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**Meeting the challenge of school improvement: a comparative study on coastal academies in England 2013**

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Academies are independent, non-selective, state-funded schools that fall outside the control of local authorities, and that are managed by teams of independent co-sponsors. The programme has been controversial, with supporters believing that academies’ freedom to pursue innovative school policies enables them to facilitate high standards of education, and opponents believing that it is a form of back-door privatisation that will lead to greater social segregation.

While there have been large-scale evaluations of the academy programme (e.g. Machin and Vernoit, 2011) and qualitative research on different aspects of the programme (e.g. Gunter, 2011), little attention has been paid to academies in coastal areas in England. These coastal academies typically have a specific range of challenges similar to those in multicultural inner city schools, including high levels of socio-economic deprivation, high levels of unemployment, limited parental involvement in their children’s education and low aspirations. This research project aims to provide a new awareness of the challenges faced by coastal academies and offer tentative strategies for school improvement based on the strategies and outcomes examined.

This project is a qualitative investigation that explores how three coastal academies in England, that converted from national challenge schools to academy status under the Labour administration, have approached the task of raising standards and tackling the ‘culture of under-attainment’ (Woods et al, 2007:239). Examination of academy documentation and publicly available data, together with interviews with the principal, a senior leader and four teachers have yielded rich data on each academy’s strategies, processes and outcomes. Analysis of the data is framed around three themes: commonalities and differences in leadership approach, drawing on MacBeath’s categories of ‘distributed’ and ‘contributed’ leadership; the culture of each institution (Glover and Coleman, 2005); and pupil outcomes. The findings offer insights into the particular challenges faced by academies in coastal regions and aid understanding of the ways in which leadership teams have responded to local circumstances. This includes drawing on the expertise of sponsors and opportunities for staff engagement.

Gunter, H. (ed) (2011) The State and Education Policy: The Academies Programme, London: Continuum.

Machin, S. and Vernoit, J. (2011) Changing School Autonomy: Academy Schools and their Introduction to England’s Education. Available at: <http://cee.lse.ac.uk/ceedps/ceedp123.pdf>.

Woods, P., Woods, G. and Gunter, H. (2007) Academy schools and entrepreneurialism in education, Journal of Education Policy, 22(2): 237-259.

**Please do not hesitate to contact Tanya or Rowena if you would like further information on the coastal academies research project, including a copy of the report.**