

## **The Academies Programme: an education revolution?**

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### **Abstract**

*The election of the Conservative-led Coalition government in England in 2010 brought with it the promise of an 'education revolution', central to which is the Academies Act (2010). Via a vast expansion of the academies programme introduced by Labour, the Academies act aims to raise standards for all children and to reduce the achievement gap between most and least disadvantaged children. In this paper we explore the original notion of academies as invented by Labour and consider how the Coalition's ideas differ from this. Drawing on interviews conducted with professionals involved in the implementation and operation of academies, we consider issues concerned with their conceptualisation and implementation and evaluate their success so far. We argue that, aside from the scale of their ambition, the nature of academies and the direction of education in England under the Coalition's academies programme is not as innovative as it may first appear. We propose that despite differences in rhetoric, the policies of the conservative-led coalition and the predecessor Labour government are remarkably similar and, contrary to their stated goal of narrowing the achievement gap, the academies programme poses a risk of further disadvantaging already challenged children and increasing the gap in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and their less disadvantaged peers.*

### **Keywords**

New Labour, coalition, specialist schools, academies, achievement, leadership

### **Introduction**

The introduction of the Conservative – Liberal Democrat Coalition in England in May 2010 brought with it the promise of an 'education revolution' (Gove, 2010), at the heart of which lies the Academies Act 2010 (Department for Education, 2010a). Within weeks of being appointed to cabinet, the Conservative Education Secretary, Michael Gove, had written to all the schools in England, primary and secondary,

inviting them to convert to academy status. According to the government, the central aims of the Academies Act are to raise standards for all children and to narrow the attainment gap between most and least disadvantaged. Academies are characterised by their autonomy from Local Education Authority (LEA) control, freedom from the National Curriculum and choice over pay and conditions, and it is these freedoms that, according to the government, will allow academies to drive up standards.

In this paper we consider the original notion of academy as proposed by the previous Labour government upon which the Coalition Government's Academies Programme originates. We consider the goals of this earlier initiative and the extent to which these goals were realised as well as the difficulties that emerged. Within this context we consider issues concerned with the conceptualisation and implementation of the new style academies, as described in the 2010 Academies Act (DfE, 2010a), and how the Coalition's academies compare to Labour's Academies both in aims and practicalities.

At various points within the article we draw on interviews conducted in autumn 2010 with key individuals involved with Academies, just as the first of the Coalition's Academies opened. Interviewees were three professionals involved in the implementation and operation of academies: Professor PS, a director of Academies and trust school development, at a North West University; JS, Independent Education Consultant with trust schools, free schools and academies; and ES, previously Assistant Headteacher in two Academies and current assistant headteacher of a local authority (LA) school in Special Measures and in the process of applying for academy status. Exploring issues surrounding the practicalities of the new Academies programme, the interviews provide additional insight into the reality of the Academies programme in practice, the differences (or lack of) between Academies and LA schools, and the possible cost of 'the education revolution' to already disadvantaged young people. In sum, we argue (a) that in contrast to other state funded education, the characteristics of Academies are less distinctive than the 'education revolution' would lead us to believe, (b) despite the differing ideologies associated with the Conservatives and Labour governments, when it comes to education policy, the recent Labour government and the current Coalition are remarkably similar, and, (c) although there is little basis on which to predict the future success of academies, existing evidence suggests that the Coalition's Academies Programme may further disadvantage already challenged pupils for whom underachievement and lack of opportunity are a harsh reality.

## **The Underpinning Ethos**

### ***Labour's Academies***

In 2000, the English Labour Party (1997-2010) introduced 'City Academies' (Blunkett, 2000); a new breed of school aimed at overcoming low attainment in

deprived areas and at creating new school places. With an above average intake of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM), these City Academies, or Academies as they became known, aspired to 'improve pupil performance and break the cycle of low expectations' (Blunkett, 2000). The rhetoric accompanying Labour's Academies programme then was one of addressing disadvantage and increasing equality. Yet, in practice, the further diversification of schooling and, in turn, choice created by Academies is characteristic of the market orientated approaches of the Conservatives, whereby the diversification of schools and the increased role of the private sector in state education is a way of increasing competition between schools.

