Editorial

A fully trust-led system?

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In March, the government published its Schools White Paper: *Opportunity for all: Strong schools with great teachers for your child*. The White Paper announced a flagship policy: by 2030 every state-maintained school in England would be an academy and either belong to a multi-academy trust (MAT) or be in the process of coming to belong. A 'fully trust-led system' would deliver compulsory state education. Six years ago, Nicky Morgan found she had to scuttle a similar policy which mandated full academisation by 2022.

Prime minister and education secretary each applauded the policy relaunch. Here was another example of 'levelling up'! Convert all schools into academies, and new targets for improved attainment would be met. But almost immediately the flagship ran on to the rocks. Ministers were forced to withdraw part 1 of the Schools Bill – the legislation to enact the policy – after fellow Conservatives in the House of Lords, led by former education secretary Kenneth Baker, savaged its proposals. Revised plans may be tabled this autumn by a Tory administration under new leadership, but it seems unlikely these can become law before next summer at the earliest.

Currently there are more than 9000 academies. About 1300 stand alone, while the rest are organised into about 1150 MATs. Together, they account for 39 per cent of primary schools, 43 per cent of special schools, and 80 per cent of secondary schools in the maintained sector. So any full academisation drive has some way to go. Under the present system, each stand-alone academy or MAT is in a direct contractual relation with the secretary of state for education. The associated funding agreements are secret: not even parliament can scrutinise them. The Schools Bill's original clauses, now withdrawn, replaced this individualised approach with blanket provisions covering all academies. It's hard to see that idea surviving. Influential figures in the House of Lords run academy chains. So do major Tory donors. They will persist in opposing any extension of the education secretary's power to regulate not just financial matters but also, as the Bill allows, the nature of the curriculum and the quality of education academies provide.

To watch long-standing proponents and beneficiaries of academisation such as Lord Agnew and Lord Nash torpedo their own government's policy afforded a certain amusement, not least to those of us who oppose this policy in the name of comprehensive education. We remember how Kenneth Baker long ago dreamed up city technology colleges as a mechanism to by-pass local education authorities and fund schools directly, strengthening central government's grip. When New Labour revamped this idea in the guise of city academies, *FORUM*'s editor, Clyde Chitty, was among many

 DOI: 10.3898/FORUM.2022.64.3.01

who warned of the consequences.[1] Albeit the city academies scheme was directed at barely 1 per cent of maintained schools, it spelled the end of a national education system locally administered. It allowed public provision of compulsory education to be taken out of the hands of a community's locally elected representatives and given to individuals accountable only to the Department for Education. The pass was sold.

As Stephen Ball makes clear in the article Jane Martin introduces from the *FORUM* archive, motivation for the city academy policy derived from New Labour's failure to understand 'ideas like participation, community, sociality and civic responsibility', and hence the significance of an ethos of public service. That policy was fuelled by the party's rash, supposedly modernising embrace of the market and its principles, chief among them efficiency and 'what works'. The pragmatic, says Ball, was given leave to trump the democratic.

Many articles in this issue of *FORUM* criticise the present government's renewed recourse to a fully MAT-led system of maintained education. Several chart the anti-democratic structures of governance which distinguish academies, and the consequences which flow from these. How and by whom schools are governed (which isn't quite the same as how and by whom they are run) are questions that bear fundamentally on the quality of young people's education and the way public money is spent. Policy comes into effect through the structured institution of schooling. Because it makes effectual a form of governance, the structure matters. To empower one form of school governance rather than another is to enable one vision of education and prevent another.

