

# **Charter schools and their impact on educational resilience**

**New York / Boston 2010**

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## Background

The Northern Ireland Audit Office reported in 2006 that the £40 million spent on literacy and numeracy programmes over the previous decade had made very little difference to the standards in these areas and that improving these standards remained a very significant challenge for schools. The report pointed to the achievement gap between the highest and lowest achievers, the selective and non-selective school pupils and the low educational attainment of those pupils who are living in poorer urban areas. The report called for the Department of Education to 'increase the momentum of change which will make teaching practices and approaches more responsive to the needs of pupils and begin to address the long standing challenges facing schools in terms of literacy and numeracy attainment levels.' (NIAO, 2006)

Consequently, school improvement is now at the forefront of education policy in Northern Ireland. 'Every School a Good School; A policy for School Improvement 2010' is focused on school accountability, literacy and numeracy, removing the barriers to learning that so many children face and making school part of a wider community of collaboration to make them more effective learning environments.

Tony Gallagher, Professor of Education at Queen's University, Belfast, who I spoke to in preparation for my Fellowship, confirmed that there was a strong correlation between lower socio economic status and educational failure in Northern Ireland. This is acknowledged in 'Every School a Good School' and therefore it is a priority to address these inequalities within the education system.

In England, the 'Free Schools' movement became topical in the media when the Conservatives prepared for the election. The ideas behind these schools, freed up from government control and therefore given more autonomy over staffing, curriculum and finances, seem to be inspired both by America's Charter schools and the Scandinavian free schools. I noticed the media interest in the Charter Schools and Gove's own fascination with the KIPP schools especially, and decided I wanted to see what they were like. If children in America's most poverty stricken areas could have access to an education which helped them to perform as well in exams as children from more affluent homes, then surely we could do with seeing what these schools do and emulating it here in Northern Ireland?

I am an English teacher in a girls' grammar in West Belfast which is a relatively socially disadvantaged area of Northern Ireland. Our results are excellent and the school is a beautiful environment, both to teach in and to attend as a pupil – however, many schools in the area, and in other deprived areas of Northern Ireland, are struggling to teach disaffected pupils who often come from dysfunctional backgrounds and low income communities. I am seconded at the minute to a regional English and literacy role in the education system and therefore spend a lot of time training teachers, supporting schools and contributing to policy discussions around assessment. As literacy is a particular problem with disaffected pupils and those from poorer backgrounds

I have a particular interest in what schools can do to support our most struggling pupils in the areas of reading, writing and talking & listening.

I chose to visit these schools in New York, as research so far has shown that New York's Charter Schools are more successful than those in other states and cities. New York is also the largest education district in the United States, educating over 1 million pupils in 36 different languages; they have a challenging remit. There are also a lot of inequalities in the lives of children – streets separate \$5 million brownstones from apartment blocks housing people who only eat because of welfare food stamps. New York Public Schools have been heavily criticised recently and therefore there are pedestal-high expectations that Charter Schools can stem the tide of pupils failing in the formal education system.

I really wanted to see what it was these schools did with their freedom that had such a seemingly profound effect on the performance of pupils who would ordinarily be at risk of education failure.

### **Aims of Fellowship**

The purpose of my Fellowship was to look at how some very successful Charter schools in the United States are improving the educational achievement of disadvantaged pupils. To this end I met with academics in the field of education from Harvard University, New York University and the University of Washington, Seattle – this was to get an academic, unbiased (hopefully!) view of how these schools are performing in empirical research terms and what they really mean for the American education system.

I spent time in the schools, taking note of the many effective techniques and strategies that contribute to the remarkable test results which pupils in these schools achieve. These include consistent teaching approaches throughout the school; a focus on literacy across the curriculum; a welcoming open door policy in every classroom; and a clear school mission which is shared by all pupils and staff. This process allowed me to reflect on what schools and teachers in Northern Ireland can do to address the 'barriers to learning' identified in the Department of Education's 'Every School a Good School', which cause a significant number of pupils from low income families to leave school without the qualifications needed to succeed in further education and the labour market.

## **Itinerary**

During my five weeks in the United States I spent four weeks in New York City and one week in Cambridge and Boston in Massachusetts.

In New York City I spent time in the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Programme) school in Harlem, the KIPP High School Prep programme at Hunter College and the Harbour Emily N Casey High school, also in Harlem. I met with a representative of Teacher U (an organisation which shares the most effective practices from the high achieving Charter Schools and have established their own teacher training course at Hunter College), the School of Education at NYU and the NYC Charter School Centre on Broadway.

In Massachusetts I visited the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Codman Academy Charter School in Rochester and the Cambridge Harvard Summer Academy which is a public school summer programme run in collaboration with the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

## **My visits and observations**

### **NYC Charter School Centre**

This centre is promotes excellence in Charter Schools and has the remit for helping groups plan, prepare and open Charter Schools in the New York district. While I was there I met groups of people who had been granted a charter to open a school and were given office space in the Centre to do all their research and prep and to do the work involved in planning and opening a school.

