

The Schools White Paper (2022) and ‘regimes of truth’

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Abstract

In this polemical piece, we begin by arguing that the Schools White Paper (2022) is framed within, and seeks to promulgate, a right-wing ‘regime of truth’. We interrogate the vocabulary of the Paper to reveal and challenge its ‘truths’ – about the curriculum and its ‘delivery’; the testing and examination regime; behaviour; and initial teacher education and the associated pedagogy. We then argue that the requirement for all schools to join ‘strong’ multi-academy trusts (MATs) is an intimate part of this agenda, not an optional add-on: the Department for Education employs MAT CEOs in every part of the system; MATs operate autocratically; and there is no local democratic control and no local accountability to communities, parents or children. All this reinforces and leaves unquestioned the centralised governmental control of schooling. We end with a call to fight to establish an alternative ‘regime of truth’ based on respect, reciprocity and democracy.

Keywords: Schools White Paper; multi-academy trusts (MATs); ‘regimes of truth’

Introduction

In this polemical piece, we argue that policies constitute and are constituted by ‘regimes of truth’. We explore the politics and philosophy of the Schools White Paper (2022).¹ Using an analysis of the vocabulary deployed, we try to lay bare the taken-for-granted assumptions, the ‘truths’, on which the White Paper is based and which it seeks to promulgate. We contrast this occasionally with snippets about education as experienced in Finland. The purpose of this is to highlight that other ways of thinking and doing are possible in the contemporary world. Having explored the politics and philosophy of the White Paper and briefly considered curriculum, assessment and behaviour, we argue that the policy of turning every school into an academy is an integral part of the educational approach of the White Paper. The structure is not an optional add-on. Rather, it occupies the same political and philosophical space, is situated in the same ‘regime of truth’, as the rest of the White Paper.

A right-wing ‘regime of truth’

All societies, including our own, have ‘regimes of truth’, by which we mean discourses

that shape how and what we think, that function as if they were true.² Such discourses – thought systems composed of ideas, outlooks, beliefs and practices – construct both us and the wider social processes that legitimate current taken-for-granted ways of seeing the world and the associated relations of power. Policies are very specific and practical ‘regimes of truth’; that is, the ways in which policies are spoken into being and spoken about, their vocabularies and so on, provide ways of thinking and talking about policies that make them sound reasonable, sensible, unchallengeable and common sense. Government education policies, currently framed by and within a right-wing political philosophy, operate in that way.

Thus, in the context of this edition of *FORUM*, even though research shows that academies do not perform better than local authority schools and indeed, that, averaged out, they do worse, the press release for the new White Paper establishes a different ‘truth’: ‘By 2030 all children will benefit from being taught in a school in, or in the process of joining, a strong multi-academy trust, which will help transform underperforming schools and deliver the best possible outcomes for children’.³

The unquestioned and unquestionable ‘regime of truth’ is that for schools or stand-alone academies to join multi-academy trusts (MATs) is an unmitigated good; that ‘strong’ is a key, valued qualifier in schooling; that there are underperforming schools that need to be transformed and this is a significant concern within contemporary schooling; that the required transformation can be achieved by schools being forced into MATs; and that education is to be understood as a process of delivering outcomes. We challenge each of these ‘truths’ and argue that their concatenation is not accidental but has deep political and philosophical roots.

The White Paper: what is education?

