Neoliberal Crises and the Academisation of the English School System

Why Governing Boards Choose to Join Multi-Academy Trusts

Ian Dewes

Neoliberal Crises and the Academisation
of the English School System

Ian Dewes

Neoliberal Crises and the Academisation of the English School System

Why Governing Boards Choose to Join Multi-Academy Trusts

palgrave
macmillan

Ian Dewes 🆔
Odyssey Collaborative Trust
Rugby, UK

Cover credit: © gettyimages/Matthias Kulka

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

For Sam, with love and thanks.

Acknowledgements

This book is based on the research from my doctorate. I would like to thank my supervisors at Birmingham City University, Dr. Rob Smith, Dr. Abdulla Sodiq and Dr. Adam Whittaker. Their support, feedback and encouragement have been integral to my research and writing.

I would also like to thank the people and schools who very generously gave up their time to take part in my research.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife Sam and my sons, James Alex and Edward for their patience and understanding while I completed the doctorate and wrote this book.

Ethics Approval

Contents

About the Author

Ian Dewes is CEO of Odyssey Collaborative Trust, an academy trust in Derby with seven primary schools. Prior to this he was the Executive Headteacher of the Dunchurch Schools' Federation in Warwickshire. Over the course of his career he has taught and held leadership roles in Warwickshire, London and Derby. From 2016 to 2022 he was National Leader of Education and in this role he has supported a number of schools in a variety of challenging circumstances. He has taught in Early Years and Key Stages 1 and 2 and was formerly part of the inaugural cohort of Haringey's Leading Teachers Scheme. As well as school improvement, Ian has a particular interest in school governance having a cumulative total of over 30 years experience of governing in maintained schools, local governing boards in multi-academy trusts and central trust boards. He is currently the Chair of Governors at Northlands Primary School in Rugby and a Director at the Coventry Diocese Academy Trust. In 2021 he completed his professional doctorate at Birmingham City University, the research from which forms the basis for this book.

List of Figures

Introduction

Schools in the English education system have experienced a number of significant changes in recent years, one of the biggest being the 'academisation' of much of the sector. Since 2005 many schools have changed their status to academies, leaving the control of local authorities (LAs). Academies are independent, non-selective, state-funded schools that fall outside the control of local authorities (Machin & Vernoit, 2012). A key feature is that they are funded directly by central government instead of receiving their funds via a local authority (BBC, 2010). They sit alongside similar initiatives in other countries such as Charter Schools in the United States and Friskolor in Sweden, both of which allow schools to act in a way independent of local government agencies. In England, academies were meant as a solution to schools which were deemed to be failing or underperforming. Often these schools were in the most challenging urban secondary school settings. The Labour government of the time sought a 'third way' of merging practice from the public and private sectors in the hope that the public sector would become more "innovative and entrepreneurial" (Woods et al., 2007: 238). Over time, academies came to be viewed by successive governments as a systemic change to the education landscape that can be used to raise educational standards in all schools (Salokangas & Chapman, 2014: 373).

Started by the Labour government in the early 2000s, academies are more independent from the local authority than other schools. They have

"freedom from local authority control; the ability to set their own pay and conditions for staff; freedoms around the delivery of the curriculum, and the ability to change the lengths of terms and school days" (DfE, 2013). In this context, academies can be seen as a continuation of government policy stretching back to the 1980s, where local management of schools and grant-maintained status gave some schools more freedom from their local authority than they had had before (Abbot et al., 2013). By the end of the last Labour government in May 2010 there were 203 academies with this accelerating to 4515 six years later under subsequent governments (BBC, 2010). By 2023, 41.6% of all schools were academies, over half of all pupils (54.4%) were attending such a school (DfE, 2023). Rayner (2017) suggests a historical timeline which stretches from the 1980s onwards:

Wave 1— Conservative Government—1986 to 1997
Certain types of schools were created (Grant Maintained and City Technology Colleges). Although not academies, they share some of the features, e.g. they were independent of local authorities.

Wave 2— Labour Government—1997 to 2010
The legislation introduced by the Conservative government during Wave 1 is used by Labour to create City Academies. These initially replaced schools which were deemed to be failing, but from 2004 academies were used where there was a shortage of school places and from 2005 all schools were promised the chance to have academy-style freedoms.

