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## **The Politics of the Academies Programme: natality and pluralism in education policymaking**

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### **Abstract**

Our investigations into the politics of the Academies Programme in England has generated thinking that draws on data about the conversion process from two projects. We engage with an early City Academy that replaced two 'failing' schools, and a recent Academy that replaced a 'successful' high school. We deploy Hannah Arendt's political tools of natality and pluralism to illuminate the depoliticisation of educational reform in England. We identify that while claims are made about innovation and new opportunities, there is little evidence of natality due to the Academies Programme as a conservative and neoliberal restoration project. Integral to this is the urgency of reform based on deferential common sense notions that elite groups know best. The denial of a plurality of options, debates, and interest groups in the conversion process is delivered by co-opted educational professionals as reform managers.

### **Keywords**

Education Policy, Academies Programme, Academisation, Hannah Arendt.

### **Introduction**

Political debates, policy manoeuvres and legislative reforms regarding publicly funded education in England have been about the imagining, promotion and realization of the 'independent' school as the preferred model. The provision of educational services as local schools inter-connected within a system governed through individual school governing bodies, area based local authorities (LAs) and elected councils, and a national UK government department and Parliament has been variously challenged, reformed and is in the process of being dismantled. Schools with governing bodies in England, and under the direction of the national UK government, have been restructured as 'independent' of the LA and elected councils in three main ways: first, the establishment of new provision outside of the LA e.g. City Technology Colleges from the mid 1980s, and Free Schools from 2010; second, the removal of schools from the LA e.g. Grant Maintained Status from 1988, and Academies from 2000; and third, major interventions into LA provision such as Fresh Start from 1997 (where a school closed and then reopened with new staffing), and the National Challenge from 2008 (where a framework for improvement was imposed on selected schools deemed at risk and National Challenge Advisers were appointed to support the school and the LA). The notion of 'independence' is based on removing the school from local democratic

accountability by building on the self-managing school as a business in a competitive market place created through the Education Reform Act of 1988. The language is one of 'specialisation' and 'choice', where 'diversity' of provision would enable 'standards' to improve. Consequently, such 'independence' has warranted further changes whereby Academies and Free Schools can operate outside of national workforce conditions of service and the national curriculum, and have facilitated the dominance of powerful interests (e.g. faith groups, businesses, and individual philanthropists). The shift from a predominantly public 'system' to private 'provision' is not yet settled or complete but there are visible trends through the promotion of parental choice, the shift of public assets into private hands, the outsourcing of provision to private interests, and the discourses around 'for-profit' educational services, interplayed with localized compliance and development of 'independence' schemes.

Within this context our contribution is to report on thinking that asks serious questions about the political processes regarding securing 'independence' located in the Academies Programme. Specifically we site our intellectual work in the politics of 'conversion' for two academies, the first is the creation of a City Academy in the early post 2000 period through the closure of two predecessor LA schools, and the second is the change by a LA school into an Academy under the terms of the 2010 Act. The argument we intend making is based on mobilizing Arendt's analysis of the political process, and in particular her work on pluralism and natality. Specifically we focus on 'conversion' as a key aspect of 'academisation' where we make the case that 'conversion' is more about labour and work than about political action, and by deploying her thinking about natality and pluralism we illuminate a failure to be innovative through the denial of a range of potential options, debates and interest groups who have something to contribute to developing educational opportunities.

### **What's new?**

The launch of the Academies Programme in 2000 was located in a fanfare of doing something dramatically different in order to make significant and necessary improvements to the provision of education in urban areas. Blunkett (2000) stated that "for too long, too many children have been failed by poorly-performing schools which have served to reinforce

