

Academisation

A balanced, fair, even-handed debate

Terry Edwards and Carl Parsons

Abstract

This conversation grows out of the book by Terry Edwards and Carl Parsons – *How to Dismantle the English State Education System in 10 Easy Steps* (Zero Books 2019). The book was written as a satire, ostensibly lauding the achievements of academisation whilst revealing the commercialised, scandal-ridden, chaotic and ineffective nature of the academy landscape in England. Continuing in the style of the book, this is a conversation between the (pretend) CEO of a multi-academy trust (P) and a (very real) combative opponent of the academisation project (E), weighing up both sides of the academisation debate as the claim is made in the latest Education White Paper that 100 per cent academisation is the ideal.

Keywords: academisation; commercialising schooling; scandals; false claims; edupreneurs

Parsons (AtaBoyMAT CEO). Well, the game is up, Mr Edwards, we are all going to be academies now. At least we hope all will be by 2030. That will tidy things up. RSCs (that's regional schools commissioners) will become directors of education in the revised system and THEY will bring order.

Edwards (Activist against academies). Not so, Dr Parsons. We are not there yet; nearly 60 per cent of primary schools are local authority-maintained. About 20 per cent of secondaries are not academies. IT MEANS THE MAJORITY OF SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND ARE NOT ACADEMIES. At the moment it is an administrative basket-case, poorly regulated, with profligate overspending on some items like CEO salaries and no proven advantage in attainment or in turning schools round. How on earth do you have so-called directors of education, six of them across the whole country, when it's just a renaming of the RSCs? They are area-based, but many multi-academy trusts are spread all over the country with no local allegiance or sensitivity.

P. Yes, but consider how getting all schools into MATs will regularise the system which has become very messy administratively, you have to admit that. There will need to be a bit of juggling. This is the modern age with internet connections and possibilities of virtual collaboration and sharing that defy geography. Local authorities are so yesterday

– last century even. It will be a test to see how many of them accept the invitation to develop their own multi-academy trusts and join the winning team, the future.

E. Let's be clear about the scale of things and how far you have advanced. In the UK there are 10,500,000 pupils, over 600,000 full-time-equivalent teachers in 32,000 schools, 2.9 million students in FE and 2.7 million in HE (November 2021 data). Three-quarters of this activity and these numbers are in England.

Table 1: Percentages of schools which are academies (2021)

Country	Schools: primary + secondary	Primary schools (academies)	%	Secondary schools (academies)	%
England	24,996	20,806 (8,100)	39	4190 (3,306)	79
Scotland	5,052	2,000 (0)	0	357 (0)	0
Wales	1,553	1,219 (0)	0	182 (0)	0
N. Ireland	1,123	784 (0)	0	192 (0)	0

As this table shows,¹ in England, 46 per cent of schools are academies. Only last year did you reach the point of having over 50 per cent of pupils educated in academies. There are still, in 2022, 152 local education authorities in England, locally based, democratically controlled, dedicated to their local communities. There are 1170 multi-academy trusts in England with two or more schools.

P. That needs sorting out and this Bill is setting out to do this. It will be wonderful if the local authorities join 'the team', so to speak, and set up academies in their area.

E. Anyone can see the idiocy of the project. It is currently chaotic, a situation of the Conservative government's making. Now they are trying to repair the problems created by pursuing further the same flawed business. 'In a hole, so dig deeper', as they say. And 'business' is what it is. The numbers above are large but you did not mention the budget for education: £53.5 billion is the projected budget for schools in England for 2022-23. It is obvious why private enterprise would target this area. There is big money to be made by the edupreneurs. Hedge funds, private trusts dressed up as charities, and linked profit-making organisations are making a killing. This is in the same direction of travel as the health service, with the same worrying outcomes as with over-priced and under-regulated privatised prisons for young offenders and privatised facilities for looked-after children. Bosses make big bucks, give poor service and ruin young people's

lives. And we have not the legal powers or the proper oversight of how taxpayers' money is spent. No proper recourse to remedies when things go so obviously wrong.

P. Local authorities were never up to the job. You get energy and innovation from the private sector. Look at the example of Michaela School in West London, run by that hero of good order and high attainment the inestimable Katherine Birbalsingh. 'We make tradition fashionable', it says on its website. Ofsted inspection in 2017 rated it 'Outstanding' on all criteria. North London's Ark John Keats dedicated to values of 'success, tenacity, aspiration, effort, kindness.' Spot on, I would say. The United Learning Trust ('The best in everyone') John Roan School heralds its **PRIDE** ethos; that's '**P**roud, **R**espect, **I**nvolvement, **D**etermined, **E**xcellent'. Lovely.

E. These claims are nonsense, just plain waste-of-time advertising, commercialising rubbish, like so much of the statistics reported in minister Zahawi's recent Bill. The misuse of statistics was indeed challenged by the National Statistics Agency. Academies advertise themselves to the public like burgers and soap powder. Where do these trusts get their names from? ARK 'absolute return for kids'. Oasis Trust. Star Academies. United Learning. Were they dreamt up by advertising agencies? And as for the bran tub of motto words, as with the Michaela and Ark John Keats selection – how utterly unnecessary.

