



Cambridge Primary Review Trust
Research Briefing 9
(new series)

ACADEMIES: AUTONOMY, ACCOUNTABILITY, QUALITY AND EVIDENCE

Warwick Mansell

This briefing summarises key issues from the report *Academies: autonomy, accountability, quality and evidence*, commissioned by the Cambridge Primary Review Trust. The report is one of twelve research surveys that the 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. In this particular case, the focus is 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.

The academies policy is the most important reform of the management of England's state funded schools for the past 25 years. Announced under the Labour government in 2000, it has created a new type of education institution as a major feature of provision across the country: the state-funded but legally independent school.

Academies are schools set up independently of local authorities, through a funding agreement or contract between the Secretary of State for Education and the not-for-profit academy trust. Academy status was originally made available only to a small number of inner-city secondary schools, which in most cases had had protracted problems. It remained confined to a small minority even of secondary schools when the Conservative-led coalition came to power in 2010.

However, under the former Education Secretary, Michael Gove, successful schools were allowed to convert to academy status. In addition, the academies scheme was extended to include primary schools. The policy has subsequently become much more central to education in England, with more than half of secondary schools, and approaching one in five primaries, having taken on academy status since 2010. In March 2016, the Government announced plans for all state-funded schools to become academies by 2022, whether this was desired by the governors and headteachers of each school or not. Even with a partial back-down on that policy in May 2016, with the government saying that schools in successful local authorities might not be required to take on academy status, the thrust of DfE policy in support of the academies scheme remains unchanged.

Academies have been presented by the Government as giving teachers and headteachers more autonomy while also raising standards. This research review explores that autonomy. How meaningful has it been? In what aspects of an academy trust's operations has it operated? Has it served the public interest? The report then assesses the evidence as to whether the government is right to claim that its policy has improved the quality of education on offer to pupils.

Academy freedoms, also known as autonomy

1. International evidence on whether schools benefit from autonomy – for example over the ability to manage their own budgets or to design their own curriculum – is complex and not easily reducible to a simple binary verdict on whether more or less autonomy is good or bad. Education autonomy varies markedly in its characteristics across countries, and attempts to link school heads' perception of the freedoms they have with the test results of their country's pupils, which have been used as the main measure of whether autonomy 'works', are fraught with difficulty.
2. Aspects of autonomy often associated with the academies policy – the ability to vary the curriculum and teachers' pay and conditions or to set the length of the school day or curriculum – have often, in practice,

not been taken up by academies. Primary schools, both academy and non-academy, are limited in their liberty to move away from the national curriculum by the pressure they experience to improve results in tests based on that curriculum.

3. Individual schools becoming academies as part of multi-academy trusts can and often do find their autonomy severely restricted, as control rests at the level of the trust rather than at individual school level.
4. At the level of the trust, however, the academies policy has provided meaningful freedoms in relation to certain aspects of their operations. Questions should be asked about whether such freedoms are appropriate, given the findings of studies which have raised concerns.
 - a. First, schools formerly run under the auspices of local authorities gain control of their **admissions** policies on becoming academies. However, concerns have been raised that this opens up the potential for schools to select pupils 'covertly'.
 - b. Second, on **finance and purchasing**, academy trusts are said by DfE to have 'wide discretion over their use of funds', with trustees being accountable for the spending of public money. In the non-academy sector, local authorities have to account for spending in the schools they oversee. Yet this different structure of spending responsibility in the academy sector has given rise to serious concerns. In 2014, a report by the House of Commons Education Select Committee highlighted links between academies and companies in which their sponsors had an interest.
 - c. Third, on **governance**, the academies structure hands great power to academy trusts to shape the system specifying who gets to take key decisions on how they operate more or less as they choose. This means that a few individuals can be in control of decisions on the spending of budgets in some cases running to hundreds of millions of pounds, as well as on education matters, with no democratic scrutiny of the process other than that exercised via the Secretary of State for Education, who signs academy funding agreements.