Wave 3— Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government—2010 to 2015
Only a month after a new coalition government was formed new legislation was passed by parliament which expedited the process of becoming an academy. This led to a rapid increase in the number of academies and the realisation of the 2005 pledge that all schools could become academies.

Wave 4— Conservative Government—2015 to 2017
In 2016 the government announced that by 2020 all schools will be academies or in the process of converting to academy status. Whereas previously individual schools

> routinely became academies (known as single academy trusts), the focus in Wave 4 was for all but the largest of schools to join or create a group of academies known as a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT).

Since Rayner's timeline was written, the number of schools converting has slowed and there has been considerable variation across the country (Gill & Janmaat, 2019). This constitutes a change in policy significant enough for a fifth wave. One aspect of the fifth wave is that there has been less of a justification for academisation based on the performance of academies; it has become clearer from research that academies are not a panacea for school improvement (Gorard, 2014). Another aspect of the fifth wave has been the dropping of the 2016 policy for all schools becoming academies. The government continued to talk positively about the benefits of academy status, but the emphasis has shifted to "building capacity in the school system" and encouraging schools to become academies voluntarily (DfE, 2018). Part of the reason for this change in approach may be due to the difficulties in finding sufficient MATs willing to take on further schools, with certain schools, for example, small rural schools, finding it difficult to become academies (NAO, 2018). Another factor in this fifth wave in the development of academies is the size of MATs. 64% of academy trusts only have one or two schools (Confederation of School Trusts, 2021) and this has led to calls for a focus on merging smaller trusts. Sir Jon Coles, the CEO of the country's largest MAT, United Leaning, has called for more larger trusts because of the economies of scale possible (2021). With many trusts already in existence, but typically of a relatively small size, the focus is likely to be increasingly on smaller trusts merging, or larger trusts cannibalising others. There is no research on this currently, but anecdotally I have come across many references to this in my professional life. A driver for growth in a MAT I have worked for was a fear that they were vulnerable to being taken over by a larger trust. A new and under-researched area is the merging of academy trusts.

The academy system has coincided with reduced budgets for LA and reduction in role. This has meant power has increasingly shifted upwards to central government and downwards to schools with local authorities becoming relatively marginalised (Connolly et al., 2017). Wilkins argues that the politics of the school system has been reconfigured; the government depoliticised the system by removing power from the

local authorities and then re-politicised by creating new levers of control through the actions of leaders in academies (2016).

The introduction of academies has not been without controversy (Machin & Vernoit, 2012). There have been a number of protests and acts of resistance with organisations such as the Local Schools Network and the Anti Academies Alliance continuing to run campaigns against academies. Some of the unhappiness with academies relates not just to the status of the school, but the way schools are run compared to maintained schools (that is, those schools which are under the control of local authorities). Baxter (2016) and Wilkins (2016) argue that where schools become part of a trust, or Multi-Academy Trust (MAT), they lose some autonomy to the central function of the trust and this has led to some resistance and protest.

There has been much debate around academies. Successive governments have argued that two of the main advantages academies have are freedom and autonomy. Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education between 2010 and 2014, said that because of academisation schools have been "given the freedom and the power to take control of their own destiny" (Eyles et al., 2017: 108). Freedoms for academies involve not having to study the national curriculum and the ability to set their own term dates. However, autonomy in these areas goes alongside another neoliberal trope—accountability. An academy does not have to teach the national curriculum, but they are still held to performative measures such as pupil test results. Further nuance on the issue of accountability can be seen in the work of Ladd and Fiske who point out that while a school that becomes an academy has more freedom in some respects, e.g. from the local authority, many schools join other academies as part of a MAT. MATs typically hold certain powers centrally, so powers that had previously been the preserve of the headteacher in a school, are then held by an executive leader, such as a CEO, who has responsibilities across the MAT (2016).

There have been a number of media reports about how power is held within the academic school system, leading to criticism in the education and academic sectors. It has been reported that local school governors have less influence, (BBC, 2010) that headteachers in each individual academy have less autonomy (TES, 2015) and that the role of parents in academy governance is being side-lined (Guardian, 2016). Similar concern is also expressed in academic writing, see for instance the work of Andrew Wilkins (2016) and Jacqueline Baxter (2016). There is a generally

held assumption based on observation and anecdote that when schools join a MAT, powers which were held locally are taken away and held more centrally within the structure of the MAT. One example is from Leicestershire where the leadership of the Leicester Diocese Multi-Academy Trust planned to make the headteacher of Swinford Primary School redundant. Parents at the school felt that the decision was being made without their consultation (saveourhead.com, 2019). In this particular instance, the protests led to a change with Leicester Diocese Multi-Academy Trust agreeing to keep the headteacher in place and the resignation of the entire board of trustees under pressure from the Bishop of Leicester (BBC, 2019a).