The centre clarified my understanding of the federal education policy 'No Child Left Behind 2000' - which made school accountability a priority. I feel that 'Every School a Good School 2010' the Northern Ireland education policy bears many similarities to this and therefore think it is interesting to see the consequences of such a policy ten years after its introduction. This was the first place I visited so it meant that I had a good overview of the charter system and the New York education system before I went into schools.

I was given a thorough background to the Charter School which began with a small group of middle class parents opening a school because they did not want to send their children to the underperforming local public school – this

seems to be very similar to the Free School experience so far. Now in the United States a proposal to open a Charter School must prove that the community needs it – therefore in New York they are mostly opened in areas of social and economic disadvantage.

They select pupils on a lottery basis – the New York schools that I visited were all oversubscribed, often hugely so.

Some of the advantage to opening a Charter School is that they can set their own curriculum, 'hire and fire' their own teachers and choose the length of their school day and year. As the education district usually have huge control over these issues, much more so than in Northern Ireland, these freedoms can be very beneficial. Aretha Millar, who I spoke to from the centre, explained to me, for example the difficulties in removing ineffective teachers from their posts. This is not a problem for Charter schools, which often have no permanent staff; a huge incentive to continue being an effective teacher.

Aretha Millar was very helpful and continued to answer my questions and help my understanding of the system throughout my trip.

### **Teacher U**

Teacher U is an organisation which is made up of various educational organisations, including some Charter School Networks. It is involved in training teachers and sharing good teaching practice so that everyone can benefit. It involves the collaboration of KIPP, Achievement First, Uncommon Schools. These are high performing Charter School Networks which share common values and techniques including a dedication to the use of data driven instruction to improve the educational achievement of disadvantaged pupils.

I spoke with Chris Torres, a doctoral student who works at Teacher U.

He advised me to read two books –

*Teach Like A Champion*, Doug Lemov  
*Driven by Data: A Practical Guide to Improve Instruction*, Paul Bambrick-Santoyo

which he told me would give me an idea about how these schools taught. The practice of instruction (teaching) is an obsession in some of these schools. The techniques in these books (some of which I mention in my magazine article), are used by every teacher in the school, there is very little teacher autonomy about this. In a way this strict approach seems to attempt to mediate against 'bad' teaching; a controversial approach which I look at again in my conclusions.

I read these books over the course of my Fellowship; as I explore later 'good educational practice' is a very subjective concept.

Chris Torres explained that Teacher U are trying to develop their own Initial Teacher Training qualification – the equivalent of our Post Graduate Certificate of Education – which means that the schools in those associated network could employ only teachers who had been trained in their approaches right from the beginning. He, like Aretha Millar, stressed how difficult it was to get dedicated, well educated, qualified teachers – the profession itself does not seem to be as respected as it is in Northern Ireland (and many would argue that it goes unrecognised and underpaid even here!)

### **Harbour Emily N Casey High school**

The Emily N. Carey Harbor School (ENCHS) is a small independent private high school created in 2005 by Hans E. Hageman, the Executive Director of Boys' & Girls' Harbor, a Charter School on the Upper East Side. They attempt to give pupils a depth and breadth of education, which would normally be far beyond the reach of their lower-income parents to provide. This involves responding to a very diverse student population. Their goal is to provide a curriculum and program that prepares students for college and the world of work. They teach young men and women the importance of, and the skills required for, active participation in life and the labour market. They have a clear focus on developing them into lifelong learners with a strong moral and ethical set of values.

The first thing I noticed about the school was the lack of facilities. The school I teach in has just completed moving into their new modern state of the art building and I was openly shocked at how little these pupils have in the way of facilities and resources. There was only one classroom for each subject, a small dingy computer room with very little technology and the walls were peeling paint in all the rooms.

Yet the atmosphere and the motivated enthusiasm of the Principal obviously compensated for any deficiencies in the facilities. The Principal was so proud of his 15 graduating students and had displayed their 15 framed letters of acceptance from the colleges and courses that they were moving on to. According to him, these were disaffected disadvantaged pupils who would have been at risk of dropping out and failing in the education system without this school.

He, however, did not approve of the data driven exam obsession that is rife in school such as KIPP. He did not believe that this prepared pupils for college, the world of work and life in general. He used the benefits of the school's excellent location to expose his pupils to museums, theatres and other cultural events, believing that these kids deserved to experience the things which many middle class children take for granted. He also believed that a strong focus on the skills of reading, writing, talking & listening and critical thinking across all the subjects was very important as these were the skills that these young people needed most in the future.

