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ACADEMIES: AUTONOMY, ACCOUNTABILITY, QUALITY AND EVIDENCE

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AUTONOMY, ACCOUNTABILITY, QUALITY AND EVIDENCE

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A report for the Cambridge Primary Review Trust

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A briefing summarising key issues from this report is also available. The report and briefing may be downloaded from the Trust's website: www.cprtrust.org.uk. The website also provides information and other reports in this series, and about the many publications of the Cambridge Primary Review.

We want this report to contribute to the debate about the future of primary education, so we would welcome readers' comments on anything it contains. Please write to: administrator@cprtrust.org.uk. The report contributes to the Trust's research programme, which includes both funded research projects and this series of specially-commissioned research reviews relating to the Trust's eight priorities.

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ACADEMIES:
AUTONOMY, ACCOUNTABILITY, QUALITY AND EVIDENCE

Prelude

It was a remarkable rhetorical introduction for a piece of legislation which paved the way for rapid changes to the governance of thousands of schools in the initial years of the UK's 2010-15 coalition government.

Michael Gove, who had been Secretary of State for Education (in England) for just 10 weeks, was setting out the case in the House of Commons for what was to become the Academies Act. Introducing the bill to his fellow MPs on July 19th, 2010, he began:

> Today's second reading marks the first legislative step towards the fulfilment of our manifesto commitment to improve England's education system. It grants greater autonomy to individual schools, it gives more freedom to teachers and it injects a new level of dynamism into a programme that has been proven to raise standards for all children and for the disadvantaged most of all. (Gove, 2010)

Gove added, basing his claim on the contested statistical evidence of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's triennial 'PISA' tests of 15-year-olds around the globe:

> The need for action to transform our education system has never been more urgent. In the past 10 years, we have seen a decline in the performance of our education system in comparison with our competitors (Gove, 2010).

This opening to Gove's setting-out of the case for reforms designed to change the governance of state-funded schools across England was extraordinary because each one of the four substantive claims in the quotation above – that schools would be granted more autonomy; that teachers would have more freedom; that the academies programme had already been proven to raise standards for all; and that England's state system was in decline – was clearly evidentially highly debatable, if one is being charitable to the Honourable Member for Surrey Heath.

However, these statements do at least provide a framework against which to analyse the changes which followed, as many schools – including, for the first time, primary schools – opted for, or, in a minority of cases, were forced into, the radical revisions in their governance arrangements which academy status would bring.

Academy status for state-funded schools in England has been the centrepiece of education policy under both the Conservative-led coalition government of 2010-15 and of the Conservative-only administration which followed. In October 2015, the Prime Minister told

the Conservative party conference that all schools should become academies, and that local authorities should become 'a thing of the past' (Cameron, 2015).[1]

Then, in March 2016, the Department for Education published a white paper which promised that all state-funded schools in England would become academies by 2022. This major top-down reorganisation of the structure of English schools was promised despite not having been mentioned in the Conservative Party's 2015 general election manifesto (Conservative Party, 2015). In May 2016, after very widespread opposition was voiced to that plan, including from Conservative backbench MPs and Conservative-controlled local authorities, DfE announced a change of course. It was no longer the case that the government would take on blanket powers to force all schools into academy status; successful schools in successful local authorities - the detailed definition of which would come at a later date - where there was still a sufficient critical mass of non-academies to make non-conversion financially viable - could remain local authority schools. However, the thrust of government policy in trying to push as many institutions as possible towards academy status remained unaltered.

This report is one of twelve research surveys that the Cambridge Primary Review Trust has commissioned in order to build upon and extend the evidence collected by the Cambridge Primary Review and presented between 2007 and 2010 in 31 interim reports, a final report and a research volume (Alexander, 2010; Alexander *et al*, 2010). In this particular case, we focus on an aspect of education policy that was in its infancy during the period of the Review but by 2016 had become both central to the government's reform programme and highly contentious, so this study was doubly necessary.

1 - THE HISTORY OF THE ACADEMIES POLICY

The academies policy was announced in March 2000 by David Blunkett, Education Secretary from 1997 to 2001 (Carvel, 2000). Originally called City Academies and targeted at previously struggling inner-city secondary schools, the policy sought to offer a bold new approach to what was seen as one of education's most challenging and enduring problems: turning around urban comprehensives which languished at the bottom of exam performance tables.

Indeed, its launch followed the high-profile struggles of a predecessor scheme, the Fresh Start programme. This had seen a few of England's most challenging secondary schools given new names, expensive new buildings and a new leader, popularly described as a 'superhead', in an attempt to transform their fortunes. However, the scheme became beset with negative headlines, with the departure of several of the headteachers, leaving ministers to seek something more radical still. The academies programme, which saw existing struggling secondary schools re-open, usually with a new name, under external sponsorship, was the response.

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[1]   Instead, the Conservative manifesto said only that 'we will turn every failing and coasting secondary school into an academy' (Conservative Party, 2015: 34)

The most distinctive element of the programme was that it would hand much power to the sponsor, often a wealthy businessman, who would contribute £2 million and who, in return, would sit at the top of the new school's governance structure, with the government arguing that this would inject new dynamism into its management. Under Labour, the schools also usually featured expensive new buildings.

Formally, academies were set up through a funding agreement or contract between the Secretary of State and the not-for-profit academy trust, headed by the sponsor, which would run the school. The scheme borrowed heavily from the City Technology Colleges initiative, launched in 1988 by the Conservatives, which had created a group of schools which had generally proved successful but with the party never having extended their number beyond 15 institutions, after few businesses came forward to sponsor the schemes (Carvel, 2000). Academies share many features with CTCs, however, including the fact that they are not run under the auspices of local authorities, but are instead accountable directly to central government, with accountability in the case of academies formally going from the Secretary of State to the trust which operates the school. The City Academy scheme also drew inspiration from the emerging model of charter schools in the United States.

The first three City Academies opened in 2002 and, over the remaining eight years of the Labour government, a further 200 were born. With a few exceptions, all replaced schools which had been heavily criticised by Ofsted and/or had poor academic results. Gradually, as ministers sought to increase the number of schools under sponsorship, and with some questions over whether financial pledges were always being met, the financial requirements on sponsors were reduced so that, by 2009, it was announced that future sponsors would no longer have to donate. Up to 2010, all academies were either secondary schools or, in a few cases 'all-through' - educating pupils from the early years through to their GCSEs and A-levels – meaning that the primary sector did not feature.

The establishment of a Conservative-led coalition government following the general election of May 2010 saw the number of schools becoming academies accelerate rapidly. This was made possible by Gove's Academies Act, which he piloted through Parliament under a shortened legislative process, arguing that the benefits were so clear that schools needed to be able to opt for academy status immediately: at the start of the new academic year in September (BBC, 2010).

The Act allowed successful schools to apply to leave the auspices of their local authority and become an academy. For the first time, academy status would be extended to primary schools.

Over the coming two years, the number of academies climbed dramatically, or at 'astonishing speed' (Pearson/RSA, 2013), according to one evaluation of the policy, with many school governing bodies and headteachers believing they would benefit financially from taking on academy status (Mansell, 2011; Bassett et al., 2012).

By February 2016, 1,999 secondary schools had taken on academy status, or 59 per cent of the total number of secondaries in England. At primary level, there were proportionately far fewer academies, at 2,919 schools or 17 per cent of the total, only one in six primaries

therefore having taken on the status since opportunities to do so were extended to the sector in 2010 (DfE, 2015c; 2016).

As the academies programme has become established, chains of academies, known technically as multi-academy trusts (MATs), have become prevalent. At the time of writing, the largest, the Academies Enterprise Trust, had 66 schools.

Changes in the Education and Adoption Bill, piloted through Parliament in late 2015 and early 2016, would see any school deemed to be failing automatically converted into an academy, while even schools not categorised as failing by Ofsted could be forced to become academies if they were defined as coasting on the basis of three years' relatively poor assessment results.

In March 2016, however, in a move which was not signalled in the Conservative Party's 2015 general election manifesto but which had been rumoured during the preceding months, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in his Budget statement plans for all schools to be compelled to become academies by 2022. This statement was followed up the next day by a white paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE, 2016b), where the policy was set out in more detail. The move was widely signalled to herald the largest structural change to the control of England's schools since the 1988 Education Reform Act, and possibly since the 1944 'Butler' Act. The extent to which that remains the case after DfE's decision in May 2016, to make a partial back-track on its plans so that schools served by "more successful" local authorities might escape academy status if they chose, is, at the time of writing, moot. It is not clear whether the removal of the compulsory element of academisation at a national level will mean the majority of primary schools will remain, as now, local authority schools over the next few years or whether most will now academise. However, the move to academy status seems likely at least to be a growing feature on the landscape of English primary education under this government.

The final major element of reform to school structures introduced since 2010 has been the advent of free schools. These are new schools, originally promoted by the Conservatives as to be set up by parents and teachers in response to a shortage of good school places, but increasingly now being established by existing academy chains. There were 271 free schools at the time of writing, including 117 primary free schools (DfE, 2016c: table 1). Free schools are, technically, just a form of academy which are newly-established schools. The discussion below will not isolate them in considering evidence on academies more generally.

2 - AUTONOMY

Returning to that 2010 quotation from Michael Gove, he said that his academies policy would 'grant … greater autonomy to individual schools' (Gove, 2010). Autonomy has been central to the debate about academies throughout the history of the policy, so this paper discusses the concept at some length.

The important questions in relation to this are: to what extent academy status is translating into meaningful autonomy for individual schools; in relation to which aspects of school

provision is autonomy being provided by the academies policy; whether greater autonomy in these aspects should be seen as beneficial to England's education system as a whole and to the pupils being educated within it; and what the evidence says about the benefits or otherwise of school autonomy.

To return to that quotation again, it is not at all clear that the academies policy is, in the reality of the way schools operate under the scheme, straightforwardly and simply 'grant[ing] greater autonomy to individual schools' (Gove, 2010) as billed by the Department for Education. It is true that there are some meaningful extra freedoms enjoyed by academy trusts. However, these may not always obtain at the individual school level, but rather, in the cases of multi-academy trusts or chains of schools, at the overall trust level. And, in the aspects of the business of running a school where greater freedom does indeed seem to have been granted to either individual academies or to the overarching trust which runs them, it seems at least debatable whether this is a positive development.

