Academies: Policy, Power and The People

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Society is made up of people, and the strength, resilience and adaptability of a society depends wholly on those traits in its people. These traits are nurtured through education: education therefore forms the basis of any society. The aim of this paper is to articulate the case for Education’s independence from political control. This will be done by highlighting the dangers of educational policy being motivated by politicians’ ideological preferences. Governments are not above using state apparatus to ignore, subvert, and diminish any opposition. This I will argue is what is currently taking place, in the current Government’s drive for the academisation of English maintained schools.

Academies were introduced in England in 2000 by the Labour government as part of its *Learning and Skills Act 2000*. Unlike maintained schools, academies are independent of local authority control, lie outside Ofsted review, and receive direct funding under individual contract with the Secretary of State for Education. Originally called ‘City Academies’, they were claimed to tackle social injustice “breaking the cycle of underperformance and low expectation” of perceived failing inner city schools (Blunkett, 2010). But now they have now come to be promoted as the only means of providing “outstanding” education. This push towards academisation represents a radical shift in education’s purpose with the present government’s intention to accomplish the ‘academisation’ not only of ‘failing’ but also of good schools reclassified as ‘coasting’, without any real public debate. The case for academies has not been made, yet the Conservative Government believes it to be the best course. Why? I believe this is the case because academisation is underpinned upon ideology, a neo-liberal ideology which has taken firm root in England since the 1980s. This ideology adopts a market approach as the best option to resolving all the ills of society. The academisation process needs to be seen in light of the ‘learning economy’- serving a desire for market competitiveness and a skills-based agenda.

**The Political Capture of Education**

Since the early 1980s the dominant trend within English Education and Training (EandT) has seen successive governments having increased influence in the design, control and implementation of policy (Keep, 2006:48). From having a limited and peripheral role in EandT prior to 1981, compulsory education in England has become one of the most centrally-controlled education systems in the world (Bassey, 2003). This has been matched by an unparalleled pace and scale of change since 1987 (Jenkins, 1995).¹

The weakening of Education’s independence from political direction began in 1976 by the then Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan’s ‘Great Debate’ speech on education at Ruskin College, Oxford. Callaghan was addressing the Black Papers (published between 1969-1977) which, though not opposed to progressive education, attacked its excesses – and a perception that education was responsible for society’s problems.

Callaghan suggested that no one could claim “exclusive right” in the domain of education – that the teaching profession should not seek sole control of the ‘secret garden’ of the curriculum, and that there were other stakeholders (parents, industry and government) whose opinions were needed to address the question of formulating and expressing the purpose of education, and the standards to be met. His argument was that given everyone had some experience of education, everyone had something to contribute to the debate. Even though Callaghan was not interested in dismantling the comprehensive education system, his speech ushered in the era of testing, school

¹ Cited in Keep, 2006:50
league tables, and accountability as articulated by Cox and Boyson (1977:8-10). Callaghan thus allowed politicians to claim a popular mandate for what they were doing, and it made education much more of a political football.

Callaghan was right however: no-one should have sole ownership of educational policy; education is far too important to be vested in the hands of a select few, expert or otherwise. However, 40 years on from his speech the sole control of the ‘secret garden’ has transferred from educational experts to politicians and their political agendas. This trend towards greater governmental control of EandT is paradoxical given that it began under a Conservative administration which, in pursuit of neo-liberal ideals, was in favour of reducing the role of the state and sought greater emphasis on market-based solutions to public policy (Gamble, 1994; Jenkins, 1995). However, the only way to bring about this ideological shift was to entertain this paradox.

**Neoliberalism and the Rise of the Learning Economy**

What is neoliberalism? It is the modification of a very particular aspect of the liberal tradition, namely: economic liberalism. Economic liberalism holds to the supremacy of free market capitalism premised upon the belief that states ought not to meddle with or intervene in the economy – that its regulation should be left to market forces. This however, should not be confused with liberalism proper, which according *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) is defined as a political ideology that favours “constitutional changes and legal or administrative reforms tending in the direction of freedom or democracy”.

