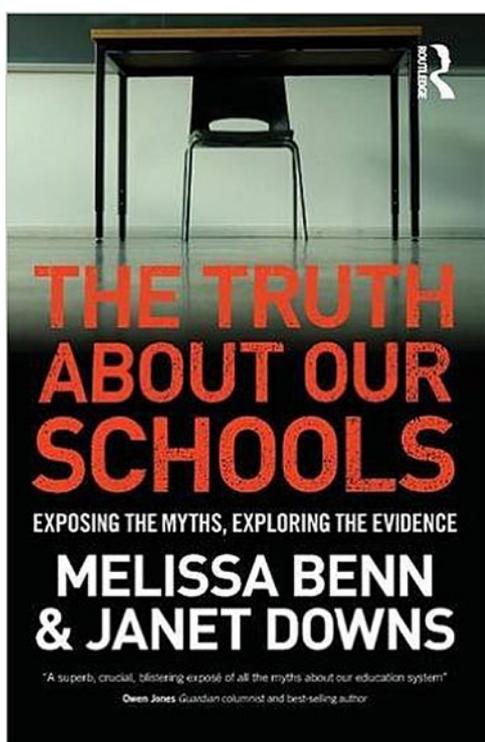


# Education faultlines, hypocrisy and contested truth

**The Truth About Our Schools – exposing the myths, exploring the evidence**

**Melissa Benn and Janet Downs, 2016, Routledge**

**Toby Greany** reviews a book which provides a coruscating challenge to much Government policy but lacks some subtlety in its analysis.



## ■ ■ ■ Powerful polemic

In his quote on the book jacket, Owen Jones calls this ‘a blistering expose of all the myths about our education system’. He’s not wrong: this is a polemical but well researched book that pulls no punches in its attack on Conservative education policy since 2010. The authors are leading figures in the campaigning Local Schools Network website and the book also includes a series of short articles by the wider group of LSN founders – Fiona Millar, Francis Gilbert and Henry Stuart.

## ■ ■ ■ Debunking myths

The book is structured around what the authors describe as ‘eight myths’, pedalled by the Conservatives and their supporters in order to justify their academy, free school, curriculum and wider reforms. The myths are as follows:

- Comprehensive education has failed
- Local Authorities control and hold back schools

- Choice, competition and markets are the route to educational success
- Choice will improve education in England: the free school model
- Academies raise standards
- Teachers don't need qualifications
- Private schools have the magic DNA
- Progressive education lowers standards

Each myth is comprehensively examined and debunked, drawing on a lively mixture of academic research, ministerial speeches, parliamentary and think tank reports and news coverage of recent developments in the system. This journalistic approach is perhaps the book's greatest strength: even as someone who follows English educational developments closely I found plenty of evidence, quotes and specific examples of malpractice that was new. For example, did you know that 'since the 1970s private school teacher numbers have doubled relative to state schools'? (p112). On the down side, the references are all basic web-links, rather than full title and publication details, making it hard to track them down.

The analysis of the myths themselves will be mostly familiar to anyone who follows education debates at any level of detail. That is not to say it's not valuable: Benn and Downs do a good job of highlighting some of the genuine faultlines and occasional sheer hypocrisy in current English education policy thinking. For example, they are right in arguing that quasi-markets founded on parental choice and competition between schools make very little impact on pupil outcomes, and that that impact is differential – i.e. some schools might benefit, while others struggle – with school systems becoming more socially stratified and unequal as a result (Greany, 2015; Greany and Nelson, 2015).

### ■■■ Lack of nuance

All that said, I think the book has two flaws.

The first is that in their determination to attack current policy, the authors risk painting an overly rose-tinted picture of the comprehensive education system that went before. The truth is that while some schools and Local Authorities do appear to have been effective in that model, others weren't: or they were only challenged to improve by the high stakes accountability model that the authors decry (Woods, Husbands and Brown, 2014).

The second is that, as in any area of social science, the evidence base on school system reform is nuanced and disputed. For example, my reading of the international literature on school autonomy is that it is effective in improving outcomes in school systems, such as England, that also have high levels of professional capacity – ie where leaders and teachers know what to do with autonomy (Bloom et al, 2014; Di Liberto et al, 2014; Hanushek et al, 2012). So whilst it is eminently possible to critique the ways in which academies policy in England has been enacted since 2010, it is important to recognise that increasing autonomy may not, in itself, be wrong-headed. Benn and Downs are not really interested in this kind of nuance and as a result their book does not move us on very far in terms of how we might interpret and respond to the current policy maelstrom.

**Toby Greany is Professor of Leadership and Innovation and Director of the London Centre for Leadership in Learning at the UCL Institute of Education. He is co-editor (with Peter Earley) of *School Leadership and School System Reform*, which will be published by Bloomsbury in late 2016.**

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