The attempt to simultaneously endorse the free market *and* social justice is characteristic of the Third way ethos underlying Labour's policies under Tony Blair. Defined by Lund (2008) as a 'blend of Margaret Thatcher's market orientation and 'Old' Labour's commitment to state-sponsored social justice' (p.44), the third way involved the adoption of neo-liberal principles combined with a strongly stated commitment to 'fairness and justice within strong communities' (Labour Party, 1997). By jointly prioritising equality and marketisation, Labour positioned themselves away from traditional neo-liberalism of the Conservatives. Academies could be seen as a way of adhering to both market forces and social justice, increasing school choice and hence competition between schools while jointly addressing the link between deprivation and poor educational attainment. As Whitty (2008) argues, for Labour, the Academies programme and other initiatives involving private sponsors in public sector education, such as the expansion of trust schools and specialist schools, were ostensibly methods by which to further social justice.

### ***The Coalition's Academies***

Central to the 2010 Conservative party manifesto and thus, the education policies of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition elected in May 2010, was a mass expansion of the academies programme. Like Labour, the Coalition identifies narrowing the achievement gap and raising standards for all as the primary motivations for academies (DfE, 2010a). There are, however, a number of key differences between Labour's academies and the academies programme put forward by the Coalition. For Labour, academies were only located in deprived areas or built to replace failing schools. Under the Conservative-led Coalition, however, schools do not need to be underperforming in order to gain academy status. On the contrary, although all schools may apply for academy status, only those schools that perform best are, under the Academies Act 2010, automatically eligible for academy status and can be fast-tracked into becoming academies.

Initially only open to schools classified in Ofsted inspections as 'outstanding', in November 2010 this fast-tracking to academy status was extended to include schools classified as 'good' but with 'outstanding' features. The decision to fast track outstanding schools was defended on the grounds that these outstanding schools-come-academies would work in partnership with a weaker school in order to help

that school improve. Sharing good practice and expertise between staff and students, acting in a support or advisory capacity and working towards helping a weaker school to convert to an academy have all been identified as ways in which this support can be operationalised. It is a DfE requirement that fast-tracked schools support at least one weaker school and that this support is focused on having a measurable impact on standards.

### ***Free schools***

The expansion of the Academies programme also involves the introduction of a new branch of academies known as 'free schools'. Based on the Swedish model of schooling, if teachers, parents and other groups such as religious organisations are not satisfied with the education providers that are available in their area they can apply to set up a free school. If their proposal is successful and the school is set up then the parents, teachers or otherwise who proposed the new school have some (but not total) control over the appointment of school staff and the setting of the school ethos.

### **Characteristics of Academies: Labour vs. the Coalition**

Arguably the most defining character of academies is that, despite being publically funded, academies are autonomous from local education control. Under the comprehensive schools system in England, LA schools received their government funding via the local authority with the enrolment of each new child prompting a payment to that school. Individual schools receive approximately 90 percent of the schools budget awarded to the LA by central government (BBC, 2010), the remainder of which is retained by the LA to provide common services such as school transport and special provision for students with special educational needs (SEN) (House of Commons, 2010). In order for Academies to receive their money directly, funding is recouped from the Dedicated Schools Budget (DSB) and paid to these Academies thus drawing funding away from the LA. The cost recouped in 2010-2011 for Academies opening in 2008-2009 was £568 million (House of Commons, 2010) and, given the scale of the Coalition's Academies Programme the amount of funding that will be taken from LA budgets in coming years will be vast. Consistent with their reduced role in the running of schools as the Academies programme expands, the Coalition has outlined a change of direction for LAs towards a more strategic role. This independence of academies from the LA has a number of implications, the most significant of which are discussed below.

### ***Service Provision for Schools***

Out of their funding, academies must buy in the services that are no longer provided for them by the LA (although they are free to buy back these services from the LA if they choose). The proposed benefit for academies is that they are able to explore the services available from different providers and buy in those that best suit the