inequality of opportunity and disadvantage” (unpaged), where the solution was to invest in new forms of schooling, and so “City Academies will create opportunities for business, the voluntary sector and central and local government to work together to break this cycle and improve the life chances of inner city children” (unpaged). Blunkett was speaking as Secretary of State for Education on behalf of the New Labour government that had taken office in 1997 with a commitment to “put behind us the old arguments that have bedevilled education in this country” and they had proposed ‘Fresh Start’ schools where a failing school would close in the July and reopen in the September (New Labour 1997, unpaged). By the time of the 2001 election this policy had not brought about the improvements expected of it, with high profile cases of headteacher resignations in the press (Gunter 2005). So the *Ambitions for Britain* manifesto (New Labour 2001) stated that: “New Labour believes that schools need a step change in reform to make quality education open to all” (unpaged) and central to this was a commitment to diversity. A range of initiatives were announced, regarding the growth in specialist schools and the need for more church schools, and with a clear stake in the “new City Academies” (unpaged) that had begun to roll out: “...we will establish more City Academies, and promote greater innovation in the supply of new schools with local consultation. We will allow greater involvement in schools by outside organisations with a serious contribution to make to raising standards...” (unpaged). The Academies Programme that had begun with the City Academies from 2000 developed incrementally over the decade from its inception and the change of government in 2010 generated continuity and expansion (Gunter 2011). The Coalition agreement in 2010 stated that they would create “new Technical Academies as part of our plans to diversify schools provision” (HM Government 2010 p29), and went on to radically expand the programme, not least through the inclusion of primaries and successful secondary schools. When combined with the plan to allow ‘Free Schools’ where “new providers can enter the state system in response to parental demand” (HM Government 2010 p28), then the idea of the state-of-the-art independent school, funded by the tax payer but run by private interests became the main focus of reform.

Our study of the politics of the Academies Programme from 2000 (Gunter 2011, McGinity and Gunter 2012, 2014) suggests that election campaigns and the operationalizing of the

mandate to govern through major restructuring and reculturing was based on a perceived need to enable something new to happen in the provision of educational services. The New Labour lexicon around the Academies Programme was dominated by the words “innovation” and “freedom”, and this became central to how those who were actively involved framed their personal, symbolic, political and economic investments. Those who have written about their experiences do so on the basis of frustrations with the existing system, and the opportunities that ‘new freedoms’ were promising for the profession and local communities (see Astle and Ryan 2008, Daniels 2011, Leo et al. 2010). Hence the academies were ‘free’ from the national curriculum, did not have to accept national workforce terms and conditions of service and could experiment with the curriculum and organizational arrangements. Sponsors could invest funds (up to £2million in the original scheme), and increasingly their know how and standing either as individuals or as established groups (e.g. faith organisations) could help break with the ‘bureaucracy’ of local government and the ‘stranglehold’ of trade unions, and the ‘cultures of depression’ that they are said to have generated (see House of Commons 2009). From 2010 there has been a shift from a ‘something must be done about inner city schools’ towards a ‘something must be done about all schools’ where it is claimed that those who are doing well within LAs can do even better outside. So schools that are officially failing remain prime candidates for academy status, but the approach has increasingly been more about creating the conditions in which academy status is an obvious move for the successful school. There is an energy and drive to enable all schools to be restructured as autonomous, as Gove (2012) has stated:

“Labour’s Academies Programme proved genuinely transformative and provided a solid basis for our reforms. But we had more than just the evidence of history to lean on. The principle of autonomy-driven improvement is solidly backed by rigorous international evidence. The best academic studies clearly demonstrate the effect of empowering the frontline. Trust professionals and they will exceed your expectations” (unpaged).

Within this context schools are going through a process of academisation from LA maintained school to an independent state school, and it is the political processes involved that we intend thinking about.

## **Conversion**

Academisation of schools in England has been aspirational whereby Blair (Northampton Academy n.d.) imagined a time when all schools would be academies, and an emerging reality whereby Gilbert et al. (2013) talk about “an increasingly academised system” (p5), and declare that “academisation is one of the most significant structural transformations” (p9). Academisation is used to describe a range of changes that are indeed structural, where Courtney (2013) has mapped the current rapidly unfolding school landscape and identified at least 80 types. For the purposes of this paper we are acknowledging the current situation for academies that are “sponsored”, “convertor” and “enforced sponsored” (Gilbert et al. 2013 p16). These labels denote the interplay between a school being forced to change (sponsored, enforced sponsored) and seeking to change (convertor), and hence the process is not just legal one in regard to the status of the school (including funding and governance), but is also about the wider political matters regarding how a school comes to go through the process. Academisation is about closing a school and reopening an academy, it is therefore about cultural and professional change, and speaks to identity issues that impact on the practice of teaching and learning.