## **Robin Lake**

Robin Lake is a researcher and lecturer at the University of Washington, Seattle and leads the National Charter School Research Project. She edits the annual report from the project, *Hopes, Fears, & Reality*. These annual reports (produced from 2004 onwards) and read them during my Fellowship, giving me an overview of the state of charter schools on a national scale. The reports have provided new evidence and analysis about what is going on in charter schools, how well they are doing, where they need to improve, and what can be learned from the research on these types of public schools. Specific topics have included how achievement studies should be conducted and interpreted, how to achieve more effective public oversight of charter schools and how to eliminate barriers to growth; they have presented nationwide trends in the number of charters opened and closed and the characteristics of these schools. Therefore they were very useful to me.

I met with Robin Lake in New York as she had come down to attend a conference on charter schools while I was there. She is very knowledgeable about the background of charter schools, how successful they are and can be and what the issues are around them and was able to give me an unbiased overview of the whole sector.

The most interesting thing about meeting with Robin was her enthusiasm for finding out about our education system in Northern Ireland; our exam results are the envy of the US. Although she was very impressed about our Revised Curriculum, which values thinking skills, communication and numeracy skills and citizenship, she wasn't aware that our very high exam results were achieved mainly because of a system which selects pupils for grammar schools at age 11. A large part of our discussion focussed on the sacrifices that were always made in a system which values exam results as the main currency of education, something that I touch on in my conclusion.

## **KIPP (Knowledge is Power Programme) School**

KIPP is a network of 99 charter schools in 20 states and the District of Columbia enrolling more than 27,000 students. The majority of KIPP schools are middle schools but there are high schools and pre-kindergarten/elementary schools.

Over 90 percent of KIPP students are African American or Hispanic/Latino, and more than 80 percent of KIPP students are eligible for the federal free or reduced-price meals program so they often serve communities who are facing challenging circumstances. KIPP schools enroll all interested students, space permitting, regardless of prior academic record, conduct or socioeconomic background. They are non-selective and enroll pupils using a lottery system.

KIPP schools share a core set of operating principles known as the "Five Pillars": High Expectations, Choice & Commitment, More Time, Power to

Lead, and Focus on Results. These values are clearly articulated in the school – they have longer school days and school year for example and they are very result driven in their focus. I refer to this in more detail in the magazine article I wrote for Linked magazine.

The results speak for themselves -

After four years at KIPP, 100 percent of KIPP eighth grade classes outperformed their district averages in both mathematics and reading/English language arts, based on state tests. This is despite the fact that many pupils arrive at KIPP lagging behind in their Maths and especially their reading.

After four years at KIPP, students are performing at the 80th percentile in math and the 58th percentile in reading, based on national norm-referenced tests. This is overall national testing, comparing state by state.

Over 90 percent of KIPP students matriculated to college-preparatory high schools in 2008—and have earned millions of dollars in scholarships and need-based financial aid since 2000. Nationally, more than 85 percent of KIPP students matriculate to college.

These figures are exceptional when compared with the average expectancy in these areas for children who come from low income families and communities.

I visited KIPP Infinity Middle School in Harlem, set in a noticeably dilapidated area and a building which would be classed as very unsatisfactory for a school in Northern Ireland. The school atmosphere was not as I expected from reading the books and listening to the philosophies. The pupils and teachers seemed to have relaxed friendly relationships and the pupils were discussing issues and commenting on aspects of their work. In my time there I visited classes in English Language Arts (our English), Maths, History and Spanish. The good practice I observed is outlined in my magazine article – my concerns at the overall philosophy of the schools will be dealt with in my conclusions.

### **KIPP High School College Prep at Hunter College**

This was a programme for the pupils who were moving from Infinity Middle School to Infinity High School - this was a transitional summer programme, the aim of which was to prepare pupils for the increased workload and higher level thinking skills needed at High School. I really liked this idea as pupils, in my experience, can come into both GCSE and A-level unprepared for the demands of this further studying.

This programme was held in Hunter College, a university/college in Central Manhattan. The pupils seemed to enjoy the lecture theatre experience as it was an introduction to a more grown up way of learning for them. I spent time

in English Language Arts, global (history and geography), maths and speech & composition classes.

### **Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE)**

Here I spent the morning with Kay Merseth, head of the Graduate school and author of a book I read while researching the Fellowship, *Inside Urban Charter Schools*. I knew that Kay had concerns about the data driven exam focussed charter networks and I scheduled this visit in the middle of my observations in the KIPP schools so I could speak to her after having some experience of observing them. I was also able to go back to the schools after talking to her and notice some of the things she had pointed out that I hadn't considered critically in my first few weeks there.

Like many academics in America's universities she is concerned that pupils are taught to such a rigid curriculum of what is externally tested that they are not encouraged to develop higher level thinking skills or experience extra curricular activities or cultural / artistic interests. She suggested I go to visit a summer programme that was run by HGSE in collaboration with Cambridge Public School in the vicinity. We were able to organise a meeting with Kyle Hartung, a doctoral student in her department who ran the summer school and I arranged to spend the day in the school.

