POLICY BRIEFING

Academy Schools

Professor Helen Gunter
Professor Ruth Lupton
Steven Courtney
Dr Ruth McGinity

Manchester Institute of Education

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SUMMARY

The introduction and expansion of new types of schools in England from the 1980s onwards is a radical reform of school provision. Academy schools are the latest example of how autonomy and the 'independent' school remain as the role model for provision within an emerging and complex market system. Evidence shows that improvement is varied, with cases of school failure repeatedly reported in the press. The impact of academisation through forced and planned conversions shows major changes to the purposes of education and the way schools are controlled and run as businesses. This briefing reports on research at Manchester University that sheds light on these issues. Our recommendations for policymakers are focused on the renewal of the purposes of public education, the redesign and enactment of local and national systems that enable coherence, and the need to draw on research that generates alternative ways of thinking about and undertaking public education. Our recommendations for researchers are to undertake more independent research into the privatization of education and its impact on the profession, children and communities, and to give attention to alternative ways of imagining and developing public education.

BACKGROUND

- Since the rapid expansion of the Academies programme major issues have been raised about accountability and governance
- In the absence of any evidence that Academies are a better form of educational provision, there remain substantial concerns in many quarters about whether academisation is the best model for improving educational standards and equity

UK education policy in England has focused on radical reforms of schools within local authority administration (e.g. Local Management of Schools from 1988) and outside (e.g. City Technology Colleges, and Grant Maintained Status from 1988). The Academies Programme is the latest example of this, whereby recent New Labour governments (1997-2010) and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition (2010-2015) have created and expanded the types and numbers of schools outside of local authorities. Known as state independent schools, the Academies Programme began with City Academies in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage, and has gone through a number of phases with expansion from 2010, where 1,500 schools converted to academy status in the first two years, and by 2014, 57 per cent of secondary schools were academies and one in ten primary schools. Diversification has taken place with new school types such as Free Schools, Studio Schools, and University Technical Colleges, and at the time of writing there are 70 types of schools (Courtney 2015b).

While there have been phases of different 'types' of schools from the 1980s onwards, the archetypal model is that of the 'independent school', where autonomy outside of local authorities is a key strategy, and controlled by private interests from faith, business, and philanthropy (Woods et al. 2007). Legislation allowed academies to act as their own admissions authority (within a national code), to define pay and working conditions for their staff, to set their own curriculum for non-core subjects and to hire unqualified teachers. Centralisation features remain through the regulation of national standards and audit by OfSTED, the control over financing in the Funding Agreement for each school, and how chains have emerged where schools are under the control of a single organisation.

These radical reforms have been based on claims that autonomy, including curriculum and budget freedoms, will enable Academies and other school types to innovate while raising standards. Government commissioned evaluation by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) came to the conclusion that improvements were not based on an "academies effect" and independent research has raised questions about the claims for conversion to Academy status and the effect on student outcomes (National Audit Office 2010; Gunter 2012; Francis et al. 2013; McGinity 2014; House of Commons Education Committee 2015).

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The rapid expansion of the academies programme has brought about wholesale changes to the organisation of state education in England. However, notwithstanding claims made by politicians, there is no clear evidence that schools provide children with a better education as academies than under local authority control. A recent review of the evidence by Manchester Institute of Education researchers found impressive examples of improvement, including better examination results achieved by some schools and chains of school after gaining academy status. But there was no consistent pattern. Success stories are counter-balanced by examples of weak organisation, such as an academy chain that was compelled to surrender its control of ten schools after inspections uncovered poor performance. Recent publicity given to a number of high-profile cases of financial mismanagement further suggests that better mechanisms for the effective oversight of academies will be a pressing concern for a new government after May 2015.

Overall, the proportion of schools rated positively by Ofsted has increased, but so has the proportion rated inadequate, with the latter still concentrated in disadvantaged areas. In 2014, Ofsted reported that secondary schools' performance had 'stalled' while primary schools (most of which remain under local authority control) continued to improve (Lupton and Thomson 2015; Lupton 2015). More specifically, the House of Commons Education Committee concluded in 2015 that it was too early to judge whether

academies were raising overall standards for students from disadvantaged families (House of Commons, 2015). For example, an assessment for the Sutton Trust of the performance of academy chains between 2010 and 2013 found a greater improvement for disadvantaged pupils in gaining 5 A*-C grades at GCSE (including English and maths) than in local authority schools. But there were wide variations and only just over half the chains exceeded the average for other schools (Hutchings, Francis and de Vries 2014)

There are, however, instances of academies using their autonomy to work collaboratively in innovative ways with other agencies and the neighbourhoods they serve. For example, one academy has been sponsored by a housing trust with the specific aim of improving outcomes for the community as whole. There is also emerging evidence of academies forming partnerships with other schools to provide mutual support for improvement. These approaches can create new ways of thinking about the link between sponsor and the community and emphasise the importance of public services working on an area-wide level (Rowley and Dyson 2012). (A more detailed discussion of collaborative arrangements and their implications can be found in briefing paper 'Collaborating for School Improvement' by Ainscow et al. 2015). However, research has also exposed concerns that the new freedoms conferred by academy status may, in some cases, have allowed the use of admissions policies and disciplinary exclusions to engineer a student population that is more likely to achieve well (Gunter 2012; Courtney 2015a).

