

It's not over, not over, not over, not over yet

Resistance to academisation from the inside

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Abstract

Since 2002, the number of academy schools in England has increased – first gradually and then, since the 2010 Academies Act, rapidly. For some, a full academisation of the school system in England appears inevitable. In this paper, however, I explore how new teachers and senior leaders within academy primary schools quietly resist identifying as academy teachers, and in doing so resist the wider process of academisation. This resistance gives those who are opposed to academisation hope that another future is possible, one in which academisation is stalled and perhaps reversed.

Key words: academisation; resistance; teacher identity; Conservative; early career teachers; school leaders

Introduction

I am writing this paper at an interesting time. A new white paper has just been published – *Opportunity for All: strong schools with great teachers for your child*. In this policy paper, the government promises to deliver: 'A fully trust led system with a single regulatory approach, which will drive up standards through the growth of strong trusts and the establishment of new ones, including trusts established by local authorities'.¹

This plan to allow local authorities to run trusts appears to be one in a long line of compromises accepted by policymakers as necessary to advance the academy project. In this article, I set out how such compromises are a result of ongoing resistance to the academy project, sometimes from sources other than those you would expect.

Academisation has been resisted by unions, teachers and parents since the beginning of the academy project in 2002.² Academy schools have a different legal status than maintained, community schools, and this differential status allows academy schools to depart from the national curriculum, employ unqualified teachers and teachers on contracts which depart from nationally agreed terms and conditions, and set their own admissions policies. For teachers, academy schools therefore heighten the risk of diminished working conditions.³ For parents and pupils, academy schools present the possibility of poorly regulated and unfair admissions and exclusion practices.⁴ Within the school landscape as a whole, academy schools contribute to an increasingly

marketised system in which middle-class children who have high levels of cultural and social capital succeed, and children from families with lower socio-economic status find it increasingly hard to compete.⁵ It is for these reasons that previous attempts to fully academise the English school system have been fiercely contested, both at a national and a local level, and I anticipate resistance to continue with the publication of the most recent white paper.

We have a tendency to think of resistance as being external, as creating pressure on an issue from the outside. However, when I researched in academy primary schools for my PhD study, teachers I spoke to were effectively resisting elements of academisation *from the inside*. Continued resistance to academisation, and consequent policy compromises, indicate that (in the immortal words of Grace) 'it's not over, not over, not over, not over yet'.⁶ Despite increasing academisation since 2002, and the feelings of some that academisation is inevitable, there remain opportunities to disrupt political intentions to academise the maintained system of education in England.⁷

I start this article with a brief overview of the academies movement in England, focusing on resistance and compromises. In the following two sections, I explore how classroom teachers and school leaders working in academy primary schools resisted academisation using various discursive strategies. I have previously published these as separate papers (focused on executive leaders and on early career teachers), but the present article provides me with the opportunity to bring the findings from both together, to argue how resistance to academisation can be identified both within, as well as outside, academy schools.⁸

The research which this article draws from was conducted in 2018-2019, across two contrasting multi-academy trusts (MATs) in England. One MAT was large, focused on the primary phase and had a national reach. The other had a local focus, included both primary and secondary schools, and was much smaller. In each trust, I conducted research in two schools, so four primary schools in total were involved in the research. All of the schools involved in the research were primaries, and none had been forcibly converted to academy status. All names given are pseudonyms, to enhance the anonymity of individual participants, schools and trusts.

Academy schools in England: a history of resistance and compromise

Academy schools were initially developed under New Labour as an alternative to local authority management, considered to be a barrier to innovation and radical reform.⁹ Both the legal justification for (and the beating neoliberal heart of) the early New Labour academies can be traced back to the city technology colleges (CTCs) introduced as part of Kenneth Baker's 1988 Education Reform Act, but CTCs were so few in number that the beginning of academies and academisation are generally associated with New

Labour. The reason why CTCs were so few was simple: the plan was that businesses would provide capital funding for these schools, but funding was not as forthcoming as was initially hoped, and as a result ‘the initiative did not progress smoothly and had to be transformed in several significant ways’.¹⁰