There is limited research into why schools choose to join MATs. While some (known as 'sponsored' academies) have no choice due to their failure to meet government set performance objectives, most choose to become 'converter' academies. In the period marked as Wave 3 by Rayner, converters represented almost 80% of the expansion of the academy sector (Eyles et al., 2015). While research has looked at the types of schools that academise, for example, those that are convertors are more likely to be in affluent areas (Eyles et al., 2015) and there has also been research that suggests academies are not more effective than maintained schools (National Audit Office, 2018; Regan-Stansfield, 2016), the rationale for joining a MAT is not well understood.

Other than sponsored academies, the power for making the decision about becoming an academy lies with the governors of a maintained school, however the limited research that does exist suggests that the governors do not simply make such decisions in a vacuum. Rayner et al. suggest from a case study of one governing body that there was an "enthusiasm" to convert but, when referring to the way some schools are made to become sponsored academies, there was a "determination not to be forced to convert" (2018: 151). In other words, the possibility that that they may not be able to say no to becoming an academy at some point in future, encouraged governors to say yes now. Some thought has focused on the role of governors in opposing academisation (Wilkins, 2016) but there is a need for literature which reflects why governors choose to join MATs, hence this book.

With the academy system being characterised by the aforementioned de-politicisation (removal of power from local authorities) and re-politicisation (new power being given to leaders in academies) it is important to understand where the new power lies. The academy system

has led to an increase in the layers of governance (Smith & Abbott, 2013). Whereas before there was a governing body in each school, in a MAT there are usually local governors, a trust board, who govern across the MAT and 'members' who have a small range of specific duties, such as appointing the trust board and being "guardians of the trust's governance" (National Governance Association, 2019). Below, Fig. 1.1 shows a structure commonly used in MATs. Note the new levels of governance used in a MAT: Members and boards of directors/trustees, whose roles have gradually evolved as the system has become more mature. These have led to a reduction in the responsibilities held by governors at local level. At the centre of MATs are two groups, those who work for the MAT, the executive leaders, sometimes known as Chief Executive Officers and sometimes executive headteachers or executive principals. There are also those who are not employed by the MAT, but give their time voluntarily to the governance of the organisation. They are sometimes known as trustees and sometimes directors. Some have argued that this shift in power has led to a reduction in democratic accountability (Baxter, 2016) and an attack on democratic representation (Wilkins, 2016). Some are less critical, claiming that MATs are "a new form of civic structure" who should be "working with other civic actors to advance education for the public good in their locality" (Confederation of School Trusts, 2019: 3).

There have been other developments to school structures which sit outside of MATs, but have a similar effect in terms of centralising governance and other leadership. Federations of schools have become relatively common in the education system, typically existing on a spectrum of hard to soft, whereby a hard federation involves centralising the governance function into one board and the soft option retains local governance (Chapman et al., 2009). In federations it has been noted that governors face increased accountability measures, as is the trend in the school system more generally (Connolly et al., 2017).

