

*Are Academies Meeting Government
Achievement Targets? A systematic appraisal
exploring educational achievement in Academies
in England from 2002-2010*

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ABSTRACT: This study focuses upon the Academies Programme in England from 2002-2010. From one perspective the Academies Programme is a straightforward attempt to increase educational achievement. And yet, from its inception the Programme has been controversial, principally because of a private ownership ideology being introduced into state schools. The findings of this study suggest three areas of significance. Firstly, evidence suggests that Academies per se cannot be said to improve academic achievements in line with government expectations. Even where an increase has been shown, it usually refers to schools that were already performing well before becoming Academies. Secondly, alternative evidence shows that Academies do appear to be reaching government achievement targets. The problem here is that the data can be interpreted as flawed, because much of the research is government commissioned and it is in their interests to arrive at 'improvements'. The third strand is concerned with the time frame under investigation. Between 2002– 2007, schools which became Academies often had a diminishing Free School Meals (FSM) intake and an increasing number of excluded pupils whose performance was poor, thus affecting a school's overall grades.

RESUME: Cette étude met l'accent sur le programme scolaire appliqué en Angleterre entre 2002 et 2010. L'on peut considérer que le programme académique tente tout simplement d'augmenter le taux de réussites scolaires mais depuis sa création il est controversé en partie à cause d'une idéologie sur la propriété privée enseignée dans les écoles publiques. Les conclusions de cette analyse semblent présenter trois points importants :Le premier est que les données probantes laissent entendre que les établissements académiques en eux-mêmes, ne peuvent pas accroître le taux de

réussite scolaire conformément aux attentes du gouvernement. En général, quand il y a une augmentation du taux de réussite, c'est parce qu'elle avait déjà commencé dans des écoles bien avant que ces dernières ne deviennent académiques. Le deuxième est que d'autres éléments démontrent que les académies paraissent atteindre les objectifs gouvernementaux. Cela dit, le problème réside ici dans l'interprétation des données qui peut-être biaisée car le gouvernement commissionne une grande partie des recherches. Il est évidemment de l'intérêt du gouvernement de réaliser de telles « améliorations ». Le troisième point concerne les délais prévus par l'enquête. Entre 2002 et 2007, les écoles qui sont devenues académiques avaient tendance à réduire la quantité de repas gratuits (FSM.) De plus en plus d'élèves dont les résultats n'étaient pas suffisants, furent exclus, changeant ainsi l'ensemble des classes de l'école.

The Appraisal:

This appraisal is an investigation into the strategies that are used to support the educational achievement of students in Academies in England. It analyses the Academies Programme as conceived by New Labour 2002-2010. This was a major part of New Labour education policy (Curtis et al, 2008).

The general election held on the 12th May 2010, saw the New Labour government defeated by a coalition between the Liberal Democrats and Conservative Party (BBC, 2010). Initially, it was believed that the Academies programme would dissolve with the introduction of this new coalition government; however, it quickly became evident that this was not the case (BBC, 2010). On the 26th May 2010, Michael Gove, the new Secretary of State for Education, presented the 'Academies Bill' to Parliament (Gove, 2010, pp.8). This Bill outlined plans for the Academies programme to expand even further, as both secondary and now primary schools rated by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) as 'outstanding', could be fast-tracked into Academy status in time for the upcoming 2010 to 2011 academic year (Coughlan, 2010; Gove, 2010, pp.8).

Under this new proposal, the majority of new Academies would be the most successful schools, often located in affluent areas (Anti Academies Alliance, 2010b); a sharp contrast to the New Labour aims of helping students in impoverished localities (DfES, 2004). This study focuses only upon the Academies set up under the New Labour Government between 2002-2010 and not subsequent Academies set up with different criteria.

The Academies programme is a relatively recent phenomenon which from the beginning has sparked a new era of schooling within the current complex and fragmented system of British education (Hatcher, 2006). By their nature Academies are enterprise promoting (Brown, 2008).

Academy schools have only been in operation in England since 2002 (Glatter, 2009) and thus very little academic research has been undertaken examining Academies (Beckett, 2007). As such, there are many unanswered questions relating to various dimensions of this educational initiative (Beckett, 2007; Elliott, 2008). One area that has been very much under-researched, focuses on the extent to which Academies are successful in reaching government targets of educational achievement (Farnsworth, 2006; Gorard 2005; 2009). This is of particular interest, as Academies were originally designed by the government in order to 'raise [academic] standards', and 'to create opportunity in some of the most disadvantaged communities in the country' (DfES, 2004b, para.2).

The theory behind the scheme was that Academies would become 'beacons of educational innovation' and would in turn, raise standards 'not just among the deserving disadvantaged but right across the school system' (Anti Academies Alliance 2010a, pp.6). Their inception was intended to address social problems, inequalities and to drive up standards (Brown, 2008; Curtis et al,2008).

