

# Academies in context

## Politics, business and philanthropy and heterarchical governance

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The English Academies programme has become one of the most controversial aspects of the New Labour strategy for education and public sector reform. And in many ways, given the significance of the programme, that controversy is understandable and appropriate. This is particularly so because, as I argue here, Academies are indicative of and contribute to a set of more general and highly significant experimental and evolutionary policy ‘moves’ which involve the reinvention of public sector institutions and a reformation of the overall institutional architecture of the state and its scales of operation. That is to say, Academies are one small part of a more general shift from government to governance (Rhodes, 1997), a shift from the ‘hierarchy of command’ to a new form of ‘polycentric’ and ‘strategic’ governance that is based upon network relations within and across new policy communities designed to generate new governing capacity and enhance legitimacy. These new policy communities bring new kinds of actors into the policy process, validate new policy discourses – discourses flow through them – and enable new forms of policy influence and enactment and in some respects disable or disenfranchise or circumvent some of the established policy actors and agencies. These new forces are able to colonise the spaces opened up by the critique of existing state organisations, actions and actors. All of this involves an increased reliance on subsidiarity and ‘regulated self-regulation’, and it drastically blurs the already fuzzy divide between the

public and the private sector ‘reallocating tasks, and rearticulating the relationship between organisations and tasks across this divide’ (Jessop, 2002: 199). All in all it replaces hierarchy with *heterarchy*. That is, it replaces bureaucracy and administrative structures and relationships with a system of organisation replete with overlap, multiplicity, mixed ascendancy and/or divergent-but-coexistent patterns of relation.

The Academies programme is a good example of the complexity and instability and the experimental nature of these governance reforms. The programme has gone through at least three iterations in response to lack of sponsors, rising costs, inefficiencies and opposition (see <http://www.antiacademies.org.uk/>). This is not a pre-planned process of reform; rather within the general logic of reform there is a great deal of muddling through and trial and error.

Tony Blair indicated the role and nature of these changes and the basic tenets of New Labour’s public sector reforms in his speech in 2005 introducing the Labour government’s White Paper on secondary education (see: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/4372216.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4372216.stm), accessed 6 March 2009):

In our schools . . . the system will be finally opened up to real parent power. All schools will be able to have academy style freedoms. All schools will be able to take on external partners. No one will be able to veto parents

starting new schools or new providers coming in, simply on the basis that there are local surplus places. The role of the LEA will change fundamentally . . . Where business, the voluntary sector, philanthropy, which in every other field is a part of our national life, wants to play a key role in education and schools want them to, they can.

I am not suggesting that hierarchical modalities of governance involve a giving up by the state of its capacity to steer policy (see below). This is not a 'hollowing out' of the state rather it is a new modality of state power, agency and social action and indeed a new form of state. That is, the achievement of political ends by different means: 'States play a major and increasing role in metagovernance' (Jessop, 2002: 242). The 'methods' and relations of heterarchy do not totally displace other forms of policy formation and policy action but: 'The state, although not impotent, is now dependent upon a vast array of state and non-state policy actors' (Marinetto, 2005).

In England (and there are similar developments in many other national systems around the globe – see Nambissan & Ball (forthcoming)) these heterarchies draw on 'new kinds of educational alliance', which 'New Labour seeks to create' around 'its project of transformation' (Jones, 2003: 160) and which mobilise various resources in the borderland between the public, private and voluntary sectors. They are a policy device, a way of trying things out, of getting things done, of changing things, and a means of interjecting practical innovations and new sensibilities into areas of education policy that are seen as change-resistant and risk-averse. In general terms they 'pilot' moves towards a public service system in which increasingly the state contracts and monitors rather than directly delivers education services, using 'performance' measurement, benchmarking and targeting to manage a diversity of provisions. In business literature heterarchical organisations are argued to be better at coping with 'rugged fitness landscapes' and with the demands of 'simultaneous engineering'. That is, when innovation and production overlap and the pace of design and implementation are speeded up, which would be apt descriptors for contemporary education policy, organisations which are 'decompartmentalised' and denoted by 'distributed authority' (Stark, 1999) are supposedly more effective.