Overarching and international evidence on autonomy

In Gove's July 2010 speech introducing the Academies Bill at second reading, he said: 'All the evidence suggests that a greater degree of autonomy and freedom yields results for all pupils' (Gove, 2010). Yet during his speech Gove cited only two pieces of evidence in support of this claim. First, he said that City Technology Colleges, the forerunners of Labour's academies policy which had been set up to be independent of local authorities and which had had business sponsorship, had been a success. There is not space here to discuss the evidence with regard to this claim, but the fact that there were only ever 15 such schools means that, even if individual institutions have been seen as successful, their use as evidence for system-wide claims about the merits of autonomy must be questionable.

Second, Gove cited the charter schools programme in the United States. He said: 'Charter schools…have done a fantastic job, free from local bureaucratic control, of transforming the life chances of young people' (Gove, 2010).

Again, there is not space to explore the huge range of studies on charter schools in the United States, which is more extensive than that on academies in England. There is a mixed picture with regard to evidence on the U.S. programme, with the most extensive research available to Gove in 2010 finding that 17 per cent of charter schools saw students achieving better results than their counterparts in non-charter state-funded institutions, with 37 per cent doing worse (CREDO, 2009: 3). Since then, the U.S. charter school movement has been increasingly contested on political, financial, educational, ethical and evidential grounds and it can readily be shown that to use it as a model for school reform in England is extremely risky (Alexander 2016, Berliner and Glass 2014, Ravitch 2015).

Debates about school autonomy in England in recent years have often focused on evidence from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and in particular on its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests and their associated surveys of teachers and school leaders.

For example, the Department for Education told the House of Commons Education Select Committee, during its enquiry into academies and free schools, that 'autonomy and accountability are the two key pillars of academies reform' (DfE, 2013: 2) and that 'international evidence shows that greater autonomy drives up educational standards, and is most effective when coupled with accountability'(DfE, 2013: 1).

In its evidence, DfE cited an OECD study from 2011. This stated that:

> At the country level , the greater the number of schools that have the responsibility to define and elaborate their own curricula and assessments, the better the performance of the whole system, even after accounting for national income. (OECD, 2011: 2)

This quotation related, then, not to all aspects of autonomy enjoyed by academies in England – as will be discussed in greater detail below – but to only two: freedom over curriculum and assessments. Of those two, it is questionable how much freedom English state-funded schools - academies or not - currently enjoy over assessments, with statutory assessments defined for primary schools at the end of key stages 1 and 2 and even English secondary schools, while having a choice of exams for pupils at age 16 and 18 through competing exam boards, having to choose between externally-designed qualifications, rather than designing them themselves. There is more autonomy for English academies in terms of the curriculum but, as will be discussed below, in reality this can be restricted by the assessment regime.

Appearing in front of the Select Committee during its academies and free schools enquiry, Andreas Schleicher, director for education and skills at the OECD, said:

> What our data do show is that school systems which offer a greater deal of school autonomy tend to have higher performance (HoC Education Committee, 2014).

In other words, education systems with high levels of autonomy over various aspects of a school's operations - which the OECD measures through perceptual surveys of headteachers - tended to do better in PISA tests of reading, mathematics and science.

However, even the OECD's evidence itself seems full of caveats, with the variety in aspects of school policy control between the countries in OECD's dataset arguably so great that interpretation – linking different types of autonomy with varying test results as measured by PISA – is very difficult. Schleicher himself conceded to the committee that:

> We cannot say that increasing school autonomy will necessarily yield an increase in outcomes because autonomy always operates in a context (*loc. cit.*).

Indeed, in a 2010 report analysing the findings of its 2009 series of tests and surveys, the OECD concluded:

> Within countries where schools are held to account for their results [and] through posting achievement data publicly, schools that enjoy greater autonomy in resource allocation tend to do better than those with less autonomy (OECD, 2010: 14).

That is quite a complicated, qualified way of saying that greater autonomy may work in some circumstances. The OECD's 2010 report added:

> The PISA results suggest that some features of autonomy and accountability are associated with better performance. However, this is not a simple relationship under which any policy to increase autonomy, accountability or choice will improve student outcomes (OECD, 2010: 105).[2]

The reality of the academies scheme in England, as we shall discuss it in the next section, is that meaningful autonomy has been granted to the academy trusts running individual schools/groups of schools in some aspects of education management, while it seems less prevalent in others. And, while academy trusts are gaining meaningful autonomy over some aspects, sometimes controversially, when an individual academy school operates within an overarching trust covering several education institutions, autonomy over all aspects of policy at the school level may be much *reduced* compared to that enjoyed by the institution if it were operating as a non-academy school with a local authority providing support and oversight.

Given such complexity, the idea of even trying to reach a one-dimensional judgement across countries as to which country provides more autonomy, which less, and whether the one or the other is associated with higher test scores, as seemingly attempted by the OECD, seems fraught with difficulty. So we will move on from considerations of more generalised international evidence on autonomy, to the character of autonomy actually seen in English schools under the academies programme.

To what extent does autonomy exist within academies?

'Autonomy', as understood through England's academies scheme, is multi-dimensional. It needs to be considered both in terms of which aspect of school management is covered and according to whether autonomy exists at the level of the individual school, or at the level of an overarching academy trust sometimes consisting of several or many schools.

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[2] The OECD's questions on school autonomy arguably seem very broad-brush. The section of its analysis of the 2012 PISA results and school principal surveys on autonomy sees it producing two indices of school autonomy for each country: one on 'school autonomy over resource allocation' and the other on 'school autonomy over curricula and assessments'. Consider the following as an example of interpretative difficulties. Under 'school autonomy over curricula and assessments', the survey asked headteachers whether 1 they and teachers in their schools took decisions on 'establishing student assessment policies'; whether 2 such decisions were taken by themselves, teachers or 'regional and/or national education authority', or 'school governing board'; or whether 3 only 'regional and/or [a] national education authority' took such decisions. No UK headteachers are reported as having answered 3. Yet is it really the case that the UK government overseeing schools in England has no influence on assessment arrangements in schools? The question is arguably too complex to be answered meaningfully enough for useful comparisons to be made between countries. The report itself says: 'Some caution is advised when interpreting the degree of responsibility schools have in allocating resources, formulating curricula and using student assessments. Decision-making arrangements vary widely across countries, so the questions posed to school principals were general; thus, responses may depend on how school principals interpreted the questions' (OECD, 2013: 129-133).

The discussion which follows immediately below relates to autonomy at the level of the *academy trust*: the freedom a trust has to run its own affairs, both notionally and in reality. Academy trusts can embrace single schools or, in the multi-academy trust model also commonly referred to as an academy chain, several schools. In the following section, we discuss different types of autonomy, making no distinction between whether this is exercised at the level of an individual school or in a wider academy trust. After that, we will move on to a discussion about whether academies operating as single institutions within multi-academy trusts can be said to be autonomous.

Aspects of 'autonomy' within academy trusts which are most commonly associated with the academies scheme.

The two aspects of autonomy most commonly associated with the academies programme are a freedom to depart from England's 'national' curriculum – 'national' is in quotation marks here because the statutory curriculum does not fully apply to academies – and over teachers' pay and conditions. Indeed, the Department for Education's 2014 evaluation of how academies were using these freedoms mentioned only these two specific aspects of policy when describing the fundamentals of the academies scheme. (DfE, 2014: 9)

The Pearson/RSA report on the academies system, published in February 2013 and based on an extensive investigation overseen by four commissioners, lists academies as having freedom to:

- set their own curriculum, subject to teaching a broad and balanced curriculum that includes English, mathematics, science and religious education
- set the length of the school day and term
- appoint their own staff and set their own staff pay and conditions of service, subject to complying with employment law
- set and manage their own budgets, subject to certain restrictions [relating to running a balanced budget, not generating a surplus of more than 12 per cent of income, and acting in accordance with the Academies Financial Handbook]
- act as their own admissions authority and set their own admissions criteria, subject to following the School Admissions Code
- determine their own governance structures, subject to the inclusion of two parent governors. (Pearson/RSA, 2013: 44-5)

However, there is evidence that notional freedom in some of these areas has not translated into the reality of how academies have operated.

A survey of 478 academies between December 2011 and February 2012 by the think tank Reform and the school support organization The Schools Network found that specific freedoms including the ability to depart from the national curriculum and to set teachers' pay and conditions were relatively low down the list of reasons that schools had chosen to become academies.

The most-cited reason did not relate directly to autonomy at all, but to additional money, with the academies programme widely seen, especially in the first two years of the coalition,

to be offering a financial windfall to schools converting, which was largely hidden in the intricacies of academy funding formulae.

'Additional money' was mentioned as a reason for conversion by 78 per cent of academies (Bassett et al., 2012: 5). By contrast, 'freedom from the national curriculum' was mentioned by only 35 per cent of respondents, with 'flexibility over pay and conditions' cited by only 22 per cent and 'freedom to make changes to the school day' offered as a reason by barely one in eight schools, or 12.9 per cent of the survey (*loc. cit.*).

After additional money, the next most-popular reasons for conversion were a more generalised sense of autonomy: general sense of financial autonomy (73 per cent); general ethos of educational autonomy (71 per cent); freedom to buy LA services from elsewhere (70 per cent); an opportunity to innovate to raise standards (61 per cent); less LA involvement (52 per cent); and seems to be the general direction of travel (44 per cent) (Bassett et al., 2012: 5).

It seems hard to imagine, then, from the evidence of this survey, that schools were embarking on academy status with detailed plans to take advantage of the freedoms with which the policy has frequently been associated.

Indeed, the detailed commentary within this survey report, based in part on written comments by survey respondents, makes this clear. Under curriculum, the report says:

> Only a third of schools…said that obtaining freedom from the National Curriculum was a reason for them becoming an academy…[curriculum changes] are typically minor and often changes they would have made anyway (Bassett et al., 2012: 4).

Similarly, under pay and conditions, the report says:

> Some schools report changing their pay policy in order to pay good teachers more, but two thirds of academies (65 per cent) have not altered staff terms and conditions and have no plans to do so. Many agreed with staff or governors on conversion that they would not make changes (Bassett et al., 2012: 5).

The more recent DfE publication *Do academies make use of their autonomy?* paints a contrasting picture. Under its headline findings, it says 'academies have used their freedoms to innovate and improve' (DfE, 2014b: 6), with a survey of 720 academies finding that '79 per cent have changed or planned to change their curriculum' (*loc. cit.*); that '90 per cent have procured or planned to procure services previously provided by the LA' (*loc. cit.*); and that '84 per cent are now linking pay to performance' (*loc. cit.*).