Studies regarding the conversion and change processes illuminate the complexities involved in 'forced' conversions based on school closure and the establishment of a new academy and 'planned' conversions where a successful school decides to become an academy (see Gunter and McGinity 2014). Such complexities involve, amongst others, obtaining sponsorship (e.g. are all schools in a position to attract this?) and how the skills of the head are used with connections (e.g. business links of the governors) to secure, or not, conversion. Our research shows the challenges to democratic accountability through local case studies of conversion (see Gunter 2012) along with the increased dominance of private interests (business, faith, philanthropy) in the control of local schools and the provision of public education (McGinity 2014). In addition, the changes surface broader issues concerning the way that academies operate, are managed. An examination of the role of headteachers in the new arrangements suggests they increasingly resemble the chief executives of companies with time committed to tendering for bids, managing contracts and engaging other business activities (Gunter and Courtney 2016). In a similar vein, academy sponsorship has created new roles and opportunities for corporate managers within educational leadership. The volunteer governors recruited to oversee academies appear to be moving closer to the role of non-executive board members, recruited for their leadership and corporate skills. It has been argued that these managerialist changes are a potential distraction away from a more appropriate focus on teaching, learning and the curriculum (Courtney 2015a). Moves towards a corporate management model may also be contributing to a more, distant, executive style of leadership, including headteachers prepared to remove

staff who do not share their vision, as well as those whose performance is deemed inadequate (Courtney and Gunter 2015; Courtney 2015b; Gunter and Courtney 2016).

The injection of elite private sponsorship into state education has – even though most academies are without a sponsor – suggested the academies programme has become part of a wider agenda to roll back the frontiers of services that are publicly provided as well as funded (Courtney 2015a). This raises important questions about the control of education, and while there is a strong emphasis on parental choice, in reality it seems that the entry of markets and market thinking into the provision of public education is strengthening powerful groups (Woods et al. 2007). Our work is concerned with locating the academies programme within a wider analysis concerning the role of the state, civil society and education, and in particular how we are witnessing the depoliticisation of education. The shift from a local school that all can depend on to an educational product that parents have to actively choose means that issues that used to be debated and worked on such as provision of school places, inclusion, and quality are now matters of personal choice (Gunter and Courtney 2016). Our examination of how markets work and how people access markets means that advantage and disadvantage affect civil society in different ways, not least how class works (Raffo et al. 2010). One way to think about this is how new types of schools over time are layered and over-layered in ways that create seemingly new opportunities, but such schools fail and are replaced (e.g. CTCs replaced by Academies). However, the idea of the independent school remains potent with a consistent message that all children can potentially benefit (Gunter 2015). An important illustration of this is how Courtney (forthcoming) shows how new forms of academy (e.g. UTC, studio schools) with their focus on work-related learning and co-constructed curricula with industry are thereby narrowing understandings of what the purposes of education should encompass. It seems that other questions might be asked, not least how the major investment in new types of schools might have achieved greater achievements if it had been invested differently, instead of being handed to private sponsors (Gunter 2012; Lupton 2015). In summary, taken together our research suggests the following key points:

- o A lack of evidence that academies are better
- o The existence of both positive and negative examples of academy practice
- o Forced changes can be detrimental
- o An overall loss of democratic accountability
- o Changed roles within schools take focus off teaching and learning
- o A further example of differentiation/choice which is likely to disadvantage more disadvantaged groups
- o Potential for narrowed curriculum and removal of entitlement

RECOMMENDATIONS

While there is not yet any evidence that academies are better or worse than other schools, the emerging evidence from our research suggests that there are serious concerns about the ways that academisation is transforming the work of schools (in negative ways) and making educational inequality more likely. We therefore recommend:

- A halt of the current conversion process until robust national and international evidence becomes available.

- The use of research on how collaboration can help within academised systems (eg by looking at how local systems of educational improvement, such as the Manchester Challenge, have brought about educational gains through professional and local co-operation and co-ordination).

- The establishment of a form of localised co-ordination of school provision that is supported and valued.

- Urgent research on:
    - the impact of privatisation on public provision of education both in England and internationally.
    - examining the professional identities and purposes of those who are attracted by corporate leadership in public education, and the impact this is having on careers.
    - studying examples of schools that have not converted to academies, with a specific emphasis on the reasons for this and the impact it has on educational provision and standards.
    - studying examples of schools and professionals collaborating within a locality in order to counteract the diversification and fragmentation in local provision.
    - imagining and conceptualising new ways of thinking about public provision of education, and how new entrants into the system can be enabled to bring new insights, structures and cultures that all schools can benefit from.

Our research raises much broader questions about the purposes of public education which are also being raised by others and could benefit from wider public debate led by government. Until then, we recommend that schools are brought back into a coherent system of local and national provision.

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CONTACT DETAILS

Professor Ruth Lupton, Manchester Institute of Education

Email: ruth.lupton@manchester.ac.uk

Professor David Hall, Manchester Institute of Education

Email: Dave.hall@manchester.ac.uk