Academies are one 'move' in a more general process of 'destatisation' – tasks and services previously undertaken by the state are now

being done by various 'others' in various kinds of relationships among themselves and to the state and to the remaining more traditional organisations of the public sector, although in many cases the working methods of these public sector organisations have also been fundamentally reworked, typically by the deployment of market forms (competition, choice and performance-related funding). In education, other specific policy moves in this loosely scripted process of 'modernisation' and 'transformation' include specialist schools, Trust schools, 'tendered'<sup>1</sup> and 'contracted-out' schools, although the latter two forms are currently small in scale. Only four schools have been fully contracted out to private management companies: one to Edison (Enfield), and two to 3Es (GEMS) and one to Nord-Anglia (all three in Surrey). (See Ball (2007) for more detail on these.) There have been at least eight competitions for the establishment of new schools: in Haringey (won by the local authority (LA)), Southampton (Oasis Trust – a Baptist group), Northamptonshire (Woodnewton – A Learning Community and The Brooke Weston Partnership), Kent (The Homewood Trust – another local school), Lincolnshire (British EduTrust (an Academy Sponsor) and the Gainsborough Educational Village Trust), West Sussex (The Bolnore School Group – a parent/community group), and two in Gloucestershire (one involving the University of Gloucestershire and supported by the White City Project and a cluster of local churches in the Gloucester City Deanery, and another still in process). The Brooke Weston Partnership also runs three Academies and part of this partnership, the Garfield Weston Foundation (a charity of Associated British Foods and the Garfield Weston Family), donated over a period of 12 years £10.2m to the SSAT (Specialist Schools and Academies Trust) for the sponsorship of Specialist Schools. Garfield Weston through its investment company Wittington Investments is a co-funder of Explore Learning (with Peter Lampl (Sutton Trust) and Peter Ogden (Ogden Trust)), which operates storefront Learning shops in larger branches of Sainsbury's. Garfield Weston, among many other things, offers bursaries for private school places (as does the Ogden Trust) and has supported the School for Social Entrepreneurs. The Foundation is also a 'founding supporter' of the Teach First programme which is funded mainly by business (although other founding supporters include the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), the Training and Development

Agency, the National Association of Headteachers and Manchester City Council). Teach First is 'an independent charity founded to encourage top graduates, who would not normally enter teaching, to teach for at least two years in challenging secondary schools in London, the North West and the Midlands. With tailored leadership training developed with over 100 employers, Teach First aims to develop the leaders of the future' (<http://www.teachfirst.org.uk/>). Academies are strongly represented among the participating schools in the Teach First programme.

As of January 2009 the total number of planned Trust Schools is 444, with 124 Trust Schools already open. To give one example:

Pensans Community Primary School, in Cornwall will partner: Falmouth University, Penwith/Truro College, Digital Peninsula Network, Virtual Schools, Cornish Pirates Rugby Club, The Co-operative Group. The Trust will focus on raising attainment and aspiration in the West Penwith area, fostering creativity and innovation through curricular development. The Trust aims to replace a culture of low expectation with one of excellence and high achievement. There will be a specific focus on raising measurable levels of attainment in Literacy and Numeracy, alongside creating awareness of local and global responsibilities via a focus on the issues of sustainability and ecological degradation. This will provide a platform for the promotion of co-operative values within the Trust. (DCSF website: [http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn\\_id=2009\\_0012](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2009_0012))

The range and variety of Academy sponsors are indicated in the other papers in this issue but include entrepreneurs, charities, businesses, faith groups, universities, local government and parastatal organisations. (Specialist School and Trust sponsors are equally diverse.) Academies are somewhat distinct in as much as they have an 'independent' status within the state school system and are contracted directly to their sponsors by the DCSF. They are also forms of partnership. Academies come into being via 'partnerships between sponsors and local education partners to enable them and the DfES to assess their individual circumstances and decide if a new Academy is the right solution for their needs' (DCSF website: [http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/academies/setting\\_up/?version=1](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/academies/setting_up/?version=1)). A good deal of this partnership activity is behind the scenes and goes on between the DCSF, SSAT, the Cabinet Office

and LA officers and councillors – a re-spatialisation of education policy.

