Primary School Autonomy in the Context of the Expanding Academies Programme

A Paper to be presented at University of East London, 25 May 2016

Ruth Boyask
ruth.boyask@gmail.com

Abstract:
The transnational trend towards school autonomy has been enacted in England through the Academies programme. The programme was poised to enter its third phase of expansion through a plan to convert all state-funded schools to Academies by 2022. While the Secretary of State for Education was forced to revise this plan in light of increasingly hostile responses from lobbyists within and outside government, there continues to be robust progression towards academies expansion. This paper considers the ideological and moral implications of the expansion of the programme for primary schools. It draws upon a study of schools in four local authorities to examine the extent to which autonomy and therefore academy conversion is desirable. In their relationships with local authorities primary schools that have resisted conversion and primary schools that have already converted show ambivalence to the notion of autonomy that has been promoted by the government as motivation to convert. Indeed most of the primary schools in this study that have already converted are critical of the local authorities that are driven by business values. Given that expansion of the Academies programme is likely to lead to more rather than less fragmentation in the education system, worsen student outcomes overall and see market values extended it is concluded that the vision of autonomy for primary schools offered via the Academies programme is both misleading and undesirable.

Keywords: Academies programme, primary schools, local authorities, school autonomy, schools policy

Introduction

England’s Academy schools programme is entering into its third phase of expansion. The first saw just over two hundred secondary schools convert to academies as a solution to raise educational achievement within communities where there was entrenched disadvantage. The second phase opened the programme to all schools, permitting primary schools to convert to academy status and in some cases enforcing conversion. In recent years many schools have become more autonomous in their governance and pedagogy (OECD, 2011). Academies are England’s version of autonomous schools, bearing similarities with charter schools in the United States, free schools in Sweden and independent public schools in Australia because like these other schools academies have control over their own budgets; and are presented as an opportunity for schools to self-manage, act with
autonomy, and develop innovative practice that addresses local problems. England’s Academies programme has changed over time, yet a constant, distinctive feature is the independence of these state-funded schools from local government oversight (Curtis et al, 2008). The plan for the third phase of expansion was articulated in the 2016 White Paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere*, aiming to compel all state-funded schools to convert to academy status by 2022, conclusively severing the link between schools and local authority control. The Secretary of State for Education has revised the plan for compulsory conversion by this date in light of opposition to mass conversion from those both within and outside government, yet the underlying aspiration to expand the Academies programme remains.

The origins of the Academies programme lay with the New Labour government and its City Academies, which were intended to draw upon the expertise of sponsors to support urban schools in areas of high disadvantage to raise low attainment (Glatter, 2012; Gunter and McGinity, 2014). The sponsors of the first three City Academies reflected some of the different kinds of interests that have since become commonplace in the governance of state-funded schooling, reported in the media to include a philanthropist and chair of several large companies, a “not-for-profit” educational services and consultancy organisation, the Church of England, and multinational telecommunications companies (BBC, 2000). By September 2001 the first three sponsored City Academies were ready to open, and these first tentative steps can now be seen as critical developments in an ongoing policy trend towards ‘school autonomy’ (Glatter, 2012). In 2008 towards the end of the Labour government’s time in power, there were 130 schools in the Academies Programme, with a further 194 proposed to open by September 2010 (Curtis et al, 2008). In 2016 there are 5549 Academies¹, most brought into being through the Academies Act 2010 that was rushed into legislation not long after the election of the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat coalition in May 2010. Curtis et al (2008) identified three original ultimate objectives of the Academies programme, including 1) raising achievement by “…breaking the cycle of underachievement and low aspirations in areas of deprivation with historical low performance…” (p5), 2) increasing school diversity and choice, 3) creating inclusive and mixed ability schools. The Academies Act 2010 overrode the first objective by offering conversion by choice to schools deemed successful because they were rated as good or above by Ofsted. It also made changes to the relationship between Academies and external sponsors, allowing successful schools to develop their own Academy trusts and act as standalone academies or in some cases become the sponsors for other schools perceived to be less successful. While many schools chose not to convert to academies, especially primary schools, some schools that were deemed to be unsuccessful found themselves compelled to convert and adopt a sponsor.