In 1997 the OECD published the influential document *Lifelong Learning for All* whose central theme was an economic rationale for lifelong learning, seen as learning to continuously renew and adapt one’s skills due to a “large and continuing shift in employment from manufacturing industry to services, the gathering momentum of globalisation, the wide diffusion of information and communications technologies, and the increasing importance of knowledge and skills in production and services” (OECD, 1997:13). This sentiment was echoed by Van der Pas (2001) (Director-General of the General Directorate for Education and Culture of the European Commission) who believed that the essential function of lifelong learning was the development of human capital - an “investment in human resources” – in order to promote the EU’s competitiveness and economic growth (Biesta, 2006:172). As Tony Blair (1998) put it: “Education is the best economic policy we have”. Learning is for acquisition of skills alleged to enable the learner to work harder, faster and smarter and thus enables their employer to better compete in the global economy” (Boshier, 2001). Without much debate the purpose of education has come to be defined in terms of ‘human capital’ predicated upon a skills-based agenda to meet the economic imperative both in term of policy and practice (see Edwards 1997; Ranson 1998; Boshier 1998; Field 2000; Grace 2004; Biesta 2004a; Jackson 2005); (Connell, 2013).

This contrasts with the social justice agenda which informed educational policy before the 1980s – especially “the ‘social purpose’ tradition in which adult learning was seen as a lever for empowerment and emancipation” (Fieldhouse 1996). In 1972 the UNESCO report on lifelong learning - *Learning to be: The world of education today and tomorrow* - was described by its chair Faure as enabling “man to be himself”; however, learning-to-be needs to be understood in

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2 Cited in Keep, 2006:50
3 Quoted, Martin 2003:567
4 Quoted, Biesta, 2006:175
5 Cited, Biesta, 2009:03
6 Quoted, Biesta, 2006:172
democratic terms, i.e. as learning-to-be-with-others.⁷

**Schools: The Current Push for Academisation**

The current drive for the academisation of the English education system is one of the most radical changes that has ever been put forward by any government, and has been achieved without any serious public debate. But what are academies? Free schools and academies are funded directly by the government and have greater control than maintained schools over how they do things. Neither need to follow the national curriculum, they can set their own school term and school day, they set their own pay and conditions for staff, but unlike grammar schools, they must be ‘all-ability’ schools, and cannot use academic selection processes. However, they are permitted to prioritise up to 10% of the pupils by aptitude.

Under the *Education and Adoption Bill 2015-16* all schools rated inadequate by Ofsted would become an academy. New powers would allow the Department of Education to change the leadership of failing schools and stop campaigners “obstructing” takeovers. The current Education secretary Nicky Morgan⁸ has defined the concept of “coasting schools” as those failing to ensure that 60% of pupils get five good GCSE grades (A* - C) including Maths and English. In addition, from 2016 schools will also be judged on pupils’ progress from the beginning of secondary school to their GCSEs; any school not scoring highly on the government’s new accountability measure on “Progress 8” will also be classed as coasting.

For primary schools the bar is even higher. Primary schools will be required to ensure that 85% of 11-year-olds achieve a Level 4 in reading, writing and maths - raised from the current intervention threshold at under 65%, and a higher-than-average proportion of pupils failing to make expected progress. Thus even schools which may be performing well but are somehow not pushing for greater attainment would be open to academisation.

Recently *Policy Exchange*, a think tank set up by former Education Secretary Michael Gove, advocated in its report *Primary Focus* (2014) that all primary schools should convert to academies. And secondary schools should follow suit. Why? Because Briggs and Simons, the authors, believe it is the most effective way to combat the ‘perfect storm’ that is looming ahead: a fifth of primary heads approaching retirement cuts in funding, and the introduction of a rigorous new national curriculum and assessment systems, which will add to pressure on teachers. Part of this ‘perfect storm’ is a storm in a teacup: at any given time about 20% of primary heads are aged 50-59 and can be described as “approaching retirement.”