The point of these details is to offer a glimpse of the complexity and interrelatedness of participation in state education, education discourses and education policy conversations by philanthropic, voluntary and private interests (both organisations and individuals), as well as to indicate the blurring between them. We can also see here the role of link and lead organisations within this particular heterarchy – the SSAT specifically. There is a variety of asymmetrical and diverse power relations involved in this complex of reciprocal, multi-level interdependencies, 'some happening spontaneously, others created deliberately through public policy and institutional engineering' (Davies, 2005: 313), but overall heterarchies such as this are political constructs. Within the processes of modernisation and transformation of the public sector the boundaries and spatial horizons and flows of influence and engagement around education are being stretched and reconfigured in a whole variety of ways. To achieve some kind of coherence and functionality these heterarchies rely on trust and reciprocity and in some of their aspects they draw upon social relations established elsewhere, in business for example (see Ball, 2008) or between charities, voluntary organisations and their lead and link organisations (Charities Aid Foundation, National Council of Voluntary Organisations, New Philanthropy Capital, etc.).

Business is integrated in a number of ways here in the governance and provision of state education, in driving innovations and, in effect, disrupting other traditional social relations. This is part of what Pollack (2004: vii) calls the 'dismantling process' and asserts to be 'profoundly anti-democratic and opaque'. So, for example, Academies have the opportunity to set aside existing national agreements on the pay, conditions and certification of teachers – the flexibilisation of the workforce. This is a radical move in a more general push for the 'modernisation' of the school workforce – 'workforce re-modelling' – which is now the responsibility of the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), one of an increasing number of new 'lead organisations' in the transformation of state education.

Within and through this heterarchy and many others like it, new organisational sensibilities, values, perspectives, interests and policy narratives are brought into play and given legitimacy. In particular, the discourse of enterprise, in various forms, is ubiquitous (Woods et al.,

2007) and the opinions and voices of heroes of enterprise as sponsors are granted a special legitimacy. The Academies also demonstrate 'corporate responsibility' and the caring face of capitalism and of 'self-made men' (sic) who want to 'give something back'. These hero entrepreneurs embody some of the key values of New Labour: the possibilities of meritocracy, of achieving individual success from modest beginnings and wealth creation from innovation and knowledge.

## Conclusion

Heterarchies 'enlarge the range of actors involved in shaping and delivering policy' (Newman, 2001: 125). Such a mode of governance involves a 'catalyzing of all sectors – public, private and voluntary – into action to solve their community's problems' (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). It is achieved on 'the changing boundary between state and civil society' (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003: 42) and between state and the economy. In general terms this is the move towards a 'polycentric state' and 'a shift in the centre of gravity around which policy cycles move' (Jessop, 1998: 32). All of this suggests that both the form and modalities of the state are changing – forms of 'direct' control are being foregone (where they existed) in favour of 'effective' control through calibration and other steering mechanisms. But nonetheless, also, through the marginalisation or re-working of local government, professional organisations and trade unions, direct relations are being established between the DCSF and schools and school providers, e.g. Academies. Fairclough (2000) argues that the 'dispersal' of government, which is a key feature of New Labour modernisation of the public sector, does not signal an abandonment of close control by the centre, and that this deconcentration rather than devolution is 'not an irrational contradiction, but a predictable consequence of the overall logic' of reform (p. 122). In effect the current state of governance, at each level, is a mix between hierarchy, heterarchy and market. The government will intervene in heterarchical relations at points of conflict or instability as well as regulating them – Academies are a case in point. A letter published on 23 February 2009 from the Independent Academies Association, which represents headteachers, governors and sponsors of Academies, claimed that the leaders of these school were "increasingly hampered" by interference from civil servants and the 'whims of quangos'.

## Note

1. The 2006 Education and Inspections Act extended the requirement for a competition for new schools to cover special and primary schools. New schools must be subject to an invitation for proposals for their establishment by alternative providers, which can include the local authority.

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