However, as a briefing for the Local Government Information Unit/Children's Services Network by Kathy Baker has argued, the DfE study suffers from the clear methodological weakness of not having a control group (Baker, 2014: 8). Although the DfE's report states that local authority maintained schools were also surveyed, 'only sixty schools responded so the results have not been included in this report' (DfE, 2014b: 9). Without such a comparison group, it is difficult to be sure to what extent the freedoms reported by academies in their

responses could be linked directly to the policy, or were available regardless of whether a school was an academy or not.

Indeed, a further survey, cited within the Pearson/RSA report *Unleashing Greatness: getting the best from an academised system* (2013), raises further questions. The survey, comprised of 477 respondents of Teach First teachers working across the academies and non-academy sectors, found little difference between the two over most of the areas of possible 'academy freedoms' about which they were surveyed. The survey found that teachers in either sector reported similar levels of innovation with regard to the curriculum, and to change in term length/dates in non-academies as in academies. Only in the category of teachers' pay and conditions were academies more likely to offer their own policies, this survey found. As the commission put it:

> In short, many maintained schools have…introduced extended school days, remedial classes, more personalized learning, improved discipline and [provided] innovative curricula, to give their pupils the best possible education. In other words, most things an academy can do, a maintained school can also do (Pearson/RSA, 2013: 50).

As the Pearson/RSA report put it, as of February 2013, 'use of specific academy freedoms has not been widespread' (Pearson/RSA, 2013: 44). Along with the Reform/Schools Network document mentioned above, it cites a study from 2008 by the consultants PricewaterhouseCoopers - which was the last official evaluation of the academies programme for the government – stating that academies were generally 'operating in similar ways to improving schools in the maintained sector' (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2008 in Pearson/RSA, 2013: 47). Furthermore, the Pearson/RSA report cites a 2012 Ipsos MORI survey of headteachers of schools which had recently converted to academy status, which yielded 'very similar results' (Pearson/RSA, 2013: 48) to those of the Reform /Schools Network document, other than that 50 per cent, rather than a third, of respondents, reported using curricular freedoms.

It is not hard to understand why freedoms which might seem available in theory to academies might not be widely taken up in reality.

With regard to the curriculum, the DfE survey *Do academies make use of their autonomy?* may offer some tentative evidence supporting the hypothesis that accountability pressures – the need of schools of all types to demonstrate improved assessment results – can severely constrain curricular freedoms.

The DfE survey found a sharp difference, within primary academies, between the proportion of school leaders saying they planned to planned to follow the new 'national curriculum' in English and maths – the subjects which are the focus of national curriculum tests - and those saying they would do so in subjects which are outside the national testing regime. So, while 81 per cent of leaders in primary academies said they planned to follow the national curriculum in mathematics to 'a great extent', and 79 per cent planned to do so in English, only 29 per cent proposed to do so in citizenship; 34 per cent to do so in design and technology; 37 per cent to do so in history; and 62 per cent to do so in science (DfE, 2014: 33). Secondary survey results followed a similar pattern, with a very large majority of

academies stating their intention to follow the 'national curriculum' in the core subjects, regardless of having the freedom not to do so, but this becoming less true in the case of non-core subjects (*loc. cit.*).

With the pressures on academies to improve results now ranging from performance tables via Ofsted inspections to floor standard targets emanating from the DfE to the new intervention powers being given to Regional Schools Commissioners, it seems unlikely that any school leadership team will feel able to design a curriculum without considering its possible effect on published results. Thus, although academies may in theory have the freedom to depart from the national curriculum, given that the assessments through which they continue to be held to account are based on the curriculum, this apparent autonomy seems likely, at least in relation to the core subjects around which accountability continues to revolve, to be more notional than real.[3]

Similarly, the theoretical freedom to be able to vary the school day or term needs to be set against the difficulty of making this work given that other local schools, to which parents may also be sending their children, may not be making these changes. Finally, as one of the reports (Bassett et al, 2012:4), states, the theoretical ability to vary teachers' pay and conditions may need to be weighed against legislation preventing changes when institutions change control, or against many headteachers' unwillingness to provoke a confrontation with teacher unions.

Other aspects of autonomy

So there are some aspects of autonomy, which ministers would like associated with the academies policy, which can seem not to be as real as billed. Yet in other respects academy trusts have genuinely been given more freedom than their counterparts in the local authority maintained sector enjoy. However, the question then becomes whether this is appropriate.

Admissions

On *admissions*, all schools become their own admissions authority when taking on academy status. Voluntary aided and foundation schools – other categories in England's complex schools system, which pre-dated the academies policy and are not academies – were already in this position, but many former community schools which have now become academies were not. So the effect of the academies policy has been dramatically to increase the number of own-admission-authority schools.[4] Concerns have been raised about the greater potential this might be opening up for schools to be selective with their pupil intakes, against the backdrop of long-raised worries that England's education system is already highly segregated socially (Pearson/RSA, 2013: 61-2). The Pearson/RSA *Unleashing Greatness* report warns that

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[3] It may be that in some academies, there are meaningful and substantial changes to curricula. But, in the absence of detail about the nature of these in official evaluations such as the DfE's 2014 document, it is hard to evaluate them.

[4] By contrast, community schools see the local authority in complete charge of admissions.

> Academies' autonomy over admissions has attracted controversy and fuelled concerns that the growth of academies may entrench rather than mitigate social inequalities (*Ibid*, 63).

It adds that 'numerous submissions to the Commission suggest some academies are finding methods to select covertly' (*Ibid*, 65).

Indeed, given that all schools are now under great pressure to raise results, and that academies taking over from formerly struggling schools will have been set up with a particular focus on transformation of pupil test or exam grades, it seems appropriate to raise concerns that some institutions might want to engineer their pupil roll towards pupils who might be seen as likely to help the school's statistics.

As the Pearson/RSA report puts it:

> Increasing competition and high stakes accountability, coupled with research showing how over-subscribed schools can manipulate the admissions system, provoke concerns that selective admissions may become more prevalent (Pearson/RSA, 2013: 65).

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers told the Pearson/RSA commission that:

> Successive reports by the Schools Adjudicator show that the propensity for unfair admissions practices is greater in schools which are their own admissions authority (*loc. cit.*).

The Pearson/RSA report cites a string of studies showing that schools that control their own admissions are more likely to be socially selective than community schools, even though all schools, including academies, have to follow a statutory Admissions Code. With the number of own-admission-authority schools having risen dramatically through the academies policy, there must be serious questions as to whether this will increase social selection of pupils. Thus, it is valid to ask whether the increasing autonomy seemingly enjoyed by academies over admissions is appropriate for England's education system as a whole.

Academies are also subject to some other specific provisions around admissions, which do not apply to non-academy maintained schools. Formally, whereas maintained schools are bound to the Admissions Code by an Act of Parliament, academies are regulated through their funding agreements with the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State can also give academies permission to vary their admissions arrangements, through the funding agreement.

Also, if a parent is unhappy about an admission authority's rejection of a place for his or her child, and an appeal to an independent panel set up by the admissions authority is unsuccessful, in the case of non-academy schools, the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) is able to consider a complaint from the parent. The LGO has various powers in this situation, including to ask the admissions authority to hold a fresh appeal with a different panel. By contrast, where a parent of a child at an academy fails at appeal, they can only take

their case to the Secretary of State, who cannot review or overturn a decision. The Pearson/RSA report concluded:

> These arrangements mean that academies do not face an independent layer of accountability and scrutiny to which other kinds of school are subject with regard to appeals (Pearson/RSA, 2013: 80).

The Pearson/RSA report also cited evidence that in some cases academies have reportedly refused to co-operate with other local schools in providing admission arrangements for hard-to-place and excluded pupils: those needing a school place outside of conventional entry times. Though it is hard to extrapolate from such anecdotes, the greater rhetorical emphasis that the academies policy would seem to place on individual institutional freedom may underscore a sense in some schools that they have a licence to go their own way. As the Pearson/RSA report put it,

> Some local authorities fear that increased autonomy could lead to individual schools opting-out of taking their fair share of pupils who face multiple challenges and are consequently hard to place (Pearson/RSA, 2013: 71).

The Pearson/RSA report also mentions receiving evidence of 'unofficial' or 'informal' exclusions of pupils within academies, where pupils are asked to leave without this showing up in official exclusions data. It also cites evidence from the Office of the Schools Commissioner, raising concerns about this happening in academies (Parish, Baxter and Sandals, 2012 in Pearson/RSA, 2013: 71).

It seems, in the case of admissions, that serious questions need to be asked about whether the academies system is really working in the interest of parents and children, or of schools. Giving schools greater autonomy in this sphere seems likely to have come at the price of reducing the rights of parents, and seemingly at the risk of increasing social segregation in state-funded schools. Instead of placing the users of the system – parents and pupils – at the centre, the academies policy seems to lay greater stress on the interest of the school.

Local scrutiny of decisions

There are other aspects of schools policy where there seems to be evidence that *local scrutiny of decisions* is weaker in the case of academies than non-academies. In other words, again, in these cases autonomy would seem to be greater for the individual education institution, but it is not clear that this is a positive development for all pupils, or for the system as a whole.

An example is the powers which education welfare officers working for local authorities have had to check the truancy figures of schools. In the non-academy sector, they have power to visit schools to carry out checks on attendance data put forward by the school. In academies, they have no such remit. Questions have therefore been raised about the accuracy of national attendance data that purport to show that truancy rates have fallen (Mansell, 2014).

Finance and purchasing

Academies' autonomy with regard to *finance and purchasing* also deserves detailed scrutiny. The DfE's latest Governance Handbook makes clear how academies take on responsibilities in these fields which in community schools reside with the local authority.

The handbook says,

> Academy trustees have wide responsibilities to ensure their trust assets and funds are used only in accordance with the law, articles of association, funding agreement and the Academies Financial Handbook. Trustees have wide discretion over their use of funds, and are responsible for the proper stewardship of those funds by exercising reasonably discretion by ensuring value for money, regularity and propriety on all transactions and in all decision-making. [The Education Funding Agency] and independent auditors will look at academies to gain assurance over the regularity and propriety of spending (DfE, 2015: 89).

The House of Commons Education Select Committee, in its report on conflicts of interest in academy trusts, described academies as designed to be 'independent organisations spending public money' (HoC Education Committee, 2014b: 3).[5]

By contrast, local authorities have to account for spending by maintained schools. The LA publishes accounts for its schools as a whole, and subjects them to external audit. 'For this reason,' says the Governance Handbook,

> each local authority has to put in place a system of financial controls that apply to maintained schools in its locality. Governors of foundation schools, voluntary-aided (VA) and voluntary-controlled (VC) schools are also charity trustees and must comply with charity law, in addition to any requirements placed upon them by their local authority (DfE, 2015: 90).