New models of school organisation created as part of DfE's academies policy

1. A new system of 'more local' oversight of academies was introduced in 2014 by DfE through eight Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs). These provide an intermediate link between the national DfE, which funds and ultimately oversees academies, and academy trusts running individual schools or groups of schools. The RSC system has been presented as devolving power. However, the RSCs are civil servants, appointed and line-managed by DfE. They are subject to little or no local accountability and there has been widespread criticism of a lack of transparency in their decision-making processes.
2. The academies policy has introduced another, hitherto-unknown, feature into England's education landscape: the school takeover. This is where a school's control is handed from one academy trust to another, again with very little transparency and little or no local democratic engagement. This represents a very rapid departure from the system of oversight and management of English state schools which has obtained since at least World War Two.

Has the academies policy produced an improvement in the quality of education?

1. Caution is needed in answering this question, particularly when attempting to use pupil test and exam results as the only or main arbiter of institutional quality.
2. In the secondary sector, there is little evidence that changing a school from a non-academy to an academy will improve its quality. A survey of research published by the House of Commons Education Select Committee in 2015 reported that 'it is too early to judge whether academies raise standards overall or for disadvantaged children.'
3. In the primary sector, very little research has been published on the impact of academy status, though recent Ofsted primary-secondary comparisons give pause for thought. They show that primary schools, the vast majority of which are not academies, perform better than the academy-dominated secondary sector.

4. Ministers have quoted figures showing that sponsored primary academies – which generally replace schools with poor previous test results – improved those results faster than was the case for the average non-academy maintained school. However, this seems to be part of a trend whereby all primary schools – academy or not – with low starting points have raised results faster than the national average in recent years. There is some evidence that maintained schools with similar (low) starting points as academies actually improved their results faster.

Conclusions

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 structures serves the public interest.

Related sources:

Pickett, K. and Vanderbloemen, L. (2015) *Mind the Gap: tackling social and educational inequality*, CPRT Research Report 4. York: Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Hopwood, L. and Thomson, S. (2016) *Primary Schools Responding to Diversity: barriers and possibilities*. CPRT Research Report 8, York: Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

Cambridge Primary Review, relevant publications:

Alexander, R. J. (ed) (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: the final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Routledge. Chapters 3 (Policies and legacies), 20 (Schools, local authorities and other agencies), 23 (Governance, funding and policy).

Alexander, R. J., Doddington, C., Gray, J., Hargreaves, L., and Kershner, R. (eds) (2010) *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Routledge. Chapters 14 (The structure of primary education: England and other countries, Riggall, A., and Sharp, C.), 26 (The governance and administration of English primary education, Balarin, M., and Lauder, H.), 27 (The funding of English primary schools, Noden, P., and West, A.), 28 (Quality assurance in English primary education, Cunningham, P., and Raymont, P.), and 29 (The trajectory and impact of national reform: curriculum and assessment in English primary schools, Wyse, D., McCreery, E., and Torrance, H.).

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based is Mansell, W. (2016) *Academies: autonomy, accountability, quality and evidence* (CPRT Research Survey 9). York: Cambridge Primary Review Trust. ISBN 978-0-9931032-9-2.

The report is available at www.cprtrust.org.uk. The website also contains information about other reports in this series, and those arising from the Cambridge Primary Review.

Cambridge Primary Review Trust was established in December 2012 with the aim of consolidating and building on Cambridge Primary Review's evidence, findings and principles. Supported by Pearson Education, it is based at the University of York and chaired by Professor Robin Alexander.

The Trust has eight priorities (equity, voice, community, sustainability, aims, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) and four programmes (policy, research, schools, and professional networking and development).

Enquiries: The Administrator, Cambridge Primary Review Trust, Derwent College M, University of York, York, YO10 5DD. Phone: 01904-323468.

Email: administrator@cprtrust.org.uk. Website: www.cprtrust.org.uk.

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