

# It goes without saying

## How the neoliberal agenda is endangering inclusive education

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### Abstract

The UK education system is becoming increasingly dominated by exclusive economic and political ideology. The neoliberal agenda marketises young people and encourages them to take part in a competitive system. The rise of multi-academy trusts (MATs) further exacerbates an already inequitable system in which young people with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) are considered invaluable commodities. Coercive political tactics have allowed the education system to exist in this way without explicit questioning, and those in power benefit from withholding the opportunity to critique the system from educational practitioners. This article utilises Bourdieu's concept of doxa to explore the surreptitious privatisation of the UK education system and consider the implications of this agenda for inclusive education.

**Keywords:** doxa; inclusion; special educational needs; exclusion; neoliberalism; marketisation; privatisation; multi-academy trusts

### Introduction

As a teacher of young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), I observed very quickly that when working with the most vulnerable young people in society, social injustice is at its most apparent. Indeed, the UK education system appears to contribute to that vulnerability by problematising and underestimating young people with SEND. I also observed the daily challenges faced by my students as the result of a political predisposition to exclusion.<sup>1</sup> Upon leaving secondary school teaching and beginning my academic career, I endeavoured to channel my anger at these injustices into changing that exclusionary predisposition. However, a tide of neoliberal ideology and policy creation, which has been steadily gaining traction over the previous 40 years, acts as a powerful counter-current to any attempt to reform a system entrenched in elitism and exclusion.<sup>2</sup>

Part of this neoliberal ideology is the increased prevalence of multi-academy trusts (MATs), with the government recently pledging to ensure that every school belongs to one by 2030.<sup>3</sup> I am yet to talk to a teacher who considers MATs a positive development, though there seems a consensus that 'this is how it is now'. The professional concerns of my colleagues and employers balance the needs of the young people they work *with* and the companies they work *for*. In staffrooms and corridors there resides a resigned,

unspoken and mutual agreement that we have no influence on the system around us – that we must acquiesce. Within these web-like systems there is the occasional outlier – the dying breed that is a local authority-run school, beacon bright and battling to stay so, though with the understanding that they must, at some point, surrender. There has been an establishment of norms which are at odds with an equitable, just system. Norms which are the result of neoliberal ideology veiled under the faux-rhetoric of progression.

### **Little by little: the slow creep of the unsaid**

The insidious inclusion of political agendas allows for a subtle shift in cultural attitudes. In Roald Dahl's *The Twits*, Mr Twit slowly adds penny-sized pieces of wood on to Mrs Twit's walking stick and chair until, eventually, she believes she has shrunk.<sup>4</sup> When attempting to redefine cultural and societal attitudes, much as with Mrs Twit's stick and chair, gradual changes allow for imperceptible shifts in what is 'known'. One cannot brazenly hand somebody a bigger walking stick and expect them to believe they have shrunk, but one can drip-feed alterations over days, weeks, years or decades, and modify their perception of a situation while avoiding seismic shifts. This allows for the perpetuation of established information and for the receptors of this 'new knowledge' to wrongly consider its formation autonomous and its acceptance unquestionable.

Bourdieu named the unwritten and unquestioned rules which structure societal and cultural opinion 'doxa'. Doxa relies on a unanimous complicity which allows for these structures to remain undiscussed. To discuss and challenge doxa would obliterate it: 'it goes without saying because it comes without saying'.<sup>5</sup> And to remain unsaid is to remain unchallenged.

Bourdieu's doxa exists in the 'world of the undiscussed', one cannot question what one does not have the language to critique.<sup>6</sup> As education becomes increasingly entrenched in private and economic rhetoric and ideology, it is increasingly difficult for educators to critique it due to a 'lack of available discourse'.<sup>7</sup> In the UK education system, this lack of availability has crucial repercussions, most starkly, that the economic discourses pervading educational policy are promoting an inevitable shift from a focus on social to economic need.<sup>8</sup> Utilising doxa as a theoretical lens allows us to observe the creation of the current status quo, as well as the newly established, impenetrable discourses which shape policy creation and enactment. Current doxa has been established through the slow immersion of education in the private sector, bringing with it the capitalist triad of individualism, competition and marketisation. Disguised as the promotion of self-reliance, these concepts champion the individual to be the driving force behind their own, largely financial, success. A focus on the economic benefits of 'looking after oneself' comes at a price, in that it promotes competition in a capitalist market over the

ethical implications of financial success.<sup>9</sup> This is echoed in an education system which idolises the collection of standardised accreditations, with little thought to the ethical implications of measuring all learners against the same criteria, and considering them less able to contribute to the labour market, and a school's place in the league tables, should they come up short.