needs of their institution. Although this autonomy over service provision is emphasised as a key characteristic of academies, this option to move away from LA control has been in existence since Local Management of Schools (LMS) was introduced in 1990. A key component of the 1988 Education Reform Act (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1988) brought in by the Conservatives, the LMS policy allows *all* schools, not just academies, the option of dropping out of LA control and receiving their funds direct from the government, in turn, allowing greater autonomy from the LA and awarding the headteacher and school governors control over finances. It is not just the Conservatives who have a history of undermining the LA, however. Highly resonant of Conservative education policy, in their manifesto published nearly twenty years previously, Labour stated that 'All schools will be free to manage their day-to-day budgets, with local education authorities (*which later became part of LAs*) given a new strategic role. Opted-out schools will be freed from central government control and brought together with City Technology Colleges into the mainstream of the local school system' (Labour Party, 1992). As Gewirtz (2000) observed, on election, Labour retained the compliance-based components of education policy such as target setting in schools and local authorities that were brought in by the Conservatives, and were responsible for relocating funds away from the LA to private companies. Hence, opting out of LA control is not a characteristic unique to academies and the increasing move away from LA control appears to have been as much a goal for the previous Labour government as it has become for the Coalition.

### ***Freedom over pay and conditions***

Unlike LA schools, academies possess autonomy over setting length of school day and term times and are not required to adhere to statutory requirements for pay. In theory, these freedoms could result in longer hours and poorer or, alternatively, better pay for teachers as well as disruption for parents who must arrange time off or child care around their child's school hours. Indeed, in the past there have been well publicised cases where teachers are required to work more hours or been asked to accept large reductions in maternity leave (Barker, 2007). While such incidences exist, in many cases academies may not choose to put these freedoms into practice. Indeed, for most academies, pay and conditions differ little from LA controlled schools (Hastings, 2011) and although this could change as the academies programme expands, at present these freedoms may constitute more of a theoretical rather than a practical difference between Academies and LA controlled schools.

### ***Costs of autonomy to disadvantaged children***

According to the Coalition's education White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010b), SEN provision and coordination of admissions are to remain an LA responsibility. The White paper identifies a role for the LA as 'champions of choice' for parents, responsible for ensuring a wide range of choice is available to parents and for encouraging the development of free schools and Academies. Then, once all

schools have converted, a consultation will be held to identify the “strategic role” of the LA.

It remains to be seen whether, as an increasing number of schools convert to Academies, the LA will retain this responsibility or whether it will be passed on to individual schools. A crucial concern over future funding arrangements is the potential cost to pupils with SEN. If funding for specialist provision is divided equally between separate institutions rather than combined in a central LA fund then the funds received per academy will be insufficient to provide the specialist services that students with SEN require (National Deaf Children’s Society, 2011), particularly if an academy has a higher than average number of pupils with additional needs. As a consequence, pupils with SEN may struggle to be placed in Academies as the Academies cannot afford to have them there. Thus, the cost of autonomy is likely to fall on those children who are already disadvantaged, especially when other measures that could benefit them, such as one-to-one tuition for English and maths, have been abolished. Although for the time being funding for Academies will not be cut from LEA funds for specialist services, in this time for austerity it is highly unlikely that this funding arrangement will continue.

### ***Curriculum and Specialist Subjects***

A further freedom granted to academies is flexibility in their exploration of new approaches to pedagogy allowing them to set their own curriculum as long as it is ‘broad and balanced’. This licence to be innovative in their approach to the curriculum, however, does not free academies from the requirement to raise standards and meet targets just like any other school. Having worked in LA schools as well as being Assistant Head of two academies, comparing the two ES observes:

I don’t find that much difference if I’m brutally honest about it because at the end of the day our core business is raising the attainment of students whether you’re working in an academy or a local authority school or an independent school but in essence it’s your core business and you will go about it as a member of staff in pretty much the same way.

A characteristic of Labour’s academies was that they had a specialist subject and, at present, secondary schools wishing to convert to academies are still required to have an emphasis in one or more subject areas. Yet, this characteristic of being ‘specialist’ is far from exclusive to academies. Indeed, the majority of comprehensive schools, 92% (DCSF, 2008), are now classified as having a specialism. With reference to the curriculum, as part of the aim to reduce bureaucracy and increase freedom, the education White paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010b), identifies the ambition of slimming down the national curriculum to make way for creativity and new ideas. If then, the National Curriculum is slimmed down and Academies are still “required by law, like all schools, to teach a broad and balanced

curriculum” (p. 42) then the contrast in freedom surrounding what is taught in schools between Academies and LA schools may be very slight.

