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They aren't faith schools and they don't select

Contrary to popular belief, Peter Vardy's three academies are true to the comprehensive ideal

Martin Wainwright

The Guardian, Monday 4 December 2006

Ask people in the schools world to play word-association with the name "Vardy" and many would say "creationism". They couldn't be more wrong.

The philanthropist whose Emmanuel Schools Foundation (ESF) runs three academies and is pitching for a fourth - in Blyth, Northumberland - is an unrepentant believer in an education C-word, but it is: comprehensive.

Sneered at in some circles and obituarised prematurely in others, the post-war ideal is flourishing astonishingly at the three ESF schools. "Astonishingly" because the row over science and religion at the Vardy academies has obscured so much of what is actually happening.

Sceptics arriving at the two-year-old King's Academy in Middlesbrough are met, not by a posse of scientology-style minders, but by a couple of 11-year-old pupils, Samantha and Liam, who conduct an unsupervised tour of anything you want to see. Here's this year's musical, Hello, Dolly! Here are teachers posing beside statues of Marx and Engels on their holidays in Berlin. Here's an inter-school debate on "Should higher education be free?".

"Do you like lizards?" Liam suddenly asks, after a look at the cleaners' cupboard and a lesson in which a tiptoe game is under way as a break from maths. Is this something to do with Darwin? No. Liam has a mate with three lizards and five tarantulas and he's bursting to pass this news on

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It's a good spontaneous moment in the orderly atmosphere that strikes all visitors; a world of scrubbed young people in blazers who open doors for you, and thank you when you do the same for them. Almost sinister, unless you've seen *The History Boys* lately and remember the postwar world of grammar schools. Alan Bennett would recognise everything: different grades of tie, honours boards, and school houses named after the Greeks, Romans, Hebrews and Medes.

Another bit of subversion broke through when Vardy was chatting in the boardroom and the door flew open, a boy with a huge satchel lurched in, said something loud but incomprehensible, and vanished. "Children like to know where the limits are," said Vardy, adding with satisfaction, "but bumping up against them - that's part of it too."

Discipline is strict in ESF-land, but within the framework common to all state schools; exclusions go to independent appeal, which can overrule them. King's works more through an ethos imposed immediately and maintained, in the style of the local mayor Ray Mallon, in small things as well as big. It helps to attract staff, who are paid no more than in other state secondary schools.

So far, so conventional. But these limits and things to bump into are for very different pupils from Bennett's selected-by-ability chums. It is an absolute for King's and the other ESF academies to take children on a catchment basis. The nearest to the gates get in. Academies may select up to 10% of pupils on ability, but these academies don't and won't.

To do so, says Vardy, would be against everything he is about, which is shifting resources to parts of the country that are most disadvantaged. But the ESF is careful in its language. Every time Vardy says something such as "We want to help people at the bottom of the pile, kids at the foot of the ladder", he balances it with comments about "the false, patronising idea that kids in these places are thick and their parents don't care". He wants to empower them, re-enfranchise them.

King's takes the point an extra mile. The Sam'n'Liam tour passes Braille signs everywhere and squares of different coloured carpet at strategic

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spots. "It's to help the partially sighted kids," Samantha explains.

King's is a specialist school for statemented children; more than 90 places out of 1,050 go to those with special educational needs. Ironically, that is a 10% selection, but in the way comprehensive pioneers dreamed. If the academy transforms its catchment, as has happened with many previous good state schools, you feel the ESF will up sticks and move in search of need elsewhere.

Which brings in the Christian motive. Vardy's regret is that he didn't counter-attack when the creationist allegations began. A big and forceful Wearsider, but extremely genial, he says: "Look, I don't believe any nonsense about the world being created in six days." He leans against his big car with its personalised number and rolls his eyes at the fact that the head of science at the Emmanuel Academy in Gateshead got involved in circulating an "intelligent design" pack last year.

"Ofsted go over us with a fine-tooth comb," he says. "Of course we get children to question everything, religion and science. Why don't the critics come and see? Stay for a week. It's unbelievable what they get wrong. There's any amount of people go around saying we're faith schools."

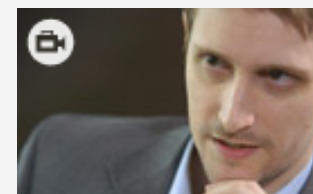
That may be another surprise. Visitors regularly have to be told that the ESF academies are not faith schools. They take pupils and staff of any creed. or none.

There is plenty of Christianity about, but in a way Alan Bennett would recognise; Tony Blair's opening plaque quotes from Proverbs, the restaurants are called Still Waters and Green Pastures and the prospectus makes the Christian ethos explicit in terms of establishing values, as opposed to faith. This isn't exactly peculiar. As Vardy says, the 1988 Education Act requires all secondary schools to have a daily act of worship that is mainly Christian. Academy pupils can skip it if their parents agree.

Religion is also crucial as the reason why Vardy got stuck in, in the tradition of Joseph Rowntree or, more recently, Joshua Rowe, who led the turnround of King David's Jewish comprehensive in Manchester. It's a



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notoriously touchy thing to do. But should Britain's best-known "churchy" schools today really be the ones that charge £20,000-a-year fees?

Vardy won't be drawn on that, but he is unrepentant about wanting ESF to run things, rather than donate and withdraw. "If you just put money in, you never see any difference," he says. The foundation has a majority on the academies' boards, which (in an interesting echo of the social Darwinist Andrew Carnegie) he sees as responsibility, not control.

"We think we know how to do it, which is why we want to," he says. "If we fail, it's clearly our heads on the block." So far, with three "outstanding" Ofsted ratings at Emmanuel and "good" at King's and Trinity in Thorne, Doncaster, this latest chapter of the comprehensive story is going well the other way.

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