This paper explores the ideological and moral dimensions of the Academies programme as it exists presently for primary schools. It shows some of the challenges schools face in forming alliances within a policy environment where they are told they should act autonomously, yet are dependent on workable external relationships to achieve their purpose and must make decisions about where to place their trust in an increasingly fragmented educational environment. It describes the context of the expanding Academies programme and related policy context, and uses data from a study on new relationships between local authorities and schools in response to policy changes of 2010 (Boyask, 2014). The study shows how relations deteriorated as local authorities were forced through formula grant funding cuts and academy conversion that relocated funding into the hands of schools

¹ The figure 5549 was obtained from the government database EduBase on 11 March 2016.
to develop business-like relations with schools. This paper asks whether further expansion of the academies programme specifically, and the pursuit of school autonomy generally is of value to primary schools? The data drawn upon are the perspectives of the schools, obtained through a survey of all schools within four local authorities, and these are compared with an analysis of interview and documentary data obtained from the local authorities. Academy and local authority maintained schools were asked whether they shared values with their local authority? Why did they either share or not share values with the local authority? What changes had they witnessed within local authorities and, how their relationship had altered as a result of changes in the local authority? This paper focuses upon primary schools to examine 1) the extent of common values between primary schools and local authorities, and the values upon which this commonality is based, 2) or if there is a perceived gap between the school and local authority, then the ideological differences. This analysis gives some indication of the extent to which school autonomy is important to primary schools.

A Context for School Autonomy

The Academies Programme originally aimed to raise achievement in secondary education. The expansion to primary schools started in 2010, when the policy was reformulated and extended by a new government. Once the Academies Act 2010 enabled schools to opt into academy status proportionally considerably more secondary schools converted to academies in the years following the policy reform than primaries. Four years later 54% of secondary schools in England were academies, and only 11% of primary schools. The rhetoric coming from government at the time of this massive expansion of the programme suggested that it was autonomy that headteachers sought when they chose to convert to academies (Fisher, 2012).

Chancellor George Osborne’s 2016 budget announced a plan to convert all remaining local authority maintained schools in England to Academies by 2022, a plan that has since been denounced by the political opposition and some members of the government. Less than two months later the plan to complete all conversions by 2022 was modified so that only schools requiring improvement would be compelled to convert, yet the desire to expand the Academies programme to all schools lives on through a reaffirmation of commitment to this goal by the Education Secretary Nicky Morgan.

Expanding the Academies programme is the final severance of local authority oversight of education, overturning the 1902 policy that put local government in charge of the management and administration of the majority of state-funded schools. The policy will heavily impact on primary schools that have proportionally been more resistant than secondary schools to the elective Academy conversion permitted through the Academies Act 2010. As numbers of Academies rise, the independence of Academies from local authorities presents central government with some big challenges. Extending the programme to include all 13740 primary schools not yet converted is a challenge that cannot be underestimated. The first large expansion of the Academies programme that occurred following the election of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government in 2010 brought subsequent pressures on centralised organisations and systems. The National Audit Office identified risks to value-for-money accompanying the expansion of the programme, highlighting tensions between “…strong stewardship of public money and a ‘light-touch’ oversight regime…”

---

and the stresses placed on the public bodies and individuals with a role in funding and oversight (Morse, 2012; 2014a; 2014b).

The government’s solution has been to establish new intermediaries by way of eight regional commissioners for school and colleges, and the encouragement that schools form into chains of Academies governed and managed through a single executive (although in practice most schools are not within chains, and those schools that do group together adopt many different forms with only some adopting the formal Multi-Academy Trust structure (Hutchings, Francis & De Vries, 2014)). While it is too early to conclusively establish the effect of the regional commissioners, academy chains have been subject to scrutiny and critical comment from Ofsted, Department for Education, Skills Funding Agency and independent researchers. Reports on Academy chains suggest that the nature of autonomy experienced by individual schools within chains is defined and influenced by the chain (Salokangas & Chapman, 2014), and different chains vary considerably in their effectiveness (Hutchings, Francis & De Vries, 2014). There are also differences in Academy type, with some schools required to enter into partnerships with sponsors (sponsor-led Academies) based upon measures of poor performance, and therefore sometimes forced into chains with few options for partners. Other schools have chosen to convert (Academy converters). The Academies programme has contributed to an overall schooling landscape of diversity and fragmentation (Harris, 2012; Courtney, 2015). The policy that has released Academies from local authority oversight of schools has affected the role played by local authorities in educational services, and affected access to services within the maintained schooling sector (Boyask, 2015).