### ***Admissions***

For maintained schools, admissions are managed by the LA while academies act as their own admissions authority. As set out in the Schools Standards and Frameworks Act (DfEE, 1998), schools who have a specialism, and thus all Academies, can select up to 10% of their pupils on the basis of aptitude for that specialism. Although the ruling was to apply to all schools, Coldron, Willis and Wolstenholme (2009) report that Academies are most likely select by aptitude. Yet, as highlighted by Tough and Brooks (2007), the extent to which schools can distinguish between aptitude and ability is subject to debate. For example, in an evaluation of overt and covert admissions procedures in England, West and Hind (2003) describe a school that selects 10% of its pupils on the grounds of ‘proven aptitude in music’ but also required children applying under the ‘aptitude’ criteria to have achieved at least Grade III of the Associated Board...in an instrument or voice’ (p. 9). Examples such as this led West and Hind to conclude that, while the admissions procedures of some schools are equitable, a significant minority, especially those with their own admission authorities employ criteria which appear to be constructed to select particular groups of pupils while excluding others.

Academies must have in place procedures to prevent admissions that bias against the disadvantaged or that promote segregation. In their report for the Institute for Public Policy, however, Tough and Brooks (2007) raise concerns that, with no designated body in place to ensure that admissions procedures are adhered to, schools that act as their own admissions authority are covertly selecting pupils on the basis of ability. They found that the intake of these schools was significantly less likely to represent the makeup of the local area than schools whose admissions was managed by the LA. As set out in the White paper (DfE, 2010b), at present the LA is still responsible for coordinating admissions. How this responsibility will be played out when academies are autonomous acting as their own admissions authority remains to be seen.

### ***Filling the shoes of the LEA***

What new Academies and those schools wishing to convert will need to consider is how they are going to account for that gap in knowledge and expertise that will be left by the LEA. As Education Consultant JS notes:

To manage schools and move to a more corporate culture is going to be a big shift for some education professionals... I think there is going to be more people doing my kind of role as a business manager in schools because it is a lot to expect schools to be able to do that themselves.

It may be that while academies call in education consultants to assist them in managing their schools, the LA, in their strategic capacity, will be a valuable advisory source for parent and those wanting to set up new schools and academies. In his recent research considering the future of LAs in London, Wilkins (2010) concluded that, for parents who want to set up free schools, it is LAs that are in the best position to boost parental involvement in local schools, as is necessary if parents are to set up free schools, whilst meeting the needs of the community in general. The LA's function as a safety net for schools when problems arise, such as destruction by fire and break down in working relationships, may be taken for granted, its value only realised on absence. But, as Wilkins (2010) argues, if LAs no longer had the clout of being significant providers in schools then it cannot be assumed that they would provide such a safety net in the cases of Academies and free schools.

### ***Sponsorship***

All Academies established under Labour were set up with the assistance of outside sponsorship. When Academies were introduced in 2000, academy sponsors were required to make a contribution to cover 10% of the capital costs for a new building, a sum capped at 2million pounds. In 2006 this was changed to an endowment fund of an unspecified sum up until September 2009 when, in an attempt to entice more sponsors, the requirement for sponsors to contribute financially was terminated. Instead, skills and leadership and the organisations educational track record and their commitment to working with local parents, teachers and pupils were identified as the criteria by which potential sponsors would be evaluated (DCSF, 2009). Under the Coalition's new criteria for academies it is only low performing schools that require a sponsor to convert to academy status (DfE, 2011) and sponsors are not required to contribute financially. As maintained by the Coalition's academy programme, sponsors could be charitable organisations (e.g. Absolute Return for Kids), philanthropic entrepreneurs (e.g. Jack Petchey), faith organisations (e.g., United Learning Trust: UTL), private (e.g. Peter Townsley) or public sector companies (e.g. Kent County Council), or schools, colleges or universities. Sponsors hold an advisory role for the school and have power in setting the ethos of the school as well as the management structure of the school and support the school via their involvement with the governing body. Yet, without the need for financial contribution, what sponsors do provide may not always be clear. As ES observes:

At the chalk face they appear to provide very little if I'm honest. They can make some demands on what they want from us but they don't really seem to provide too much.

