism, the commitment to *all* curriculum subjects. A ‘complete’ National Curriculum for *all* pupils, thus remains firmly in place. The specialism is intended to act as a focus and catalyst for improvement across the breadth of the curriculum (and particularly in the ‘core’ subjects of English and mathematics), rather than signal development of a narrow expertise.

The increase in range of specialisms has been paralleled by a repeated and rapid increase in the number of schools being designated as Specialist Schools. In October 1998 the then Schools Minister, Estelle Morris explained that:

Specialist schools are central to the Government’s agenda of supporting diversity and promoting excellence. Since last May, we have rapidly expanded the number of specialist schools from 222 to 330. Today I am pleased to announce that we intend to have 500 such schools by September 2001 – more than one in seven secondary schools in England. (Morris, 1998a)

At that time Morris also confirmed the status of the initiative, saying:

Specialist schools are a crucial part of the agenda for school improvement. The programme is about modernising the comprehensive principle. It allows schools to play to their strengths and to use a particular area of the curriculum as a focus for a rigorous approach to school improvement benefiting all their pupils.

Their success will be a central part [of] our drive to raise standards and their work with other schools will spread the benefits of their success and specialist support beyond their own boundaries. (Morris, 1998a)

Speaking later that year at the annual Technology Colleges Trust conference (2), Morris emphasised that Specialist Schools were “at the heart of our standards agenda in secondary schools” (Morris, 1998b).

Morris’ targets have since been rewritten. In 2001 the stated target was 1500 Specialist Schools to be designated by 2005, “as a staging post for all schools that are ready for it” (DfES, 2001a, p.41). In 2002 there was a promise of a “major drive on specialisation” with a target figure of 2000 by 2006 (DfES, 2002b, p.4). The vision was then ‘complete’ and explicit; a “new “specialist” *system*” (Morris, cited in DfES, 2002, my emphasis), that continues to take shape. At the time of writing there are 1,686 Specialist Schools designated, with 1,445 operational and the remainder becoming operational this September. Specialists Schools now represent 54% of all secondary schools In England (DfES, 2004).

It is important to point out adaptations of the initiative that have occurred in parallel with its growth. Most notably New Labour established clear expectations and requirements for Specialist Schools to work with other schools and community organisations. Requirements for schools applying for specialist status to submit not only a school development plan, but also a community development plan (addressing ‘partnership’ and ‘network’ activities with other schools and community organisations), and furthermore, then dedicate 30% of their budget to work with neighbouring schools, served to embed a cooperative / collaborative commitment within the initiative (Garner, 2001). Since then Specialist Schools have been portrayed as catalysts and hubs of innovative activity and critically for the government, the ‘raising of standards’ across the primary, secondary and sixth form sectors, not only in the Specialist Schools themselves. In the White Paper “*Schools achieving success*” (DfES, 2001a) the remit for Specialist Schools was firmly identified as a collaborative one, “spreading excellence, sharing success” (ibid., p.38).

In the case of schools designated as Specialist *Sports* Colleges there is an added dimension to these expectations. Specialist Sports Colleges are fundamentally concerned with excellence in education *and* in the provision of sport for young people in England. They are positioned centrally in the transformation of education, but also the transformation of the sporting infrastructure in England (DCMS, 2001; Penney & Houlihan, 2001; Youth Sport Trust, 2002). Responsibilities to be ‘spreading and sharing’ is therefore two-fold, and are explicit in the aims that Sports Colleges are required to address in their development plans (3). Yet as I discuss below, the rhetoric of collaboration in relation to the role of Specialist Schools has been accompanied and arguably countered by some sharply contrasting messages and incentives, while the wider policy context has remained far from attuned to cooperative / collaborative interests.

### **To be Specialist you have to be special - and stay special**

The above adaptations to the Specialist Schools initiative have emphasised connections between Specialist and non-specialist schools. A commonality of purpose has been stressed – better standards of teaching and learning and more latterly, improved structures via which to support learning as a lifelong activity (4). Yet this vision of Specialist Schools as the hubs of collaboration and partnerships remains accompanied and to a large extent obscured by very different images and agendas; of overt hierarchies and heightened competition in the education system.