Within this context we intend using the term ‘conversion’ to illuminate a particular part of academisation, and in deploying it we intend to give meaning to the Academies Programme from 2000 rather than accept the government use of the term for current ‘convertor’ academies. This is a helpful way of developing understandings because conversion embraces a process designed to be revolutionary, and in ways that are not just about the technical legalities of a change for one particular type of academy but are about how people think about and practice such a change across the system. There are new dispositions to be cultivated, new ways of organizing learning, and new people to be embraced in the organizational and governance structures. Literally people have to be converted to the idea and the realities of academies as both ‘independent’ and ‘state’ schools, and so the inter-relationship between those who hold public office and those in civil society who are located within the conversion process needs to be taken into consideration. Hence in the first phase

of city academies teachers, children, and parents had to be converted to the idea that an independent school would resolve the failings of the current schools in their locality; whereas in the current phase of post 2010 'convertor' schools teachers, children, and parents had to be converted to the idea that high standards within the LA can be guaranteed outside of the LA.

This process is necessarily political in the sense that as Blunkett and Gove illustrate (see above) there is a need to present and sustain a case for change in ways that will speak to all those directly involved from parents, to teachers, to sponsors and to children. In this sense the imperative for academisation to take place is based on a form of 'preaching' in oral and written texts (e.g. see DfE 2010), and how it is received is integral to whether those in receipt are receptive as 'converts'. While research evidence (e.g. Wrigley and Kalambouka 2013), commissioned evaluations (e.g. PwC 2008), and Parliamentary scrutiny (e.g. NAO 2007) have all raised serious questions and presented challenging evidence about the Programme, not least that there is no evidence of "an academies effect" (PwC 2008), politicians of the left and right have remained resilient in their promotion of the independent school, and have been able to generate a sense of normality (Gilbert et al. 2013). Hence conversion is not just about academisation *per se* but about the opportunities to gain advantage in the market place for those who ordinarily cannot afford fees for private education. This is a necessary process for strategizing towards for-profit provision, with the return of vouchers as a means through which purchasing can be extended to low-income families.

Research has been done on forms of resistance (see Gunter 2011, 2014) and the Anti Academies Alliance remains robust in challenging conversion strategies and tactics. This opposition is helpful in enabling understandings that conversion is about how the purposes of 'public' schools and schooling is not settled, and who is involved in the design and development of the curriculum, pedagogy and the workforce is broader and more influential than under the previous LA and professional groups. Hence the process is one of both radical futuring and adaptation on ground, where major changes in the organization and funding of schools is taking place to create improved provision which has had to be translated into local

policies and practice. This requires at least acceptance and but hopefully enthusiasm from all those involved. In many ways the spiritual sense of conversion is also appropriate as new ways of thinking and doing as professionals, children and parents are required as a salvation narrative (see Gunter 2011, 2014). Conversion requires a break with the past, particularly by fracturing and restorying individual and collective memories. Reactions to national and local resistance to conversion illustrates this, where politicians have sought to denounce those who are working to retain their schools within LA control and/or for different models of local provision.

We present two illustrations of this conversion process where we do not report on fieldwork and data *per se*, but use our learning from this to develop an approach to thinking. The first story is located in the setting up of Metropolitan City Academy opened in the first tranche of academies from 2000, whereby two schools were closed in order to create the academy. This is a *forced conversion* whereby sponsors were recruited and required to fund and take ownership of the school and the standards of education (see Gunter 2011). The story is based on a research project funded by the British Academy where Gunter was co-investigator and a member of the fieldwork team. The case study began during the conversion process, and continued through the first two years of the Academy's existence. Data sets were collected from children, teachers, senior leaders, sponsors, other schools in the area, and the local authority, and for this paper we refer to, but do not directly report on, data sets developed from fieldwork with the headteachers of the predecessor schools, and from the principal and senior leaders of Metropolitan City Academy.