This contrast may help explain why academy trusts have been in the news frequently with regard to concerns over conflict of interests, with the focus centring on what are called 'related party transactions'. These are when trusts spend money on services provided by companies in which their trustees or members have a financial interest.

The National Audit Office reported in 2010 that a quarter of academies responding to its survey 'said their sponsor provided paid services and 44 per cent said they could potentially provide goods or services in the future' (NAO, 2010: 39). Indeed, concerns about this had been reported in relation to early sponsors of academies under the Labour government as far back as 2004 (Stewart and Mansell, 2004).

More recently, the Education Select Committee's report raised concerns, saying that

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[5] This may not be completely accurate, as academies do not operate independently of scrutiny by central government. But they certainly have an independence from oversight through local authorities not experienced by maintained schools.

It is clear that very large sums of public money are being paid to trust Board members and their companies as well as the trading arms of academy chains (HoC Education Committee, 2014b: 4)

via agreements whereby academy sponsors are allowed to provide trusts with goods and services provided they are on an at cost basis. The report added: 'we could not find evidence of whether or how the "at cost" rule is assessed' (*loc. cit.*).

The report added:

The [academies] Financial Handbook states that academies must be able to show that public funds have been used as Parliament intended. At present, it seems that the interpretation of what this means in practice is largely left to individual academy boards and leaders to decide. Most worryingly, it seems that some questionable practices are being signed off [by auditors and the regulator, the Education Funding Agency] within the existing rules (HoC Education Committee, 2014b, 5).

The report, based on a literature review and interviews with 14 senior figures including academy, local authority and trade unions employees, quotes unnamed interviewees giving unspecified 'examples of malpractice' concerning conflicts of interest. These included:

- 'One interview described an academy they knew where the headteacher had spent £50,000 on a one day training course run by their friend. The decision had not been run past the governors.'
- 'One interviewee gave an example of a chair of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) who is also a lawyer specialising in education matters and who uses his company to provide all the legal services for the MAT'.
- 'In one trust, the headteacher's husband has applied for a role within the trust. There was no advert. The husband does appear to fit the requirements for the role, which are quite specific, but not completely since he has never done this exact role before. The interviewee feels it will be difficult for them to turn the applicant down.' (HoC Education Committee, 2014b: 16)

The report concluded:

This view that the checks and balances are too weak for an academised system was common across several interviewees…a common view was that the Secretary of State now has many more schools to oversee than any Local Authority (HoC Education Committee, 2014b: 17).

It added:

There was a sense that the strengths of the academy sponsor model may also be weaknesses. Sponsors are explicitly empowered to intervene and make decisions quickly in order to address underperformance, but this can mitigate against them following due process or considering alternatives to their existing network of trusted friends and colleagues (HoC Education Committee, 2014b: 21)

It also concluded:

> Perhaps the strongest message of all from the interviews was that the checks and balances that we are used to in the public sector are not yet there for academies (Hoc Education Committee, 2014b: 22)

In sum, therefore, the greater freedom academy trusts appear to have to take financial decisions also appears to have created risks.

Governance

On *governance*, the academies structure hands great power to academy trusts to shape their decision-making structures more or less as they choose. This, in fact, is stated almost verbatim in the Department for Education's latest governance handbook for academy trusts and maintained schools.

There are two layers of academy governance: academy members, who sit at the top of the governance structure for a single- or multi-school academy trust, and trustees. The members, who can be as small as three in number - although the DfE recommends that there are at least five - have ultimate responsibility for ensuring the trust achieves its objectives. They sign off the trust's Articles of Association, which is its constitution, and can appoint and remove trustees. In sponsored academies, the lead sponsor has the right to control the governing body by having the ability to appoint the majority of members.

The trustees collectively act as the trust's governing body and must ensure it complies with company and charity law and with the trust's funding agreement with the Secretary of State (DfE, 2015).

One independent guidance document, produced by a governance charity in association with two law firms, underscores the importance of governors, in the academy trust model, putting the interests of the trust to the fore. It says: 'before making any decision, governors should ask the question: 'does this directly further the academy trust's objects?'' (SGOSS, Allen & Overy, and BrowneJacobson, 2012: 13).

The DfE governance handbook states that:

> The constitution of the board of trustees is set out in each trust's own articles of association. Academy trusts have almost complete flexibility to design the constitution of their board of trustees as they see fit in order to ensure it has the necessary skills and capacity to carry out its functions effectively. There are very few requirements relating to the constitution of the board of trustees… (DfE, 2015: 26-7).

The requirements stated in the handbook include that there should be at least two elected parent trustees. In cases of multi-academy trusts, they must either serve on the overarching trust board, which oversees all of the schools, or on each of the local governing bodies for each school. Furthermore, no more than a third of the board of trustees can be employees of

the trust, and fewer than one in five trustees can be local authority associated, including teachers or headteachers at a maintained school and councillors.

In practice, this means that decision-making power, sometimes over large numbers of publicly-funded schools, can be concentrated in the hands of small numbers of people, some of whom can be close associates or friends.

For example, the Aspirations Academies Trust, which at the time of writing controlled nine academies including six primary schools, had only three controlling members over the period of October 7th 2013 to 31 August 2014, two of whom are a married couple (Aspirations Academies Trust, 2015: 1).

Future Academies, a trust set up by the current minister, Lord Nash – who oversees the national academies policy – and his wife, Caroline, includes both of them as two of its four members (Future Academies, 2015: 1). The trust currently runs four schools in Westminster, central London, including three primaries.

A report on conflicts of interest in academies, commissioned by the House of Commons Education Select Committee and published in September 2014, said: 'Some academies have very small numbers of board trustees…who all know each other well and may be related' (HoC Education Committee, 2014b: 13).

It is not clear that the requirements set out in the governance handbook are being met in all cases, such as in the instance of whether all multi-academy trusts have two elected parents. This would seem further potentially to allow academies to concentrate power in the hands of a few decision-makers, who may be remote from their communities.

Andrew Wilkins, of the University of Roehampton, underlined these concerns following a 27-month study of governance which included interviews with 102 school leaders, school governors and parents and case studies of nine state-funded primary and secondary schools: two free schools, three academies, a foundation school and three community schools.

His research reported on a general trend, across all types of schools, away from the stakeholder model of governance, in which the main role of governors was to interact with, and represent the views of, their local communities. This more participatory, or horizontal, form of governance was giving way to something more vertical, where decision-making was controlled by a smaller number of people and the main role of governors was seen as more technocratic. Thus there was in general a more professional culture of school governance, where a commitment to the ability to scrutinise a school's performance and technical and business demands were beginning to prevail.

However, in a presentation of his research in October 2014, Wilkins found this movement was most in evidence within the sponsored academy sector:

> It is a trend which is certainly more pronounced among some academies and in
> particular academy sponsor schools where hierarchical relations of power – between
> the board of trustees and the local governing body for example – limit the scope over

who gets to participate in key decision making and shape the vision and direction of the school (Wilkins, 2014: 5).

Wilkins cited the example of a sponsored academy where the school's governing body technically operated not with decision-making powers, as would happen in, for example, a community or foundation school, but instead merely 'operate[d] as a sub-committee of the sponsor, sometimes called an 'advisory group'' (Wilkins, 2014: 8). This model is quite widespread among academy chains.

The school's headteacher is quoted as saying:

It's a funny situation working for T-ALK [academy sponsor; not its real name] because actually the governing body has got very little power…so actually T-ALK hold all the strings, all the reins of power really and in some T-ALK academies I'm not sure if they've even got a local governing body any more (*loc. cit.*).

A parent governor is quoted backing this up:

Well, they [decisions] are sort of presented as a fait accompli during the meeting really but I've never had access to sort of main board minutes…in a maintained school it's fairly standard that governors have access to all of that (*loc. cit.*).

Wilkins concludes:

If the role of school governors today is to shape the vision of schools and enhance accountability in the broadest sense – to the funders, to the regulatory body, to the community it serves and to the broader public that includes the taxpayer – then governance needs to be more open, participatory and engaged with the wider community (Wilkins, 2014: 9-10).

Thus, while an academy trust running a single school may enjoy some greater autonomy at least over its governance structures, its admissions arrangements and its financial affairs compared to that it would have enjoyed as a local authority maintained school, in the case of an academy operating as one school among several or many within a multi-academy trust or chain, the opposite would seem to apply. That is, such autonomy as there is operates at the overarching trust level, rather than at the school level. Schools within such a framework may well find that the overarching academy trust enjoys much more power or control than that experienced by a local authority in a maintained school set-up.

This centralised control at the trust level is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that several large academy chains – examples include Harris, Ark, Oasis and E-Act – now include the name of the sponsor as the first words in the title of each school. While this could still occur in cases where the schools were not subject to strictly-controlled central management, it does rather imply a uniformity of education experience across the schools within a chain.

Recent articles in the education media may illustrate this point. In July 2015, Ian Comfort, the chief executive of England's largest multi-academy trust (MAT), the Academies

Enterprise Trust, reportedly said there was less autonomy for schools in MATs than there was for those overseen by local authorities (McGauran, 2015).[6]

In January 2016, Toby Salt, the chief executive of another large MAT, the Ormiston Academies Trust, wrote that trusts should be open with schools which might join them that governors operating at the individual school level would have little power. In an article in Schools Week, he wrote:

> Too often sponsors do not communicate the reality that local governing bodies ultimately become sub-committees of the main board, with reduced autonomy. Disguise this at your peril! (Salt, 2016)

Also in January 2016, a third large chain, E-ACT, announced it was scrapping local governing bodies from its 23 schools entirely. They would be replaced with 'academy ambassadorial advisory bodies' (Coughlan, 2016) charged with 'celebrating the academy's achievements' (*loc. cit.*). These local groups would no longer hold their schools accountable, the BBC reported, while they would be 'chaired by someone appointed by the academy chain' (*loc. cit.*). Consistent with its non-prescriptive rules on academy governance, DfE said it was for academy trusts to decide how to administer their schools, and that 'we trust them to decide on the most appropriate arrangements for their trust' (*loc. cit.*).

3 - NEW MODELS OF SCHOOL ORGANISATION

Regional Schools Commissioners

Another layer of influence over England's academies – and, in the near future, also over all other-state funded schools – needs to be considered.