Firstly, there is a need to recognise that while any maintained secondary school may apply for Specialist status, not all will be successful in their applications. The status is fundamentally something that sets some schools apart from others – even if there are a now decreasing number of ‘others’. Application for designation as a Specialist School is the first point at which we see that individual school results in examinations remain a key political and very public reference point in policy development – and for investment. The need to have an established improving trend in examination results data has always been highlighted in the application process. The guide for schools contemplating applying for designation as a Specialist Sports College states “Where current examination performance is modest there *must* be either: evidence of improvements over the recent past; or convincing evidence that the school, as a Sports College, will be able to achieve a step change in performance” (DfES, 2001b, p.7,

original emphasis). Alleviating any outstanding doubts about the significance of this matter, it adds that:

Sports Colleges will be expected to demonstrate improved standards by meeting challenging but realistic targets. *Consequently, it is unlikely that a school whose examination results are on a declining trend will be successful in its application unless there are good reasons to explain the trend and the application is part of a convincing strategy for improvement.* (DfES, 2001b, p.7, original emphasis)

The school development plan submitted within the application then has to be directed towards maintaining and/or accelerating that trend. The plan and targets within it become the reference point for annual reporting and formal review of the specialist designation granted. Designation can be removed if targets for improved performance in these terms are not met. Application for re-designation (now relating to a five-year cycle) is then a rigorous process and furthermore, one that again prompts public examination targets to be placed at the fore of planning. Progress towards targets set in original plans and associated examination performance within and beyond the specialism comes under scrutiny (DfES, 2004b).

Thus, although the remit for Specialist Schools extends beyond improvement in examination data, it is very clear that some development agendas and related targets ultimately carry greater weight than others. Success in particular terms *does matter*. The government's continued (and extended) use of school performance tables serves to "specify a particular weighting for the different outcomes of schooling" (Adnett & Davies, 2003, p.394). Judgements of the success of the Specialist Schools initiative have repeatedly focused on league table results and positions, thereby couching success in comparative / competitive terms. Headlines of press releases and newspaper articles have captured the irony that the very schools singled out to lead the spread of innovative practice and support the raising of standards across local networks are under overt pressure to 'out-perform' the schools that they are meant to be working with. Towards the end of 2003 announcements declared "Specialist schools widen their lead over non-specialist schools" (Specialist Schools Trust, 2003a) and "Specialist schools make up 76 of the highest performing 100 comprehensive schools" (Specialist Schools Trust, 2003b). Debates over the statistical basis of these and prior similar claims are ongoing – and are for others to pursue (see

Jesson & Taylor, 2001; Goldstein, 2001; Schagen & Goldstein, 2001; Schagen & Schagen, 2003). My concern with the reports relates not to statistical validity so much as the values and interests that they serve to legitimate and reinforce. Whether featuring absolute or ‘value-added’ data, league tables openly position school against school and inevitably act to frame the ways in which schools will respond to collaborative / cooperative agendas. I therefore share Boxley’s (2003) view that in many respects “the particular percentages and comparatives are not relevant” (p.2). The point is “that these statistics exist at all” (ibid., p.2).

### **Diverse identities but specific measures**

Thus we have the government presenting ‘diversity’ in terms of an increasing range of specialisms, and an increasing number of Specialist Schools as one of its key means of promoting ‘excellence’ – that is judged in very specific terms. League tables, like the Specialist Schools initiative itself, were not merely inherited by New Labour, but have also been extended to address ‘performance’ and ‘standards’ throughout the 5-16 education system and particularly at the end of key stage 2 (age 11 and transfer to secondary), 3 (age 11), and 4 (age 16). The competitive policy context established during the early 1990s has not been challenged but rather, openly reaffirmed and reinforced. The thinking ‘behind’, embedded in and promoted by New Labour has been “performative thinking”, featuring “the quota and target” (Boxley, 2003, p.9).

The Specialist Schools initiative has entered this context and arguably become (and/or been used as) a catalyst for the further promotion of a culture of inter-school competition. The following statements from recent press releases serve to illustrate this point. They mirror statements that have been issued on an annual basis by government and those agencies with direct responsibility for supporting the development of the Specialist Schools initiative, but also reflect the focus of much of the research that thus far has explored this initiative (Bell and West, 2003).

- CHILDREN at specialist schools have extended their academic lead over their counterparts at non-specialist schools, an analysis of the 2003 provisional GCSE results has revealed.
- The study shows that the 940 non-selective specialist schools averaged 55.3% 5+ A\*-C grades at GCSE in 2003, compared to 46.63% for the 1,989 non-specialist non-selective schools.