Current regulatory structures stop young people, parents, carers and education workers from having any meaningful say in a school becoming an academy or joining a MAT, or from affecting how an academy runs, or even from publicly scrutinising important aspects of the relevant decision-making process. Set up as companies, academy trusts are subject to company law. This shapes how they are governed. Tiers of bureaucracy help obscure the way in which strategic control in a MAT, including the power to hire and fire and to determine the curriculum, rests with a group of unelected private individuals ('members') who generally number only five people, sometimes fewer. As with any fiefdom, power and control can be passed by a MAT chief executive officer to their own offspring. Minutes of the meetings of the most significant governing bodies in a MAT are not routinely published. Accounts do not have to be filed in the same degree of detail as is required of a school under local authority oversight. 'Members' are formally accountable, but to the Department for Education rather than the young people, parents, carers and local communities whom the school purportedly serves. The governance mechanisms built into the academisation policy place in the hands of members control of public assets such as school buildings and playing fields, and of millions of pounds of public monies in the form of school budgets and reserves. Such mechanisms wrest even the hope of formal

influence away from local communities and those who attend or work in the school. Andrew Allen notes in his article that three people head the Academies Enterprise Trust. Unelected, they hold funding contracts to the value of £234 million of public money and have responsibility for 57 schools. How, he asks, is this arrangement acceptable?

The salaries of those who run academy chains are paid from public funds. Some salaries are very high by public sector standards, while teaching unions find that pay for teachers in academies tends to be lower than average. The questionable use of public funds by those who run academies has been regularly brought to light. In 2017/18, for example, £134 million of public money was paid out in 'related party transactions': contracts for services or building work agreed between a MAT and a company connected to or owned by a member or a trustee. The proportion of academies involved in such transactions is increasing, from 67 per cent in 2020 to 69 per cent in 2021.[2]

Andrew Allen's article lays bare just how profoundly undemocratic MAT governance is. Michael Pyke reports on a pair of webinars held by the campaign group *Reclaiming Education* to discuss control of schools, in which Nigel Gann argued that those who govern MATs are not suitably qualified to oversee the education of children. The fundamental antagonism, he suggested, is between those who understand education as a common good to which all have equal entitlement, and those who regard it as a public utility amenable to consideration in transactional terms. It might be inferred that for the latter there is no intrinsic objection to restructuring state school governance along private commercial lines. The government itself likens the members who govern a MAT to shareholders of a company.

Such a simile suggests that schooling for profit remains a long-term policy goal. In their article, Hilary Povey and James Whiting analyse the language of the Schools White Paper to trace its informing ideology. They point out that the word 'trust' appears 138 times in the White Paper's 64 pages, far more frequently than words such as 'happy', 'imagination' or 'mathematics'. But 'trust' is never deployed to mean a strong belief in someone's honesty, veracity, competence and good faith. Ministers dedicated to a trust-led education system, and the school governance structures it engenders, have no truck with trust of that sort. It has long been superseded by mechanisms of hyper-accountability, mechanisms not of trust but of fear.

The White Paper's slippery discourse is also scrutinised by Helen Gunter and Belinda Hughes. They demonstrate the lack of trustworthy evidence which its advocates bring in support of a fully MAT-led system. The authors style these advocates the 'education reform claimocracy' or ERC. Gunter and Hughes draw on the writing of Hannah Arendt to explain why 'tools of deception and concealment' are pressed into service by those who make up this powerful clique of knowledge producers:

> Claims are made for and about academies and MATs: that amounts to rule by assertion. Proclamations are spoken and typed into the public realm as simplifications, fictions and mimicry in ways that conceal. Notably, we recognise how fabrications operate in the ERC … The first problem to be concealed … is that LA-maintained schools are more successful than academies.

Gunter and Hughes go on to trace how local authorities, whose schools bear witness to the failure of the academisation drive, will be co-opted as part of the push for a fully trust-led system.

