
Seeking Educational Excellence Everywhere: an exploration into the impact of academisation on alternative education provision in England

CHARLOTTE DEAN

ABSTRACT This article presents a policy analysis of the UK Government's Academies programme and explores the impact that this might have on young people who have become disengaged from the mainstream education system and are thus educated in 'alternative provision' (AP) settings. It argues that the academisation proposals curtail some of the 'freedom to learn' which is currently experienced by young people in innovative alternative provision environments. These proposals potentially limit access to genuinely individualised, needs-led alternative educational provision in England. The article concludes by arguing that the Government is pursuing a top down reorganisation of AP that has no basis in evidence and that as a result, has silenced and further marginalised young people who are already disengaged from the mainstream education system.

Introduction

In recent years, the UK has experienced huge changes in its education system, partly as a result of the 'Academies Programme' which was introduced in 2010. This initiative, driven by a Conservative-led coalition and modelled on Charter Schools in the USA, promised to improve standards by offering greater levels of freedom and autonomy for schools (Cameron, 2010; Gove, 2010, 2011). The impact of this academisation agenda on 'alternative provision' for young people who have become disengaged from the mainstream education system is largely unexplored and forms the central concern of this article.

This article is the result of a policy analysis of the academisation programme, with a particular focus on a recent White Paper [1], 'Educational

Excellence Everywhere' (Department for Education [DfE], 2016) which, it is argued, has issued its biggest threat yet to the most vulnerable young people in our education system. This White Paper centres on the current Conservative Government's plans for all schools to become academies [2] by 2022. It contains several proposals which will affect alternative education provision in England, with the consequence that the nature of 'alternative provision' (AP) and its providers is set to change. The proposals curtail some of the 'freedom to learn' which is currently experienced by young people in innovative AP environments. Ironically, the 'freedom and autonomy' which the policy purports to offer for schools (or in this case, AP free schools) actually works to the detriment of freedom for young people.

The article is largely informed through consulting relevant government documents relating to academisation and juxtaposing these findings with published research about young people's experiences of AP in England.

This article starts by outlining the central changes proposed in the new White Paper and then evaluates the potential impact of these on young people in AP. 'Alternative provision' is not the same as 'alternative education', which is selected by parents and children through their own preferences and choice (such as Montessori, Steiner or Democratic Education). It is defined by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (2016, p. 4) as 'something in which a young person participates as part of their regular timetable, away from the site of the school or the pupil referral unit and not led by school staff'. AP is for children and young people who have struggled to attend mainstream schools and have thus been described as 'disengaged', 'disconnected' or 'excluded'. This might be for a variety of reasons, such as formal school exclusion, behavioural issues, short- or long-term illness, school refusal or teenage pregnancy.

Policy Context

In the past, there has been no statutory requirement in England for local authorities to have any form of AP set up in the locality, and the opportunity to set up an AP has been open to private, voluntary and community organisations such as youth projects, community settings, social enterprises and community interest companies. They have been commissioned by either the local authority or the schools themselves to work with those young people who are proving difficult to engage in mainstream educational provision. These independent providers have often been seen as best placed to engage those young people for whom attendance and re-engagement at a mainstream school seems irretrievable. They are often very small, sometimes catering for just one person, as this example visited by Ofsted shows:

A small independently owned garage that specialises in car electronics; it is run by the owner and one employee. The garage caters for one pupil who attends for one day a week as part of an extended work placement. (Ofsted, 2016 p. 51)

The Taylor Report (2012) was commissioned by the Government to review and make recommendations about the nature of AP in England. Its author, Charlie Taylor, was highly respected by the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, and its recommendations have been largely adopted. This report heavily influenced the proposals outlined in 'Educational Excellence Everywhere' (2016) and contained 28 recommendations for the reform of alternative provision, all of which have been accepted in the new White Paper. Recommendation 28 of this is pivotal to the arguments contained in this article as it states that 'if local authorities wish to open new [alternative] provision, it should be set up as an AP Academy or an AP Free School' (Taylor, 2012, p. 26). This proposal was not entirely new. It was first suggested in Section 6A of the Education and Inspections Act 2006, introduced again by the Education Act 2011 and finally came in to force in relation to AP as an amendment in The Pupil Referral Units (Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations 2012. In practice, this proposal means that by 2022, all current and future forms of AP have to be set up as AP academies or free schools.[3] The question that arises as a result is whether small, innovative, individualised AP placements such as the one described above could survive as part of an academy or AP free school?