Thus David Cameron’s desire for “zero tolerance” on “failure” and “coasting schools” would mean that even schools rated good by Ofsted could be forced to become academies. For Cameron: “schools rated good at their last inspection – but which haven’t been maintaining high standards since... are giving children ‘just enough’ to avoid falling beneath our floor standards. But frankly ‘just enough’ isn’t good enough for my children, and it shouldn’t be for yours.” He continues: “[I]f you're not making fast enough progress in raising standards, you have to change and if you can't do it yourself, you have to become a sponsored academy and welcome in people with a proven track record of running outstanding schools.”⁹

**Evidence for the Success of Academies**

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⁷ Quoted, ibid p.171
⁸ Weale, 2015
⁹ TES Reporter, 2015
Considerable emphasis is given to the expectation that converting to academy status will improve outcomes as a result of “establishing collaborative practices around teaching and learning, supporting teachers and individual school leaders to focus on what happens in classrooms, and supporting a culture of continuous improvement and development” (Briggs and Simons, 2014:10).

But there are examples of excellent local authority (LA) maintained schools. So what prevents the Head Teachers of these schools from sharing their skills and expertise, or schools within different districts and boroughs from pooling their resources? Why can’t LA schools become part of federations? Nothing, bar political will. Allowing greater autonomy to academies but not to maintained schools is explicitly and deliberately denying those freedoms to maintained schools. The effect is to create an incentive for academisation in order to access greater freedoms.

In the foreword to *Primary Focus* Sir David Carter, Regional Schools Commissioner for the South West and former Executive Principal, Cabot Learning Federation begins by saying how over a period of 17 years to 2014, standards in primary schools had improved in Maths and English, from 67% (English) and 62% (Maths) of children attaining Level 4, to 89% and 86% respectively. These results are some of the best results ever for primary schools. However, because the government has set higher standards from 2016, to 85% in each subject, the *Policy Exchange* authors believe academisation is the best path to follow because they estimate “as many as 20% of schools would not have reached that level this summer.” Anybody reading this would be quite befuddled, primary schools are currently achieving above the target, yet the report estimates that 20% will fail!

Briggs and Simons (2014:10) acknowledge that: “Academy status is not some sort of panacea” which will automatically lead to improvements. But for them “it is clear that the creation of groups of schools collaborating together and sharing best practice is what is needed ...” Is this not spinning the truth to arrive at a conclusion which the evidence does not support?

Russell Hobby (2014), general secretary of the school leaders’ union points to “flaws in the report’s analysis because it is not “convincing to compare converter academies to maintained schools, when the majority of converter academies were selected from those who were already good and outstanding maintained schools.”

There appears to be little evidence to support the view that academies are more successful than maintained schools. The Education Select Committee in January 2015 found that: “It is too early to judge whether academies raise standards overall or for disadvantaged children.” The Committee went on to say that: “Academisation is not always successful nor is it the only proven alternative for a struggling school”. Even Nick Gibb, Minister of State for Schools, conceded in September 2015 that: “This government does not believe that all academies and free schools are necessarily better than maintained schools.”

The Government often claims that the results of sponsored academies improve at a faster rate than maintained schools. However, the reason why some sponsored academies results may appear to improve at a faster rate is due to the fact that sponsored academies are generally schools whose exam results were previously lower than average; consequently the rate of improvement tends to be higher. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) which was commissioned by the Local Government Association to analyse academy performance found

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10 House of Commons Education Committee (January 2015:23)

11 Speech delivered at a ResearchED conference on 5 September 2015
that: “The analysis shows that the amount of attainment progress made by pupils in sponsored and converter academies is not greater than in maintained schools with similar characteristics.”

By the start of 2014, 60% of secondary schools had become academies. However, the Sutton Trust’s report on academies, *Chain Effects 2014*, deemed 44% of the academies studied to be below the government’s new ‘coasting level’ and that 26 of the 34 chains analysed had one or more schools in this group.” The subsequent report *Chain Effects 2015* concluded that “a majority of the chains still underperform the mainstream average on attainment for their disadvantaged pupils.”