### **Cambridge Harvard Summer Academy (CHSA)**

Although this was located in a public school, it was an independent summer programme, taught by the trainee teachers for the HGSE; it gave them experience of teaching and it was of benefit to pupils from the high school that needed extra support in school or who wanted extra credits.

The reason Kay Merseth had recommended that I visit this school was that she thought the cross curricular, active methodologies practised by the teaching staff would be good for me to see after observing the numeracy and literacy focussed approaches in the KIPP settings. In the CHSA I observed pupils taking part in classes such as *Black American History through Music* and *The American Dream through American Literature*. Subjects like history, music and literature were taught in a collaborative and meaningful way. Pupils were engaged and interested and delighted in explaining to me how Hip Hop has come about due to the alienation of black people and has contributed to the attitudes to violence and women in the black community. These are very difficult concepts which became more interesting when taught in the context of rap music which is very relevant to the pupils' lives.

I spent a very enjoyable day in the school and left having learnt an awful lot myself both about American history and music and about literature that I thought I knew very well already!

## **Codman Academy Charter School**

This school is based on the Ten Design Principles of Expeditionary Learning which are; (taken from the school's website)

### **1. THE PRIMACY OF SELF-DISCOVERY**

Learning happens best with emotion, challenge and the requisite support. People discover their abilities, values, passions, and responsibilities in situations that offer adventure and the unexpected. In Expeditionary Learning schools, students undertake tasks that require perseverance, fitness, craftsmanship, imagination, self-discipline, and significant achievement. A teacher's primary task is to help students overcome their fears and discover they can do more than they think they can.

### **2. THE HAVING OF WONDERFUL IDEAS**

Teaching in Expeditionary Learning schools fosters curiosity about the world by creating learning situations that provide something important to think about, time to experiment, and time to make sense of what is observed.

### **3. THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEARNING**

Learning is both a personal process of discovery and a social activity. Everyone learns both individually and as part of a group. Every aspect of an Expeditionary Learning school encourages both children and adults to become increasingly responsible for directing their own personal and collective learning.

### **4. EMPATHY AND CARING**

Learning is fostered best in communities where students' and teachers' ideas are respected and where there is mutual trust. Learning groups are small in Expeditionary Learning schools, with a caring adult looking after the progress and acting as an advocate for each child. Older students mentor younger ones, and students feel physically and emotionally safe.

### **5. SUCCESS AND FAILURE**

All students need to be successful if they are to build the confidence and capacity to take risks and meet increasingly difficult challenges. But it is also important for students to learn from their failures, to persevere when things are hard, and to learn to turn disabilities into opportunities.

## **6. COLLABORATION AND COMPETITION**

Individual development and group development are integrated so that the value of friendship, trust, and group action is clear. Students are encouraged to compete not against each other, but with their own personal best and with rigorous standards of excellence.

## **7. DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION**

Both diversity and inclusion increase the richness of ideas, creative power, problem-solving ability, and respect for others. In Expeditionary Learning schools, students investigate and value their different histories and talents as well as those of other communities and cultures. Schools and learning groups are heterogeneous.

## **8. THE NATURAL WORLD**

A direct and respectful relationship with the natural world refreshes the human spirit and teaches the important ideas of recurring cycles and cause and effect. Students learn to become stewards of the earth and of future generations.

## **9. SOLITUDE AND REFLECTION**

Students and teachers need time alone to explore their own thoughts, make their own connections, and create their own ideas. They also need time to exchange their reflections with other students and with adults.

## **10. SERVICE AND COMPASSION**

We are crew, not passengers. Students and teachers are strengthened by acts of consequential service to others, and one of an Expeditionary Learning school's primary functions is to prepare students with the attitudes and skills to learn from and be of service.

Obviously, the ethos of this school is completely different from that of KIPP and the other exam focused charter networks. This is a school which uses its autonomy and freedom to do something very different – the purpose of the Fellowship was to look at good practice in charter schools and the main point about these charters is that they can do whatever they think is of most benefit to their pupils. As the expeditionary learning philosophy is one I was not familiar with I was most interested to see this school. Although the exam results were very good, among the best in the Boston area despite the disadvantage in the community, the pupils were also involved in activities that developed their problem solving, communication and social skills. They had one enrichment afternoon per week, taking part in activities like bird watching and chess.

The school building itself is located in a very run down community and the school, in collaboration with the local health centre (which is in the same building as the school) works alongside and within the community to change pupils' lives and futures, not just educate them. Pastoral care is very important and the school has a full time social worker on site.

### **Professor Pedro Noguera**

Pedro Noguera is a Professor of Education at New York University. He is an urban sociologist whose research focuses on the ways in which schools are influenced by social and economic conditions in the environment and their community. He teaches in the departments of Teaching and Learning and Humanities and Social Sciences at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Development, as well as in the Department of Sociology at New York University.