Labour argued that sponsors would serve as role models, inspiring young people to achieve. Although sponsors do not have to make a financial contribution to their academy it is also the case they do not have any financial incentive for being a sponsor. Hence, sponsors' motivations for undertaking such a role are not



immediately clear. Based on his examination of the privatisation of the school system, Hatcher (2006) argues that academy sponsorship is seen by sponsors in the context of their record of charitable donations and community activity rather than any more materialistic purpose. Although under Labour, sponsors could not profit financially from their sponsorship (whether sponsors may profit under the Coalition is still unclear) critics have raised fears that the power that sponsors possess over the governance and ethos of the school could be manipulated for personal gain. There are particular concerns over Academies sponsored by religious organisations with fears that they will teach extreme religious views as part of their curriculum. For instance, in the past there has been concern about the teaching of creationism as part of the curriculum by the ULT, the largest sponsor of Academies in England (Marley, 2010). Indeed, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) have been outspoken in their concerns over the unsuitability of many sponsors stating that while it would be reasonable for parents to expect a sponsor of their child's school to have the appropriate experience to undertake the role, "Academy sponsors do not need to have any educational experience and many of the current sponsors have no track record in education" (NUT, 2010:10).

### ***Leadership***

Effective leadership has been identified as crucial in the improvement of failing schools. The notion of the 'super headteacher' was put forward by Blair during his party conference speech in 1998 in which he argued that outstanding headteachers responsible for rescuing failing schools should be rewarded for their efforts with substantial salaries. This notion of super heads has also been adopted by Gove who announced plans to increase the National Leaders in Education (NLE) from 393 to 1000 by 2014 identifying their skills and experience as key for rescuing failing schools (DfE, 2010c). A scheme run by the National College for School Leadership, NLEs are outstanding headteachers with a proven track record of turning around an underperforming school and who have volunteered their services to help turn around other struggling schools. The track record for retaining academy leaders has not been a great success, however. For instance, the ULT, the largest sponsor of Academies lost over half of its headteachers within two years of appointment with 8 out of 16 principals leaving within this period (Marley, 2009). Gleeson, Needham & Morley (2007) suggest that the high pressure on Academies to meet targets and to raise standards often from very low start point may explain this high turnover of senior staff. Furthermore, while effective leadership is often identified as a characteristic of successful schools, the evidence is not conclusive. For instance, in a sample of 57 secondary schools, Opdenakker and Van Damme (2007) investigated school leaders' engagement in participative professionally-oriented leadership such as inspiring teachers to implement innovative interventions and to reflect on the educational goals of the schools. They reported that the extent to which leaders engaged in this participative leadership had very little effect on practice within the school. Opdenakker and Van Damme's findings suggest that,

despite the large salaries it demands, leadership is not necessarily a high ranking factor in school success.

### ***New buildings***

Under Labour's Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme, state schools as well as Academies were often given new buildings. Hence although identified as a key feature of Labour's Academies, new school buildings are not a characteristic exclusive to Academies. Since the Coalition government have come into power, the BSF programme has been terminated and it is currently unclear the extent to which Academies and state schools will be awarded funding to build or rebuild.

### **The Question of Social Justice**

Conservative education policies have long been criticised of working in favour of the middle class (Ball, 2003) and the Coalition's academies programme is no exception. Most controversial is the Coalition's decision to fast-track high performing schools to academy status. This approach has raised fears of the creation of a two-tier education system where the middle class monopolise academies and free schools leaving less privileged pupils to attend the remaining LA schools. Examination of the Swedish schooling system upon which the Coalition's academies modelled has found that increased school choice does lead to segregation (Skolverket, 2003). In a discussion of this issue, Bunar (2010) raises concerns that for middle class parents, rather than basing school choice on the quality of the school, school selection would be informed by the social and ethnic background of the school intake. Such selection criteria would result in a two tier system with high quality schools tailored to the middle class with second-rate schools catering to working class and ethnic minorities.

Although too early to evaluate the impact of the academies programme on social cohesion and equality in England, consistent with fears of the emergence of a two-tier education system, the Centre for Economic Performance (Machin & Veroit, 2010) reports that schools that have applied to become Academies under the Coalition's Academies Act are more advantaged than the average secondary school and of the academies that opened under Labour with better GCSE performance and less FSM intake. Consistently, while it is outstanding schools that will be fast-tracked to become academies, Ofsted report that it is those schools that are inadequate rather than outstanding that are more likely to include children from deprived backgrounds (Ofsted, 2009). Machin & Veroit (2010) warn that these differences between the old and new style academies, rather than reducing inequality in the education system, could actually bolster advantage and exacerbate existing inequalities.