Potential Impact of the Academisation Agenda on Young People's Experiences of Alternative Provision

In order to appreciate the effect that this legislation might have on the freedom of choice and access to individualised learning opportunities for young people it might be useful to provide a snapshot of the current AP landscape in England. A report published in 2016 by Ofsted found that the type and make-up of the 448 AP providers visited varied widely (Ofsted, 2016, p. 51). This report was based on a three-year survey of how schools used off-site alternative provision. Providers included youth centres, community centres, colleges, workplaces, special schools, academies, free schools, independent schools, charities and work-based learning providers. Some of these were 'very small one-off establishments' which catered for 'very small numbers' (Ofsted, 2016, p. 51). Thomson and Russell (2009) identified that AP, whilst sometimes being provided by specialist units within a mainstream school, was also delivered via 'various kinds of privately funded organisations and some traditional charities' (p. 433). These smaller providers might not necessarily be able, in terms of infrastructure and/or financial stability, to present the capability required to set up as either an academy or an AP free school. The process for gaining academy or free school status is complicated and consists of a formal conversion process which entails the organisation being established as a legal entity (incorporation as a charitable trust for AP free schools) supported by either a management committee or business sponsor and then embarking upon a full-scale due diligence process. Successful completion requires final approval from the Secretary of State for Education. This process, along with the completion of numerous grant applications, land transfers and commercial transfer agreements,

could prove a major barrier for smaller alternative providers and effectively force them out of the AP arena entirely.

However, there is evidence that the smaller AP providers are frequently more able to provide the enriching and individualised placements for children and young people who struggle to engage educationally and socially within the mainstream environment (McCluskey et al, 2015; O’Gorman et al, 2015; Thomson & Pennacchia, 2016). AP providers currently have the capability to include pupils with a variety of needs, regardless of at which school they are on roll, and this positions these providers as ideally placed to meet the individual needs of young people and, also, the needs and wishes of parents/carers. A major strength of the AP sector is that it has been able to focus on the importance of relationships and communication and on developing the abilities of young people to make choices. As a result, young people have had ‘freedom to learn’ in the ways that suited them best. Thomson and Pennacchia (2016) argued that young people in AP were more likely to be encouraged to take responsibility for their own actions through ‘talking therapy’, getting young people to ‘understand their own behaviour’ and ‘to make responsible choices’ (Thomson & Pennacchia, 2016, p. 624). These are important elements of supporting young people to be able to use freedom responsibly.

That there is a place for AP is not in question. The overall quality of provision appears to have increased steadily since the Ofsted (2011) report on AP which identified that the quality was ‘variable’ (Ofsted, 2011, p. 6). By 2016, it found that ‘almost all the alternative providers visited during the survey were of a reasonable standard and some were excellent’ (Ofsted, 2016, p. 6) Feedback from the children and young people attending AP appeared to be largely positive:

The overwhelming majority of pupils had positive comments to make about the provision, what they were learning, how well they were supported and the impact the provision was having on their behaviour, attitudes, attendance and outcomes at school. (Ofsted, 2016, p. 38)

One young person who was interviewed by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner for England for their report on young people excluded from school said of his experiences within AP:

It’s the environment. It’s a totally different atmosphere. It’s not the same routine every day. You get to do different things. You get to talk to your key worker. They’ll talk to you one to one which helps. (Office of the Children’s Commissioner, 2012, p. 115)

What is in question, however, is the continuing ability of these smaller providers to maintain the autonomy and the freedom that best places them to respond to the needs of individual children and young people and, in turn, to offer them a freedom to learn. The greatest threat for these small providers without the means and infrastructure to convert to academy or free school

entities is the ultimate control and homogenisation that being at the behest of academisation may bring. This concern was expressed in comments made in the DfE (2012) consultation on the Taylor (2012) report that the proposed approach of conversion of AP to academies and free schools would not allow the space for developments such as 'new innovative partnerships', or other arrangements that might suit local circumstances and the needs of children and young people (DfE, 2012, p. 4). Daniels et al (2003) found that, when staff within AP were asked to describe the factors that they believed contributed to the success of their work, they emphasised that it was imperative that they made the time to 'listen to and talk non-judgementally and empathetically to the young people'. They also noted that if they were to become too dominated by an 'academic' and 'achievement' orientation that necessitated large group teaching at the expense of individual work, they feared that this would reduce their capacity to find time for relationship building and addressing young people's emotional needs (Daniels et al, 2003, p. 64).