The 15 CTCs eventually founded during this period may have remained an oddity within the English education system had Andrew Adonis, the ‘architect’ of the academies programme, not decided they provided a blueprint for improving comprehensives.¹¹ Academy schools were conceived as public-private partnerships, within which experts from successful businesses would provide both financial capital and management expertise to ‘turn around’ failing schools.¹² By 2010, there were 203 academies open, with plans to expand to 400. However, even to open this small number of academy schools Labour had been forced to compromise on their original vision. History repeated itself, as original plans for businesses to provide both funding and managerial expertise to academy schools did not flow as freely as expected. As noted in a special 2008 issue of *FORUM* devoted to academies, ‘[t]he original ideas – that [academies] should be in areas of high deprivation, that sponsors should pay £2 million upfront, that they should be in sparkling new buildings, that sponsors should be commercial companies, that local authorities should be squeezed out – have all gone’.¹³ A series of financial scandals further tarnished the academy programme, and growing research evidence resisted political claims that academisation provided the radical solution to educational failure.¹⁴ By the time Ed Balls was education secretary, a wider range of academy ‘sponsors’ were being sought beyond business, including universities and high-performing schools.¹⁵ High-profile campaigns against academisation had been organised both locally and nationally by groups of teachers and parents, and by unions, providing perhaps the most recognised and explicit forms of resistance to academisation.¹⁶ However, refusal by businesses to buy in to either CTCs or academisation on the terms offered by either the Tories or New Labour also provides evidence of other, less well-known forms of resistance which have nevertheless stalled the progress of the academies movement. Sometimes, resistance can be identified in unlikely places.

The Coalition government, with Michael Gove as education secretary, took New Labour’s academies plan and put it on steroids. The 2010 Academies Act, infamously rushed through parliament with the speed of anti-terrorism legislation, allowed all schools to convert to academy status.¹⁷ Two white papers prior to *Opportunity for All* indicated the Conservatives’ intention to convert all schools in England to academies. In *The Importance of Teaching*, Michael Gove set out initial plans for a ‘school system where Academy status is the norm and more and more schools are moving towards greater autonomy’.¹⁸ High-performing schools would convert to academies (becoming ‘converter academies’) and take over the management of schools considered to be failing (‘sponsored academies’), thereby creating MATs which would function, in many

ways, as an alternative to local authority management.¹⁹ In *Educational Excellence Everywhere*, the Tories promised to make '[e]very school an academy'.²⁰ However, this was the subject of much criticism, with Tory backbenchers vocally opposing plans, arguing it could damage provision for vulnerable children.²¹ Eventually, plans announced in *Educational Excellence Everywhere* for compulsory conversion to academy status were scrapped in what was described as a 'chaotic U-turn'.²² Post-2010, resistance to academisation by teachers and parents continued, as evidenced by campaigns supported by the Anti Academies Alliance.²³ However, the backlash against the 2016 white paper by Tory MPs shows, again, that resistance to academisation was evident in other, more unlikely spaces.

Opportunity for All may open with a boast that 44 per cent of mainstream schools are now academies, and that 88 per cent of these are within a MAT, but 20 years on from the first academies being opened by New Labour – and more than 10 years since the Academies Act – this percentage tells of a continued resistance to and negotiation of the academies programme.²⁴ *FORUM* has been at the forefront of giving voice to educationalists who have resisted academisation, but as this short history has indicated, academisation has also been resisted by businesses and MPs who you might expect would be favourable towards such plans.²⁵ These multiple resistances have resulted in political compromises which have limited the impact and reach of academisation, allowing more than 50 per cent of schools to remain in the maintained sector, despite the drive towards academisation in the past 20 years.

Executive leaders resisting academisation

I interviewed four executive leaders as part of this research project. All had responsibilities above the level of headteacher: Noah was a CEO; Rachel and Margaret were responsible for school improvement across two or more primary academies; and Charlotte managed a teaching school which provided support and development for teachers across her MAT. All had ostensibly chosen to work in the academy sector – at least, they were not working in an academy school because their schools had failed their Ofsted and they were undergoing forced academisation. For this reason, I assumed prior to interviews that their attitudes towards academisation would generally be positive, and that they would identify as academy leaders, primarily by distinguishing their academies and management styles from that of the local authority or of maintained schools. What I was surprised about, instead, was how these leaders worked to emphasise the *similarities* between their academies and maintained schools.