The second story is located in the transition of Kingswood High School into Kingswood Academy following the 2010 Academies Act. This is a *converter academy* whereby the school decided to apply for academy status and sponsors have been invited to work with the school. The story is based on a research project funded by the ESRC as a doctoral CASE studentship, and was a case study of localized policymaking with McGinity undertaking the role of doctoral student as an 'embedded' or researcher in residence. The doctoral project focused on the development of learning cultures and practices from 2010 through to 2013,

and during the period the school underwent the conversion to an academy. Data sets were collected from children, teachers, senior leaders, governors, and for this paper we refer to, but do not directly report on, data sets developed from fieldwork with the principal and senior leaders.

*Story 1 - Preaching to convert:* As Metropolitan City Academy was in the first phase of the Academies Programme it was under the spotlight not least in regard to improving student outcomes through testing. While the two predecessor High Schools were closed down at the end of a school year, and the Metropolitan City Academy was opened with a new Principal, workforce, curriculum, and with a state of the art new building planned, the whole process was highly contested. The aim for those who initiated and generated the plan was to locate a radical approach to new schooling in the area of the city within a major regeneration project regarding housing and the economy. The original plan for an academy fell through due to the withdrawal of a sponsor having faced opposition and threats. Indeed the community opposed the formulation of the Metropolitan City Academy plan, due to concerns over the land where the new building would be located, and cultural antipathy between the two communities that supported the predecessor schools. The data show the importance of the sponsors in rescuing and promoting the Academies project in this area of the city, with a commitment to investing in the community as a means of both 'giving something back' and to benefitting their own concerns. Emphasis was put on the separation of the sponsors from the newly appointed professionals, but at the same time the importance of both supporting and challenging in order to bring about improvements. The networks that these sponsors were located within were seen as beneficial to aspirations regarding entrepreneurialism and to accessing resources to realize these aspirations.

In summary the politics of the conversion process shows the following:

Sponsors: they drove the conversion process and had a hands-on role in the appointment of the Principal and Senior Leaders, the organization of the school and the curriculum. Importantly they brought business techniques and culture to the curriculum and the organization, and gave the workforce access to resources and networks that would support this process.



Principal and senior leadership: they drove the educational vision and the setting up of the organization. Importantly they accepted business techniques and culture in the design and delivery of the curriculum and the organization.

Workforce: they are a combination of staff appointed from the two predecessor schools and new staff, and overall they were more positive than negative, with claims made that the culture was more focused on innovation with the resources to do things. But with concerns over the role of business, and with one respondent claiming that the predecessor school where they had worked had not been failing.

Children: activity in the new academy showed overt compliance through everyday processes but the data show concern regarding the lack of authentic involvement in the decision to close their predecessor schools, and their lack of support for aspects of the new curriculum.

Parents: while their children were attending the academy the data show opposition from within the community, this focused on community distinctiveness as well as concern regarding the location of the new building.

The data show that overall the conversion process was one of 'preaching' as a means of 'converting' those who had to recognize how the change being done to them was integral to economic regeneration for the area. The opportunities for the staff were presented as a form of professionalization, whereby doing something different was a mantra for improvement. A culture of negativity towards the heads of the predecessor schools, the local authority, and the local community is a strong feature, with a language of 'war', 'battlefields', 'survival' being used in the accounts given of the reasons for and the experience of the conversion. Such a process was highly stressful and there is much evidence of unpleasantness and threats (both verbal and written) towards those managing the conversion. Data from the predecessor school heads show a concern that their schools were not 'failing' (with evidence supplied of improvements), but remained in need of investment and revitalisation. With heads of other local schools and the LA identifying problems regarding local planning and co-ordination, not least with enrolment and transfer.

*Story 2 - Preaching to the converted:* Kingswood High School was closed in 2012 and in order for Kingswood Academy to open a legal conversion process had to be gone through. The transition was visible through a branding, and new investment in the buildings and curriculum. The aim was to build on the success of the school in a highly affluent area through generating improved opportunities for learning, particularly in regard to business and vocational training. The school had a history of innovation, and had engaged with successive

reforms through developing original interpretations regarding localized policymaking. For example, the application for specialized school status in the early part of last decade was based on a rejection of specialization between schools and in favour of specialization within the school. The argument was that as a comprehensive school it did not make sense for the whole school to specialize in one curriculum area (e.g. languages, sport, business, technology), but it did make sense to personalize the curriculum through enabling the children to exercise choice regarding how they wanted to design their learning. The success of this proposal created a positive approach in regard to the handling of centralized reforms locally. Consequently, the response to the 2010 Academies Act was based on a view that the full academisation of the system was inevitable, and so the school should get on board and make it work before they were forced to convert. Kingswood did not have to convert in the way that the two predecessor schools to the Metropolitan Academy had been forced to close, and indeed Kingswood had developed forms of independence from the LA that had been productive. It seems that the spaces and opportunities for autonomy within the LA system had created the conditions and dispositions to leave it.