Academisation is recognised as not being a panacea yet it is argued as being the most effective solution because it is ideologically motivated – deep at the heart of this policy is a neo-liberal philosophy that sees marketization as the best solution to all the ills and failures of society.

**Privatisation Through The Back Door?**

There is the suspicion that this trend towards the academisation of the entire school education system is privatisation and selection through the back door. Let us consider the evidence for such a secret privatisation agenda. Academies are outside the control of Local Authorities, they are free to disburse their funds as they wish, and set their own pay and conditions for staff. This radical change has seen maintained schools that were once accountable to democratically elected local education authorities, now directly under the control of central government through legally binding contracts with the Secretary of State for Education with an increasing number of private education providers. Is this not in essence a form of privatization?

England is not the only country in Europe to have radically changed the management and accountability of its school system. The Swedes under the guise of ‘choice’ introduced an educational voucher system (*skolpeng*) in 1992 which enabled private schools to compete for students with public schools on an equal financial basis with full public funding (Blomqvist, 2004:147). The move, inspired by the ideas of Friedman (1962) and Chubb and Moe (1990) was promoted as improving ‘choice’. In a very short period of time, the education system was transformed from one that was public run with little parental choice, to one of the most liberal education systems in the world (Blomqvist, 2004:148). However, research (Björklund et al, 2005; Böhlmark and Lindahl, 2007 and 2008) has not been able to identify any positive effect on free schools and higher educational attainment. Since the introduction of *friskola*, Sweden has seen a steep decline in its PISA rankings. In the most recent Pisa (OECD, 2015) assessment, Sweden’s 15-year-olds ranked 36/40 in Reading; 38/40 in Maths, significantly below their Nordic neighbours. This has prompted the OECD in its report in May 2015 to recommend that the Swedes undergo a comprehensive education reform to restore previously high educational standards. It is interesting to note that Finland, which nationalised all its schools and turned them into comprehensives 40 years ago, finds its students consistently ranked high in international comparisons such as the PISA grading. Finland topped the PISA tables in 2000, 2003, and 2006, coming third in 2009. Although it has slipped down a little since, Finland remains the top-performing nation in Europe.

**DISCUSSION**

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12 Worth, 2014:26
13 Francis, Hutchings and De Vries (2014)
14 Ibid.
16 Cited, Wiborg, 2010:14/15
Consequences of Academisation

Both New Labour and Conservative governments have been keen to promote ideas of greater choice and autonomy for the population. This was wonderfully articulated in the Ministry of Justice (2007) Green Paper The Governance of Britain, which asserted that: “...power should not just be devolved from the national government to the national Parliament: power must also rest with local communities. [...] The Government believes it must find new ways to enable people to become active citizens, empowered and fully engaged in local decision-making. The Government will enhance democracy by devolving more power directly to the people” (para. 169).  

Academies are promoted as strengthening local democracy: the Academies Act 2010 specifies that “before a maintained school in England is converted into an Academy, the school’s governing body must consult such persons as they think appropriate.” However, evidence given to the Report on the MPs Committee of Enquiry into Academies and Trust Schools on January 12 2007 discloses “rushed, flawed and manipulated consultation processes with a complete disregard of [the] views” of those against academisation.

More worryingly there is evidence of government trying to bypass consultation. For example, while Roke primary school in Croydon was being primed for academy conversion as part of the Harris chain, a letter was sent from the schools minister, Lord Nash, to local Conservative MP Richard Ottaway suggesting parents, teachers and members of the local community would not be invited to give their views about the proposed conversion until after it had been agreed by the DfE. Worse still the consultation was permitted to be carried out by Harris, who stood to gain from its successful conclusion.

Academisation also raises the prospect of a greater stratification of society and ethnic segregation, as in the case of Sweden (Skolverket 1996, 2003).  