Academisation has been presented by governments of all stripes as a way to extend new freedoms to those running individual schools. Gunter and Hughes explain how the policy has instead constricted their freedom. The current government's own research, carried out in November 2021 among headteachers of local authority schools who are not pursuing conversion to academy status, found nearly nine in 10 apprehensive that academisation and MATification will mean loss of autonomy with regard to their school's culture, ethos, values and budget.[3]

They are right to worry. Academisation has helped intensify the process whereby education is to be understood as a commodity and teaching as, principally, transmission of content and the readying of students for high-stakes public testing. The unmediated influence exerted by the DfE on those who run MATs, combined with the loss of autonomy for individual headteachers, exacerbates this process. Subject to excessive levels of observation and accountability, teachers are prevented from working in ways that accord more closely with their own values, their practice always at risk of being further standardised and homogenised to suit the straitened conception of education relentlessly imposed from the centre. Catherine Gripton *et al.* explore how academisation has reduced the scope for teachers to make their own decisions about practice. The authors write that the academisation policy has 'diminished and destabilised' structures of support for teachers' professional learning. Their article focuses on primary mathematics teaching. Its implications resonate far more widely, and are amplified by proposals in the Schools Bill for initial teacher education, or, as it's tellingly termed there, 'teacher training'. These buttress the officially sanctioned misrepresentation of teaching, whereby a relational and moral practice is taken to be merely an instrumental one. Yet good teachers are not simply technically competent; they stand in relation to the 'good'.

The gap between an official account and the truth is apparent in that version of academisation which conjured up 'free' schools. David Bray probes it, after offering a succinct insider's account of how this species of academy arose as a manifestation of the global education reform movement (GERM), Govian dogma and the activities of the lavishly funded New Schools Network. 'Despite official discourse', Bray writes, 'free

schools were, in most senses, not free from anything'.

Mass education conceived of as transactional, instrumental and chiefly to do with fashioning for the economy its future workers, seems to require overly punitive approaches to the way behaviour in schools is managed. Barry Dufour offers examples. He argues that some practices now seen as normal infringe markedly on a pupil's or student's rights. They help accelerate the 'slide to authoritarianism' which Diane Reay condemns. The voices and choices of young people – in particular those most marginalised – are denied or repressed in many academies as a matter of deliberate policy. In such schools the disciplinary regime a teacher is exhorted to implement all the better to 'teach like a champion' ensures that a pupil or student will, in Reay's words, learn like a servant.

To challenge the current policy consensus, Diane Reay calls for 'a radically left-wing socially just equivalent' of the reactionary *Black Papers* of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These *Rainbow Papers* would argue for a fairer and more compassionate education service true to an untrammelled vision of the educability of all young people. They would put forward policies and practices for realising that vision, one which chimes with the ideals of comprehensive education. *FORUM* supports this call.

In their ironically titled article, Carl Parson and Terry Edwards snappily rehearse many of the arguments sparked by the academisation policy: its lack of democratic structures, its costly failures, its preening self-promotion. They note the consequences which follow when a MAT is made up of schools in widely scattered parts of the country. Decisions affecting a local community are taken by people wholly lacking in what the authors call 'local allegiance or sensitivity'. Little by little, the authors go on to imply, ground is being laid for the privatisation of schooling.

The standard rejoinder to criticism of academies has been that such schools allow 'what works' to work. Academies improve outcomes. Back in 2015, the House of Commons education committee was unconvinced: 'There is a complex relationship between attainment, autonomy, collaboration and accountability. Current evidence does not allow us to draw conclusions on whether academies in themselves are a positive force for change'.[4]

A report by the Education Policy Institute in 2017 revealed much the same picture.[5] Five years on, evidence that academies improve attainment in high-stakes public tests and exams remains at best mixed. In asserting incontrovertibly the benefits of a fully trust-led system, the government was accused by the National Education Union of cherry-picking statistics. Claims by central government that Ofsted inspection outcomes confirm the superiority of academies over council-maintained schools were rebutted by the Local Government Association.[6]

A fundamental struggle continues in the public sphere between contrasting conceptions of what state education is and how it may best be brought about. Is it to

be a public service available through a system of common schools, or a quasi-private enterprise whose vehicles, the multi-academy trusts, blur, in the words of Helen Gunter and Belinda Hughes, 'the demarcation between the state and the market, and represent the relocation of public issues to private decision-making arenas'?