In summary the politics of the conversion process shows the following:

Sponsors: they had been approached and brought on board by the school leadership, and have been involved in curriculum design and accreditation, and have given the workforce access to resources and networks that would support this process.

Principal and senior leadership: while they remain troubled by the Academies Programme, they originated and drove the decision and built commitment within the school and community. Importantly they have a negative view of the local authority, and have led on the importance of building business sponsorship with the concomitant techniques and culture.

Workforce: they are highly supportive of the school and have accepted the principal and senior leadership decision about the necessity for and vitality of the conversion.

Children: they are highly supportive of the school and where there are concerns they are about issues that the school knows about and is working on.

Parents: they are highly supportive of the school, and want to enable it to provide the best education possible. The town has large discrepancies in socio-economic status of families, with a buoyant private sector, and so in the longer term the issue will be about how parents may move from private to state independent education, how current private schools may convert as competitor state independent schools, and how parents may set up a competitor free school.

The data show that overall the conversion process is one of 'preaching' to the 'converted' or at least to those who would not overtly challenge what was being presented as an opportunity

for curriculum innovation. The school has used its own research to investigate curriculum and whole school issues as a means of enabling development, not least through asking questions about whether children and families are expected to fit the school culture and how the school can know and understand family and community aspirations better. The academy conversion at Kingswood has not been based on its own local research but on an acceptance of the current national policy discourse combined with the sidelining of concerns about what this might mean for the inclusion policy as a comprehensive school serving the whole community. It seems that their success so far in handling national policies locally, in ways that bring the school local gains, has generated a confidence that they can put their unease to one-side. The shift to “school-led school improvement” (DfE 2013, unpagged) has been embraced, though as yet the academy has not been asked to support improvement in another school in ways that could potentially enhance or endanger its own position, and it has not yet faced competition from a ‘free school’ as new provision. Interestingly, while there are examples of schools in other regions of England grouping together with the LA to plan and develop education locally, this school has not done this. They had recognized that the Department would not do business with a school within a LA, not least because the ‘comprehensive’ school had become a toxic brand, and so there was a need to do something to enable the school to retain the gains made over the past decade in localized policymaking. It seems that ‘going it alone’ has been an audacious feature in the localized enactment of major policies such as specialization and academies, and it is enabling the school to stake novel branded claims in a locally competitive market.

These two sites of conversion raise questions about the polity and the processes by which national education policy is working through in localized policy processes. Importantly, the projects speak to Apple’s (1993) identification of an “official knowledge” that is communicated through a “politics of common sense” (p1), whereby the neoliberalism of entrepreneurial sponsors and the neoconservatism of faith sponsors confirm the crisis in public education and provides solutions that strengthen their interests (see Woods et al. 2007). Fabricated urgency combined with a ‘there is no alternative’ to academies is based on a liberation narrative, which interlinks with traditional professional values of doing your best for the

children, or at least getting hold of a reform and making it work in ways that prevent too much damage. A crisis was created for both schools where the solution was located outside of LA accountability processes: Metropolitan City Academy was based on a centralized compulsion to break the LA monopoly, and Kingswood Academy was based on an acceptance of a centralized compulsion that the LA monopoly is an anachronism. Consequently local policymaking is about professionals being converted into reform managers, or more accurately how successive reforms have created ways of working that have generated opportunities for elite professionals, where building commitment with teachers, children and parents enables neoliberal and neoconservative projects to be realised.

### **The politics of conversion**

We have presented conversion as a wider and more enveloping process than that suggested by the 'convertor' label under the 2010 Act. Following Arendt (2005) we would want to examine the politics of conversion in ways that not only challenge what has and is taking place, but also enable us to think about ourselves as researchers. This is important because while we have some accounts of conversion (e.g. Barker 2010, Elliott 2011, Hatcher 2011), there is little that examines the political processes *per se*.