Lindbom and Almgren (2007) contest this and claim that housing accounts for the greatest part of segregation and free schools contribute only a very small proportion of increased school segregation. However, their claims are challenged by many other studies which identify greater segregation being attributable more to the result of school choice than to the effect of housing (Daun, 2003; Arnman et al., 2004; Böhlmark and Lindahl 2007; Gustafson, 2006, 2007; Bunar, 2008).

In England there is some evidence of academisation as a driver for segregation and selection (Green et al., 2015). Society is increasingly becoming segregated with respect to class, ethnicity and religion with people living parallel lives. I can see academies leading to further social non-inclusiveness. Academisation will have impact on social cohesion, and facilitate the formulation of ‘the other’. Compare this with the advantages that an inclusive comprehensive education offers: “a rich experience of diversity and the chance for children to sit side by side with others of backgrounds, capabilities, interests and talents. What a grounding for life” (Pickett, 2015).

If one proceeds down the path of full academisation, and with it the further potential for profit-making as in Sweden, then Sweden again provides a worrying example: of bankruptcy. In 2013, JB Education, owned by the Danish private equity company Axcel, became bankrupt leaving a debt of $150 million. In England, who would foot the bill? And what would happen to students and teachers whilst a new company was found to take over the affected schools?

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17 Quoted, Hatcher, 2008:28
18 Cited, Wiborg, 2010:14
19 Cited, Wiborg, 2010:15
20 Cited, Wiborg, 2010:14
Influence of Power

How has academisation been achieved? Academisation is in fact about power and how it is exercised through policy. If one looks at the debate - or lack of it - around the academisation process one sees that those against academisation are thwarted at all stages of the process, and are made powerless.

In 1974 Steven Lukes, challenging Dahl (1961) and Polsby’s (1963) idea of power, argued that power must be understood not only in terms of who participates, but also those who do not. For Lukes power has three dimensions: public or visible power, exercised through the use of political bodies, such as legislatures, local government bodies, local assemblies, or consultative forums; hidden power, which keeps issues off the agenda in decision making arenas (Bachrach and Baratz 1962); and an even more insidious third, invisible power, through which the relatively powerless come to internalise and accept their condition. They might not be aware of nor act upon their interests. This insidious use of power prevents conflict from even arising. A “exercises power over [B] by influencing, shaping or determining his[/her] very wants” (Lukes, 2005:27), through indoctrination, acculturation and socialization. Moreover, power is exercised in part through control of the institutions that shape and create meaning (Hinson and Healey, 2003:04).

Most citizens are being acculturated into believing academies are the only solution for ‘failing’ schools. So let us examine how the academisation debate is framed by government, and how this message is delivered. Consider the following factors.

First, the origins of academisation in England lie in the need to address failing schools. From its inception, academisation has been about addressing failure. The use of invisible power has manipulated the debate by framing it around the idea that academisation is the only way to help failing schools. Over time the concept of failure has been redefined, and in the Education and Adoption Bill 2015-16 all schools rated inadequate by Ofsted must become an academy. This is an example of the use of visible power through legislation. However, the Bill additionally extends the concept of failure to coasting schools, so even schools performing well can be subject to academisation. This skillful use of invisible power to redefine the concept of failure implies that any school being converted must be a failing school. Any opposition to conversion is negatively construed as an obstruction and using new powers under the Bill, can be ignored. Second, hidden power is also at play in the consultation process because it is rushed, flawed and manipulated to avoid the discussion of opposing views. Third, the use of invisible power has prevented conflict from arising by controlling the terms of reference of the Academies Commission (Husbands et al., 2013). The Commission was not tasked to revisit the policy decisions to create and develop the academies programme, “but rather to explore a future with a significantly or wholly academised system” (Husbands et al., 2013:04). Fourth, hidden power is at play using the specially created think tank Policy Exchange to conduct research and give academisation a semblance of academic respectability.