One obvious area in which these executive leaders aligned themselves with maintained schools was in adhering to national terms and conditions for teachers – teachers could expect the same working hours, maternity and sick pay, and holiday arrangements as

those working in the maintained sector. The ability to depart from national terms and conditions once transferred to academy status was constructed by politicians as one of the great benefits of academisation, allowing academies to ‘pay staff more [and] extend school hours’.²⁶ However, when asked about the contracts provided to new staff at her MAT, Margaret replied: ‘at [our] trust we follow national terms and conditions so that’s nice and straightforward’. Similarly, Rachel argued during her interview that: ‘I think these urban myths about well you’ll have to work ‘til five and you’ll get shorter holidays ... No it’s all on teachers’ pay and conditions which is exactly the same as it is anywhere else and there isn’t any difference’.

Rather than embracing the freedoms that academy status allowed in terms of paying teachers differently and changing their working conditions, these two executive leaders emphasised how the pay and conditions offered in their schools were exactly the same as in a maintained school. Of course, it remains that adhering to national pay and conditions in the academy sector is a *choice* made by academy leaders, rather than a requirement, as it is in the maintained sector. Margaret was very aware of other academies in her locality which did not choose to support their teachers in this way, instead cutting employment benefits such as maternity entitlements. Rather than emphasising how their schools offered an alternative to employment in the maintained sector, these leaders were keen to emphasise a consistency between employment conditions in their academies and in other local maintained schools. This indicates a resistance to (and an understandable suspicion of) political discourse which has emphasised the benefits of departing from national pay and conditions. Research conducted by the DfE in 2014 supports these findings: only 24 per cent of schools changed their staff pay structures once they academised, and only 8 per cent increased the length of their school day.²⁷ This suggests that the vast majority of academy schools have retained the working hours, pay and conditions of the maintained sector after academisation, resisting the neoliberal opportunity to disrupt the employment market across schools by creating variable working conditions at different MATs.

Academisation offers freedoms to schools because they are legally no longer managed by the local authority, and this autonomy has been consistently constructed by politicians as one of the benefits of academisation. One of the significant themes in Adonis’s memoir about the early academies is the indecisiveness and bureaucracy of local authority management, which he positions as responsible for stagnation and low standards in comprehensive schools.²⁸ In political discourse, the autonomy of academies has been contrasted against inefficient local government management for the past two decades. Gove’s speech to the Freedom and Autonomy for Schools Association (FASNA) provides just one example of such polemical accounts of academisation:

The liberating power of greater autonomy for great head teachers was not seen as

the most powerful driver of higher standards – as we know it is today. It was seen as a threat. To vested interests. To local authorities ... And you were a threat. Because you were the leaders of the nation's best state schools ... you therefore proved that many of those responsible for state education elsewhere had failed. Failed generations of children, who were condemned to a culture of low expectations.²⁹

It was because of the demonisation of local authority management in political rhetoric from Adonis to Gove that I walked into interviews with senior leaders fully expecting complaints about local authorities, celebrations of autonomy, constructions of the bad old days under local authority management contrasted with positive accounts of the MAT system as a better alternative. But again, this was not what I found. Charlotte, for example, lamented the loss of the local authority in her area, as it was slowly dismantled as a result of efforts to create a school-led system post-2010: 'This local authority had some fantastic advisors that were often in schools, often teaching, and I'm really missing that side of things'.

Rachel and Noah aligned their practices with those of local authorities. Rachel argued that MATs were not really very different from local authorities, as both provided a central team to support schools:

[in a MAT] you have that central team who support you so, if you like, the central team are your local authority but they're there all the time. So I don't think in terms of demands, standards, anything I don't think it's any different. Because you've either got the trust saying, come on, you need to work at these things, you need to improve, or you've got your local authority saying it.

