

The education reform claimocracy and the academisation and MATification of schools in England

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Abstract

An education reform claimocracy is rule by assertion, and in this article we examine the claims made for the academisation and MATification of the provision of and access to school places in England. We examine the claimocracy at work in regard to the Conservative government white paper, *Opportunity for all. Strong schools with great teachers for your child*. We explain the knowledge production processes involved through deploying Arendtian scholarship regarding her work on *Lying in politics*, with specific attention to how concealment operates in the public realm.

Keywords: claimocracy; Arendt; academisation; MATification; knowledge production; education policy

Introduction

It should come as no surprise that the complete academisation and MATification of the provision of, and access to, school places in England is current UK government policy. After all, city academies set up from 2000 were recognised as having such potential by Tony Blair: ‘in a few years’ time when all schools will be academies, we’ll see a transformed education system’.¹ In 2010, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government introduced reforms to include successful schools in the academisation process.² In 2016, the Conservative government announced and then retracted a blanket conversion by 2022.³ More recently, full conversion was back on the agenda when the now former secretary of state for education, Gavin Williamson, stated: ‘I want to see us break away from our current “pick and mix” structure of a school system and move towards a single model, one that is built on a foundation of strong multi-academy trusts, and I’m actively looking at how we can make that happen’.⁴

It is unsurprising too that academisation has generated multi-academy trusts (MATs) as privatised delivery and regulatory chains to replace public local authorities (LAs), with the plan to establish a ‘fully trust led system’.⁵ Significant headway has been made in the full academisation and MATification of the system: 9836 schools have been academised out of a total of 24,454 schools,⁶ and 87 per cent of academies are in a MAT.⁷ However,

while the redesign of the education system now means 4,774,342 million children out of a total of nine million are educated in academies, it is the case that independent research evidence was missing in 2000, and, in spite of over 20 years of system redesign, the evidence is still lacking to support full academisation and MATification.

In this article we focus on this lack of evidence by examining the relationship between education policy and the education reform claimocracy (ERC).⁸ 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, not least because ‘truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings’.⁹ Our argument is that such tools of deception aid concealment, and this is evident in the interplay of academisation and MATification as ‘Macademisation’ – in education some potholes are being filled in with resurfacing taking place, and our task is to dig and reveal the unseen depths hidden in layers of deceit.

The ERC and Macademisation

The origin and development of the academies programme from 2000, and MATs from 2010, demonstrate that assertions matter more than evidence. City academies from 2000 were born out of a desperation to move quickly to make changes in urban provision. The ideology and legal framework of central regulation and depoliticised corporate autonomy that underpinned city technology colleges (CTCs), and grant maintained status, were used to justify the closure and replacement of ‘failing schools’.¹⁰ The 2002 Education Act allowed for the creation of academies outside urban areas where academies relied on public/private partnerships such as businesses, faith and voluntary organisations or wealthy individuals, for example Clive Bourne, founder of the Mossbourne Academy in Hackney in 2004. The change process that became known as academisation encompassed ‘the largest programme of systemic change since the introduction of comprehensive schools in the 1960s’.¹¹ Academisation represented a form of systemic ‘disarticulation’¹² typified by rapid reforms, and contingent, hastily passed legislation, particularly after 2010. This disarticulation had, by 2015, created between 70 and 90 different types of schools in England,¹³ where the formation of chains, federations and trusts led by CEOs enabled the MATification of the system.¹⁴

MATs are groups of schools operating under an overarching trust arrangement overseen by a trust board independent of the LA. They have a legally binding contract with the secretary of state for education and are centrally funded. MATs enjoy certain freedoms, such as the ability to set staff pay and conditions, oversight of the provision

of school places, deciding on timings of the school day and have some leeway over the curriculum. The ERC makes compelling claims for MATs:

The growth of MATs will improve the quality of governance – meaning that the best governing boards will take responsibility for more schools. As fewer, more highly skilled boards take more strategic oversight of the trust's schools, MAT boards will increasingly use professionals to hold individual school-level heads to account for educational standards and the professional management of the school.¹⁵

In reality the MAT structure represents complexity or the ‘tangled hierarchies’ that obscure the private-public divide where state power is recalibrated, reinforcing mechanisms such as ‘regulated self-regulation’.¹⁶ The diversity of school types in a complex hierarchised system embody ‘underlying structures of unfreedom’ where central regulatory control is exercised through powerful policy actors.¹⁷ The MAT then is a ‘political not educational’ structure.¹⁸ MATs blur the demarcation between the state and the market, and represent the relocation of public issues to private decision-making arenas.¹⁹ MATs embody the privileging of private sector knowledge. They ‘structurally facilitate aggressive expansionism’.²⁰

The ERC at work

Academisation and MATification now interplay in a Macadamisation process of surface change that conceals the realities of the dismantling of public education. A sophisticated and complex claimocracy based on state simplifications, the promotion of fictions and the employment of mimicry, continue to be used.²¹