Academies differ from any other type of state schooling in England as they are independent of Local Education Authorities (LEA's), have the power to vary the pay and working conditions of teachers (Hatcher, 2006), were established and managed by voluntary or private sector sponsors, received substantial financial funding, attained state-of -the-art buildings and facilities (Beckett, 2007), and are authorised to follow their own independent Specialist Curriculum. Power lay with the sponsor as they chose the Headteacher and majority of governors, even though they had only contributed 10% of the capital cost (Brown, 2008; Curtis et al 2008).

The majority of existing Academies across England have been established for a number of years and arguably, should have been able to present some level of improvement in academic performance (Farnsworth, 2006; Gorard, 2009). In light of this, it seems timely that research is carried out to establish whether Academies have been able to achieve the government's educational aims for academic standards, and if so, how this has been accomplished.

This systematic appraisal focuses upon the success Academies have attained in enhancing the academic achievement of their students and the strategies undertaken in pursuit of this goal. The study examines the Academies set up under the legislation of the previous Labour government and uses the definition of an Academy and measures of academic success based upon the previous government's policy.

Academic Success within Academies

Since the opening of the first cohort of Academies in 2002, government officials have continued to claim that Academy schools are successful in meeting targets of raising educational standards and student academic performance (DfES, 2004a; NAO, 2007). Findings taken from government funded research (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2008) support this argument, as evidence shows that 'many Academies performed better than the national average for [academic] progress from Key Stage 2 to GCSE [General Certificate of Secondary Education level]' (para.8, pp.8). However, independent researchers refute findings such as these, as they argue that any gradual improvements in student attainment achieved by Academies, is directly due to an employment of fraudulent educational strategies, rather than through raising standards in student educational performance (Beckett, 2007). In addition, Beckett (2007) argues that Academies strategically select more academically-able students from more affluent areas through admissions procedures such as banding, entry examinations, sibling places and random selection school lotteries, in order to ensure educational performance rates increase. A report issued by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) (2008) supported this claim as it suggests that some Academies, have targeted students situated in more affluent areas several miles away, rather than neighbouring localities which are severely deprived.

Methodology

The key to systematic appraisal methodology is the quality and comprehensive nature of the search using a series of steps. The first stage in the methodological process was to develop a Protocol document. This Systematic appraisal research process consisted of a series of action steps, i.e. Title, Aims, Research Question(s), Scope, Inclusion/Exclusion criteria, Data Searches, Quality Analysis, Thematic Analysis. These key stages are identified in the protocol document and subsequently all these steps are taken in order during the research process. This prescribed structure enables a comprehensive and systematic process throughout

the research drawing on the appropriate knowledge in the field. This approach enhances validity and enables replication of the study.

Search Criteria

Online searches were directed by the use of specific 'key words'; taken directly from the research question and scope. This was done to ensure that any literature found would be specifically relevant to the investigation and would also correlate with the information discussed in the scope; maintaining validity of the research (Davies, 2000; Slavin, 1986).

The process of applying stringent inclusion and exclusion criteria to potentially useful studies is carried out within a systematic appraisal as a measure of quality control (Davies, 2000; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Slavin, 1986). These different types of criteria not only allow for researchers to identify those studies which can be used to answer the stated research questions, but can also help to reduce reviewer selection bias (Hammersley, 2001; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). This maintains the validity and reliability of the research (Hammersley, 2001; Slavin, 1986).

This methodological reviewing process, documented in a Protocol, can be easily replicated by other researchers, (Hammersley, 2001; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Torgerson, 2006). All articles dated before 1990 were excluded from the study as they would not accurately cover the time-scale for when Academies first began to be established within England. It should also be made clear that only secondary school Academy Key Stage 4 results were examined within this investigation. This is because alternative educational provisions and qualifications are not consistently found within all Academies across England (Chitty, 2008; Elliott, 2008). Due to this, only compulsory GCSE (or equivalent) Key Stage 4 qualification scores were examined.

Findings and Critical Discussion

When examining findings relative to government targets and educational achievement within Academies, two distinct themes emerge. One of which is supported by evidence derived from both Gorard (2005; 2009) and Farnsworth's (2006) independent research, and centres on the argument that Academies have been unsuccessful in raising student academic standards and have therefore, failed to meet government targets of improving educational achievement. For example, Gorard's (2009, pp.103) findings demonstrate that compared to local authority secondary schools "*fewer students in Academies reach Level 1 (any*

GCSE or equivalent) and markedly fewer reach Level 2" (five good GCSE's at grade A* to C or equivalent).