While it is only high performing schools that can be fast-tracked to academy status, low performing schools are still able to apply as long as they have a sponsor and

those schools that have been in special measures i.e., those who have failed their Ofsted inspection, for a year will automatically be converted to academies. Hence, in theory, it should still be possible for less privileged children to benefit from attending an academy. With the increase in the diversity of schools, however, competition and the pressure to raise pupil performance will increase. While this competition is what the government strive for there is a risk that those children who are not able to achieve the high grades that qualify an education provider as successful may find it harder to get placed in Academies. Changes in pupil intake have been associated with previous academy success. For instance, in an examination of school composition and outcomes for Academies at GCSE from 2004 to 2006, Gorard (2009) identified a number of Academies whose FSM intake decreased as pupil performance improved. Such findings indicate that the apparent success of academies may be attributable, at least in part, to changes in pupil intake rather than changes in pupil performance and that when pupil intake changes occur, it is the already disadvantaged that are likely to suffer most. Consistent with Gorard's findings, ES observes that:

When a school converts to an academy, what the new headteacher would have to do is to show quite quick improvement. One of the easy ways to do that is if you siphon off the bottom thirty percent so immediately your standards are raising. It's very stereotypical but the bottom thirty percent may be the ones that exhibit behavioural difficulties... The more unscrupulous headteachers who know how to work the system would, I suspect, put the lowest performing thirty percent back into Local Authority hands.

Although admissions procedures should prevent such bias occurring, unfortunately, there may still be room for discriminatory practice, intended or otherwise. Based on their examination of admissions in 3134 English secondary schools, West, Barham and Hind (2009) conclude that admissions procedures lack transparency, particularly for parents or carers who are not proficient in English. Such findings indicate that the admissions framework is not fool proof in its attempt to eradicate bias in admissions, particularly for those groups associated with educational disadvantage.

### ***Partnership with struggling schools***

While the current expansion of the Academies programme is no longer focused on social inclusion the Coalition's Academies programme does require that all Academies support a weaker school to raise attainment; a stipulation that, the Government argue, helps address inequality. Emphasised in Labour's White paper 14-19 Education and Skills (DfES, 2005), partnership working already exists, particularly in 14-19 education where institutional partnerships are deemed essential for delivery of the 14-19 curriculum. All interviewees remarked on the potential benefits of partnership for example, for sharing good teaching across institutions, reducing the training budget by sharing training sessions between schools and

sharing expertise for the benefit of all children. Hence, partnerships between schools have potential for raising standards as well as improving social cohesion. The nature of individual partnerships and the motivation of partners, however, will be paramount for their success. For instance, Lumby and Morrison (2006) remark that for partnership in 14-19 education, conflict and institutional superiority dominant components of the partnerships while Higham and Yeomans (2010) report that those collaborations generated by a need to fulfil external requirements tended to be limited and fragile in nature.

In addition to each partner's commitment to the collaboration, locality of weaker schools to outstanding school is also likely to influence the extent to which weaker schools benefit from the partnership. Schools with a disadvantaged intake that are located in an affluent area where the majority of the schools are high performing may be in a better position than struggling schools located in areas on high deprivation to (a) be partnered by an outstanding school that is converting to academy status or (b) find an outstanding school with which to partner if they themselves want to convert to academy status. Furthermore, the extent to which weaker schools may benefit from such partnerships depends on the commitment of stronger schools in helping weaker schools improve.

### ***Impact of Academies on local area***

There exists a paradox between the free market approach to education characteristic of the Conservatives and the emphasis they place on the 'big society'. Moving power away from central government to local communities as Academies is an example of this. The partnership of weaker and stronger schools, for instance, and the investment in improving availability of and access to apprenticeships for under-represented groups suggest the building of community cohesion and provision of opportunities for social mobility. As professor PS observes:

There does seem to be, by the Coalition, much more emphasis on localisation and providing opportunities for young people in the area in which they've been brought up.