**Autonomous Schools**

In the fragmented environment the promised autonomy of the Academies programme may prove illusory. Autonomy as a political philosophy is problematic, because it obscures the important social relationships, interactions and interdependencies that occur in all human endeavours by emphasising independence and personal liberty (Olssen, 2006). Academy schools are part of complex networks of influence. Governance in the Academies programme flows through intricate interrelationships between diverse individuals and organisations, leaving little room for school autonomy. Even standalone academies that are governed by their own academy trusts are subject to broader governmental influences from policy actors, brokers and service providers. Ball and Junemann (2011) use network ethnography to uncover the policy networks of schooling where governmental power is exercised through interconnections between different actors and stakeholders. They claim that philanthropic and business interests converge in state-funded schooling, with the effect of disarticulating state education and undermining its democratic function. Braun et al. (2011) highlight the importance of contextual factors in policy enactment, identifying interrelated situated, professional, material and external contexts that influence how policy is enacted within institutions. There are a variety of contextual influences on the ways that schools enact policy, including a school’s own history and geographic locality (Braun et al, 2011). There are also external influences from those who wield governmental power. In Braun et al (2011) schools are disciplined through the governmental power of the local authority. Outside of local authority control and within the Academies programme, governmental power is still exercised over schools but it becomes less visible when taken out of the mainstream public sphere and exercised through private companies. Within the new networks the ideologies that inform educational goals and drive educational practices can be hidden. When governance is located in private spheres it is much more
difficult to identify the ethical basis of schooling and for schools to act autonomously by aligning themselves strategically with others who share their values. Negotiating a context of multiple school formations, alliances and service providers is a complex process and requires school leaders, managers and governors to make many and varied fine-grained decisions, such as how to source and assess the best quality services for their school. Higham and Earley (2013) suggest that in a complex policy environment, school leaders are caught between competing external demands so that their capacity for decision-making is limited to “...tactical interpretation rather than actual strategizing” (p.704), exercising what Simkins (1997) calls operational rather than criteria or defining power in respect of the destiny of their school.

Trading some autonomy to join with other schools within an Academy chain may reduce the breadth of decisions to be made; otherwise Academies are positioned as consumers in an open marketplace who must themselves make these challenging decisions. Growth of the Academies Programme assumes not only that Academies are equipped with the intellectual resources to make these decisions well, but also that they are ethically aligned with the values of an open marketplace and corporate approach to schooling. The data examined in this paper suggest that many present Academies and the local authority maintained primary schools that may soon be compelled to convert do not easily align themselves with these kinds of values.

Research on Primary Schools Perspectives on Local Authorities

The findings reported here come from a regional study of changes in relations between local authorities and schools that occurred in response to structural reform of education and the expansion of the academies programme. The policy changes, including the Academies Act 2010, resulted in significant changes to local authority budgets and furthered a trend of reduction in their direct involvement in educational and social services. The study followed a pragmatic line of inquiry that sought data that would illuminate the changes in relationships between schools and local authorities in the light of the growing number of academy schools, which saw resource allocation shifted away from local authorities, and a decline in local authority services affecting the schools remaining under their authority. Data were collected from four local authorities and schools within their boundaries, chosen because they represented differences in demography, geography and types of constituencies: LA1 is a large borough authority; LA2 is a small, non-metropolitan authority; LA3 is a large unitary county authority; and LA4 is a unitary authority in an average-sized city. The data were collected in the following three ways: 1) a review of publicly available documentary evidence; 2) 11 one-to-one interviews with senior managers and service providers from each local authority; and 3) a survey distributed to all state funded primary and secondary schools in each of the local authorities. The majority of these data were collected in 2012-13, with the original survey data collected in May and June 2013, and some supplementary demographic data collected in March 2016. The documentary evidence gathered for this investigation was all in the public domain, so no permission was sought to access these data. Interview and survey participants’ consent to participate in the research was sought through an ethical protocol developed in accordance with university and professional body ethical guidance. Participants were informed about the nature of the project and their rights in respect of participation. The main ethical concern was to protect the identities of individuals, particularly when their responses touched on areas of personal or professional sensitivity such as redundancies, personal well-being or critique of employers; the
identities of organisations such as local authorities and their joint ventures or schools have been anonymised and roles obscured to help protect the identity of individuals.