Noah went further and stated that the aim of his large, national MAT was to create a system which would essentially replicate local authority management: 'If we've done our job well, a teacher shouldn't notice any significant difference between being in an academy [in our MAT] from being in a well-run maintained school with a supportive local authority'.

These executive leaders were resisting the position offered to them by politicians as adversaries of their local authorities, who had set out to seek autonomy in an effort to raise standards. Indeed, both Charlotte and Rachel identified their local authority with systems and strategies to raise standards, resisting dominant political discourses which have positioned local authorities as failing. Rather than rejecting local authority management, the aims of these leaders were to try and replace local authority support as best they could within the MAT system.

New teachers resisting academisation

As I have noted elsewhere, there has always been a close relationship between academies

and new teachers.³⁰ The reason for this was partly pragmatic. When experienced teachers are difficult to come by, new teachers can be used to plug staffing gaps, so schools which find it difficult to recruit and retain teachers can resort to relying on newly qualified teachers, and it is probable that due to high-profile anti-academy campaigns by unions, some experienced teachers avoided working in early academies.³¹ More recent research also confirms what has been known to experienced teachers for a long time, that senior leaders employ younger staff because they are cheaper.³² However, the decisions of many academy leaders to actively seek out young, inexperienced staff also reflects more ideological motives. In the brilliant *Factories for Learning*, Kulz shows how a young, attractive staff body was particularly appealing to professional, middle-class parents.³³ Keddie, Duoblys, and Salokangas and Ainscow, researching across a number of different academies, all detail how young staff were prized for their commitment and work ethic, and because they were more likely to align their pedagogical priorities with school leaders' 'vision'.³⁴ Such visioning work appears to be more common in the academy sector.³⁵

Post-2010, political discourse strongly emphasised the benefits of working in the academy sector to prospective and newly qualified teachers. In one address to new teachers, Michael Gove stated that: 'In Ark's academies new and more ambitious maths curricula have been developed by brilliant young teachers'.³⁶ *Educational Excellence Everywhere* detailed a 'possible journey to leadership' for Chek-Yan, who begins teaching through a School Direct route in a MAT and, thanks to the wonderful career development opportunities on offer in her MAT, quickly progresses to leadership, eventually becoming the head of a challenging school.³⁷ In the increasingly academised educational landscape post-2010, new teachers were promised that academies were places where they would have autonomy to innovate, and would be supported to progress quickly. Having worked as a teacher in a primary academy prior to studying for my PhD, I recognised these archetypes: young teachers obsessed with climbing to positions of power as quickly as possible, praising the 'grow your own' mentality of MATs in which those hungry for power and willing to place their students' attainment figures above all else could climb to the rank of assistant head within five years.

I fully expected, when I went to research in primary academies, to find new teachers who had specifically chosen to work in academies because they wanted to progress quickly, or they wanted the prestige of working in an academy. And this was the case for *some* of the new teachers I interviewed, but not all and certainly not the majority. I mainly found teachers who had *fallen* into working at an academy. Julia, for example, gave the following response when asked why she chose to work at an academy primary: 'I work in an academy because that's how my path has gone, not because I've chosen it'. Isabella, when asked whether there was any reason why she had chosen to apply to an academy school, emphatically responded: 'No, it's just a school, yeah?'

New teachers I spoke to played down the differences between academy and

maintained schools, rather than emphasising the benefits of working in the academy sector. Simon expressed this most clearly, saying: 'I've worked in an academy and placement was in a non-academy and there's ... barely anything different'. Zoe made a similar argument: 'I'd say it doesn't matter, does it? Depends on the school. I've been to academies that are completely different and I've been to schools that are completely different, I don't think it means much any more'.