To understand why the policy which forces all schools to join MATs is a fundamental plank of the government’s educational agenda, we need to unpack what the view of state education is that the White Paper promotes. A useful place to start is to look at the vocabularies that structure its ‘regime of truth’. ‘Maths’ occurs 46 times and ‘numeracy’ adds a further 30. ‘Literacy’, ‘reading’, ‘writing’ and ‘English’ occur 40, 32, 13 and 22 respectively. ‘Creativity’, ‘thinking’ and ‘critical’ applied to thinking occur not at all. ‘Play’ also is never mentioned, and ‘happy’ is only ever used (three times) in the context of future lives. ‘Trust’ which occurs a massive 138 times only ever refers to groups of academies – if this were not tragic, it would be comic. Compare our proposed ‘fully trust-led system’ with a view of Finnish schooling from an observer from the United States:⁴ ‘Trust. This was perhaps the greatest difference I observed. The Finnish government trusts their municipalities, the municipalities trust school administrators, administrators trust teachers, teachers trust students, and in return, parents and

families trust teachers. There is no formal teacher-evaluation system. Teachers, similar to doctors in the US, are trusted professionals'.⁵

The same observer notes the happiness found in Finnish schools. Our children, in contrast, are amongst the least happy in the world and Britain's schoolchildren are suffering from an epidemic of anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts.⁶

But back to the White Paper and the 'truths' embedded in its vocabulary. The curriculum is narrow and narrowly focused on the acquisition of knowledge (nine occurrences) and skills (16) with pupil understanding referred to just once. Whilst it lacks any interest in creativity or critical thinking, sport (three) and music (two) do get a look in (within a single paragraph) but we were unable to find any reference to practical or vocational aspects of the curriculum. A feature of the curriculum in existing MATs has been its restricted nature. A school principal, on researching a local MAT he might join, said: 'It's just shocking. There's no drama. There's no music. There's nothing out of school that's going on'.⁷

The White Paper does not comment on the controversial curriculum changes made since 2010. They have all become part of the 'regime of truth' and, in case schools should seek to try alternatives, the changes are all subject to external tests to make sure they comply. Synthetic phonics, the rote learning of multiplication tables, grammar taught out of context, compulsory Victorian literature as opposed to female and black writers, the downgrading of speaking and listening and hence of classroom talk, the requirement to write about science practical skills rather than demonstrate them are all examples of how a narrowed, one-dimensional curriculum is now accepted as a 'truth'. Even delivery of the government's highly criticised technical education agenda does not get a mention.⁸ The state-educated pupil is to make do with mathematics and English – there is no mention even of history let alone philosophy or sociology – subjects which might encourage learners to think critically about the world around them and their place in it.

At the heart of the act of teaching is a relationship of love – 'a mixture of *agape* and *philia*', that is, goodwill, benevolence, delight and affection.⁹ This involves responding to learners, and the learning community which they form, with respect, reciprocity and creativity. But not so in the White Paper's 'truth'. There is to be 'a new arms-length curriculum body'¹⁰ which will deliver: 'packages of optional, free, adaptable digital curriculum resources and video lessons that are effectively sequenced to help teachers deliver an evidence-based, high-quality curriculum ... so teachers can concentrate on delivering lessons'.¹¹

Curriculum design is an 'expert skill' and teachers thinking for themselves and responding creatively to learners is a waste of their time: they are simply 'reinventing the wheel'.¹² Since reducing teacher workload is an Ofsted criterion, it is difficult to imagine that headteachers who do not enforce the use of the new resources will escape penalty.

In the White Paper, the current testing and examination regime is completely unproblematised: ‘We will maintain our current system of primary assessment and world-class GCSEs and A levels’.¹³ This despite the nature of what is measured in these tests and how norm referencing and similar practices at GCSE and again at A-level ration the number of pass and higher grades. The unjust nature of our norm-referenced examination and assessment process was exposed during the pandemic when attempts to use it to moderate teacher-awarded grades led to an outcry. But applied to examinations it is hidden and therefore accepted by parents and pupils as fair. Ironically, the White Paper sets a target of raising the average GCSE Maths and English by half a grade. This does not correlate to a rise in ‘standards’, although this is to be accepted as a ‘truth’, because current GCSE grades are not criterion referenced. Ofqual could simply just increase the pass rate. Tim Brighouse and Mick Waters argue that: ‘All externally validated tests and exams should be criterion referenced. We have made the case for replacing a variable and unreliable norm referenced test and exam system, which requires a given number of children to succeed or fail, with criterion referenced assessment’.¹⁴

The assessment regime does not have the broad acceptance that the White Paper implies.