## **Marketisation, competition and individualism**

Neoliberalism's influence on the public sector is clear and its dominance of the education sector promotes 'the logic of unchecked competition and unbridled individualism'.<sup>10</sup> One key area in which we see clear competition in education is the use of league tables and the further use of standardised examination results to inform them.

Slee argues that the focus on league tables encourages schools to be selective in enrolling students, reinforcing an imbalanced power dynamic in which schools can choose students in accordance with who can contribute, excluding vulnerable young people and those with SEND.<sup>11</sup> This results in exclusive practices which fail to reflect professional judgements of teachers, or the best interests of pupils, but are only a reaction to external scrutiny.<sup>12</sup> The increasing promotion of inter-institutional competition within education is shaped by complex interactions between the students and educational providers, and focuses primarily on the schools' ability to support students in achieving higher qualifications and enter the labour market.<sup>13</sup> This focus on competition has multiple negative effects, including 'gaming', or any covert measures taken by schools to appear more successful in the league tables.<sup>14</sup> This gaming involves the exclusion of some young people, including those with SEND, the extent of which I will explore later.

Parents, carers and young people are increasingly primed to expect output from educators in the form of examination results which allow them passage into the labour market. The economic concept of possessive individualism, when profit increases as individuals purchase more, no longer only relates to the culmination of economic capital, but increasingly permeates our social relations and expectations.<sup>15</sup> Consumers – in this case parents, carers and pupils – become increasingly concerned with the individual consumption of not only material goods but all services, resulting in a move away from collective benefits of education to a focus on how they can benefit from it individually as customers.<sup>16</sup> Considering students as customers distorts the purpose of education until it appears to be little more than an economic exchange.<sup>17</sup> Terms such as 'freedom' and 'independence' saturate governmental rhetoric on academies; rhetoric which fetishises autonomy and claims that this independence will pave the way for further academic achievement.<sup>18</sup> When one boils the process of education down to an exchange of goods (to the input of knowledge and the output of a set of examination results) it becomes increasingly focused on the needs of the individual, not that it

champions differentiation and diversity, but rather that it encourages competition between schools and students in a way which means someone is going to lose. This increased focus on neoliberal ideology and a privatised education system is exemplified in the academy initiative.

## **The rise of the multi-academy trust**

The academy initiative began under the 1997-2010 Labour government as a response to what it deemed substandard local authority education. The answer, it believed, was to enlist a team of private ‘co-sponsors’ to manage schools.<sup>19</sup> The initiative ultimately led to the 2010 Academies Act.<sup>20</sup> As of academic year 2020/21, 39 per cent of schools are academies and 52 per cent of children attend one – the disparity here coming from the lower number of primary academies compared to secondary ones, with 37 per cent to 78 per cent respectively being academies or free schools.<sup>21</sup> Academisation gives MATs responsibility for any school-based decisions; schools cannot leave unless they are re-brokered and, in such a case, they cannot return to local authority management.<sup>22</sup> The government has recently revealed that it expects every school to be part of a multi-academy trust by 2030, with all schools having a consistent regulatory approach which, the government claims, will support its ‘levelling up’ agenda.<sup>23</sup>

The government alleges that this process will lead to ‘great teaching that will raise standards’, a claim which comes as employment practices in UK schools have altered through a focus on neoliberal policies and market-orientated reforms.<sup>24</sup> In 2012, the government abolished regulations which required teachers to have qualified teacher status (QTS). Academies are more likely to hire teachers without QTS than local authority schools, with possible negative implications for pupil outcomes and the working conditions of qualified teachers, and further exacerbating class inequalities.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, this reliance on business-led approaches to recruitment further undermines professional qualifications.<sup>26</sup> For young people with SEND, who particularly benefit from strong subject knowledge, pragmatic pedagogy and a commitment to theoretically informed teaching and learning, this development may be particularly devastating, and their true inclusion within the education system increasingly tenuous.