This is the new system of Regional Schools Commissioners, introduced hastily by DfE in 2014 in response to concerns that the vastly-expanded numbers of academies were becoming increasingly difficult to supervise from central government in Whitehall. The RSCs are eight civil servants, each one operating across a region of England, who supervise academies in their area, monitoring their results and seeking improvements; decide on applications for academy status in relation to non-academy schools; can preside over the transfer of schools between academy chains; and generally promote the merits of the academy scheme (HoC Education Committee, 2016).

Regional Schools Commissioners have been given oversight powers in relation to non-academy state-funded schools, monitoring all of those who come into a new category of 'coasting schools', which are institutions deemed to be underperforming on the basis of their

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[6]   He also reportedly argued that there was less autonomy for academy trusts themselves than individual schools enjoyed under the auspices of their local authority, given the supervision that trusts experience through England's Education Funding Agency. Further discussion of that point is beyond the scope of this report.

assessment results. Such schools, if they are not already academies, will be considered by the RSC for academy status.

As civil servants, RSCs take on delegated powers from ministers to perform the supervision of academies. They are answerable to more senior civil servants, and ultimately to the Secretary of State herself. Although the RSCs have been said by ministers to represent a devolution of power towards the regions, in reality they are not accountable locally to anyone; the academies scheme remains a Whitehall-controlled system, now administered more locally (Nash, 2015).

The only element of connection to a local electorate is the structure of eight Headteacher Boards (HTBs), each of which works with an RSC in advising him or her on decisions such as academy applications. The boards generally have eight members, half of whom are the headteachers of successful academies, elected by fellow academy heads in the region, while the other half are appointed by the RSC/Secretary of State or co-opted by the elected headteachers. There is thus no place within this structure, which has the power to take decisions of major long-term importance for school communities, for most stakeholders within those communities. That is: pupils, parents, staff, governors and other local taxpayers and citizens have no say.

The RSC system has also come under criticism, for example during evidence sessions for the Commons Education Select Committee's 2015-16 RSC inquiry, for an alleged lack of transparency. Decisions by RSCs and HTBs are taken behind closed doors. At the time of writing, only very brief minutes are published. These state that decisions have been taken, without giving reasons or even the overall criteria or judgement frameworks against which decisions have been taken. The presence of a number of leading figures within multi-academy trusts on particular HTBs covering regions in which that trust operates has also been criticised as creating potential conflicts of interest.

The presence of this new oversight system, which has the power to transfer schools between academy trusts without even any transparent decision-making process, is also relevant to the autonomy debate. While schools under the academy system may be billed as having more freedom to take their own decisions, in reality if the RSC intervenes amid concerns about a school's performance, autonomy for that institution will be non-existent. In December 2015, a senior figure within an academy chain told the author: 'This idea of autonomy for academies is dead.' In autumn 2015, the founders of a free school in Northumberland seemed to underline this point, complaining that they were being forced by the Department for Education into the arms of an academy chain not based in the north-east after failing an Ofsted report. One of the founders was quoted as saying:

> We are astonished that the department is expecting a decision from the school without any documentation whatsoever setting out the terms of the arrangement (Scott, 2015).

Despite the free school's founders having said 350 parents had backed the argument that it should be given a choice of academy sponsor, it was announced that Grindon Hall School was to be transferred to the Stockport-based Bright Tribe Trust. (Scott, 2015)

School takeovers

A particularly controversial new feature of England's education landscape in the past five years, which could be seen as a by-product of the academies scheme, is the school takeover. This, though touched on in the discussion above, merits closer examination in its own right.

This is the case of the transfer of control of a school, either from maintained to academy status under an incoming sponsor, or of a school which is already an academy being transferred between sponsors.

The notion of a 'hostile takeover', which is a familiar phrase from the corporate world, has been used by campaigners to describe some such cases. Examples can include DfE forcing a non-academy school into academy status under a chosen sponsor, despite serious community opposition. These are cases of so-called 'forced academies'. Examples include the cases of the former Downhills (Mansell, 2011b), Roke (Walker, 2013) and Camden (Mansell, 2013) junior schools in and around London, all of which were transferred by DfE to academy status under the academy chain the Harris Federation in the years 2012 and 2013; and Cavell primary (Mansell, 2014c) in Norwich, which became an academy sponsored by the RightforSuccess trust in 2014 as Norfolk county council argued that academy status was the government's favoured solution for struggling schools.[7]

'Hostile takeovers' could also involve an unpopular transfer of school from one academy trust to another. An example is the case of Grindon Hall free school in Northumberland, which is discussed above.

'Takeovers', hostile or not, where a school is transferred to an incoming academy trust, seem likely to be an increasingly important aspect of English education. Some 54 schools were reported to have transferred between academy trust between January 2012 and June 2015, with 21 having done so in just the first four months of 2015 (Dickens, 2015). A January 2016 blog by Kent-based education consultant Peter Read offers a flavour of what might have been considered a staggering change to English education even only five years ago, as several schools in the county found themselves moving from one academy trust to another.

> The Academy Monopoly game continues to run, with Marsh Academy now being managed by the Skinners Company Trust, Mascalls School joining the Leigh Academy Group and taking over the running of its three troubled Maidstone Primary Schools, and Chantry Primary in Gravesend being taken over by Greenacre School in Chatham after the failure of the Meopham Community Schools Trust (Read, 2016).

As previously discussed in the section on Regional Schools Commissioners, there is little transparency when schools change hands in this way. Transfers of schools between academy

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[7] Some of these examples have gone on to achieve reported success as sponsored academies. However, the experience of state assets being transferred by DfE without popular support on the ground needs to be noted, before we go on to consider questions as to whether the academies programme has improved education quality.

trusts are subject to discussions between those trusts and Regional Schools Commissioners, Head Teacher Boards, DfE civil servants and ministers, although even the precise details of the decision-makers in each case must remain obscure, as no details are published. The system of transfer of schools is not even subject to having to follow a publicly-agreed framework of rules.

These developments represent a very new, and startlingly rapid, departure from the system of oversight and management of state-funded schools which obtained in England for many decades, and certainly since World War Two. The implications of this change will be discussed in the coming sections.

Commercialisation

The advent of school 'takeovers', as described above, could be seen as one aspect of a model of control of schools, through the academies scheme and multi-academy trusts in particular, which seems more commercial in character than the traditional structure of state-funded schools operating under the auspices of local authorities.

Multi-academy trusts often now have chief executives as their lead employees, rather than headteachers, with a select group of academy CEOs now earning salaries higher than the Prime Minister (Mansell, 2015). The 'members' who sit atop academy trusts' governance structures are the equivalent of shareholders in public companies, though without ownership rights as the profits of the company cannot be distributed to them (SGOSS, Allen and Overy, and Browne Jacobson, 2012).

Academy trusts themselves are companies limited by guarantee, though also not-for-profit charities. It is not unheard of for academy trust accounts to mention having 'acquired' new schools, even though in reality the trust will have paid no money for this privilege. And schools' exam and test results are often reported and discussed in academy accounts as if they were a commercial bottom line.

Ambitious headteachers, who perhaps once aimed to lead single schools or maybe to move to a local authority supporting them, can now aspire to run fast-growing groups of institutions, competing with others to build education empires whose turnovers can now run into hundreds of millions of pounds.

Above all, the notion of rival academy trusts, with rival brands, competing for the 'custom' of pupils, seems borrowed from the corporate sector. Whereas, under a local authority framework, parents might have a chance to exert influence on decisions over the running of schools either through directly getting involved in their governance or through putting pressure on their locally-elected councillors, the academy trust model would seem to view parents' main leverage as operating through the chance to choose between rival schools, or chains of schools. This opens up a very important debate on different visions of the future.

Claimed injection of urgency

A final element in any debate about the trajectory of England's schools system through the academies scheme is a consideration as to whether it has brought about a sense of dynamism or urgency, in cases of individual schools facing possible takeover, or of a general sense of local authorities and schools being put under perhaps useful pressure to improve by a new model.

The Pearson/RSA academies commission report in 2013, despite offering many caveats in relation to the overall success of the academies scheme to that point, and many recommendations as to how it could be improved, did conclude: 'the introduction of academies has provided much-needed vitality to the school system' (Pearson/RSA, 2013: 4).

It added:

> Set against a backdrop of substantial top-down reform for schools over the last 20 years, the sense of permission to lead and innovate that academy status enables [in an individual school] is significant. It indicates potential energy and ambition for change and reform (Pearson/RSA, 2013: 46).

As we have seen, the degree to which schools have taken advantage of innovation opportunities remains contestable, and the merits of innovation and autonomy in particular aspects of school management also debatable. But this strand of argument remains important to consider.

Indeed, the sense of dynamism engendered by, for example, the concept of school takeovers described above, which may see some institutions rapidly changing their controlling sponsor as well as their headteacher frequently, may be palpable. An argument remains, though, over whether this constitutes useful energy within the system or something, at least when matters are resolved less successfully, more akin to chaos.

In January 2015, the House of Commons Education Select Committee's report on academies and free schools offered similar conclusions to that of the Pearson/RSA report. It said: 'Competition from the academy model may be driving improvement in English schools,' (HoC Education Committee, 2015c) – but note the 'may'- and that:

> Academy sponsorship has encouraged and facilitated the contribution of individuals not previously involved in education provision and laid down a challenge to maintained schools to improve or face replacement by the insurgent academy model (HoC Education Committee, 2014: 3).

As we shall see in the discussion about standards below, the evidence on which to base claims even that English schools have improved over recent years, and beyond that, to show empirically that academy status for some may have driven any improvements, seems slim. However, again, it is important to consider this argument in any weighing of the merits of the academy policy. This is a task to which we return in the conclusion.

4 - HAS THE ACADEMIES POLICY PRODUCED AN IMPROVEMENT IN THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION?

Prelude

Arguments about who controls schools, about democratic influence and about the level of trust the system may place in national politicians, in local politicians, in parents, in teachers, in pupils, in business sponsors and in others clearly seem important in this debate. They will be considered at the end of this report.

Yet they may take second place, in the eyes of many members of the public, to a more basic question: has the quality of education in our schools improved as a result of the academies policy? To put it another way, if the academies scheme had been found to be much less democratic, in terms of its control, than its predecessor policies in the administration of schools and yet the quality of education on offer was better than in the past, it may be hypothesised that, for many people, the lack of democracy might not be an issue.

The author believes that some local democratic accountability does matter in the running of state-funded schools, and is also wary of any suggestion that debate on that issue should be closed down so that a discussion on different types of school organisation can take place entirely on the grounds of whether test and exam results for particular institutions have risen. But let us leave that to the side for the moment, as we consider the evidence as to whether education quality has been improving, with particular reference to primary schools, under the academies scheme.