He has published over one hundred and fifty research articles on a variety of topics including conditions that promote student achievement, youth violence, the potential impact of school choice and vouchers on urban public schools, and race and ethnic relations in American society. His opinion that a school must look to the community and work in the context of the challenges the pupils face on a daily basis influenced me in changing my Masters pathway to Collaborative Leadership in Schools.

### **Disseminating Good Practice**

The following is an article that I wrote for *Linked*, an educational magazine that is posted out to all teachers (Primary, Secondary, Special Educational Needs and substitute teachers) in Northern Ireland. This link shows the actual report in the magazine.

[http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/linked/linked12\\_oct10.pdf](http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/linked/linked12_oct10.pdf)

### ***The No Excuses Approach***

*Last October I submitted a proposal to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, which awards grants to applicants who want to travel to make a difference,*

*bringing back information and ideas which will benefit their profession and their community. I proposed to travel to New York for five weeks to look at the charter schools there; I had been following the media reporting on their success in raising the educational attainment of pupils from disadvantaged urban areas and low income families.*

*After attending an interview in London I was awarded the Fellowship and began researching, contacting and arranging visits to universities and schools which would give me an idea of the kind of practice which contributed to this success.*

*Charter schools are publicly funded schools which are largely exempt from government oversight. They are held accountable for pupils' performance in state tests, and if successful are given a huge amount of freedom to source money from private sources, employ any teacher they choose, create their own curriculum and set the length of the school day and the school term.*

*There are now over 100 charter schools in New York City serving 30,000 pupils in the city and although charter schools nationally are showing mixed success, many of the schools in New York City are extremely successful in raising the test scores of children who traditionally would have been at risk of academic failure.*

*The Department of Education's 'Every School a Good School; A Policy for School Improvement' acknowledges that 'there is too strong a link between disadvantage and educational outcomes and we must do more to achieve equity in our system' (2009, p.i). Consequently one of the six key areas of the policy is 'tackling the barriers to learning that many young people face' (2009, p17). I was therefore interested to see how the schools in New York approach this.*

*One of the most well known Charter School networks in America is the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Programme) network. There are 99 KIPP schools across the US and 80% of their pupils come from low income families. However their test results are remarkable and the middle school I visited is the highest achieving middle school in the city. In many states KIPP schools have closed the achievement gap between high and low income pupils in Maths and English tests.*

*During my visit to a number of KIPP schools I was immediately struck by how accustomed to visitors the teachers and pupils are. I was invited to visit the classrooms at my leisure and neither teachers nor pupils were distracted by my presence. The principal of another school told me he often spent the majority of his day visiting the lessons in progress. Teachers are comfortable with visitors in their lessons as there is always meaningful teaching and learning going on in every classroom.*

*The KIPP schools run daily from 7.30am to 5pm eleven months of the year; pupils spend 60% more time in school than those in traditional public schools.*

*There is a big emphasis on the fact that all time in school is an opportunity to learn and therefore it is imperative that not one minute is wasted.*

*With this in mind each lesson begins with a 'Do Now' activity, which is written on the board before pupils arrive. They begin this silently as soon as they enter, ensuring that pupils are on task immediately. The 'Do Now' is a technique that has now been adopted by many schools in New York City and I observed it in all the schools I visited.*

*There is a great deal of consistency in the charter schools I visited, in terms of blackboard configuration, lesson structure and expectations for behaviour. Pupils know what is expected of them in each class – the 'Do Now', learning objective, discussion topic and homework activity are clearly displayed on the board. The teachers I observed were therefore very prepared and had a clear idea of what their pupils were going to learn and do in that lesson.*

*It is in all teachers' best interests that pupils do well in English, which is assessed externally in New York City, as these schools must do well in state examinations to remain open. Therefore it is accepted that literacy is the responsibility of every teacher. I observed pupils in a History class engaged in improving their analytical writing skills, based on the redrafting of a History essay.*

*In Codman Academy, a successful Charter School I visited in Dorchester, Boston, History is taught through Literature as 'Humanities'. The school are experimenting with this approach because of research findings by Bank Street College, New York which shows that disadvantaged pupils develop literacy skills more effectively when it is taught within a specific context (<http://www.bankstreet.edu/www>).*

*The Cambridge Harvard Summer Academy, a summer programme staffed by trainee teachers from Harvard School of Education uses a similar approach. Here I observed a lesson on African American History taught through music – pupils looked at the major categories of African American music, such as Jazz and Hip Hop, researching the historical, political and social contexts which framed their beginnings. I also observed an excellent class named Banned Books where pupils were studying literature which had been censored at a time and researching the contexts which made them so controversial. I witnessed many meaningful examples of connected learning which enhanced the pupils' subject knowledge and developed their literacy skills. The pupils were engaged and enthusiastic, despite being in school at the end of July!*