- This +8.67% difference indicates the gap is widening - figures for 2002, when there were only 650 specialist schools, showed they outperformed non-specialist schools by +7.40%.
- This latest increase has been achieved despite the fact that 289 schools have only been in the specialist schools programme one year.
- The analysis also shows that this rise is not dependent upon specialist schools recruiting more able cohorts.
- The average key stage point count for the intake of pupils into specialist schools at age 11 for the same year group in 1998 was broadly similar - 25.7 for specialist schools versus 25.3 for non-specialist schools.

(Specialist Schools Trust, 2003a)

- Just 24 schools in the entire country gained a pass rate of 90% and above [of pupils gaining five A\*-C grades in GCSE examinations]- 16 of those schools have specialist status.
- When the list was extended to the top 300 schools in the country, specialist schools made up two thirds of the list - a total of 192 schools.

(Specialist Schools Trust, 2003b)

One only has to look as far as the ‘notes for editors’ that accompany these releases to see the ‘policy tensions’ that I am concerned with. It is explained that;

Specialist schools have a special focus on their chosen subject area but must meet the full National Curriculum requirements and deliver a broad and balanced education to pupils. *They work within a named 'family of schools' for the benefit of pupils beyond their own school boundaries and other groups of people in the wider community.* (Specialist Schools Trust, 2003a,b; my emphasis)

Other commentators have recently also drawn attention to the tensions at play here. Bell and West (2003) instigated a small-scale research project specifically designed to examine the issues of co-operation and competition in relation to Specialist Schools. In summarising their findings they stated that “Although the specialist schools programme appears to have facilitated co-operation between schools, there are some major barriers that need to be overcome. One of the most significant is the competitive environment in which schools in England operate” (Bell & West, 2003, p.273). The discussion below, drawing on research focusing on Specialist Sports Colleges is designed to provide further insights into the effects of the current competitive – collaborative/ co-operative policy mix at the school level. A number of points made in Adnett and Davies’ (2003) analysis provide a framework and focus for discussion.



## **Specialist Schools: Co-operation in a competitive context**

Whether competition or co-operation is more likely to promote effective innovation depends on the strength of market hierarchies, first-mover advantages, and the resources required for successful innovation. (Adnett & Davies, 2003, p.394)

The discussion above pointed to the current strength of the market hierarchy amongst schools in England. The Specialist Schools initiative together with others, including 'Beacon Schools' and the 'Leading Edge Partnership (LEP) Programme', have arguably accentuated the market hierarchy. Amidst talk of collaboration, a position of being 'different from' and 'better than' is clearly established. Beacon Schools have been designated as such in recognition that "they are among the best in the system. Their excellence is recognised by the programme and they are given additional resources to work closely with other schools and share practice" (DfES, 2001a, p,39). The LEP programme that has since been developed features similar rhetoric.

Schools in the LEP programme are at the forefront of the drive to reform secondary education. Schools working within the programme will lead the way, helping to transform the face of education in their local areas. Schools at the cutting edge of innovation and collaboration will be selected from amongst the country's best schools to act as a lever to transform secondary education, to engineer the growth of collaborative learning communities and federations, and to promote innovation, research and development to push the boundaries of current teaching practice. (DfES, 2004c)

We can then pose the question of whether Specialist Schools are operating within a context in which there are 'advantages for first-movers', and in turn, therefore, incentives for Specialist Schools to seek to retain their hierarchically superior position relative to other schools. Specialist Sports Colleges are an interesting case in these respects. Increasingly, they have been accorded a lead role in new developments relating to the provision of physical education and sport in schools. With that role come further resources. Most notably, Specialist Sports Colleges have been encouraged to apply to act as 'hub schools' for the School Sport Co-ordinator [SSCo] partnerships now being established throughout England (DfES, 2001b). The SSCo programme is seeking to increase the opportunities available for children of primary school age to participate in physical education and sport. It involves secondary teachers, partially released from their teaching responsibilities, supporting identified

‘primary link teachers’ in the development of these opportunities, within and beyond the school curriculum. Four or five small networks, incorporating a ‘family’ of primary schools, are linked into a wider partnership, co-ordinated by a partnership development manager (PDM). Significantly, PDMs will usually be based within Specialist Sports Colleges. Thus “Sports Colleges are at the heart of the SS Co programme” (YST, 2002, DCMS, 2001) and as such can expect to retain the situation of being something of a ‘magnet’ for further investment of resources. Specialist Sports Colleges are in a position of now being the ‘natural first port of call’ for agencies and organisations looking to invest in physical education and school sport. There is an ongoing advantage in being ‘first-movers’, in retaining a hierarchical position in relation to one’s ‘family’ of schools. Furthermore, the situation appears self-perpetuating by virtue of this superior ability to attract resources. The investments to support innovation are repeatedly going to those at the top of the hierarchy.