## **Exclusion and the multi-academy trust**

Persistent disruptive behaviour is the most likely reason for school exclusion, with young people with SEND significantly more likely to experience both temporary and permanent exclusions.<sup>27</sup> Since the Academies Act in 2010, permanent exclusions have overwhelmingly increased. Figure 1 collates permanent exclusion data from academic years 2010/11 to 2019/20 found under ‘Exclusion data’ on the Gov.uk website.<sup>28</sup> School closures due to coronavirus during 2019/20 render the data collected that year

anomalous, though remarkably, there were still 5,057 exclusions, a decrease of just 2,837 from the previous year. For the purpose of this data analysis, I have focused on permanent exclusions:

*Figure 1: permanent exclusion data*

Academic year	Permanent exclusions (all schools)	Exclusion rate
2010-2011	5080	
2011-2012	5170	+ 90
2012-2013	4630	- 540
2013-2014	4950	+ 320
2014-2015	5800	+ 850
2015-2016	6685	+ 885
2016-2017	7720	+ 1035
2017-2018	7905	+ 185
2018-2019	7894	- 11
2019-2020	5057	incomparable

One can see that, since the 2010 Academies Act, there has been a significant increase in the number of exclusions. Analysis of 2017/18 data by Laura Partridge concluded that young people with SEND were five times more likely to be excluded – accounting for 83 per cent of exclusions in primary schools – and that pupils in sponsored secondary academies were 1.5 times more likely to be permanently excluded.<sup>29</sup>

Alongside official exclusion data, ‘school mobility’, or the process of a child moving school outside of usual school transitions, also forms part of exclusionary practice.<sup>30</sup> Young people with SEND are more likely to move schools, potentially corresponding with negative educational outcomes, and this movement is based heavily on the neoliberal concepts of strategic mobility and market choice, a focus which belies its ability to limit academic outcomes and associated repercussions.<sup>31</sup>

### **Climbing the imaginary ladder: marketising the marginalised**

The vast majority of children in the UK will soon be taught in MATs, in which exclusionary tactics are becoming increasingly normalised. For young people with SEND, this could

be particularly disastrous. In an increasingly privatised system, the marginalised, and those who cannot succeed in a mainstream system which lauds the promise of individual success, will never be seen as valuable. When did children become commodities to support league table inclusion? When did parents, carers, teachers, educators of every type, sign up to allow their children to be pawns in a business strategy framed as a 'strategic levelling up agenda'?

Despite the government's insistence that MATs are the only way to ensure 'great' teaching, Wood and Legg's study illustrated that academy staff failed to see any increase to their autonomy, experiencing the same pressures as when managed by local authorities, and that those pressures were hindering successful SEND provision.<sup>32</sup> They also found that there were tensions as MATs attempted a holistic approach across academies while the schools themselves sought to retain their individuality.<sup>33</sup> Homogenising schools undermines individuality, hiring unqualified teachers increases inequitable access to education, and insistence by the government that privatisation of the education system – which, in all but name, the academy initiative is – is implicitly and explicitly excluding the most vulnerable young people in our country. This should not be 'the way things are'. And it can no longer go unsaid.

## Conclusion

Economic discourse has supplanted educational rhetoric and priorities; the economic cuckoo's egg has hatched in the educational nest and, as it arrived unnoticed, its presence has gone largely unquestioned. Crucially, this convenient evolution of educational doxa has required the use of economic rhetoric within schools. Educators are exhausted. They have worked tirelessly through a pandemic and now the new horizon of a privatised system looms. At what point have they been allowed, or had the time or space, to discuss this, let alone object to it? Educators need to be considered in reforms which are not only shaping policy, but readjusting the entire educational system to align with neoliberal ideology, an ideology that eclipses the needs of the most vulnerable students in society. As doxa is established through silence, it is challenged through opposition. And we must oppose it loudly.

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## Notes

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