Following Scott (1998), we adopt ‘simplifications’ to mean assertive statements that characterise LAs and inclusive comprehensive school systems as failing, and promote Macadamisation as necessary and innovative.²² A pervasive simplification from the 1988 Education Reform Act through to the current day is the restoration of school autonomy as a condition of productive freedom from local democratic control. In 2008, Michael Gove stated:

These academies, and the city technology colleges which came before them and on which they were modelled, were designed to be free. Free to choose and shape their own curriculum. Free to hire and reward their own staff in their own way. Free to co-operate and collaborate with who they wanted, in the private and public sector, in the way they wanted. Free to exclude disruptive pupils and set their own discipline policies. Free, above all, from local authority control.²³

Such claims are at the core of the Gove *Mythbuster* document that provides selected gobblets of information, mainly about charter schools in the US and the PwC evaluation of academies in England,²⁴ without due attention to alternative data and analysis available at the time.²⁵

While new freedoms have been technically awarded, school autonomy has actually been limited through schools joining MATs. Control over the school is at once removed from the head's office and is now located in the MAT head office. Collaboration between schools is not new, but traditional LA terminology such as 'family of schools' is being re-purposed in order to comfort the leader of radical changes proposed in policy texts.²⁶ LAs are condemned as denying freedoms, but MATs are allowed to take away freedoms because they are deemed to be exceptional: 'the benefits of joining a MAT are strong both for high-performing schools and for those which need greater support – particularly small schools and primary schools, which can call on the expertise of the MAT for better governance and back-office arrangements, and to increase and improve the breadth of their curriculum and extra-curricular activities'.²⁷

Such simplifications are based on and generate *fictions* as narrative aspirations that do the same job as fairy stories.²⁸ Adonis witnessed the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition from 2010 take forward and expand the programme, and he argued that: 'academies have now passed the thousand mark, but academies and other successful reforms of recent decades are only the beginning of the transformation of the English school system required for England to be an open, classless and prosperous society in the twenty-first century'.²⁹ The transformation was such that the then Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, stated that:

'Head teachers are growing in confidence as they throw off the shackles of local council control raising the aspirations of children, parents, communities. This movement is sweeping across our country. So, my next ambition is this: 500 new Free Schools. Every school an academy ... and yes – Local Authorities running schools a thing of the past'.³⁰

The circulation of the same ideas and language within a government and between governments (of the left as much as the right) illustrates that simplifications and fictions depend on *mimicry*, or how people are incentivised to promote ideas that are based on belief-based ideology rather than evidence. For example, a headteacher stated: 'Hackney Downs had been a school with such low standards that it was branded by the Conservative government in the 1990s as the worst school in Britain. But with the freedoms the academies have brought with them, Mossbourne has been able to achieve remarkable improvements in standards'.³¹

And a MAT CEO says:

Our development as a MAT has been very much about the regional schools commissioner saying 'we have got these two schools, what do you think, can you help?'. It is very flattering, but we are not flattered into taking a school on: we have very clear strategies and criteria so we can choose. Sometimes we say 'great' and we go in; in one school I brought them in £1million of conditions improvement funding.

We decide on uniform, funding for each of our schools, recruitment, and the timings of the school day.³²

Both extracts illustrate that the actual new freedom is to intensify segregated division in the provision of and access to school places. Independent primary research and investigative journalism continue to dig and uncover the realities of what these new freedoms actually mean for children, parents and the profession.^{33,34} Notably, power has primarily shifted to the secretary of state and to approved MAT CEOs who operate as 'little monarchies' in the ownership and control of schools in their realm.³⁵

However, the ERC is struggling with how and why Macademisation is not delivering:

Despite having operated for a number of years, many of the trusts manifested the same weaknesses as the worst performing local authorities and offered the same excuses ... Given the impetus of the academies programme to bring about rapid improvement, it is of great concern that we are not seeing this in these seven MATs and that, in some cases, we have even seen decline.³⁶

It seems that, integral to the construction and telling of assertions, is the need to prevent research-based data and analysis from being narrated, whereby not only is independent primary research defunded and ridiculed, it is also represented as malicious: 'We will show the world that this beautiful experiment in deep and purposeful collaboration will make us the best system at getting better – despite our detractors'.³⁷

The ERC and deception

The claimocracy is manufactured and valufactured through the activities of an oligarchic club who control civil society through significant economic, social, cultural and faith organisations, and who occupy state institutions through the operation of elections, political parties and patronage.³⁸ Knowledge production for Macadamisation is located within this club. Members includes ministers, civil servants, consultants, professionals, researchers, business people, philanthropists, faith groups and think tanks who use particular knowledge, support particular ways of knowing, demonstrate acclaimed knowledgeabilities and are approved of as knowers. We have studied in detail how this club operates regarding what is deemed to be known and worth knowing.³⁹