There is an obsession in the White Paper with ‘behaviour (32 occurrences):¹⁵ scholarships are to be provided for teachers ‘who want to develop expertise in high-quality teaching practice’ but, almost unbelievably, this is illustrated by ‘such as behaviour management’.¹⁶ Relationships are never mentioned. Current understandings of ‘behaviour’ in English schools led in 2018-2019 (the last year for which figures are currently available) to 7980 permanent exclusions; the figure for Scotland was five.¹⁷ Reports from teachers and parents suggest that the behaviour demanded, in very many cases, includes, for example, instant compliance to orders and only speaking when invited by a teacher to do so.

A major focus of the White Paper is initial, early career and continuing teacher education. In 2021, the government carried out a market review into initial teacher training (sic) to which initial teacher education providers from across the university sector expressed their dismay. The Russell Group responded to the consultation on the ITT market review with the following:

There is a very clear risk that, in England, the professional body of teachers will in future generations be replaced with a body of executive technicians. Such an outcome would make teaching an occupation that is unlikely to attract high-quality graduates; would provide a limited and limiting capacity for schools to respond to new challenges as they arise; and would have significant long-term impacts on teacher retention and wellbeing.¹⁸

The model of pedagogy the Department for Education is attempting to promote through its core content framework, alongside its narrow factual curriculum, is instructionist and mechanistic, concerning itself mainly with memorisation, retrieval and behaviour management. It omits any reference to child development or the social context of education. 'Truths' related to this technicist approach abound in the White Paper with, for example, 'the delivery of new, cutting edge, intensive training and practice activity' within the initial education of teachers.¹⁹ A new 'minimum quality threshold' will be set with the re-accrediting of all initial teacher training providers against this 'higher standard'.²⁰ To date, only one-third of university teacher education courses have been reaccredited, often because the materials they intend to use do not match the department's intentions. At the same time, teacher recruitment is in crisis.

Thus there is no sense in the White Paper of education understood as a moral enterprise, a shared good for the benefit of all. Rather it is understood as something 'delivered' – the White paper is very keen on delivery (94 occurrences), by itself, by its programme, by teachers – against 'standards' (44 occurrences) and measured only by examination results (with no apparent understanding that, in at least some cases, these are not criterion referenced and so, as we saw above, some children are structurally guaranteed not to make the highest grades). Education is portrayed at a national level as a tool to improve the performance of the economy²¹ – the wider benefits of pupils meeting the government's ambitions 'are estimated to be worth at least £30 billion each for the economy'.²² Success is only ever success for an individual, never for a community. This individualisation of what is valued is at the heart of the academisation programme. During the period of academisation, schools have become more and more unequal and the experience for working-class children more alienating than ever.²³

A 'truth' of the White Paper is that the education envisaged is fair and that all children are included. But despite its title including the phrase 'opportunities for all' and the first sentence of its executive summary making reference to 'levelling up' (11 occurrences), there is not a single occurrence of 'race', 'ethnic', 'black', 'gender', 'social class' or 'poverty', despite the overwhelming research evidence that these are all sites of systematic disadvantage in schooling systems world-wide.²⁴ Individual pupils may be 'disadvantaged' (32) or 'vulnerable' (20); but the social roots of these conditions is entirely absent. This gives the lie to another 'truth': that the White Paper is based on 'evidence' (70 occurrences) and can be described as having a 'rigorous, evidence-driven approach'.²⁵

So why are MATs integral to supplying and supporting this agenda?