Let me tell you of an excellent comprehensive school in Greenwich, south east London, so popular you have to live within about 300 metres of the school to get in. It has a full curriculum offer with encouragement for the arts. I could reel off a list of such local authority excellent schools. Good results, happy children, ethically managed and a joy to visit.

P. Attainment levels were dropping and behaviour was falling apart under the sloppy, LA regime. The curriculum was loose and too broad. And teachers were too soft. We in the academy sector have a proven record of turning schools around and developing weak schools

E. Rubbish. So many of your claims, like your flash advertising, are shown to be a sham. There are as many academies that have failed as there are LA schools in that category. Don't forget that 'failing' can so often be related to poverty, family poverty. LAs are much better at supporting in these situations, with their wider remit for community well-being – if they are properly funded. This is better than the academies with their obsession with the single, simplistic goal of exam success without attention to wider notions of personal development.

P. Get good teachers and good discipline and clear goals and you get success ...

E. And look at these behaviour policies. They are so restrictive. Some MATs will not allow children to speak in the corridors as they move between lessons, insist that in the yard they gather in groups no larger than six and impose ultra-authoritarian uniform regimes that ape public schools.

P. The recent white paper sets out how ‘Strong trust leaders are relentlessly focused on improving outcomes ... strong MATs can transform previously underperforming schools ... can mobilise expertise ... can utilise evidence-based teacher and staff development’.

E. Stop! You could replace ‘strong MATs’ etc with ‘strong LAs’. More than that, this is an amateurish use of pseudo statistics, even a woeful grasp of statistics, even false, basic reasoning. You select particular examples but ignore the generality.

P. You should have attended the Schools and Academies Show at the Excel Centre in east London, a veritable jamboree of all the academy system has to offer and what its achievements so far are. And how we will go on to consolidate. Even you must see there is no going back.

E. That show, on for two days, was shocking. Why the need for a marketplace for services for schools? And with all the speeches there were scarcely any opportunities to question. Amanda Spielman, Ofsted’s chief inspector, so confident in her support for the government’s move to semi-privatise all schools that she walked off the stage after 35 minutes of presentation and, to the annoyance of teachers and headteachers, refused to answer questions or take comments. Even the DfE civil servants in their stand were embarrassed by this when challenged.

P. Look, we control the schools, we are intricately involved in shaping teacher training with the new Institute for Teaching, involved with colleague organisations in delivering the tutoring and mentoring programme and we are behind the government’s *Levelling Up* agenda that this country so urgently needs.

E. Levelling up in a very narrow way that excludes creativity, imagination and personal development, even vocational courses, all sacrificed on the altar of arbitrary testing throughout the school years.

In pursuing these very questionable ends there is a scandalous misuse of public money with inflated salaries for senior staff – and too many senior staff members. You referred to Ark John Keats earlier: a little over 1000 secondary pupils but 14 teachers listed as head, vice principal and assistant principal.

As if that were not enough, there are the equally scandalous ‘related party

transactions' and opportunities for corruption, and many of the MATs do not submit their audited accounts to Companies House on time.

P. This is minor stuff in the face of what we have achieved over the last 12 years.

E. How can you justify a £340,000 salary for the CEO of a MAT when the chief inspector for schools receives £180,000? Even the prime minister's salary is only £167,000. This is crazy money. And top people's salaries in the academy system have gone up.² This is levelling up, but for the benefit of the haves rather than the have-nots.

P. In a world of neo-liberal, light-touch government this is the way things are done, where you pay the market rate, yes the market rate – we are not frightened of using that term – to get, retain and develop good people.

E. This is what you get when you give very high salaries to people whose motivation appears to be amassing personal wealth rather than promoting the development of young people. Despite recommendations from government committees for a curb in trust executives' pay, the average rise in 258 trusts examined was nearly £7000 in 2020-21. The Harris academy chain boss, Moynihan, earns close to half a million. That is for 50 schools and works out at 13 times the average employee's pay.

P. This is the way forward. We innovate, drive progress and define the future in education. Inequalities are inevitable. High levels of achievement are what we stand for. Getting the best from our students at every stage.

E. If it is so good, so marvellous, why are Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales not following? No European country has decided that education should not be managed by government, central and local. None has gone down this road. Only America can be cited as the model for this sort of education management and can you really advocate an education system as implemented there?

P. It is no use listening to you, all backward-looking nostalgia, namby-pamby, nanny-state nonsense.

E. There is no point in discussion with you. It is getting us nowhere. We have no common ground. For you, it is about data, certainly not about human happiness; only dogma – anti-democratic, privatising dogma.

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Terry Edwards and Carl Parsons are the authors of *How to Dismantle the English State Education System in 10 Easy Steps*, Winchester, Zero Books, 2019; available from all the usual places and from the authors. See also Facebook *Deconstructing Education*.

Notes

1. Figures on school type taken from DfE, *Open academies, free schools, studio schools, UTCs, 2022*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-academies-and-academy-projects-in-development>; BESA *How many schools are there in the UK?*, 2022, <https://www.besa.org.uk/key-uk-education-statistics/>
2. See *How to Dismantle the English State Education System in 10 Easy Steps*, Winchester, Zero Books, 2019, p15 and p85.