### **A far from even spread on a far from even pitch**

As discussed above, the intention within the Specialist Schools initiative (and similarly the SS Co programme) is that innovation is spread, and resources and expertise shared, with the aim of collective improvement via collaborative activities. Yet when it is evident that there are advantages in retaining a superior position in the market hierarchy and furthermore, also clear expectations and pressures to do so, we have to question *who* Specialist Schools may be inclined to work collaboratively with, in relation to *which particular* aspects of their work and also acknowledge increasing inequities emerging in schools’ ability to undertake innovation. As Adnett and Davies (2003) point out:

For schools at the top of the local hierarchy, there are no market incentives to undertake costly and risky innovation. Whilst for those lower down and losing market share, the market provides incentives for curriculum innovation but takes away the necessary resources. (p.401).

Given that secondary schools in England remain in a position of competing for pupils within local markets it is perhaps not surprising that there has been an apparent lack of development of ‘partnership’ based work between Specialist Schools and neighbouring secondary schools. “One school cannot at the same time compete and collaborate with another school in providing the same outcome” (Adnett and Davies,

2003, p.394). A report of the progress of Specialist Schools produced by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) in 2001 echoed preceding studies (Yeomans et al, 2000) in identifying a relative absence of positive development of the so called ‘community dimension’ of Specialist Schools’ remit. The report stated that “With a few exceptions, the community dimension in the schools visited was the weakest part of their specialist schools’ work. The majority of schools had found it difficult to define, develop and manage” (p.37). Notably, Sports Colleges have been singled out as making progress in the development of their community role in comparison to other Specialist Schools (Yeomans et al, 2000; OFSTED, 2001). However, there is still a need to explore the precise nature of the partnership work being developed – or not.

A survey of the 101 Specialist Sports Colleges becoming operational between 1997 and 2001 provided us with some important insights into the nature and extent of collaborative / co-operative work being undertaken and the apparent impact of the broader policy context in which these schools are operating. In many respects the partnerships that appear to be emerging as strong ones and equally, those failing to gain ground, are unsurprising. Adnett and Davies (2003) point out that “since relative performance determines the extent of market success, co-operation now occurs only when both local schools believe that their *relative* performance will improve” (p.397). This will be the case when the partnership is between the Specialist School and a primary school and may similarly be so when a Specialist School looks to establish partnerships with other organisations, such as local sports clubs or national governing bodies of sport. However, problems are very evident if we consider prospective collaboration with neighbouring secondary schools who remain competitors in the local market. Thus, we were able to report that

...for many colleges and families of schools the stimulus to partnership development that followed specialist colleges designation had produced significant benefits across a wide range of measures of teaching and learning including benefits in areas such as KS2/3(5) transition, staff development (particularly for primary school teachers), and opportunities for participation in PE and sporting activities for pupils. (Penney, Houlihan and Eley, 2002, p.143).

But this was with the caveat that “while the overall picture was very positive partnership development was uneven with, for example, partnerships with primary phase schools being significantly more firmly established and productive than partnerships with secondary schools” (p.143).

The mutual attraction of sound partnerships between Specialist Schools and local (particularly ‘feeder’) primary schools is clear given the potential for collaboration to impact upon firstly, the end of key stage 2 results attained by primary schools and then in turn, the progress and attainment achievable in the Specialist (secondary) School context. The situation is one in which collaboration between one group of schools (linked primary-secondary) is prompted by competition between another group (secondary-secondary) (Adnett & Davies, 2003). In our survey the four most common joint activities with partner primary phase schools were professional development, development of schemes of work for key stage 2, increasing the number of young leaders assisting in the delivery of key stage 1 or the physical education curriculum, and increasing the number of primary/middle school staff holding a physical education related qualification. We noted that “Collaboration in the development of schemes of work for KS 2 was linked to the joint activity of achieving improved levels of attainment in PE at the end of KS2” (Penney, Houlihan and Eley, 2002, p.69).