Two points are worth making before embarking on a survey of evidence on school quality under the academies scheme.

First, much of this debate centres on often marginal rates of improvement in national test and/or examination scores in individual schools. Such evidence should be considered very cautiously, given that no set of assessment results can completely sum up the quality of education offered in a complex institution such as a school; that the results can over-emphasise particular curriculum subjects; that supposedly 'objective' results may miss important, and fundamental, contextual information, such as in some cases large changes in the numbers of pupils in particular year groups as they progress through individual schools (Mansell, 2014b; Mansell, Adams, and Edwards, 2016); and that the very emphasis on a narrow set of results may incentivise the 'wrong' sort of behaviour among schools, such as the focus on particular subjects, or on particular groups of pupils thought most likely to have the potential to improve the institution's results. Nevertheless, the government has repeatedly sought to use test and exam results in support of its academies scheme, so it is important to weigh this evidence. That is, it is important to try to assess the government's evidence on academy status on its own terms.

Second, much of the evidence of necessity relates to secondary schools, since primary academies are still a relatively recent phenomenon. The specific evidence on primary

academies will be discussed, then, after we consider earlier findings relating exclusively to secondaries.[8]

Evidence

Under Labour, a series of official evaluations of the academies policy was carried out by the management consultancy firm PricewaterhouseCoopers. This produced five annual reports, the last of which, in summing up the available evidence at the time in terms of GCSE results, found that sponsored academies had higher levels of pupil progress - as measured by their national curriculum test results immediately prior to entering secondary academies aged 11 and their GCSE results aged 16 – than the national average.

The findings were only based on analysis of the exam results of the first 24 academies, however. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that fact, the evaluation concluded that 'there is insufficient evidence to make a definitive judgement about the Academies as a model for school improvement' (DCFS/PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2008: 19).

The most detailed and statistically robust study of the academies scheme under Labour was published in 2011 by Stephen Machin and James Venoit of the London School of Economics and Political Science. This used a statistical model which sought to ensure a like-for-like comparison of the results of academies and non-academies by checking the GCSE grade improvements of sponsored academies created from 2002 to 2009 with those of other schools which would later go on to become academies.

Machin and Venoit's (2011: 46) analysis found that results in the academies improved faster than those of the comparison group of schools. Furthermore, it concluded that results in neighbouring schools gained a boost in addition, seemingly showing that the academies policy was spurring on other secondary schools to achieve well through greater competition. Importantly for the development of the policy, however, one of the researcher stressed that their findings could not be extrapolated to make a judgement about the effectiveness of the academies scheme after it expanded rapidly under the coalition: their conclusions applied only to Labour's sponsored academies (Machin, 2012).

There are other caveats to bear in mind, however, in relation to even the most statistically-impressive research such as this. If academies have improved results faster than other schools, does this show that academies are 'better' schools? Or are they simply schools which have become especially focused on results?

A report by the Historical Association in 2011 found that academies were more likely than other schools to run a two-year key stage 3, meaning that the compulsory study of the subject was restricted to two rather than three years in secondary education, and leaving pupils to spend three years studying for their GCSEs (Burn and Harris, 2011: 3).
An Ofsted report on history teaching in primary and secondary schools, also published in 2011, while not offering any information on whether a shorter key stage 3 was more

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[8]   And in a small number of cases, to all-through schools.

prevalent in academies, did offer concerns about it occurring in any type of school. Restricting compulsory history study in secondary schools to two years could lead to 'courses that were unbalanced and rushed,' it was argued (Ofsted, 2011: 48). While GCSEs are important to pupils, the length of time given to the lead-up to GCSEs may suggest academies were more results-focused than other schools, in this case perhaps to the detriment of this particular national curriculum subject.

Furthermore, no statistical academic study on the overall effectiveness of academies of which this author is aware – including the Machin and Venoit paper - has considered a phenomenon which is rising to the fore in the debate on the results achieved by secondary schools: the possible shrinkage of particular year groups of pupils in the run-up to their GCSEs.

Analysis of official statistics on the size of particular secondary school year groups as children moved through the school showed that more than 10,000 pupils are lost to mainstream education in the two years leading up to their GCSEs, and that, in some schools, the number of pupils has shrunk by more than 20 per cent from the time they enter the school, in year seven, to the time they leave, in year 11 (Mansell, Adams and Edwards, 2016). Another study in 2015 raised concerns about pupils moving between secondary schools. It investigated what would happen if GCSE school-by-school results were changed to give less weight to pupils who stayed on a school's roll for less than the conventional five years. The six secondaries – among nearly 3,000, across England included in the analysis, most affected by such a change were all academies (Education Datalab, 2015: 6).

However, no analysis, so far as this author is aware, has been carried out taking into account the movement of pupils in assessing the effectiveness of the academies policy.

With schools seeming to have an incentive to remove students perceived to have a lower chance of achieving high grades from their rolls, arguably both the accountability system needs to change to address this potentially serious side-effect and researchers need to start looking at cohort sizes as they investigate school results patterns.

What evidence there is on the record of England's larger academy chains indicates a very mixed picture. The Sutton Trust has published two reports on their results, the second of which - *Chain Effects 2015: the impact of academy chains on low-income-income students* – was based on GCSE grades among 34 chains from 2014. It concluded:

> There is very significant variation in outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, both between and within chains. Some chains continue to achieve impressive outcomes for their disadvantaged pupils against a range of measures… However, a larger group of low-performing chains are achieving results that are not improving (Hutchings, Francis, and Kirby, 2015: 4)

It added: 'A majority of the chains still underperform the mainstream average on attainment for their disadvantaged pupils' (*loc. cit.*).

In addition, a DfE paper published in March 2015 (DfE, 2015d), which was based on measuring academy chain performance, and that of local authorities, on two experimental 'value-added' measures, found few chains with results above the national average (Cook, 2015). Ofsted also sends in inspectors to carry out visits to groups of schools within a chain if it has concerns. It has published adverse reports on several of the largest ones (Vaughan, 2016b), and in March 2016, Sir Michael Wilshaw, the chief inspector of schools, wrote to the Education Secretary Nicky Morgan to express his concerns about several large chains (Wilshaw, 2016).

Perhaps the best summary of evidence evaluating the results of academies published during the time of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government was the House of Commons Education Select Committee's publication: *Academies and Free Schools* (2015).

This surveyed in detail evidence on the performance of both sponsored and converter academies and concluded that 'current evidence does not allow us to draw conclusions on whether academies in themselves are a positive force for change' (HoC Education Committee, 2015: 3).

The report, the product of a cross-party of MPs with a Conservative majority and chair, added:

> According to the research that we have seen, it is too early to judge whether academies raise standards overall or for disadvantaged children. This is partly a matter of timing. We should be cautious about reading across from evidence about pre-2010 academies to other academies established since then (*Ibid*, 23).

The report also said:

> What can be said is that, however measured, the overall state of schools has improved during the course of the academisation programme. The competitive effect upon the maintained sector of the academy model may have incentivised local authorities to develop speedier and more effective intervention in their underperforming schools (*loc. cit.*).

It was unclear, however, what the evidence for this general improvement in state education was beyond a rise in the number of good and outstanding schools which coincided with a change in Ofsted's methodology and terminology for the rating of schools (Mansell, 2013b).

The committee acknowledged that it was unclear exactly why, as of the end of the last Parliament, more schools in England were Ofsted-rated good or outstanding 'than ever before', and then took the Department for Education to task for, as it saw it, overstating the impact of academy status.

It said:

> The Government should stop exaggerating the success of academies and be cautious about firm conclusions except where the evidence merits it. Academisation is not

always successful nor is it the only proven alternative for a struggling school (HoC Education Committee, 2015: 64).

The report also stated:

> There is at present no convincing evidence on the impact of academy status on attainment in primary schools. The DfE should commission such research as a matter of urgency (*Ibid*, 3).

It is to the evidence on the effect of academy status in primary schools that we now turn.

In its response, the DfE said it would indeed commission some research on the subject, but that this would take time. It said:

> We agree with the Committee that it is important to continue to analyse how well academy status works in the primary phase. To carry out such analysis requires a large enough number of primary academies to have been open long enough to have a reasonable time series of results which can be analysed. We are only now reaching such a position, and will be undertaking this analysis in 2015 (HoC Education Committee, 2015b: 14)

It is unclear whether such research has been carried out; at the time of writing, there was no record of any findings having been published.

The DfE's response also drew attention to a document it published in March 2014, inviting suggestions for research from the academic community, which had acknowledged that, as of that time, 'the research evidence [on academies is] primarily based on secondary schools' (DfE, 2014b: 6)

In its response to the Select Committee of March 2015, the DfE used two other strands of evidence in arguing for the success of the academies programme in primary schools. These need to be considered in detail, as they appear to be the only general justifications for moves to primary academy status which, in some individual primary school cases were being forced through on the ground in the face of vigorous opposition from local communities.

First, DfE said:

> Recent results show the impact we have had. The first wave of primary sponsored academies that opened by September 2012 has seen the proportion of pupils achieving level 4 or above in reading, writing and maths increase by nine percentage points since opening, double the rate of improvement across all schools [which it said was four percentage points]. (HoC Education Committee, 2015b: 1)

These statistics were also cited by Nick Gibb, Minister of State for schools, in an interview with BBC Radio 4's 'Today' programme on February 2nd, 2015 (Bishop, 2015). This, however, was a surprising response, given that the Select Committee had already discussed, in the report to which the DfE was responding, the need to be cautious in comparing results

improvements in sponsored academies against those of schools more generally, as the former started to have more statistical scope for improvement.

The Select Committee report said:

> It is important to recognise from the start that sponsored academies have usually replaced struggling schools; starting from a low base, they could be expected to improve at a faster rate than the national average (HoC Education Committee, 2015: 10).

It also cited a comment from the Sutton Trust, in its own report on the effect of academy chains, which had noted

> a trend for proponents of the academies programme to highlight sponsored academies' faster-than-average improvement (when of course, this is to be expected given that so many sponsored academies start at a low base) (*Ibid.*, 23).[9]

The issue of how results improvements in schools which start from a low base should be interpreted is important. It was therefore investigated by the author in 2015, starting with a blog for the Cambridge Primary Review Trust (Mansell, 2015b). This used test result data for all primary schools, available from official DfE spreadsheets, to compare the improving scores of sponsored academies against those of all other primary schools, including non-academy schools, with similar statistical starting points.