All data were examined and reported upon in a summation report (Boyask, 2014), and a closer analysis of the local authority data reported (Boyask, 2015). The current analysis draws predominantly upon the school survey data, in a more detailed analysis than previously published, and compares the findings of this analysis with prior findings from the local authority data. The survey of schools was an online survey consisting of 10 questions with a mix of closed and open responses. The survey was sent to all primary and secondary schools with an identifiable email address within the four local authorities, and received 131 responses out of a total of 682 schools contacted. Only 105 of these responses were completed sufficiently to use in the analysis for this paper, which is based on an overall 15% response rate. There were responses from 91 (86.7%) primaries and 14 (13.3%) secondary schools, which is close to the proportion of primary to secondary schools in the local authorities overall (primary =87.3%; secondary= 13.7%). While an 85% non-response rate is quite high it is common to have a response rate of this order for online surveys, which tend to attract a lower rate of response than paper surveys (Nulty, 2008). An assessment of the demographics of the responding schools in terms of phase and school type shows that they broadly mapped onto the population and were equivalent with non-responding schools, which shows that the self-selected sample of respondents bears some similarity with the population. Kano et al (2008) point out that it is important for replicability that surveys report on response rates and consider the effects of response bias, although note that analyses of school based research using more than one variable, such as most of those developed in this paper, are fairly resistant to response bias, even with low response rates. Responses for this survey came from ‘headteachers, principals or executive heads’ (n=96), ‘other senior leader’ (n=1), ‘business manager, senior administrator or administrator’ (n=8).

**Table One: Numbers of Respondents by School Type (between May – June 2013)**

|                | Academy |  | Community |  | Foundation |  | Voluntary |  | Voluntary |
|----------------|---------|  | School    |  | School     |  | Aided     |  | Controlled|
|                | Converter|  | School    |  | School     |  | School    |  | School    |
| Primary        | 6        | 3 | 37        | 22 | 20         | 3 |
| Secondary      | 8        | 1 | 1         | 4  | 0          | 0 |
| Total          | 14       | 4 | 38        | 26 | 20         | 3 |

An additional 14 of the local authority maintained schools converted to academy status from July 2013 and the time of writing (March 2016), including 3 sponsor led academies (2 primaries and 1 secondary school) and the remainder are primary converter academies. These schools have been included in some of the analysis and helped generate further findings on academies. In the original survey data for some categories of school type there are very few respondent schools, and so the data has been grouped as either local authority maintained or not local authority maintained (academy), and is focused upon primary schools where there was a greater number of responses returned. There are also significant differences in the sizes of the authorities observed in this study, which means responses tend to come from the two larger local authorities. Most of the analysis is
aggregated across the four local authorities; there is some analysis at the local authority level, and in cases where the number of schools used in a statistic is less than five this has been identified. These findings should be regarded only as indicative and requiring further investigation, or are interpreted with findings from qualitative data. The statistical data returned from the survey are categorical, and the statistical analysis is bivariate to show simple counts and relative frequencies. The survey analysis is compared with a deductive content analysis previously undertaken, which identified corporate, community engagement, entrepreneurial and co-operative approaches from local authorities to the privatisation of services (Boyask, 2015).

**Differences between Primary and Secondary Schools**

Secondary schools are more likely to be academies, and of the secondary schools that responded to the survey 57% of them had converted to academy status of their own volition, a proportion close to the present national average for secondary academies. This compared with 7% of primary schools. Other recent research on school reform has pointed to differences between the ways primary and secondary schools orientate themselves to the academies programme. In their study on the impact of structural reform at the local level Coldron et al. (2015) found that a school’s decision to convert was related to their relative prestige within the local school field, with primary schools positioning themselves as subordinate to secondary schools. Personal values also play an important part in decision-making (Coldron et al., 2014).