While much might be said about current disappointments and even revulsion with politics, we would want to associate with Stoker's (2006) claims about how and why politics matters, because it:

"... can provide a means of getting on with your fellow human beings that aims to find a way forward through reconciliation and compromise without recourse to straightforward coercion or outright violence. It provides a way to live in an ordered manner with your neighbours, but one that unavoidably often calls on you to sign up to deals and compromises that might not be your first or even tenth choice, but which nevertheless have something in them that enables you to put up with them. It might not be very inspiring, but when it works politics delivers one great benefit: it enables you to choose, within constraints, the life you want without fear of physical coercion and violence being used against you. Politics creates space for human choices and diverse lifestyles. Politics, if done well, creates the positive context and stable environment for you to live your life. That's why politics matters" (p7).

Such an approach to politics is based on opportunities and space through which options and decisions might take place, and where debates and thoughtful choices might be public. It is out of the scope of this paper to engage with evidence and discourses about the precious

nature of the public domain, but we would want to confirm the diversity of publics (Newman and Clarke 2009) and how the current anti-political political culture is putting this at risk (Marquand 2004). In Scott's (1998) terms hierarchy continues to work through political processes whereby complex ideas are communicated as "simplifications" as a means of enabling "legibility" (p77) by those in receipt of them. Illustrative of this are the claims about sponsors, who it is argued "challenge traditional thinking" and who "seek to make a complete break with cultures of low aspiration" (DCSF 2009, unpagged). These type of simplifications do not interconnect with historical evidence about the creativity of Local Authorities, and that schools have been and are successful under Local Authority control. This is about "seeing like a state" in ways that are not "simple minded" but is about using facts in ways that are "replicable across many cases" (p81). So seemingly different interests in the Academies Programme (e.g. politicians, civil servants, business, professionals, faith groups) can associate together through a predisposition to exercising power and legitimacy through hierarchy. Indeed, the know how, the experience, the leadership of sponsors has been characterized in ways that legitimize forms of oligarchy (see SSAT 2007 p9). While seemingly pluralistic political processes are taking place (e.g. elections, manifestos, TV debates), in reality it is "simplification, abstraction, and standardization" (p81) that dominates. The practical knowledge and knowing of children, parents, and professionals is messy, incoherent, and can be easily condemned as unmodern and unhelpful. In this climate the silences are loud, whereby people who are in the midst of it can be caught up in the discourse, and may be prevented from raising their concerns. Our argument is that politics is being taken out of educational choices about purposes and practices, not just through the dominance of a convergence of neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies but because the elite interests that are dominant are enabled to opt out. They inhabit a world where they may not have children or their children do not go to the schools that they claim to be investing in. When they opt into practical matters it is being a presence (see SSAT 2007 p90), or through working with and supporting the principal and governing body. It is about building markets for their ideas (faith groups) and products (entrepreneurs), and securing a 'compliant ready' workforce and citizenry. How the Academies Programme illustrates this process of

depoliticisation of public education can be understood through Arendt's political tools and analysis regarding what she describes as action.

There is much activity around academies but little action. By this we mean that people are committed and busy in the creation and establishment of the idea and reality of academies. In Arendt's (1958) terms this activity is mainly a form of labour and work, where the former is about survival (eating, warmth), and the latter is about crafting something (artefacts, ideas) that are durable and can outlive our mortality. In this sense, our two examples are about people who want schools to survive within particular contexts, and so make this happen through the practice of making academies work. Academies have been laboured over rather than created, and without action there is no politics with a space to share, debate and decide.

There are two aspects to this: natality and pluralism.

Natality is about how birth generates the capacity for something new:

“Labor and work, as well as action, are also rooted in natality in so far as they have the task to provide and preserve the world for, to foresee and reckon with, the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers. However, of the three, action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought” (Arendt1958 p9).