In conflict with this big society focus is the potentially damaging impact that the expansion of Academies will have on the local area. A key criticism comes from a perceived cost to neighbouring schools the notion being that if middle class families and good teachers are attracted to Academies due to extra funds and the potential of having their expertise recognised by a better salary then neighbouring schools will suffer as they will lose both the brightest pupils and the best staff. With reference to free schools in particular, Hatcher (2010) proposes that demand for these schools will be greater for middle class parents wishing to retain their educational advantage and who would rather their child attend a free school than a socially diverse LA school. This is consistent with the experiences of educational consultant JS:

The majority that I've seen that have been parental set ups are those in areas where this is a high demand for school places. So, where there is high demand for school places in a high performing school and maybe parents aren't able to get the places for their children in that high performing school then a group of them can come together and say 'the provision is currently not meeting our needs and so we will set up a free school which will meet our needs and create a high performing, quality school that all our children can attend. So, potentially that will have a negative impact on other schools in that area

Given the emphasis on high performing schools, the needs of challenged students seem to have been overlooked in the Coalition's education revolution. There is, however, a specific fund allocated to improving standards for challenged students in the form of the Pupil Premium. For each FSM pupil a school enrolls they will receive the sum of £430 for them to use in whatever way they see fit with the aim of meeting the needs of disadvantaged pupils within their school and raising attainment. The extent to which this premium will be viewed by schools as offsetting the potential costs of enrolling disadvantaged students, in terms of impact on league tables and requirements for extra provision, is unclear. The sum is, however, far less than was expected when plans for the premium were first announced (Sibieta, 2010) and it is hard to see how this amount of money could have any real impact on social mobility for disadvantaged pupils.

### **The Success of Academies under Labour**

Labour's stated goal for academies was to break the cycle of underachievement and deprivation. From the evaluations conducted about the effectiveness of Labour's academies it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about whether their goal was met. For instance, the National Audit Office (NAO, 2007) reported that the speed at which academies had improved GCSE outcomes was faster than predecessor schools and that when accounting for pupil characteristics - gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status – academies generated better GCSEs than other schools. However, these conclusions are based on the *mean* improvement and contrast to Curtis et al.'s (2008) report, funded by the Sutton Trust, which found that 72% of Academies did not reach the 5 A\*-C national benchmark for GCSE performance.

Furthermore, Gorard (2009) reported that the schools chosen by Labour to be transformed into Academies were in many cases not selected on the basis of greatest need and that schools whose improvements in standards have been attributed to becoming an academy were actually already improving prior to their conversion to academy status. For instance, in his review of the first three academies set up, Gorard (2005) reported that the Academies did not always replace the most deprived schools in the area as measured by entitlement to FSM. This is supported by an analysis conducted by the TES in 2005 on the 27 Academies that had, by then, opened. The TES (Mansell & Luck, 2005) report that none of the

27 predecessor schools which the Academies replaced were actually failing at the time of closure. Thirteen of the schools that had previously been in special measures or serious weakness were deemed in inspections to be improving and recovering. Such findings suggest that becoming an academy was not the only contributing factor for Academy success and indeed, raises the possibility that improvements would have occurred regardless of whether the school had become an academy or not.

Adding to the already confusing evidence on the effectiveness of Academies, PriceWaterhouseCooper (2008:PwC), in their DCSF funded evaluation of Academies, concluded that with so much diversity between Academies, no 'academy effect' could be observed. Indeed, if Academies are as different as they are similar then how can the active ingredients of successful Academies be identified and monopolised on?

In sum, the success of Labour's Academies is difficult to evaluate and, hence, limited in what it can tell us about the potential success of the Coalition's version of the initiative. Since the Coalition announced their plans to expand the Academies programme, the NAO (2010) published a further report about Academies stating that despite the impressive performance of many existing Academies this cannot predict with accuracy the potential performance of the Coalition's Academies as the social and educational context which these new Academies will be functioning in will be very different than the context of the old style Academies. With only tenuous evidence of the effectiveness of Academies and with such modifications to the original Academies programme that this tenuous evidence can do little to inform predictions regarding the success of the Coalition's Academies, the evidence base on which the Coalition's Academies programme is founded appears decidedly unstable.