There are many good reasons to oppose academies, their absorption into MATs and their spread. Overall, they do not increase attainment; academies employ more unqualified

teachers than maintained schools; teachers are paid less but CEOs of MATs are paid (in some cases much) more; excessive expenditure, including on luxuries for senior staff, is common; and the allocation of contracts to family members or other personal connections is becoming rife – see the Anti Academies Alliance Fact Sheet which draws on a variety of reputable sources.²⁶ The programme is also incredibly expensive. According to research the National Education Union conducted in 2019, the government wasted over £300 million on free schools, university technical colleges (UTCs) and studio schools which either closed or never saw the light of day.²⁷ In addition, the marketing of and competition between schools is a fundamental principle of academisation and will continue, with the consequential dehumanisation of children who become known as numbers, an entry on a spreadsheet or a plot on a two-way grid and are seen as having market value or otherwise.²⁸

The features of MATs that make them integral to supplying and supporting the philosophy and associated practices of education as promulgated by the White Paper are structural: they are in no sense accountable to local communities, parents or, indeed, children. It is the absence of any sort of local democratic control that makes MATs so well adapted to implementing the agenda of the White Paper: ‘In contrast to maintained schools, where decisions are taken by governors appointed through an open process, academies are run by “trustees”, whose opaque appointments are not subject to openness rules which apply across other areas of public life’.²⁹

The White Paper proclaims: ‘It is only through a collaborative system in which everyone involved in education plays their part that we will achieve our literacy and numeracy mission’.³⁰ The word ‘collaborative’ implies a partnership between schools but this is far from the model of how the ‘trust led system’ is designed to work. If it were genuinely partnership working, our system would change and develop in response to innovations on the ground rather than have curriculum, pedagogy and assessment imposed from the top.

In their report, Greany and Higham identify other, more autocratic features of MATs: ‘This chapter... challenges the notion that such arrangements are partnerships. Instead, we illustrate how MATs are being incentivized and required to adopt hierarchical and increasingly standardized approaches that limit the autonomy and agency of individual schools’.³¹

They conclude that MATs increase levels of hierarchy in localities whilst at the same time fragmenting the system. They quote a regional MAT CEO who sums up how they operate: ‘We know that some of the most successful [MATs] don’t muck about with thinking about autonomy. Let’s not kid ourselves. We’re not in this to be autonomous. It’s plan A, and that’s what everybody does’.³²

In a previous era when state schooling was provided by local education authorities, some provided innovative, progressive policies – for example, the Inner London

Education Authority set up and maintained a community theatre, supported all attainment grouping and ran a programme of anti-racist education.³³ Others allowed individual headteachers to pursue such policies.³⁴ None of this would be possible in a fully trust-led system. Under the proposals in the White Paper, central government would have control over virtually every aspect of schooling, vastly increasing the power of the Department for Education and giving communities no say at all. The department's 'regime of truth' refuses to acknowledge there is more than one perspective on education: there is only one way of organising a curriculum, one way to assess pupils effectively and, perhaps most worryingly, one acceptable pedagogy.

There are two ways of ensuring that the department's agenda and nothing but its agenda is 'delivered'. One, totally anathema to the Conservative Party, is for the state to control and, for example, issue all curriculum materials, as has happened in some other countries. The Tories' way is more like the London bus model. The route and fares are decided by the state along with health and safety regulations and payment methodology. The buses are run by large multinational companies who pay the workers and keep the profits once the contract has been agreed. This is not too dissimilar from how MATs operate in delivering the government's ideology. The White Paper's reference to the necessity of having 'strong' trusts indicates the government's intention to whittle down the current 1269 trusts to the 'strong' few. Along with Sainsbury's, Tesco and Morrisons, there will be a Harris, an Outwood and a Star in every town.