In this survey, both primary and secondary schools were asked to identify:

- which local authority services they used prior to the 2010 reforms, and which they used post reforms;
- whether their relationships had changed with the local authorities, and if so why;
- what other changes they had noticed in the local authorities;
- whether they felt that their relationship was based on shared values, and why they thought that was the case.

The survey was designed to prompt cumulative responses that built upon responses to previous questions. This meant that answers to the penultimate question on whether the schools shared values with their local authority were informed by the information requested in the previous questions and the respondents’ previous answers, and were followed by a request to explain their answer. Constructing the survey in this way meant that the questions related to shared values were key to the study findings.

**Figure One**
In light of the connection made by government between academy conversion and aspirations for school autonomy it was expected that primary schools would be closer in their relationships with local authorities than secondary schools. The survey findings concurred and the proportion of secondary schools respondents who agreed they shared values was lower than for primary schools.

Looking more closely at the survey data, the proportion of local authority maintained primary schools who perceive that they share values with their local authority is markedly larger than for primary academies. The proportion of primary academies that perceive differences between their
values and the values of the local authorities is even greater than the proportion of secondary schools who perceive similarly. The make-up of these academy schools is 6 converters and 3 sponsor-led academies, from which it can be assumed that two thirds have chosen to convert. While the number of schools included in this statistic is low and therefore inconclusive, it seems reasonable that schools which have opted to convert may be more likely to differentiate themselves from local authorities. Further investigation through inclusion of the 13 additional primary academies that have converted from July 2013 onwards reveals that this relationship is not consistent. Of the schools who converted to academies after the survey, 11 were converters and 2 sponsor-led. There is an apparent difference between the proportion of these schools that regard their local authority as sharing values with their school and the 9 academies that converted before June 2013.

Figure Three

Values of Primary Academies Converted since June 2013

When these 22 schools (both pre and post June 2013 academies) are examined, either as two separate groups or together and despite the low numbers, their responses to this question are supported by the open ended responses schools were asked to explain their answer to the question of shared values. In these responses the schools reveal some of the contextual factors that are influential in their experiences as academies and how they perceive local authorities.

**Primary Academies: Seeking School Autonomy or Distancing Themselves from Corporate Values?**

Of the 22 primary academies 9 did not think they shared values with the local authority. The explanations for this difference can be understood as relating to two main views of the local authority. The first is concerned with their previous experience of the local authority’s exercise of control over schools, and concern that this control is exerted at the expense of school autonomy or
as an expression of the local authority’s dominance. For example, the following are explanations from two primary academies on why they did not share values with the local authority:

We are looking toward local self-determination; the LA tends toward centralisation and one size fits all.

They still appear to think that they have an entitlement to a job, no matter how they behave.

The second view from academies that did not perceive shared values with the local authority was related to the way local authorities were changing as a result of policy reform and changes to funding. For example:

Local authority as a corporate body now has to make money and run as a business. People within the LA probably do hold some of the same values and principles.

These responses may reflect differences in the schools that chose to convert soon after the Academies Act 2010 from those that converted later, and help explain why the survey responses indicate differences in ethos between the schools. When the academies are considered as two separate groups, pre and post June 2013 academies, it is apparent that the second view was exclusively held by academies that had not at the time of questioning converted, but at some point afterwards. Furthermore, it was only offered as a rationale for why their values differed from the local authority by schools that had latterly chosen to convert. The two post June 2013 sponsor led academies (required to convert) claimed they shared values with their local authorities and praised them for the support offered regarding school improvement. Prior to June 2013 the decision to convert occurred within the context of primary schools’ prior experience with the local authority. In some cases this was a positive and supportive experience, based upon mutual educational values, and aligning with the school’s professional context described by Braun et al. (2011) as “…teachers’ values and commitments and experiences and policy management within schools…” that contribute to a “…distinct set of professional outlooks and attitudes that make certain policy responses more or less possible” (p.591). In other cases the relationship was fraught, and the local authority perceived as an external threat to the school and regarded as aligned with the external pressures on schools “…such as Ofsted ratings, league table positions, and legal requirements and responsibilities” (Braun, 2011, p.594). By June 2013 the changes in funding and policy had become embedded within local authority practice. By this point it was apparent that local authorities had reconfigured their services, and in many cases become more business focussed, through traded services, joint ventures and commissioning. This was perceived by schools as a reduction in service to them. Schools in the survey were asked what had changed in their use of local authorities, and what changes they had noted after 2010. A typical response was ‘Fewer services offered / having to pay extra for many services which used to be free.’ This change will have been noticed particularly by the local authority maintained primary schools, who found less value in their status. One post-June 2013 Academy converter explained the changes they had witnessed to local authority services since 2010:

They are reducing and we are having to pay for services we did not have to pay for before, without the equivalent top slice money appearing to come back into our budgets.
Becoming more Business-like

The changes described by schools were also observed within the local authorities. Analysis of documentary evidence and interviews with key figures in local authority service provision and commissioning reveal conspicuous changes occurring in response to the 2010 changes to policy. At the time of the survey the main statutory duties for local authorities in respect of education included: guaranteeing there is fair access to schooling for all children and young people; supporting those who are most vulnerable; school improvement and raising standards of achievement; and promoting and responding to the interests of parents, families and children who they represent through their democratic mandate (DfE, 2010; Parish et al., 2012). In response to central government policy reform and funding cuts local authorities had to fulfil these responsibilities with reduced resources, and the pressures arising from a scarcity of funding led all four to the solution of privatisation.

Table Two. Models of service: Four Local Authorities in 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LA 1 Corporate</th>
<th>LA 2 Community engagement</th>
<th>LA 3 Entrepreneurial</th>
<th>LA 4 Cooperative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A fully corporate model, developing a joint venture with a multi-national corporation</td>
<td>Community and stakeholder engagement, commissioning services from schools</td>
<td>A small statutory provision (although under threat of closure), and an entrepreneurial business unit</td>
<td>Aspirations for cooperative models of business, following the lead of their council</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While central government structural reform was an impetus for change, each of the local authorities moved toward privatisation from a different set of ethics. In two cases, LA 1 and LA 2, privatisation of services fitted with their own trajectories of change. This and other differences show nuances in approach to privatisation, some less mitigated by a deep-rooted social ethics than others (Boyask, 2015). LA 1’s solution to privatisation was to offer skeletal service provision for core statutory duties, and supplement this provision with a joint venture developed with a FTSE 100 listed multinational corporation with the intention of moving away from reliance on government commissioning and growing its traded business.

As we go through time, and money is moving away from the centre of local authorities, then more will depend on the traded arm than the commissioning arm. And that is right and proper that that company will be genuinely shaping services that schools need and schools want to buy (Interview with LA 1 Senior Manager, 11 April 2013).

Although LA 2 also chose to pare down central service provision, it approached the privatisation of services differently, commissioning services to meet statutory duties from local schools and expert head teachers.

And through those two heads working initially two and a half days a week for the local authority and then two and a half days a week back in their schools we started to develop this journey. And they were quite instrumental in working with the senior officers in the
local authority to restructure our advisory team (Interview with LA 2 Senior Manager, 10 April 2013).

LAs 3 and 4 both opted to maintain diverse service provision within the local authority, with core packages for maintained schools and a catalogue of traded services to supplement core services and act as an offer to academies. There were differences in values between LAs 3 and 4 with LA 3 driven by an entrepreneurial spirit and the desire to create innovative educational products to sell in a national marketplace beyond the boundaries of their region.

We did notice there was a bit of a hole in Birmingham. Some of our staff had been working with individual schools in Birmingham and they did say they thought there was scope for something happening up there. So, we’re doing a trial one. We’ll be able to use it for two purposes: we’ll actually run the conference; and we’ll also have our own products up there as well. If you’re working in the commercial world of buying spaces at conferences it could cost as much as us putting on a conference (Interview with LA 2 Traded Service Provider, 10 April 2013).