Data relating to collaborative or ‘partnership’ work with neighbouring secondary schools indicated a comparative lack of development. Furthermore, it was noted that there was “a slight preference for working with partner secondary/post 16 schools/ institutions on *out of hours activities rather than on curriculum or assessment objectives*” (Penney, Houlihan and Eley, 2002, p.74, my emphasis). Essentially, while Sports Colleges may well be identified as being proactive in developing the community dimension, the proactivity may well centre on those areas that are peripheral to the curriculum and standards agendas that remain so dominant as the basis of judgement of the success of both Specialist and non-specialist schools. The warning articulated by Adnett and Davies (2003) that “increased inter- and intra-school competition encourage the retention of one’s ‘best practice’ teaching materials and first mover experience to gain competitive advantage” (p.397) thus seems extremely pertinent and worthy of further investigation in the context of continued

expansion of the Specialist Schools programme. As Hargreaves (2003) recently acknowledged;

In a highly competitive climate, the pressure on school staff is to keep successful innovations to themselves in order to maintain their competitive edge, that is, position in the league tables and popularity among parents. Why give away one's best ideas? (p.52)

However, other aspects of our project work with Specialist Sports Colleges highlighted an added complexity in relation to these tensions and more particularly, extended our understanding of circumstances in which collaborative / cooperative activities may be appealing (or at least non-threatening) for colleges to engage in. One of the characteristics of Specialist Sports Colleges that has been repeatedly stressed and encouraged by the agency designated to support the development, the Youth Sport Trust, is a willingness and desire to share 'good practice' with *other Sports Colleges*. Via its website developments and professional development programmes for Sports College staff, the Youth Sport Trust has done much to foster collaborative agendas and developments. We also worked with the Trust to establish what it was hoped would be the first of several group research projects, involving a small number of Sports Colleges with a common development interest or agenda (see Penney, Hill & Evans, 2003). One cannot deny the positive side of these developments, nor the apparent support for the suggestion that "if schools cannot compete and collaborate with the same schools over the same outputs, then there is a case for organizing schools so that they collaborate with schools outside their local markets whilst still competing with other local schools" (Adnett & Davies, 2003, p.403-4). Yet at the same time we might reflect quite critically on a willingness to establish Specialist School – Specialist School linkages in preference or at the expense of the more local Specialist – non-specialist linkages. While Arnett and Davies (2003) make the observation that "Schools serving different markets may benefit from pooling specialist expertise and from sharing information about markets and processes" (p.397), there seems a need to counter tendencies that will serve to further promote inequity in the education system. Hargreaves (2003) recently highlighted these dangers, saying that "when applied to schools, the norm of reciprocity could mean that the more effective schools would be inclined to exchange best practice with other above average schools, which would simply widen the gap between the best and worst schools..." (p.53).

Thus, despite the Third Way rhetoric of commitments to inclusion and claims that policies are designed with benefits for all schools and all students in mind, there seems little to suggest that the Specialist Schools initiative is doing anything other than contributing to a continued pattern of highly uneven investment and benefits. Social agendas and opportunities to focus on social relations, appear to be notably lost in the context of a continued dominance of neoliberal thinking (Codd, 2003), with policy development informed and ultimately driven by economic agendas. Boxley (2003) has pointed out that the investment of capital being made is with the expectation of specific returns; “Productive efficiency and international competitiveness are the aims, a regulatory framework of measures is the means of establishing it” (p.1). Within this context “the gaining of positional advantage by some results in a loss of advantage for others. It is a sum-zero game” (Codd, 2003, p.6).

All of this serves to reveal ‘deeper’ problematics in New Labour policy and from which the competitive – collaborative tensions arise; the maintenance of a concern with ‘*standards*’ of a particular sort, amidst stated interests in reforming educational *structures*, and the rhetoric of social democratic commitments amidst a prioritising of economic concerns. Bentley (2003) recently observed that “a government that began by insisting that ‘standards, not structures’ mattered most is now staking its credibility on the introduction of new structures...” (p.9). Yet statements of interest in transformation of structures lack substance while paralleled and arguably overshadowed by continued concerns with the established standards. While individual school league tables remain, we can certainly question whether any significant change in direction will emerge with the change in language, from ‘improvement to transformation’ (Hargreaves, 2003). Thus, I would agree with Hargreaves’ (2003) observation that “the government’s latest strategies are still insufficient to achieve the intended transformation” (p.19), and suggest that unless we can instill a collaborative agenda and discourses of social justice within the standards agenda, then we cannot expect the hoped for changes in structure and culture to materialise. The final part of this paper is therefore directed towards prospects of introducing into the policy arena what might be termed ‘new levers’ (Hargreaves, 2003, p.22), designed to alleviate some of the policy tensions and capable of re-connecting education policies with agendas of “social well-being and social connectedness” (Codd, 2003, p.3).