It highlighted statements in a DfE 'statistical first release,' published in December 2014. This included the figures on which the DfE's claims about primary sponsored academies' progress in its response to the select committee had been based, showing that primary sponsored academies which had opened by September 2012 had seen, between 2012 and 2014, their results improve by nine percentage points, compared to a four point rise among local authority schools overall.

The CPRT blog focused its analysis on comparing the improvements of primary sponsored academies over a single year – between 2013 and 2014 – with those of other schools. It acknowledged a finding, in the DfE statistical first release, that results among the 420 sponsored academies in the DfE analysis rose by seven percentage points in the proportion of these schools' pupils achieving level 4 in all of reading, writing and mathematics in national curriculum assessments between 2013 to 2014. The gain was from 61 to 68 per cent. By contrast, the 13,396 non-academy schools saw results rise three points, from 77 to 80 per cent.

However, further statistical analysis was carried out for the blog in two ways. First, a comparison group was created among all non-academy schools which started with exactly

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[9]   The Sutton Trust report, cited by the select committee, also criticised supporters of academies for highlighting sponsored' academies generally lower-than-average results when this was also to expected 'given their low starting points and pupil demographic' (Hutchings, Francis and De Vries, 2014: 11-12 in HoC Education Committee, 2015: 23).

the same level of test performance as was the average result among sponsored academies in 2013: 61 per cent. In 2014, this comparison group of schools saw their results climb to 70.7 per cent, a rise of 10 points. This was higher than that achieved by the sponsored academies.

Second, a larger sample group of 1,650 non-academy primary schools was created from the 2013 test result data. This had a wider span of test performance in 2013, ranging from 56 to 66 per cent. However, the sample was constructed to have an average result in 2013 of 61 per cent. This found that this group of schools which were not sponsored academies saw their results improve to 72 per cent. This was an 11 percentage point rise, which again was substantially higher than that of the sponsored academies which had started from a similar statistical starting point.

It is important to be cautious in interpreting such comparisons. The analysis above did not prove that non-academy schools were 'better' or 'more effective' than academies. Given that the policy of sponsored academies has been said to be focused on schools in disadvantaged areas, it may be that the sponsored academies included in the above statistics may have faced particularly daunting challenges in the business of extracting better results out of their pupils in the assessed subjects.

However, the analysis did seem to throw down a challenge to the DfE to provide better evidence as to whether academy status itself was producing results improvements in schools which saw them closing the gap on the national average, in the face of an at-face-glance strong suggestion that it was just a product of a statistical pattern whereby schools of all types with low starting points tended to see results improve faster than those starting out with better results. To date, such an analysis has not been forthcoming.

The author also wrote to the UK Statistics Authority to make these points (Mansell, 2015c). In response, the authority seemed to concur, writing that the data as presented in the statistical first release could not be used to imply a 'causal link' between academy status and improvements in test results.

The UKSA director general for regulation, Ed Humpherson, wrote:

> DfE presented comparisons of improvement in performance by school type with no comment on limitations, supporting narrative or analysis. We conclude that this presentation did not make it clear that the difference in rates of improvement in performance was not necessarily caused by school type. (Humpherson, 2015)

In reporting on primary school assessment results from 2015, in statistical releases published in the latter part of that year, the DfE did therefore include a statistical caveat. In the first such release after the UKSA's intervention, DfE said:

> it should be noted that the extent to which a school improves is related to a range of factors. Schools with the lowest previous outcomes tend to see the largest improvements' (DfE, 2015b: 7).

At the time of writing, the evidence, in terms of using test results improvements in sponsored academies to demonstrate any causal relationship with the status, remains far from robust.

The second strand of evidence offered by DfE in its March 2015 response to the Select Committee, in relation to the effect of academy status in primary schools, centred on Ofsted inspection data. It said:

> We also know that primary converter academies also do better against the new tougher Ofsted inspection framework. Department analysis… shows that primary converters are more likely to retain their 'outstanding' rating, and are more likely to improve from 'good' to 'outstanding' than LA-maintained schools (Hoc Education Committee, 2015b: 14)

The DfE statement cited research it had commissioned which did indeed find that 'primary converter academies previously rated as outstanding were more likely to retain that rating than local authority maintained mainstream schools' (DfE, 2014c: 4); that 'primary converter academies previously rated as good were more likely to subsequently be rated as outstanding than local authority maintained mainstream schools and were also less likely to achieve a lower rating' (*loc. cit.*) and that 'Primary converter academies previously rated as satisfactory were more likely to improve that rating than local authority maintained mainstream schools' (*loc. cit.*). The analysis was based on comparing the Ofsted judgements for those converter academies inspected during the 2012/13 academic year with their final inspections as a local authority maintained school.

However, these findings were based on a relatively small sample size. For example, there was inspection data on only 57 primary converter academies which had previously been rated as outstanding (as local authority maintained schools) (DfE, 2014c). Some 19 continued to be rated as outstanding when inspected again. This was 33 per cent, compared to a rate among all those non-academy primary schools inspected in 2012-13 which in their last-inspection-but-one had been rated outstanding, of 25 per cent. The number of primary converter academies used in the analysis and previously rated as good was only 70; while among those previously rated as satisfactory, the figure was 72 converter academies. Such sample sizes mean quite small changes in the number of schools in particular Ofsted rating categories can lead to large changes in how the results are interpreted.

Furthermore, no analysis was provided on the inspection results of sponsored academies.

A Parliamentary written answer in December 2015 did provide some statistics on relative success rates of sponsored academies which previously were graded inadequate by Ofsted as local authority maintained schools, and of corresponding local authority schools which did not become sponsored academies. However, the data need to be treated cautiously.

The written answer, provided to the Labour peer Lord Hunt of Kings Heath by the chief inspector of schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw, looked at the first Ofsted rating, after taking on academy status, of sponsored academies which, in their final Ofsted inspection before becoming academies, had been rated 'inadequate' (Wilshaw, 2015). These ratings were then

compared with the most recent inspection judgements of maintained schools which had also been Ofsted-rated 'inadequate' at the previous inspection.

Considering all schools in these categories with inspection judgements published by December 2, 2015, Ofsted's statistics showed 26 of the sponsored academies (12 per cent of 557 schools) remained Ofsted-inadequate at their first inspection after academisation, compared to only seven (two per cent of 406 schools) of the maintained schools in their first inspection after the 'inadequate' verdict. Similarly, 62 per cent of the maintained schools were rated good or outstanding at their first inspection after being rated 'inadequate' compared to only 47 per cent among sponsored academies. The sponsored academies did have a slightly higher rate of schools achieving the remarkable change to 'outstanding' status following that 'inadequate' judgement, however, at six per cent, compared to only two per cent among maintained schools.

This evidence has to be treated cautiously. It is not clear whether the sponsored academies were had the particular characteristic of generally taking on tougher challenges than those faced by the comparison group. Perhaps the fact that academy status was chosen for some schools, rather than others, among those previously rated inadequate, showed in the former cases the need for radical structural departures from the mode of operating previously and thus more serious problems in these schools. There was also no analysis of how sponsored academies which had not previously been rated as inadequate had fared in comparison to corresponding non-academy schools. Finally, the figures provided no specific analysis of sponsored *primary* academies; they related to sponsored academies of all kinds.

Notwithstanding these caveats, it seems from this statistical exercise that there is one firm conclusion to draw. This is that evidence pointing the way to sponsored primary academies doing *better* than maintained schools in terms of improving inspection outcomes, as claimed by DfE in relation to converter primary academies, is, at the time of writing, hard to come by.

In summary, then, the evidence claimed by DfE in relation to standards improvements in primary academies, in its response to the Select Committee report of March 2015 (HoC Education Committee, 2015b), seems relatively weak. There is no evidence that improvements in sponsored academy national curriculum assessments are not the product of a more general statistical trend which has seen other schools with low previous results catching up with national averages. DfE has cited improvements in Ofsted results among converter primary academies compared to comparison groups of maintained schools; but these are based on relatively small sample sizes. And there seems as yet no convincing evidence that sponsored primary academies have improved Ofsted inspection judgements compared to local authority maintained schools.

This lack of a robust evidence base is important, finally, because it comes against the background, beginning in the first years of the coalition government, of cases of local authority primary schools sometimes being impelled towards academy status by the Department for Education, or on occasion by a local authority citing DfE views, on the grounds that this is the best possible improvement option for the school. In March 2016, it

became much more significant at a national level, with DfE signalling that academy status was to be imposed on all schools.

The interaction between this evidence base and action being taken by policymakers in changing the structure of individual schools will be considered in the final section of this report, on conclusions and recommendations for change.

5 - DISCUSSION: THE RAPIDLY-CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF SCHOOL CONTROL IN ENGLAND

The developments described above could be seen to encompass a startlingly rapid transition from what was once a relatively settled system for managing and overseeing schools towards something much faster-changing and, perhaps, unpredictable.

Indeed, the Pearson/RSA report described England's academies structure as having developed at 'astonishing speed' (Pearson/RSA, 2013: 4), while the 2015 Education Select Committee Academies and Free Schools report said 'the landscape of schooling in England has been transformed over the last five years' (HoC Education Committee, 2015: 3).

The post-war system of primary education in England saw most state-funded schools run under the auspices of, or supported by, local authorities overseen by locally-elected councillors. A considerable minority of schools were also run in partnership with the Church of England or Roman Catholic church. In the 1988 Education Reform Act, the Conservative government enacted reforms designed to give individual school governing bodies and headteachers greater control. 'Local management of schools' as it was called, placed greater emphasis on institutional autonomy from local councils. However, the local authority remained in the background, providing support services and some oversight. There was, thus, always a local democratic link both in the organisation of schools and in their scrutiny and regulation.

England now seems to be moving towards a very different future, whereby the dominant model will become schools linking together in multi-academy trusts, or academy chains, with no such local democratic links and with oversight coming not from local, but from national, government. Indeed, in an article published in August 2015 describing the achievements of the Conservative government's first 100 days in power following the 2015 general election and its plans for the coming years, the Prime Minister wrote that 'we will make it a priority to…support more great headteachers in coming together in academy chains'. In April 2014, England's schools commissioner at the time, Frank Green, whose job it was to promote academy status and oversee academy conversions, wrote: 'I want to show school leaders that working as part of an academies chain is much more rewarding that trying to go it alone' (Green, 2014). In September 2014, a right-of-centre think tank with close links to ministers called for all primary schools to become academies, and for all schools to be operating within academy chains by 2020 (Vaughan, 2014). In the white paper of March 2016, DfE set out its preference for multi-academy trusts, saying it expected 'most schools' to join them over time (DfE, 2016b: 53). In April 2016, official guidance for schools wanting to

become academies was updated to specify that 'DfE expects most new academies to join or form a multi-academy trust' (DfE, 2016d: 9).