Whereas LA 4 was influenced by the co-operative values of its council (i.e. democracy, responsibility, fairness and partnership) and attempted to amalgamate its social and economic goals. While LA 1 and LA 3 in particular seemed ideologically motivated by economic exchange over social equity, all of the approaches risked co-option in this direction as the scarcity of funding and centralised policy discourses acted as strong normalising influences. A senior manager at LA 4 lamented the risks to vulnerable children and young people that had opened up through government legislation and the consequent fragmentation occurring.

So a good example is I’ve had to close down my Behaviour Support Team, the funding went and it wasn’t felt to be appropriate that the local authority ran a Behaviour Support Service, and I probably agree with that. But we’ve closed down the Behaviour Support Service and schools are now, on a daily basis, ringing my office and saying, ‘Where do we go for Behaviour Support, because there isn’t a market around here?’ (Interview with LA 4 Senior Manager, 3 April 2013).

Overall, most schools felt that they shared values with their local authority. Yet, the differences in approach were also reflected in the school survey responses, and furthermore presented some very critical views of approaching educational services as a corporate or business-focussed enterprise. Notably, the nature of LA 1’s joint venture, and the histories and interests of its partner that were presented as neutral in interviews with senior managers from the local authority was a great cause of concern for some school respondents, as evident in some of their comments transcribed below, to describe breaches between the ethics of education and the interests of the multinational corporation partner.

| Table Three. Proportion of all Surveyed Schools that Perceive Shared Values with Local Authorities |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| LA 1 Corporate | No | 0.36 | Yes | 0.64 |
**Community engagement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LA 2 Community engagement</th>
<th>0.14*</th>
<th>0.86</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LA 3 Entrepreneurial</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA 4 Cooperative</td>
<td>0.25*</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* indicates less than five responses included in this statistic

Within LA 1 and LA 3 36% and 49% schools disagreed that they shared values with the local authority. These were the authorities who predominantly approached privatisation of their educational services from a business angle. There is also a strong thread of criticism about the local authorities’ financial and business practices in the schools’ data, even amongst those who felt that they shared values with the local authority.

A headteacher at a local authority maintained primary school who was broadly supportive of the local authority made the following statement about LA 1:

> Whilst understanding the reason for undertaking the joint venture with [retracted], it does seem appalling that a private firm is now making a profit from education services.

The separation between the values of the individuals involved in providing educational services and the organisations of which they are part was a qualification made a number of times in relation to schools’ perception of local authority values. This qualification accompanied an extreme criticism from a headteacher in LA 1 who claimed:

> Many individuals have a shared sense of values however...they have outsourced support to an arms dealer who are making a profit from their involvement in education.

The number of responses in LA 2 and 4 are low; while the response rates for all local authorities were in keeping with their relative population sizes the low numbers do put into question the reliability of the statistics in Table Three for these two local authorities. Yet it was only responses from these two local authorities that included statements in support of the local authority, with some schools indicating close allegiance.

A headteacher in an LA 2 maintained primary school stated that:

> We are all committed to improving the lives of LA 2 children.

A headteacher in an LA 4 maintained primary school claimed that her school shared values with the local authority because:

> The LA is the locally accountable, democratically elected body. This school serves the local population and is accountable to them.
Overall, the findings suggest that while a small number of primaries sought autonomy for its own sake from academy status, for others distance from local authorities is a complex response to central government policy change. In the survey distributed in May – June 2013 the primary academies tended to distance themselves from local authority control. Since the survey was distributed a further group of primary schools have opted to become academies, but the gap between local authorities and those schools should be contextualised by the changing financial context. Indeed, West and Bailey (2013) argue that it is the financial status of academies, and their constitution as non-profit making, private companies that are the most significant implications of the transition away from local authority control. The four local authorities in this study have been compelled to move away from service provision and adopt some form of privatisation in their educational services to meet their statutory obligations. This has taken the form of traded services, joint ventures or extending their commissioning of services. The implications of these decisions have been reflected in responses from the schools, especially primary schools that opted to remain local authority maintained after the Academies Act 2010 and still feel affinity with the local authority, or for those who chose to convert to academies and lamented the change in ethos of the local authority. For many of the headteachers and other school personnel from primary schools who participated in the research traditional commitments to social responsibility, equity and public accountability remain fundamental to schooling, and business-like practices in educational services are regarded as impositions and are discordant with their own educational values.