### **The Coalition's Academies Programme: The story so far...**

The key difference between Labour and the Coalition's Academies programmes is the scale and speed at which the Academies programme is expanded. In the ten years following their introduction in 2000, 203 Academies had opened in England. In the Coalition's 9 months in power, this figure has more than doubled with 442 Academies open (at the time of writing). These figures certainly seem to suggest that the Coalition's vision of all schools becoming Academies is on route to becoming a reality. The picture for free schools is less clear as, out of 258 applications (at present), only 40 of these have been approved to moved to the business case and plan stage of application. If free schools are to be established then parents must want to be involved in the running of their child's school. However, research by Ipsos Mori (2010) indicates that parents may not want this type of daily commitment to the running of their child's school.

### **Conclusion**

So, to what extent is the Coalition's academies programme a 'revolution', how different is the Coalition's programme to that followed by Labour, and what is the likelihood that this revolution will attain the stipulated goal of narrowing the achievement gap between most and least disadvantaged pupils? As described above, although the academies programme does mark a move away from LA controlled state education this is by no means a new idea. As JS observes:

This type of school management structure and governance has been around for a long, long time. This is just the next evolution...this notion has been around for a long time, just maybe not on a national scale or been championed the way it is now by the current government.

Indeed, the move away from state schooling has been in motion ever since the 1988 Education Act where LMS was introduced and grant-maintained schools and city technology colleges were created. The ethos then was the same as it is now: to increase diversity and therefore competition whilst reducing the role of the LEA (now the LA) by allowing schools to receive their funding directly from central government. Of those characteristics which distinguish academies from LA schools, their real impact on schooling may, in practice, be relatively little. For instance, while academies do have freedom over the curriculum and how they deliver it they, like maintained schools, must be accountable to the government and their performance will be reflected in student performance and, in turn, league tables in exactly the same way as other schools. Indeed, there is a well documented paradox in education policy between increasing school autonomy while simultaneously tightening control from central government in the form pupil testing and target setting (Exley & Ball, 2011). The degree to which academies can be 'innovative' is limited if they are to avoid risk of damaging their high grades or, if a weaker school, show improvement.

What becomes apparent when considering the Coalition's plans for education is how little difference there is between their policies and those of the predecessor, Labour, government. As Whitty (2008) argues, while the Conservatives were at the forefront of market forces, choice and competition in education, Labour was responsible for taking these mechanisms much further. It was not simply that Labour retained the policies put in place by the predecessor government but they also put in place policies that threatened the authority of LAs. For example, Labour's 2006 Education and Inspections act, while ostensibly motivated by a desire to increase parental power, served to take power and status away from the LA, something that is more commonly associated with the Conservatives. In their paper examining the newness of New Labour policies in which they compare the policies of Blair's Labour government with its Conservative predecessors, West and Pennell (2002) conclude that "The Labour Government can be seen to have embraced the quasi-market with a similar enthusiasm to that of its Conservative predecessors. The main structures of the quasi-market are still in place – parental choice, open enrolment, funding

following pupils, school diversity and publication of league tables.” (p. 218). Hence, although the rhetoric between the two parties may differ, the core pursuit of the marketisation the education system is the same.

Whether by converting schools to academies the Coalition’s goals for raising standards and narrowing the achievement gap will be realised is difficult to evaluate given the mixed evidence on the success of academies so far. Indeed, government policies are often criticised over a lack of evidence base (e.g., Gorard, 2005; Whitty, 2006; Exley & Ball, 2011) and, on the topic of Academies, the findings and concerns raised by research to date provide very shaky grounds upon which to build educational reform. In the most recent evaluation of academies to date, the NAO (2010) report that although the performance of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds including those on FSM improved over time, the gap between disadvantaged and less disadvantaged pupils actually widened. The likely future costs to pupils with SEN, if and when funds for specialist services are divided up from the central LA fund, and the increased competition between schools who, without the safety net of the LA, will be even more cautious to avoid damage to precious league tables may make it increasingly harder for challenged pupils such as those with SEN, and on FSM to get placed in academies or indeed remaining schools. Combined with the proficiency of middle class parents in enrolling their children in ‘good’ schools (Reay & Ball, 1997), contrary to its stated aims, the Coalition’s academies programme is at risk of creating a two-tier system in which the achievement gap is widened and already deprived children are further disadvantaged.

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