FORUM stands against a policy of academisation because we advocate a comprehensive education system. That system, a public service and not a public utility, cannot sanction a structure of governance which enables those who control schools to stay remote from a school's community, unresponsive and unaccountable to it in significant ways. Nor one which cuts off schools themselves from many children's services, especially those services which are charged with children's social care, the responsibility of local authorities. By its very nature a comprehensive system cannot accept a curriculum narrowed to the needs of high-stakes testing, or a pedagogy reduced to week after week of test-readying, or the replacement by numerical data of holistic forms of student assessment. A comprehensive system will not finally overcome the grammar/secondary modern divide, or that between public and private provision, in order to countenance so-called 'ability' sets, or allow 'sink groups', or permit the interests of the institution to override those of particular students by, for example, off-rolling them or not entering them for specific kinds of qualification. Rather than suppress the voices and choices of young people, a comprehensive system of education must find ways to harness these in order to enable a more rich and fulfilling educational offer.

Jane Martin and Chris Millward map in detail the historical and political context which they believe has led to the current government's 'inability to match its own diagnosis of the nation's inequalities with a prescription that could begin to address them'. Such a situation, they argue, is 'unlikely to be resolved by new leadership'. They review a century of argument in the Labour Party between egalitarian and meritocratic approaches to education policy, and whether – and how far – to support 'a progressive education project based on comprehensive ideals'. In an echo of Povey and Whiting, they suggest that an incoming Labour administration should adopt 'a new common sense' and promote an education system 'underwritten by the democratic essence of the comprehensive principle that will work for everyone.'

A fully MAT-led system falls far short of that 'democratic essence'. It strengthens central government's leverage over maintained schools at the expense of localities. It confirms 'state education' rather than opening a way towards 'a new public education in a new public school' which this journal has advocated. It intensifies the pressure imposed on school staff by those ignorant of the realities staff face. It will not adequately address educational inequalities, and may entrench them further.

The intention to see all schools become academies marshalled within academy trusts has provoked a campaign of opposition. It is called 'Give Us Back Our Schools!'.

Ian Duckett and Mel Griffiths sketch the campaign's rationale, offer material of use to campaigners, and rally support.

In Scotland, there are no academies. Even so, those trying to engender richer democratic practice in Scotland's schools face significant obstacles, as Andrew Killen and Chris Holligan reveal. Their article is a straw in the wind. The Spring 2023 number of *FORUM* will carry more contributions from countries of the United Kingdom which aren't England.

To round off this issue, Colin Richards reflects wryly on the business of school inspection and the nature of inspectors, himself included. Insight, cogency, good sense and good faith can also be found in the edited transcript of the second *FORUM* round-table discussion. With Melissa Benn once more in the chair, academics Robin Alexander and John Yandell, author, campaigner and film-maker Madeleine Holt and headteacher Paula Ayliffe discuss progressive education. Their consideration of the theoretical complexities and practical realities which shape teaching and learning in today's schools offers an antidote to the assertions of the 'claimocracy' handed down in the Schools White Paper by its nameless authors. When it comes to a direction for education policy, Robin Alexander reminds us, we always stand at the crossroads. Let us choose the better way.

Notes

1. See Clyde Chitty, 'A bad White Paper and a bad Education Bill', *FORUM* 48, 1, p4.
2. UHY Hacker Young 2022 *Academies Benchmark Report*, p3.
3. See IFF Research, *Schools' views on the perceived benefits and obstacles to joining a multiacademy trust*, Research report, November 2021, DfE, p67: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1033936/Academisation_research_report_FINAL_NOV_21.pdf
4. House of Commons Education Committee, 'Academies and free schools', Fourth Report of Session 2014-15, p3.
5. See 'The impact of academies on educational outcomes', Education Policy Institute, July 2017.
6. https://www.local.gov.uk/analysis-ofsted-inspection-outcomes-school-type