MATs do not operate according to an agenda over which they have no control. The department has employed MAT CEOs in every part of the system, not only to advise but to act as members of panels implementing the agenda. Instead of subject associations, trade unions, professional bodies and most academics, they are the government's go-to people. They are the new blob. Warwick Mansell's website, Education Uncovered, is the place to go for detailed information.³⁵ The market review into initial teacher education was led by Ian Bauckham (Tenax Academies), with John Blake from Ark. It is unsurprising that MATs (Harris, Outwood, Ark and Oasis) will run the new Institute of Teaching, which will have degree-awarding powers.³⁶ Ian Bauckham now runs Ofqual. The Children's Commissioner is Rachel de Souza, who ran the Inspiration Trust. The HMCI, Amanda Spielman, is a non-teacher executive from Ark. This is just the tip of a large iceberg. It appears, though, that the department has perhaps given MATs too much influence even for its own purposes. At the time of writing, some of the relevant clauses in the proposed legislation have been temporarily removed for redrafting because their supporters in the Lords, Lord Nash, Lord Askew and others, are concerned about MATs being more centrally regulated and losing their 'freedoms'.

In order to ensure the delivery of the most right-wing education project England has experienced, incidentally one out of kilter with the rest of the UK, the Conservatives have arrived at the school structures they think need to be in place. MATs are seemingly

removed from government, but also immune from any other democratic form of accountability.

Last word

It is said that words can liberate as well as imprison. Returning to our opening paragraphs, we believe that we have to fight for a radically different ‘regime of truth’ in which it becomes common sense that education is a collaborative moral endeavour, humane, imaginative, respectful and loving. To achieve such an education, it is vital that communities, parents, schools, teachers and children all have their voices heard, and that they all are democratically involved in decision-making at a local level. And that means the structures of schooling matter.

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Notes

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7. Quoted in T. Greany & R. Higham, *Hierarchy, Markets and Networks: analysing the ‘self-improving school-led system’ agenda in England and the implications for schools*, London, UCL Institute of Education Press, 2018, p90.

8. Ian Duckett, Pam Tatlow and James Whiting, ‘Towards a comprehensive 14-19 curriculum: a socialist perspective’, *Education for Tomorrow*, 22 September 2019: <https://educationfortomorrow.org.uk/towards-a-comprehensive-14-19-curriculum-a-socialist-perspective/>

9. Hilary Povey and Corinne Angier, ‘Against “progress”’, *FORUM*, 63(2), 2021, pp20-31. DOI: 10.3898/forum.2021.63.2.03

10. Department for Education, 2022, *op. cit.*, p10.

11. *Ibid.*, p28.

12. *Ibid.*, p27.

13. *Ibid.*, p31.

14. T. Brighouse & M. Waters, *About Our Schools: improving on previous best*, Carmarthen, Crown House Publishing, 2021, p590.

15. Public schools are where the elite and the powerful in the UK are educated: see R. Verkaik, *Posh Boys: how English public schools ruin Britain*, London, Oneworld, 2019. The leader of such schools is Eton College. The website for Eton College contains only one sentence about behaviour: the boys should ‘consider their own behaviour and call out abusive behaviour among their peers to end violence and harassment of women’ (International Women’s Day 2022, Eton College). Not for them the coercive control and demand for instant obedience now frequently expected of state school pupils.

16. Department for Education, 2022, *op. cit.*, p20.

17. Figures from Gus John, unpublished seminar, *Socialist Education Association*, 25 June 2022. Professor John also pointed out that black boys were six times more likely to be excluded than their white counterparts and that 90 per cent of permanent exclusions were of black boys.

18. Russell Group, Initial teacher training (ITT) market review: Russell Group response, August 2021, p12: [initial-teacher-training-itt-market-review_russell-group-response-aug-2021.pdf](https://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/initial-teacher-training-itt-market-review_russell-group-response-aug-2021.pdf) (russellgroup.ac.uk)

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26. https://antiacademies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/AAA_academies_factsheet_Sept2018_web-4.pdf
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30. Department for Education, 2022, *op. cit.*, p11.
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33. See, for example, <https://smilemaths.wordpress.com/>
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35. <https://www.educationuncovered.co.uk/>
36. Department for Education, 2022, *op. cit.*, p22.