Academy status as a whole currently remains a minority choice among primary schools, with only a fraction even of such institutions grouped together in sponsored chains. Even if the government's white paper vision comes to pass – and in spring 2016 it faced opposition from many quarters including leading Conservative councillors and back-bench Conservative MPs - there seem many practical hurdles on the path to DfE's desired destination of academy status for all by 2022. These include serious questions as to whether there is enough capacity in the system to create and lead many more multi-academy trusts, and the implications for small rural primaries with high costs which may not prove attractive for academy chains. However, it seems likely at least that academy status will be a fast-growing category among England's primary schools over the coming years. Even after DfE's change of course in May 2016 away from requiring academy status for all schools by 2022, ministers have said they would still be in favour of such a scenario. Yet there seem many practical hurdles in the way of realising that goal, or even coming close to it in seeing the proportion of primary schools climbing dramatically. These include serious questions as to whether there is enough capacity in the system to create and lead many more multi-academy trusts, and the implications for small rural primaries with high costs which may not prove attractive for academy chains. However, it does seem likely at least that academy status will be a fast-growing category among England's primary schools over the coming years.

The fundamental question is whether this should be seen as a positive development. Such a question is important now, and also seems likely to be in the future, as historians look back on what could be a pivotal moment in the long-term development of England's primary schools.

It will be the contention of this report that the upheaval that English schools are currently going through under the academies scheme should at best be seen as an untested experiment, and at worst an almost wilful throwing-away of aspects of the post-war settlement which, as the Cambridge Primary Review final report concluded, had helped create a generally stable, successful primary schooling experience for children; one, moreover, that was acknowledged by Ofsted at the height of the academies debate to be more impressive in terms of educational performance than its academy-dominated secondary counterpart (Ofsted 2015a, 2015b).

Under that structure, as it has obtained at least since 1988, schools have had some autonomy but still operated with a locally-democratic authority providing support and oversight. Headteachers reported to governing bodies who themselves were linked to their local communities through parent governance.

Proposals for major changes to school structures, such as the closure of specific institutions, or for the movement from a three- to a two-phase system of schooling, were subject to open and extensive debate. Schools were not subject to sudden change through the takeover of its management by an outside organisation.

Although since 1988 primary schools had been subject to some market-orientated reforms such as the notion of competing to attract pupils, they were generally not seen as operating under quasi-commercial brands. Public service and vocation, then, perhaps remained the dominant idea, rather than loyalty to a particular organisation.

This system's possible replacement by an alternative vision of competing academy chains, often controlling their schools tightly from the centre and with the remote Secretary of State the only democratic actor to which they are answerable, must raise many concerns.

Although academy trusts do have the ability to shape their governance and operations so that this not the case, the academy chain model seems demonstrably less democratically rooted in local communities. As illustrated by ministerial or Regional Schools Commissioner approvals of academy sponsorship, there is often a staggering lack of transparency in relation to decisions which can be fundamental to the future of schools, such as who gets to control their day-to-day operations. The discussion above about autonomy suggests that, while academy trusts have not often taken up freedoms which have been billed by ministers as important to the scheme – such as in relation to the curriculum – they do enjoy meaningfully greater freedoms in areas such as finance and admissions, which may nevertheless be of questionable public interest and seem likely in the former case to continue to generate scandals. The advent of semi-commercial academy brands may come into conflict with older notions of public service as the prime motivating factor in the minds of school staff.

All of these arguments might be seen to fall, in the minds of the public, if academies could demonstrate that the quality of education was markedly better than what went before. However, as we have seen, the evidence on that, particularly in relation to primary education, remains thin. Indeed, even as the government was forcing through very contentious primary academy proposals on the ground in 2012-14, it was admitting that there was little evidential basis for the policy.

A government which was really committed to investigating objectively what might make for the best learning conditions for children would be proceeding much more cautiously, paying careful attention to research, and only moving forward once it was confident that major change would be for the better. Instead, the system has moved into a phase of very rapid, and perhaps dizzying, reform, illustrating the degree of power which England's highly centralised political system hands to the governing party to make substantial changes very speedily. While a sense of dynamism may be exhilarating for policymakers including national politicians trying to prove themselves as transformational to the electorate, on the ground in schools it can make for a sense of damaging instability.

No system of school governance or management should be seen as immutable, or perfect. Innovation is important. Yet England's primary schooling system seems to have embarked on a risky experiment. The Cambridge Primary Review's final report suggested that in the main primary schools were 'highly valued' (Alexander, 2010: 488) by children and parents and generally were 'doing a good job' (*loc. cit.*) under the more stable school management environment which then obtained, while the schools inspectorate Ofsted reported that primaries were still generally doing better than secondaries in the largely-still-non-

academicised position of 2015 (Ofsted 2015a). That seems a powerful argument for some element of stability, against the counter-view that the academies programme has put more energy into English school improvement.

Any move towards schools mainly being administered by centralised multi-academy chains would in effect go against the advent of local management of schools as envisaged through the 1988 Education Reform Act. One, reasonably democratically accountable supra-school body, the local authority, would have been replaced by others, the academy chain and the Regional School Commissioner, which lacked such local grounding.

Ministers therefore seem to be moving England's primary schools towards a structure which will afford parents and local communities much less democratic influence over the running of these institutions they both use and fund through taxes. (The running of schools may become a private matter, to be decided between semi-private academy trusts, some of whom will be presided over by a small group of individuals with close personal connections, and remote ministers and their civil servants.)

That seems a grave loss in itself. Yet it may be doubly regrettable given that any likely compensating improvements in the quality of education which the scheme's advocates might claim for the academies scheme have yet to be consistently demonstrated, particularly in relation to primary schools.

Indeed, sudden, imposed changes in the running of schools without any guarantee of future success must seem a frightening prospect on the ground for many children and parents, as England's system moves from one of settled management regimes to one where external 'takeovers' seem likely to be an increasing feature. This stands in contrast to the Cambridge Primary Review's statement that,

> as was noted by many witnesses, primary schools may be the one point of stability and positive values in a world where everything else is changing and uncertain (Alexander, 2010: 488).

Weighing both sides of the argument, there seems much, potentially, to lose from what could be seen as English primary education's great looming leap in the dark.

6 - RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The needs of the child should be at the centre of policymaking. Government has not been able to provide the necessary evidence to demonstrate that forcing all state-funded schools in England into academy status will be beneficial for pupils. Major structural changes should take place only when their benefit for those being educated can be conclusively demonstrated.

2. In the absence of good evidence showing why they should be dispensed with, local democracy, accountability and support should be maintained for all state-funded schools.

3. There should be maximum transparency at all levels of decision-making about the future of schools. Users of services, and citizens generally, need to be involved in these decisions and in any event they should be told why and against what criteria and evidence the decisions have been made. Meetings where decisions are taken about the future of publicly-funded schools should themselves be public unless there are compelling arguments against this.

4. Serious questions must be asked about whether giving academy trusts greater autonomy over admissions, over finance and purchasing, and over the nature of their own governance.

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Final report. The key publication for both CPR and CPRT. Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations from the Cambridge Primary Review*, Routledge. 600 pp. Obtainable through usual commercial channels. http://cprtrust.org.uk/cpr/cpr-publications/final-report/.

Companion research volume. The original 28 research surveys, revised and re-edited with commentaries. Alexander, R.J. *et al* (ed) (2010), *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Routledge. 856 pp. Obtainable through normal commercial channels. http://cprtrust.org.uk/cpr/cpr-publications/companion-research-volume/.

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CPRT Research Reports. Commissioned by CPRT to update and/or supplement the 28 research reviews published by CPR. View/download at http://goo.gl/dSEFW3.

1. Harlen, W. (November 2014), *Assessment, Standards and Quality of Learning in Primary Education.*
2. Robinson, C. (December 2014), *Children, their Voices and their Experiences of School: what does the evidence tell us?*
3. Goswami, U. (February 2015), *Children's Cognitive Development and Learning.*
4. Pickett, K. and Vanderbloemen, L. (September 2015), *Mind the Gap: tackling social and educational Inequality*
5. Bourn, D., Hunt, F., Blum, N., and Lawson, H. (February 2016), *Primary education for global learning and sustainability.*
6. Jopling, M., and Vincent, S. (April 2016), *Vulnerable children: needs and provision in the primary phase.*
7. Burnett, C. (*June 2016), *The digital age and its implications for learning and teaching in the primary school.*
8. Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., and Hopwood, L., and Thomson, S. (May 2016), *Primary schools responding to diversity: barriers and possibilities.*
9. Mansell, W. (May 2016), *Academies: autonomy, accountability, quality and evidence.*

10. McNamara, O., Murray, J., and Phillips, R. (*July 2016), *How should primary teachers be trained? Policy and evidence.*
11. Hall, K., and Øzerk, K. (*September 2016), *Autonomy, accountability and quality assurance in primary education: England and other countries.*
12. Hogan, D., Kwek, D., and Renshaw, P. (*TBC 2016), *Research on teaching: what do we know and how should we act?*

* Expected date and provisional title.

CPRT Research Briefings

Four-page briefings on each of the above research reports accompany their publication. Read/download those already published at http://cprtrust.org.uk/about_cprt/cprt-publications/.

Primary Colours

Alexander, R.J. (ed) (June 2015), *Primary Colours: Westminster postcards from the Cambridge Primary Review Trust.* An edited collection of CPRT blogs published between July 2014 and June 2015. View/download at http://cprtrust.org.uk/about_cprt/cprt-publications/.

Primary Curriculum 2014 (CPRT with Pearson)

Primary Curriculum 2014: developing an outstanding curriculum in your school. 86-page Illustrated handbook to support the introduction of the new national curriculum. Contributions from Pearson, CPRT and eleven of the subject associations. Published by Pearson http://cprtrust.org.uk/about_cprt/cprt-publications/.

Other CPRT publications

These include responses to DfE consultations, public lectures, articles etc. http://cprtrust.org.uk/about_cprt/cprt-publications/.

The Cambridge Primary Review Trust is the successor to the Cambridge Primary Review (2006-12). It aims to extend and build upon the Review to advance the cause of high quality primary education for all. It is supported by Pearson Education, based at the University of York, and chaired by Professor Robin Alexander.

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