Using Foucault’s concept of “Docile Bodies” (Discipline and Punish, 1975), people are and will be regulated in subtle, seemingly invisible ways leading to normalisation and acceptance of systems which do not promote their interests. Many people already have fallen prey to false consciousness and accept the neoliberal belief in less government, and the supremacy of the individual as ‘natural’ and ‘common sense’.

If education is not wrest free from political control, future generations will continue to be fed a
diet of neoliberalism. Martin (2003) bemoaned the lack of a critical, social purpose to (adult) education, and so do I. Education has the potential to transform lives and, in Plato and Aristotle’s ideals, be instrumental in creating a just society and in the *fulfilment* of human beings – engendering a deep concern for the ethical and political. There is a real danger that academies, not unlike Catechetical (charity) Schools of the 18th century, will end up providing an education which supports *social subordination* – teaching a narrow curriculum that will be skills-focused, teaching akin to apprenticeships - training for specific employment, whereby the majority are educated simply to be of use in the economy. One could argue that the seeds of such a society are being sowed in Studio Schools whose students spend a substantial part of their school week on work experience.

In this world-view teachers will be seen as deliverers of a curriculum, and would not need to be qualified or experienced. Already, free schools are exempted from the obligation to employ teachers with QTS. There will be a bank of lesson plans that ‘anybody’ would be able to deliver. In England teachers are no longer trusted nor respected as autonomous skilled professionals who know their subject-matter. Instead, they are provided with proscribed curriculums that they have to deliver in a certain way, with goals other than those of developing deep knowledge and critical thinking.

The invisible hand of power is controlling people through institutions that shape and create meaning i.e. the government, the media and certain academics aligned to business interests. Those who pull the strings of invisible power are able to make people feel powerless by excluding them from the decision-making processes, or by offering only tokenistic consultation (Arnstein, 1969). This sense of powerlessness becomes internalized and seen as the ‘natural state’ of things. “When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you [...] It takes some strength of soul — and not just individual strength but collective understanding — to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard” (Hinson and Healey, 2003:05).

**Conclusion**
Academisation represents the privatisation of a public service (Ball 2007, Beckett 2007). It is about to reverse the historic gain made by the working class in access to education. It represents “a return to a new form of Victorian charity (which does not exclude the possibility of a future transition to a profit-making role). They pose fundamental issues of democracy and of class politics” (Hatcher, 2008:21). Academisation is a contested field and the Government acts as if the case for academisation had been made. The voices of those against this policy are marginalized, ignored and by-passed. Why? Because the academisation process is all about power and is ideologically driven by a neo-liberal political hegemony that has taken root in England since the 1980s.

The academisation process highlights clearly the dangers of how even in the face of great opposition, a government that is ideologically motivated will not hear any dissenting voices and proceed blindly with what it believes as a ‘good’. The way academisation has been promoted should be a wake-up call to all interested in active citizenship and an education that promotes critical thinking – one that permits the challenging and questioning of hegemonic socio-economic structures.

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21 Cited, Hatcher, 2008:21
This can only come about if and only if Education is wrest free from political control. Otherwise politicians driven by dogma will peddle half-truths to “manipulate the school agenda for bigger policy outcomes than education” (Waters, 2013). Politicians are not beyond “consciousness engineering” and remoralisation of the population in order to push ahead with their ideas (Sanderson 1999). There is a wealth of evidence which points to individual socio-economic status as a factor in educational attainment and life chances, yet politicians shrewdly use Education alone to bridge the socio-economic divide (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2007).

Only when there is an open and honest debate can one have a radical rethink of the purpose, direction and control of our education system, whether for children or adults. I like Mike Waters’ (2013) idea of a permanent nationally elected National Council for Schooling at arms’ length from politicians and “meddlers and shaded advisors” which places education firmly back in the “control of wider society, employers, teachers, parents and pupils”. It would oversee educational policy and practices in teaching nationally, akin to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). Only then can the teaching profession engage in teaching critical pedagogy, and regain its respect and professional lustre whereby not every Tom, Dick, and Henrietta would deem themselves an expert.

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References