Importantly, we recognise Hannah Arendt's analysis that while politics is relational and dependent on the fact of human plurality and the potential for natality (doing something new) in the public realm,⁴⁰ the ERC is presented as apolitical because it is premised on constructing problems and providing solutions that use selective data and normative visioning in ways that mean there is nothing to do other than deliver. For example, a comparison of *Better Schools* with *Local Management of Schools* not only demonstrates how, within three years, there is a shift in cover design, paper quality

and textual presentation, but also how by 1988 the crisis in education is presented as one that can only be solved by the corporate colonisation of educational processes, purposes and identities.⁴¹

Arendt identifies two trends that can be used to explain the relationship between crisis production and the ERC.⁴² First, policy interventions are presented through 'opinion manipulation' created by 'public-relations managers in government who learned their trade from the inventiveness of Madison Avenue';^{43,44} and second, policy outcomes are controlled through a self-confident 'game of deceptions and falsehoods' regarding theories, tools and data that are vended by 'professional "problem-solvers" who have been 'drawn into government from the universities and the various think tanks'.⁴⁵

These trends are evident in the White Paper, *Opportunity for all. Strong schools with great teachers for your child*, and this policy text is replete with simplifications, fictions and mimicry that obfuscate what is really happening.⁴⁶ For example, a version of reality is constructed using the language of freedom and autonomy for schools, and – while the direction of travel is the full Macadamisation of the system by 2030 – it seems that the LA is now rehabilitated as needing a 'role'. The case is made that 'local authorities will remain at the heart of the system, championing all children in their area – especially the most vulnerable', but there is a change under way because LAs will 'step back from directly maintaining schools'. This is because:

We will introduce new powers enabling the Secretary of State to bring a local authority's maintained schools into the academy system where a local authority has requested this as part of their local strategic plans, working with them and their schools to shape the local trust landscape. It is important that no maintained school is left in isolation, without the benefits that a strong trust can offer. We want all schools to be in or joining a strong trust by 2030 and will engage with the sector on how best to achieve a fully trust led system.⁴⁷

What is happening here? The original claim for school autonomy in the 1980s was that LAs were problematic sites of unaccountable professional cultures and practices enabled through provider capture.⁴⁸ Hence reforms from the 1988 Education Reform Act onwards have been about ridiculing, dismantling and ultimately abolishing LAs in the name of autonomy. In reality, what has been restored is club dominance in a system of centralised and corporatised regulation with opportunities for club members to privately access and benefit from public resources in the delivery of educational services.⁴⁹

The problems within the framing and exposition of the ERC is complex. While actual school types such as academies, CTCs, grant maintained schools, local management of schools, studio and university technical colleges (UTCs) may themselves fail (schools

open and close based on the market), the rhetorical idea of business autonomy has to be protected. The only way to do that is to eradicate maintained schools in a local democratic system. The first problem to be concealed within the ERC is that LA-maintained schools are more successful than academies and are resisting academisation,^{50, 51} and academies are failing as businesses and educationally.^{52, 53}

A second problem is that ‘facts need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnesses to be established in order to find a secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs’ and it seems that witnesses to the facts of successful LA schools and ERC fabrications are not going away. So the ERC needs to not only promote a different narrative but also to deal with actual and potential witnesses that speak otherwise.⁵⁴

The issue of ‘witness removal’ can be illustrated by events in 2016 when the UK government put full Macadamisation on the table. Prime Minister David Cameron stated ‘that his “vision for our schooling system” was to place education into the hands of headteachers and teachers rather than “bureaucrats”’.⁵⁵ Pushback from professional, local parent/community and research witnesses against academisation tends to be ignored or rejected by the UK government, but in 2016 opposition from Conservative MPs and local councillors meant that this plan was shelved in order to revise the ERC.⁵⁶ Notably, concerns were raised by Conservatives about the operation of the market in regard to local planning, not least the protection of special needs places. The subsequent reworking of the ERC narrative in 2022 means that the ‘role’ of the LA will be to make Macademisation work by and from 2030. As such, the narrative is designed to appease national and local Conservative representatives to accept the changes and not act as witnesses and narrators of a different set of claims: ‘lies are often much more plausible, more appealing to reason, than reality, since the liar has the great advantage of knowing beforehand what the audience wishes or expects to hear’.⁵⁷

Summary

The illusionary appearances of the ERC which replicates, reforms and re-layers falsehoods based on previous claims results in a fraying of facts and a denial of the plurality of ideas, strategies and possible policy options. The actuality of and engagement with the ERC is made believable and actionable, where deception and self-deception interconnect. Simplifications, fictions and mimicry interplay in order to make the trickery with the self and others work because fabrications about and for autonomy are presented as facts. Comparing the progress of Macadamisation in 2016 with 2022 not only shows that the realities of ERC claims are not credible, but also that the push back in 2016 by those required to enable local rule by assertion has itself been concealed by 2022. What has changed is the context in which the dynamics of the ERC is located, where the 81-seat Conservative majority in the House of Commons from 2019 means

that Macadamisation policy is likely to become law despite any continuing opposition from within the national and local Conservative party. What is being concealed is that the club dominates its members in order to protect its wider interests, and the dominated club members are unlikely to risk their own chances for re-election and the party's mandate in government.

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