Instead of dealing with some of the issues highlighted in this article, the Government appears to be pursuing a top down reorganisation of AP that has no basis in evidence. There has been no thorough analysis of the complex issues that the AP sector faces, and feedback from those working in the sector has consisted of a rudimentary six-week consultation which gathered the views of just 86 respondents (DfE, 2012). The most frequently raised concern arising from the consultation was that there was no room to disagree with the policy intentions as the questions were about how to implement decisions that the Government had already taken (DfE, 2012, p. 7). Perhaps more unsettling is the lack of consultation with the young people for whom such provision exists, young people who are already marginalised from the mainstream education system and whose voices are seldom heard.

The effects of these proposals will potentially be both far-reaching and long lasting and will no doubt have ramifications for the freedom of choice for young people already disengaged from education. Perhaps the greatest and hitherto unknown impact will be on those smaller AP providers such as charities, workplaces and independent providers who are meeting the needs of those young people for whom attendance at larger, more homogenised providers would be very challenging.

Notes

- [1] White Papers are policy documents produced by the Government that set out their proposals for future legislation in England. Plans announced by ministers do not apply to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where education policy is devolved and where academies do not exist.
- [2] Academies are independent, state-funded schools, which receive their funding directly from central government, rather than through a local authority.

- [3] Free schools are funded by the Government but are not run by the local authority. They are not required to deliver the National Curriculum and may be sponsored by universities, colleges and/or businesses and employers.

References

- Cameron, D. (2010), We Will Make Government Accountable to the People. Speech at the Civil Service Conference, London, 8 July.
www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/07/David_Cameron_We_will_make_government_accountable_to_the_people.aspx (accessed 5 August 2011).
- Daniels, H., Cole, T., Sellman, E., Sutton, J. & Visser, J. with Bedward, J. (2003) Study of Young People Excluded from School. DfES Research Report RR405, School of Education, University of Birmingham.
- Department for Education (DfE) (2012) The Consultation on Reform of Alternative Provision: a summary of responses. 3 April. London: DfE Publications.
- Department for Education (DfE) (2016) Educational Excellence Everywhere.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/educational-excellence-everywhere> (accessed 9 June 2016).
- Gove, M. (2010) Speech to the Association of School and College Leaders.
www.governmentinitiativesiq.com/michaelGoveFinal.pdf (accessed 5 August 2011).
- Gove, M. (2011) Speech on Free Schools. Speech at The Policy Exchange, London, 20 June. www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/speeches/a0077948/michael-goves-speech-to-the-policy-exchangeon-free-schools (accessed 9 August 2011).
- McCluskey, G., Riddell, S. & Weedon, E. (2015) Children's Rights, School Exclusion and Alternative Educational Provision, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 19(6), 595-607. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2014.961677>
- Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (2011) Alternative Provision.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/alternative-provision-education-outside-school> (accessed 9 June 2016).
- Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (2016) Alternative Provision: findings from Ofsted's three-year survey of schools' use of off-site alternative provision.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/alternative-school-provision-findings-of-a-three-year-survey> (accessed 9 June 2016).
- Office of the Children's Commissioner (2012) 'They never give up on you'. School Exclusions Enquiry.
<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/They%20never%20give%20up%20on%20you%20summary.pdf>
- O'Gorman, E., Salmon, N. & Murphy, C. (2015) Schools as Sanctuaries: a systematic review of contextual factors which contribute to student retention in alternative education, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(5), 536-551.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2015.1095251>
- Taylor, C. (2012) Improving Alternative Provision. DfE.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-alternative-provision> (accessed 9 June 2016).

- Thomson, P. & Pennacchia, J. (2016) Hugs and Behaviour Points: alternative education and the regulation of 'excluded' youth, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(6), 622-640. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2015.1102340>
- Thomson, P. & Russell, L. (2009) Data, Data Everywhere – but Not All the Numbers That Count? Mapping Alternative Provisions for Students Excluded from School, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13(4), 423-438. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603110801983264>
-

CHARLOTTE DEAN works with young people who are disengaged from the mainstream education system in various educational and youth work settings. She also teaches in higher education in social care, education and youth work and is currently working towards an EdD in Inclusion and Social Justice at the University of Hull. *Correspondence:* charlotte.dean@hull.ac.uk