*Keeping activities fun and engaging for pupils is a priority in the summer programmes. The pupils in the previous examples did not even realising that they were being academically challenged. While I was in New York, Time magazine published an article about the 'summer learning loss' that disadvantaged children experience during the long summer break (David Von Drehle, Time, Aug 2, 2010 pp36-42). The article reported that low income pupils can fall up to three years behind by the end of high school and that 'summer learning loss was the biggest culprit' (p36).*

*Even in the schools I visited which did not operate an extended school year, there were organised summer learning initiatives. In Codman Academy, the high school pupils spend the summer rehearsing a Shakespeare production which they then perform for three nights in the Huntington Theatre in Boston. I watched them rehearse *The Taming of the Shrew*, and listened to 17 year old men from the Dorchester housing projects discuss, with empathy and insight, the motives behind their characters' actions. Most importantly they were having fun and keeping their minds active over the break from traditional lessons. The museums, parks and children's theatres in New York City were filled with groups of primary age children on summer school trips. The alternative for many of these children is watching television or getting into trouble on the streets so these schools play an invaluable role in keeping them safe and engaged over the summer months, especially in the most disadvantaged areas.*

*Many of these schools have become part of the community, encouraging the participation of parents, employers and businesses. Home visits and Saturday morning parent-student learning sessions are approaches taken by the KIPP schools to include families in the learning process. Codman Academy is situated in the same building as the community health centre, the only school in the United States to take this approach. This is beneficial for everyone involved. The health centre and the school work closely together in promoting healthy lifestyles to pupils who may not have access to this care otherwise. Every pupil in the high school does an internship in the health centre in an aspect of employment that interests them, such as nursing, nutrition or administration. The school also employs a full time social worker who works with vulnerable pupils and families; they believe that learning cannot happen if the pupils are dealing with difficult family circumstances alone. Everyone works in collaboration to ensure that their pupils do not fall through the net.*

*The staff in all the schools I visited share a 'no excuses' belief that these pupils can succeed regardless of race, socioeconomic status and difficult family circumstances. The principal of a school in East Harlem shapes his school around the pupils who go there, adapting and planning to suit those pupils' needs. He had fifteen pupils in his graduating class, all from very difficult family backgrounds; all fifteen of them had been accepted into the colleges that they had applied for. Their acceptance letters were proudly displayed in the foyer of the school. Some of the schools name their kindergarten classrooms after universities, the pupils are a member of the Columbia or the Harvard class. There is an expectation right from the beginning that these children are destined for great things. 85% of KIPP students, for example, go to university, compared with a national rate of 20% of pupils from low income families.*

*The academics that I met from Harvard School of Education, New York University and The University of Washington, Seattle, all of whom were experts in charter schools and in educational resilience, agreed that charter schools nationally are no more successful than traditional public schools. They acknowledged that I had visited only the most impressive schools; this*

*after all was the aim of my Fellowship. Just like in our own system, the successful schools use their autonomy to experiment with effective strategies and innovative practices, employ the most dedicated teachers and ensure that the pupils spend as much time learning as possible. They expect their pupils to succeed and ensure that their pupils believe that they will do so.*

*I encountered many different critical perspectives on the growth of these schools; there are many people, including some of the academics I met, who have concerns about the effect that schools with a relentless results-driven focus will have on pupils' constructive and creative thinking skills in the long term. But President Obama, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his Education Chancellor Joel Klein are all fiercely pro-charter schools so it looks like they are there to stay. The original cap on the number of charter schools opening has been lifted in New York this year and the huge numbers of parents who have children on the waiting lists are delighted at the news.*

The remit of this *Linked* article was to share effective practice and therefore it was not the place to discuss some of the problems associated with the data driven, exam result obsessed system that many of these schools have created. I will discuss my concerns about these issues in this report instead.

## Conclusions

I did indeed see a lot of good practice in the schools I visited and this is outlined in the accompanying magazine article for *Linked*, reprinted above.

However, the whole experience did make me reflect on how important it is that schools and teachers strive to be holistic educators, who engage and stimulate their pupils; they must teach them to become creative and critical thinkers as well as enabling them to achieve good exam results. This is something that the Northern Ireland Curriculum is designed to encourage. Some of the schools I saw, although very intensely organised around good exam results, and very effective at training children to achieve these, did not value skills such as critical thinking and creativity as much as I believe they should. Since I have come back I have begun to think about how I can encourage teachers and schools to integrate these skills into their subject teaching while still allowing their pupils to access the good exam results required for further study and success in the labour market.

I witnessed many good classroom strategies, some of which teachers are already beginning to implement in the classroom. 'Do now' exercises have been particularly popular and many teachers that I have spoken to have introduced this very simple but effective technique since reading my article in *Linked*. This whole experience has most certainly made an impression on me in terms of teaching and when I return to school I will be implementing many of the strategies I observed. In terms of classroom teaching, many of the charter schools have such a regimented policy for using teaching strategies and organisational techniques that they almost mediate against bad teaching by giving the teachers no choice about what they do; teachers seem to have very little autonomy inside their own classrooms despite the idea of a charter school having more freedom in their teaching and curriculum approaches. This autonomy seems to be allocated more to the Leadership in the school.