While legally the responsibility for the running of the trust lies with the central board of directors or trustees, they are able to choose to delegate powers to others, be they employees or those involved in governance (NGA, 2020a). How much they do this depends largely on the size of the trust, with smaller organisation more willing to delegate responsibility (Allcroft, 2016). Commonly, the most significant powers are held at the centre and this can often lead to tensions between those at the centre and those who work locally in individual schools (Baxter & Cornforth,
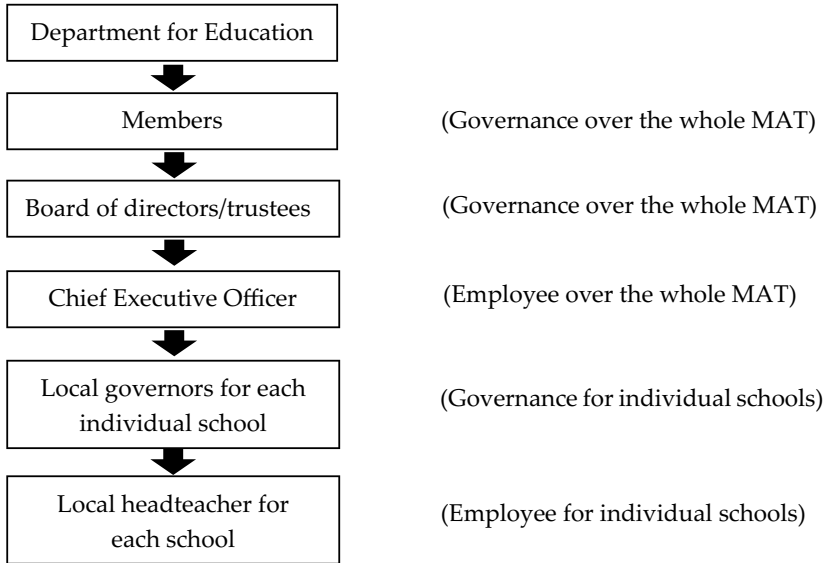
Department for Education	
↓	
Members	(Governance over the whole MAT)
↓	
Board of directors/trustees	(Governance over the whole MAT)
↓	
Chief Executive Officer	(Employee over the whole MAT)
↓	
Local governors for each individual school	(Governance for individual schools)
↓	
Local headteacher for each school	(Employee for individual schools)

Fig. 1.1 Typical structure of a MAT

2019). A particular feature of the academy landscape is MATs which have grown out of one successful school. The Dixons Academy Trust, which has fourteen schools, grew from just one, Dixons City Academy. This MAT has codified a specific approach to running schools, based on the founding headteacher's principles and this has been rolled out across all the schools, thus reducing local autonomy (Dixon's OpenSource, 2020).

Over recent years money has become an increasing focus in educational debate. Schools are said to have been under increasing financial pressure. Reports of difficulties which schools have faced have been consistently recorded. For example, there was a march against cuts to school funding to Downing Street by 2000 headteachers in 2018 (School Cuts, 2018). In my own professional experience, the schools I have led have reduced teaching staff in recent years. In the MAT where I am a non-executive director, we have been encouraged by a Department for Education consultant to review staffing in all of the schools in the trust after numbers, such as the pupil to teacher ratio, were compared against national metrics. All schools were said to have inefficiencies which needed to be corrected in order to save money. The Department for Education

(DfE) has claimed that schools are well funded, for example claiming that English schools receive the third highest levels of funding in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development)—a claim refuted by the UK Statistics Agency (BBC, 2019b).

Financial constraints are having a significant impact on schools. While I have noticed challenges across all schools I know, one school I have previously worked at stands out as being particularly vulnerable. This is because of its size—pupil numbers are about fifty. The DfE commissioned research which culminated in a report which made suggestions about how small schools can continue to survive. One of the key recommendations was for them to join a MAT or share a headteacher with another school (BBC, 2016b). Research has shown that balancing the budget is the greatest challenge faced by school governors: 40% of governors identified this as their biggest problem (National Governance Association, 2020b).

The influence of OFSTED can be seen here; the latest iteration of the OFSTED Inspection Handbook has increased the focus on pupil and staff wellbeing, staff workload and ensuring pupils are taught a broad curriculum. The aforementioned National Governance Association survey revealed that the challenge of finance is felt more keenly by schools who are not in academy trusts (National Governance Association, 2020b).

A body of academic writing has linked the academisation of the English school system with the paradigm of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism refers to a focus on free market approaches and private enterprise and despite much criticism, has persisted as major economic and political influence for decades (Steger & Roy, 2010). Brighouse points out that government speeches and publications consistently contain neoliberal mantras such as 'choice', 'autonomy' and 'accountability' (in Pring & Roberts (Eds.) 2015: 161–2). Arguments have been made for how government initiatives such as New Labour's 'Third Way' and David Cameron's 'Big Society' have helped neoliberal behaviours influence education in the academy system (Pickerden et al., 2015). Keddie links the behaviour of senior leaders in an academy chain with neoliberal behaviour traits such as self-responsibility and entrepreneurism (2015). Wilkins links the academy system with the neoliberal ideal of a minimal state with moves by successive governments, both New Labour (1997–2010) and Conservative (2010 onwards) to save the public from an overbearing state. This is termed as the anti-producer capture rhetoric (2016). Kulz considers