Education is integral for natality, and so the teacher's role is crucial in doing what Arendt calls “preserving newness” (Levinson 2001 p14). This is challenging as there is a need to create learning in ways that open up possibilities for something different but within the context of threats to natality, not least through how particular versions of history are deployed. This is why the involvement of teachers in the politics of change is vital, because Arendt ascribes to them the need to take and exercise responsibility for learning. However, while the Academies Programme is replete with the language of newness and an urgency to do something new, there is little that is new. Replacing the LA with autonomous academies or linked academies as a ‘chain’ is about transferring rather than replacing the logic of control. Our examples show that it is a conservative restoration project whereby elite interests are imposing their model of

the independent school that is not independent by virtue of their economic, cultural, and legal control. And even though various types of schools fail to deliver (e.g. Academies, Grant Maintained, City Technology Colleges, Free Schools) the idea of independence has remained remarkably uncontaminated, but is reinvented through a process of forgetting. Consequently children are denied natality because the curriculum and ways of doing things are repackaging and rebranding control structures. In both of the example academies the work related curriculum is being devised in ways that segregate children, with the re-emergence of the Grammar and Secondary Modern schools 'by the back door'. What is most shocking is how those who are concerned about the bigger picture of the Academies Programme are complicit with it, and spend time convincing others that they should also be accepting – on the basis that things will be better, without considering better for whom. Arendt is helpful here through her analysis of pluralism as being integral to action, and policy analysis reveals a denial of other ideas and imaginings that extends beyond the Academies Programme (Gunter 2014).

Arendt (2005) argues that: "politics is based on the fact of human plurality. God created *man*, but *men* are a human" (p93), and so: "politics arises *between men*, and so quite outside of man... politics arises in what lies between men and is established as relationships" (p95). Elite interests in the formal political process (e.g. political parties, Cabinet, Whitehall) deny politics in the Arendtian sense through the promotion and delivery of one way of resolving the problem, and attacks on those who want to consider alternative forms of education and schooling. This puts barriers in the way of relational encounters, not least through using labour and work as the means by which to render humans as objects of reform. In the Academies Programme this is visible in the insistence of the shift from experimentation to radical systemic reform in the face of evidence to the contrary or at least slow down (Gunter 2011). In relation to our two examples we can identify how 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. Indeed we have evidence that the Department will not engage with schools unless they are Academies. The displacement of professionals and locally elected representatives (but recognising the co-option of some members of these groups) by business and faith elites is based on a rejection of a 'system' with derogatory claims about

bureaucracy and provider capture. The potential and necessity of democratic renewal is widely recognised (see Marquand 2004) but this requires a pluralism of ideas and positions that is not currently tolerated. The language and beliefs underpinning the justifications for Academies is about delivery rather than the capacity for spontaneity located in natality and pluralism:

“What, then, *is* ‘action’? ... Arendt’s account of action in politics contains very considerable complexities. In *The Human Condition*, however, she is chiefly concerned with action as a basic human capacity, and at this level it is not too difficult to say what it is. It is a very broad category of human activity that covers interactions with other people that are not matters of routine behaviour but require personal initiative. However intelligible they may be in retrospect, actions are unpredictable before the event. Thus, jumping into a river to rescue someone is action, going to work is usually not” (Canovan 1992 p131).

While any radical change in school provision requires labour and work, the absence of action in regard to the Academies Programme renders it as routine. Our examples illuminate a drive for security through reliance on established notions of knowledge production within elite groups: how business people have know how about teaching, learning and welfare, and how faith organisations know how to discipline potential.

What the logic of our examples and argument are leading to is an assessment of how our polity is in danger:

“the world is constituted by our common and shared experiences of it; we can be in the world to the degree to which we implicitly trust that the orientations we follow are more or less also followed by others. This commonness of the world is the background against which the plurality of perspectives that constitute the political can emerge. Politics requires a background of commonality and the recognition of the plurality and perspectivity of the judgement of those who share this background commonality. It is over and against such a background that political action can unfold. Political action, action in concert, presupposes civic and political equality as well as the expression of the new and the unprecedented, the expression of that moment that distinguishes the doer from all others. Such an experience of the world signifies that individuals share in common a ‘public realm,’ a space of appearances in the world, constituted by the interplay of commonality and perspectivity, equality and distinction” (Benhabib 2000 p55-56).