I think, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, that there are two ways to interpret these statements: you can take a paranoid reading, or a reparative reading.³⁸ The paranoid reading is what I explore in my previous article on early career teachers working in academy schools, and would argue that the willingness of new teachers to work in academy schools is indicative of how effective government policy has been in normalising academy status.³⁹ New teachers simply don't consider any more which type of school they should work in, and as new teachers who hold this attitude are willing to work in academies as much as maintained schools, such attitudes fundamentally both support and extend the academy project. The paranoid reading is suspicious and has a negative affect. Reading these statements in this way makes me feel saddened, pessimistic about the future. What hope is there for resistance against academisation when those entering the profession don't care either way whether they work in academies or maintained schools, or don't recognise a difference between the two?

There is, however, another way of reading these statements, with a more joyous, optimistic affect. A reparative reading instead focuses on 'extracting sustenance' from a text; reading it in such a way that you are enriched and revived.⁴⁰ My reparative reading of these interviews is as follows. Academies have specifically sought out young, inexperienced teachers. These young teachers have been promised unrivalled career progression and increased freedom in the academy sector. Despite this, these young teachers appear to feel no loyalty to academies, but instead construct them as just the same as maintained schools. They resist identifying as *academy* teachers. Instead, they identify as teachers, who just *happen* to work in an academy school. Isabella's explanation of why she chose to become a teacher is perfectly illustrative of this:

Like, it wasn't anything, it's just for me, it was about, you know, working in a school; you've got kids, I want to teach kids, that's why. I'm here to make a difference to kids, it doesn't matter to me really which school they come from as long as I'm, you know, making a difference to children ... yeah, so it wasn't about the trust or school.

In identifying as teachers foremost, these new entrants to the teaching profession actively resisted the professional identity of the 'academy teacher'. They showed no loyalty to their academy school, or to the wider MAT which managed it, or to the academy system as a whole. They entered teaching because they wanted to teach, and they went to teach in a school that would allow them to do this, with scant regard for its legal

status. A reparative reading chooses to interpret this as an act of resistance. Regardless of how politicians mess with schools, people will always enter the profession placing children and their best interests at the heart of what they want to achieve, rather than their own career progression or prestige.

Conclusion

In terms of resistance to academies, the reason why these interviews give us reason to be cheerful is the clear lack of loyalty or fondness that either new teachers or executive leaders showed towards academies and academisation. What *was* important to these teachers was the act of teaching, the desire to improve students' attainment and lives, rather than the type of school they work in. This indicates a failure of political discourse to win over the hearts and minds of those in the teaching profession. Rather than creating a cohort of teachers and leaders attached to the academy programme, instead teachers find ways to actively resist identifying as 'academy teachers'. For executive school leaders, this resistance involves positive constructions of local authority management and efforts to retain vestiges of these structures within the new, post-2010 academised landscape. For new teachers, resistance to academisation involves emphasising a desire and willingness to work in any school where they can make a difference, rather than specifically seeking out employment in an academy setting.

Of course, there is a paranoid reading of all this available to us; that academisation is now such a non-issue, it has become so normalised within the school sector since 2010, that even those who are not actively supportive of academisation and academy schools are working in this system. And if this is the case, then what hope is there for rescinding the academy programme? But a reparative reading offers an alternative. These types of resistance, by those working within the academy system, show the inherent weakness of the academy system in England. None of the teachers I interviewed gave the impression that they would be unhappy if academisation were reversed and their school returned to a well-funded, supportive local authority. It is for this reason that those resisting academisation from the outside should be hopeful, in the knowledge that there are those resisting academisation from the inside too, albeit in a different way.

Resistance to academisation on the inside looks and feels different to external resistance. Rather than the explicit protests, backlashes against policy proposals and investigations into various corruptions which have marked external resistance to academisation, resistance by those working in academies has involved consistent resistance to an identity offered by politicians over the past 20 years, the identity of the 'academy teacher'. It is because politicians have failed to make this identity appealing to many in the teaching profession that compromises keep having to be made about the size and scale of academisation in England. And, as long as teachers continue to resist

identification with and commitment to academisation, it remains a pretty easy policy to completely reverse, should the political will emerge. So, despite the claims made in *The Importance of Teaching*, then *Educational Excellence Everywhere* and now *Opportunity for All*, I would argue that the fight against academisation is 'not over, not over, not over, not over yet'.

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Notes

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