However, my Fellowship did become a lot more than just an observational exercise when I was there. It encouraged me to think very critically about the aims of these schools, the aims of education and the lengths that schools will go to reach targets when they are set. All of this is particularly significant in Northern Ireland as our new policy for school improvement 'Every School a Good School' gives schools relative autonomy but also makes them very accountable – targets are set for all children in Numeracy and Literacy. Data tracking and effective use of this data to set targets and analyse school performance are important aspects of school's self evaluations in this new climate.

All of this is similar to North America's federal education policy 'No Child Left Behind'; a policy much criticised in certain sectors for being too focused on exam results, meeting targets and assessment in general. I heard it referred to as 'No Child Left Untested' on more than one occasion! In observing New York schools, and the charter schools in particular as their 'charter' to remain open and their government funding is dependent on exam results and

meeting targets, I began to see how a policy like this can have a negative impact on learning and teaching, and on the experiences of pupils.

Many of the academics I spoke too, although agreeing that the KIPP charter schools had very good exam results, have grave concerns about how these children were being taught and how they would cope in an environment such as university or the workplace when they had been hot housed to rote learn and given no opportunities to develop thinking skills or extra curricular interests throughout their school career. Academics at British universities already complain of this – pupils who cannot independently study and are not equipped with skills such as essay writing, delivering presentations and meeting deadlines. Many universities blame this for the high drop out rates among students today. The United States is no different and it was interesting in itself to find out that we all face the same problems.

Many of the experts I spoke to in the United States, academics and teachers in various schools, also worried about the impact that tutoring pupils for exams had on the long term creativity of pupils. One academic, Robin Lake, from the University of Washington, and an expert on Charter Schools told me that Newsweek had recently run an article citing research which showed that students in North America were demonstrating reduced creativity skills and that this was getting worse every year. A data driven, exam focused school system was thought to be at least part of the problem.

There are many people who think that giving poor pupils the opportunity to perform excellently in external exams can never be a bad thing. I have some sympathy with this opinion. Exam results are incredibly important in terms of social mobility; it is difficult for anyone to argue with this point of view. However a lot of the pupils at the KIPP schools (which encouraged very long days, often with extra exam classes on Saturdays) are from poor families with very little money at home for extra curricular experiences. Therefore these pupils are missing out on developing cultural interests, sporting talents and social lives in school *as well as* outside of school. I was surprised to find very little access to art, music, technology or drama in these schools; where I did see this it was as an 'add on'. Most of the time spent in school was spent on the externally assessed subjects such as mathematics and English language arts. Because the pupils sat public exams in these subjects they were viewed, not only as more important (which is arguably true here too), but as the *only* important subjects. I can't help but think that middle class pupils who experience a highly academic education system are still more advantaged, as they experience travel, sports, music etc at home and in their lives outside school.

I think one of the most important things we can see from these experiences in that whatever way an assessment system is designed will have consequences at school level and in the classroom. If some subjects are externally assessed and schools are judged on these results, these subjects will be given extra importance in schools. I think the Northern Ireland curriculum addresses this to some extent in that Learning for Life and Work, Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities must be assessed and reported on

at Key Stage 3. The external assessment of the Cross Curricular Skills of ICT, Communication and Using Maths also strengthens the message that these skills are the responsibility of all teachers. This is what I am working on at the minute and this Fellowship has helped to reinforce the concept that assessment can end up leading the curriculum and therefore has to be considered carefully before decisions are made.

One thing I did notice in the KIPP schools was that they did encourage all teachers to take responsibility for literacy and numeracy. It really was a case of 'every teacher is a teacher of English'. This seemed to be a consequence of the threat of closure that all charter schools experience if their pupils do not perform adequately in state exams. As this is a threat for every subject teacher, it is in the interest of everyone to ensure that pupils develop and progress at these skills. Is it then that enforced responsibility is a good thing? I think this needs to be balanced overall with the ethics of teaching to the external exams and this is a very fine balance; one that needs to be given careful consideration when writing education policy, designing a curriculum and developing the assessment arrangements for that curriculum.

Whether the advice I am bringing back on the issue of literacy across the curriculum is listened to by those in charge of it all remains to me seen. It has been very useful however, in the work that I do with schools and teachers. Whatever policies dictate, teachers have the power, in the classroom, to ensure their pupils are engaged, motivated and that they are developing relevant and useful skills, not just those that will be assessed.

Many of the schools I visited were very critical about the KIPP model, a model that is also used for other school networks in America such as Uncommon Schools and Achievement First. It was interesting to speak with principals and teachers from such different ideological backgrounds.