We losing the potential for a “commonness of the world” because the people who are leading and profiting from academisation seem to experience the exercise of power differently from those who are labouring and working for academies. The Academies Programme is based on a totalising ideology of common sense beliefs held by elite groups and overtly converted individuals. The more that phrases like ‘new freedoms’ are stated the more unity around this



as a reality is generated. Penetrating this is really difficult. While the self interested and damaging conduct of some elite interests has been exposed (Beckett 2007) and there have been localised protests against academy conversion (Gunter 2011), it seems that political debate has been replaced by censure. As one of us has shown, the conditions for totalitarianism are always with us, and following Arendt's (2009) analysis the process of crystallisation is evident in the modernisation of education (Gunter 2014).

This is not inevitable, and what Arendt's thinking does is to help researchers think about the purposes of their projects, and to challenge ways of thinking and accepted methodologies. In this sense, as researchers, we need to critically engage with our intellectual tools and how these are deployed in the field and at our desks. For example, Kohn (2005) synthesises Arendt's position as follows: "hence action, as Arendt came to understand it, is largely missing from the tradition of political and philosophical thought established and handed down by these thinkers" (p. 16), and so social science may not be able to help the field to grasp the limitations of a politics of activity based on labour and work. So as researchers who overtly locate within the social sciences as critical policy scholars, we need to critique intellectual work and how the elite knowledge we use interplays with demands for democratisation within knowledge production (Apple 2013). What our thinking with and about academy conversion does is to expose the depoliticisation of the relationship between ideas, evidence and action, and how as "critical secretaries" we can illuminate how the Academies Programme is example of "nonreformist reforms" (Apple 2013 p.41-42). In doing this we risk the wrath of our field, particularly since we are often exposing the role of researchers and professionals in making those reforms look to be reformist (Gunter 2012). The very adoption of the phrase "Academies Programme" accepts a rationality that is not there, the use of "conversion" for an academy suggests a benign change that disconnects from a wider conversion process outlined in this paper. At a time when research is meant to deliver evidence to inform policy and practice we are engaging with a thinking process, and as such we will not deliver a set of recommendations for action. As Strong (2012) argues "thinking is always result-less" (p.339), but it can enable us to focus on what is distinctive about a situation, and following Arendt there is a need to make judgements about what is new. While academies are not new in the

sense that different versions of the independent school have been introduced at different times over the past thirty years, what seems to be emerging as distinctive about the current version is the shift from entryism of a 'new' type of school towards the normalisation of the private provision of education for all.

### **Summary**

Claims and counter claims fill the literatures about academies and their place within wider reforms. Comprehensive schools are variously damned with Adonis (2012) claiming that they are "a cancer at the heart of English society" (pxii) while academies as the "all-ability independent state school, with dynamic independent sponsors taking charge of their management..." (pxii) are lauded as the cure. However, this misrepresentation of the comprehensive school is evident in wider discourses (Benn 2011), and the centralisation process involved in the rapid expansion of academies post 2010 has been identified (Bangs et al. 2011). Research and commentary suggests that a process of privatisation is underway (Mortimore 2013), whereby Ravitch's (2010) u-turn as a neoliberal reformer is recognition that enthusiastic policy delivers can recover from conversion. Such activity suggests that the politics of the Academies Programme has vitality and energy, and we would agree that the debate implies that promoters of academies are subject to critical review, and alternatives get an airing. However, the examples we have used are just two out of many where the politics of conversion is taking place without due recognition of the evidence base and discourses. Academies are being forced onto communities without local ballots (as happened with Grant Maintained Status from 1988), and without scrutiny of the claims made by those who have taken over public assets and the education process.

Arendtian analysis has generated new insights about academy conversion through revealing the denial of a robust political process, particularly through exposing flimsy claims to be doing something new. The dominance and revitalisation of elite interests in the provision of public education is based on a narrative of educational purposes that is seductive – we must do something about urban education – and, singular – what we must do is to produce a workforce capable of complying with our profit and missionary motives. Pluralism and natality

generate imaginings of sponteneity, so integral to learning and creativity, but sadly missing from the politics of this reform. Our capacity as researchers to see through this is related to the intellectual tools we access and deploy in our conceptual and analytical actions. Underpinning our analysis are claims that we must be critical of the demands for researchers to labour and work, where knowledge production needs to be based on action as a form of scholarly activism.

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