Implications of Further Academies Expansion

The academies programme and its supporters have reframed schooling so that “… the idea of a public system of schools maintained by a LA is rapidly becoming unthinkable, and if it is thought about it is rendered unspeakable” (Gunter and McGinity, 2014 p. 310). There are however, voices from all parts of the political spectrum critical of extending the academies programme to all state-funded schools. Perspectives from primary schools on their relationship with local authorities suggest that some schools perceive a gap between the values of their school and the local authority that is based on a desire for freedom from control. Yet for many others autonomy is less desirable. Some schools that have converted to academies appear less concerned with freedom from local authorities and more concerned about what they perceive as shift in values towards economic expediency that has crept into relationships between schools and local authorities. The research findings presented in this paper suggest that adopting a business approach to education is what many primary schools take issue with about the present reforms of schooling. Unfortunately, the government’s robust progress towards the conversion of all schools to academies will make this objection irrelevant.

A careful read of the recent white paper Educational Excellence Everywhere (DfE, 2016) extends the promise of autonomy to some schools, but not all. For some school leaders who have been deemed successful within the terms set out by the central government there will be an opportunity to take on substantial leadership roles and enact autonomy also within those terms.

The best leaders will play a wider role across the system, as we transfer responsibility for school improvement from local authorities to schools and system leaders – teaching schools, NLEs and other designated system leaders – to spread expertise and best practice. This will
mean those who have experience of realising high standards and turning schools around are
positioned to drive change across the system. Where schools are performing well, they will
choose and organise their own school improvement support when they consider it
necessary; only if they’re underperforming and don’t have a plan or the means to improve
will RSCs do so on their behalf (DfE, 2016, p.19).

This is an important revelation, because it shows the myth of the academies programme as a
programme of autonomous schooling for all schools, and reveals how the government exercises
control through networks of power and influence over schools that enact ‘autonomy’ in undesirable
ways. Primary schools in particular are likely to be subject to the uncomfortable influence of more
powerful interests, such as teaching schools, secondary schools, and other sponsors (Coldron et al,
2014). Furthermore, a natural conclusion of the reforms for primary schools is their grouping
together under multi-academy trusts that are governed along corporate lines (Husbands, 2016) and
therefore potentially separate from the communities in which schools are located, and supported by
an infrastructure of consultants and private service providers who profit from public funds (Gunter,
Hall & Mills, 2014). This is unlikely to be palatable to the primary schools critical of their local
authorities for becoming more business-like.

If the Academies programme improved educational outcomes, raised student achievement and
addressed inequalities in opportunity then it would be appropriate to ask why does it matter
whether schools are academies or not and governed as businesses or not? However, research on the
enactment of the Academies Act 2010 to date is on the side of the primary schools. Overall the
Academies programme has maintained rather than reduced social segregation (Gorard, 2014), is not
involving the disadvantaged communities the government originally sought include (Higham, 2014)
and improved rates of educational attainment for disadvantaged students within them is exceptional
to particular schools and not widely distributed across schools (Hutchings, Francis and De Vries,
2014). Hutchings, Francis and De Vries (2014) on the impact of academy chains on low income
students recommend undertaking further research to understand how a few chains are raising
attainment so that this information may be shared and potentially replicated. Gorard’s (2014)
research on the links between Academies, student outcomes and socio-economic segregation
concludes that homogenous state-funded and governed schooling is the most preferable model for
creating and maintaining equality and social justice, and thus it is systematic reform in the direction
of standardisation that is required rather than understanding and disseminating examples of
exceptional practice. The fundamental flaw in an education system built upon market values is that
like in any competitive marketplace there will be winners and losers. A just society should not write
off a proportion of its children, and if resistance to expansion of the Academies programme to all
state schools proves ineffective the impact on children and young people must be documented and
disseminated.

References:


http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/925378.stm