## **Conclusion: Action in search of a change in context**

The discussion above has pointed to the over-riding significance of a policy context dominated by competitive market values in shaping / framing the development priorities and actions of Specialist Schools. In working with Specialist Sports Colleges and the Youth Sport Trust I increasingly found myself contemplating ways in which the political, public and school focus on individual performance could be effectively challenged and other inherently more equitable values promoted within the context of the ongoing growth of the Specialist Schools programme. Unlike Adnett and Davies (2003) I do not see a focus on value-added rather than absolute data as countering the current highly individualistic and competitive orientations. Instead, I contend that if the government is seriously interested in schools operating in the context of new learning 'networks' or 'communities', then those networks or communities, rather than individual schools within them, need to be the reference points for any target setting or judgement of progress. New targets, based on collective rather than individual performances and relating to established national targets for all schools in England, would seem to offer a means of reducing some of the tensions noted thus far, and a response to Hargreaves' (2003) observations that;

Rather than pushing an old lever beyond its natural limits, policy-makers would be wise to search for new levers to replace older ones, not additional ones...  
Appearing to abandon a lever is risky; explicitly replacing it by a better ones makes professional good sense and a less vulnerable news item. (p.22)

The government is seeking (amongst other things) to ensure that by 2007, 85% of 14year olds achieve Level 5 or above in each of the key stage 3 tests in English, mathematics and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and 80% in science. Is there any reason why a local 'cluster' (or 'family') of schools should not establish a shared agreement to seek this across their collective school population and to endeavour to pool their expertise to facilitate realisation of the target? 'New levers' of this nature would surely fit far more comfortably with visions for genuine collaboration across 'networked learning communities' than current targets. Whether or not they would be politically acceptable is something that only politicians will be able to tell us. Having now left the UK, I will watch the ongoing dynamics between the various New Labour policy agendas and the ways in which those dynamics are played out in contexts of implementation, with much interest.

## Notes

1. Dawn Penney and Barry Houlihan were the co-directors of a collaborative Specialist Sports Colleges National Monitoring and Evaluation Project established between Loughborough University and the Youth Sport Trust, with the endorsement of the Department for Education and Skills.
2. The Technology Schools Trust (now the Specialist Schools Trust), provides practical support to schools within the Specialist Schools programme and hosts a national conference (see <http://www.specialistschoolstrust.org.uk/schools/index.html>).
3. The five aims established for Specialist Sports Colleges comprise three school and two community aims: SA1: To raise standards of achievement in physical education and sport through the increased quality of teaching and learning; SA2: To extend and enrich curriculum and out of hours learning opportunities in physical education and sport; SA3: To increase take up and interest in physical education and other sporting or physical activity related courses, particularly post 16; CA1: To raise standards by developing good practice and disseminating and sharing with other schools and groups, including non-specialist secondary schools; CA2: To work with appropriate local partners, including business and community groups, clubs, governing bodies and sports development units, to develop sustainable sporting opportunities which promote both participation and achievement in PE and community sport (DfES, 2001b).
4. The Networked Learning Community (NLC) programme is an initiative being developed by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in partnership with the DfES, the Teacher Training Agency and the General Teaching Council. “A networked learning community is a cluster of schools working with others, such as Higher Education Institutions, Local Education Authorities, FE colleges or community groups to: raise standards by improving the learning of pupils and staff, and school-school learning; develop leadership for learning by developing and harnessing the leadership potential of a wide range of people; build capacity for growth and continuous



improvement by schools developing evidence-informed practice and resources” (NCSL, 2002, p.1). It is a pilot programme in which the NCSL and DfES provide funding to support the development of the community (up to £50,000 p.a. for three years), facilitate learning between networks and initiate wider dissemination. Each NLC identifies a ‘Learning Focus’ as its “unifying theme and objective” and agreed upon by all member organisations. The objective “must be shown to add significant value to what the schools (individually or as an existing network) are already doing” (ibid, p.6).

5. KS refers to key stages within the National Curriculum. Key stage 2 relates to the curriculum for children at the upper end of primary school (age 7-11). Key stage 3 relates to the curriculum in the opening years of secondary school (age 11-14).

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