In Rochester, Boston, I visited Codman Academy, a high school which has worked hard to make itself part of the community. It is situated in a very disadvantaged community and seeks to use links with the community (it is, for example located in the same building as the community health centre) to serve both the pupils and the community itself. Although the pupils there perform exceptionally well in the state exams, they are also exposed to the cultural and extra curricular activities that many middle class pupils take for granted. The school works as an expeditionary learning centre, believing that pupils should experience education actively and engage with their own learning. Although the school rules on behaviour and uniform are strict, their learning and teaching methods are a lot less rigid than in the KIPP schools, pupils spend time out in the community, doing work experience in the connected Health Centre, attending chess classes and performing in the annual Shakespeare production. I attended rehearsals for the 2010 production, which was Taming of the Shrew, and as I mention in my magazine report, it was a delight to see older teenagers from Rochester giving up their summer holidays to perform in a Shakespeare play; Huntington theatre provided the rehearsal and performance facilities where the pupils performed

to large audiences later in the summer. I felt a lot more comfortable with the very engaging and rounded education these pupils were receiving than I had with the exam focused data driven instruction that KIPP provided.

However, when I told Doug Lemov, the director of Uncommon Schools, a high performing school network similar in ideals to KIPP, that I was visiting Codman Academy he told me that it was a *good* school but that there were other *great* schools in Boston that I might like to visit. He was referring to schools with more rigid exam focused structures (similar to his own) which performed better in the state exams than Codman (which performed excellently but not as good as some of the others). The idea of a 'good school' is therefore very subjective – what makes a 'good school', what is the point of education and what is a 'well educated person'? My Fellowship in New York has encouraged me to reflect on these questions and I have yet to come up with a definitive answer. Interesting, when I emailed Lemov and told him I was deliberately visiting Codman academy because I wanted to see an alternative to his data focused, exam driven school he stopped all communication! He has obviously settled on his view of a good education and he is happy with it. I did read his book, *Teach like a Champion* while I was in New York. It is the bible of the Uncommon Schools, KIPP and Achievement First networks and includes many excellent teaching strategies which attempt to make the most of every minute in the classroom; however, I do have reservations about the state exam focused nature of his methods. What cannot be denied is that the schools in these networks and the techniques he promotes in this book do make a difference to the exam results of the pupils in these schools - the results in state exams and the proportion of pupils who move on to higher level education speak for themselves.

Much of the criticism of these 'no excuses' schools is related to the dedication and time expected of the people who work there. Because they work long hours (a few different people told me that teachers in some of these schools have to keep their Blackberrys turned on until 10pm) and have very little job security (they are not offered permanent contracts) staff morale can be low and there is always the danger of 'burnout' from overworked staff. Because of this, I heard, anecdotally, that staff turnover is very high; they tend to recruit young inexperienced staff and many of the teachers are Teach for America graduates who looking for experience which will help them to progress into a different career. It seems that many teachers use a few years in a tough charter school as a means to career progression. It may be impossible for teachers, especially women with young families, to continue to work at such a pace in the long term.

The idea of schools as businesses also causes controversy, as it does in Britain when the subject arises. Many of the charter schools are run by people without an educational background. Often there will be joint leadership between instructional principal and business directors – they do have their own finances, marketing and employment to consider so this is understandable in such a context. When I was there, the Centre for Charter School Excellence has just heard that Rupert Murdoch had taken a place on the board of one of the New York networks. I am still uncomfortable with the

idea that people with 'agendas' can influence school structures, curriculum matters and teaching & learning but maybe this is the way of the future. Time will tell. America's education system seems to be in such disarray that it seems they are prepared to experiment with anything; this is how the charter school era has come about. Perhaps the limited financial support available from the government in Britain over the coming years will mean that schools here are forced to find other ways of funding themselves too, especially those who serve disadvantaged populations.

Some of the best practice that I encountered and mention in the Linked article includes school collaboration with the community. This encouraged me to look more closely at the effects of this type of practice on the achievement of poorer children and I have started an MSc in Collaborative Leadership for Schools at Queen's University, Belfast. I am focusing specifically on the effective use of school collaboration to improve the educational attainment and inclusion of children from socio-economically deprived backgrounds. A lot of the research I did while preparing for my Fellowship has been very useful in this context.

All in all this was an excellent opportunity and it has changed the way I think about education. Michael Gove, the Conservative Education Minister has used the charter schools in the United States as a basis for many of his plans for Free Schools in Britain so my Fellowship was timely. After seeing the KIPP schools (which he refers to frequently) I worry about this structure for schools. The poorest children do indeed need help and support to achieve higher results; at the minute they are being failed in this. However, I believe they also need the experiences of life, travel, culture and sport that more affluent children take for granted in their extra curricular and home lives – some of the schools I visited were so fixated on exam results that they did not seem to value or provide time for these other experiences. Obviously I did not find an answer to the age old problem of the poverty related achievement gap but this Fellowship has inspired me to continue my research as well as disseminating the good practice that I did find there.