This evidence suggests that Academies are failing to meet government educational targets of increasing Level 2 student achievement at Key Stage 4 (Gorard, 2009). Furthermore, Gorard (2009) argues that "*there is no clear evidence that Academies work to produce better results than the kinds of schools they replace*" (pp.112). For example, Gorard's (2009) evidence illustrates that despite the national annual increases in GCSE scores in secondary schools "*the first three Academies opening in 2002 did not outperform the [LEA] schools that they replaced*," (pp.104). A similar pattern can be found for those Academies established from 2003 to 2004 (Gorard 2005; 2009). For instance, "*the best year for GCSE results in the school that became an Academy in Bexley was 1998, long before the change to Academy status*" (Gorard, 2005, pp.374). Likewise, schools in Haringey and Middlesbrough achieved their best ever GCSE scores prior to Academy takeover (Gorard, 2005). In addition, from 2004 to 2007, evidence suggests that nearly all Academies failed to raise educational achievement at Key Stage 4; with previously weaker LEA's outperforming the majority of Academy schools based on GCSE (or equivalent) Level 2 scores (Gorard, 2009). In fact, out of the 35 Academies examined in Gorard's (2009) research, "*only five appear to be gaining appreciably higher results for their students than in previous years (including those when not an Academy)*" (pp.112). Curtis et al (2008) found concerns with regard to attainment in a number of Academies.

Farnsworth's (2006) findings support those of Gorard's (2005; 2009) and further the argument that Academies have been unsuccessful in raising academic standards and meeting government educational targets. For example, evidence shows that the majority of LEA schools across England perform substantially better than Academy schools based on Key Stage 4 achievement results (Farnsworth, 2006). Moreover, when measuring achievement growth across both outsourced and non-outsourced schools, Farnsworth (2006) found that the speed of educational achievement was faster in LEA schools before they were privatised, rather than in Academies. In addition, Farnsworth (2006) illustrates that the majority of Academies which existed in 2002, were rated by Ofsted as "*poor [academic] improvers*" (pp.486).

Although there is some evidence of a minority of Academies in 2004 academically outperforming LEA schools (Gorard, 2009), Farnsworth's (2006) research suggests that these schools were already outperforming

comparable authorities before they were privatised and thus, these findings should not be taken as an indication of Academies being successful in their own right. For example, evidence shows that “[academic] performance was also better within the subsequent outsourced authorities [Academies] prior to outsourcing” (Farnsworth, 2006; pp.495). In light of the former, support can be given to Gorard’s (2009) argument that academization does not lead to any improvements in schools academic outcomes.

These findings are worrying when taking into account the financial costs associated with establishing and maintaining Academy schools (NAO, 2007). Building costs for Academies were higher on average than LEA community schools and Principals salaries were also higher on average than LEA schools (Curtis et al, 2008). There are also ethical concerns in terms of the ‘*opportunity costs for students facing their one chance of education*’ (Gorard, 2009, pp.111). The evidence also challenges findings obtained from government funded research, which suggest that Academies consistently achieve “*positive overall progress in securing improvements in [academic] performance*” (PwC, 2008, para.8, pp.8).

An alternative theme identified within the analysis, presents a very different argument. Armstrong, Bunting and Larsen (2009) and Pike’s (2009) research suggests that Academies are meeting government targets of educational achievement and as such, have improved student academic performance. For example, Pike’s (2009) Trinity Academy case study shows that in 2006, in its opening year, only 34% of students gained five or more A* to C passes at GCSE level. By 2008 however, 74% of students achieved this Level 2 academic standard. Pike (2009) uses this evidence to support the claim that “*where the majority of young people were previously denied the opportunity to succeed most [in Trinity Academy] now experience [academic] success*” (pp.142). Pike (2009) argues that this sizeable improvement in student performance is a direct consequence of academization and the vision, values and expertise of the schools sponsor.

Findings from the work of Armstrong, Bunting and Larsen (2009) further supports the argument that Academies are successful in raising educational standards, in that academic improvement across all Academy schools is greater than the national rate and other comparison LEA schools. Armstrong, Bunting and Larsen (2009, pp.121) also found that “*when English and Maths [scores] are taken into account, rates of progression are generally less substantial (though still ahead of comparator schools and the England average)*”. Furthermore, Academies are “*...meeting the needs of a wide range of pupils, and increasing the*

*spread of ability range... ”(pp.120). Although educational improvements seem to have taken longer in some of the earlier Academies, Armstrong, Bunting and Larsen (2009) argue that this is “*perhaps due to the [low] baselines from which they started*”(pp.120).*

The findings of Armstrong, Bunting and Larsen (2009) correlate significantly with the evidence obtained by the PwC (2008) investigation and further supported by the government (DfES, 2004a, Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons, 2007). This is of no surprise however, as the research conducted by Armstrong, Bunting and Larsen (2009) uses a similar design to that of the PwC (2008) study and therefore, the likelihood of acquiring comparable results is high. On the other hand, ethical considerations pertinent to this research must also be addressed. For example, it became evident during the analysis that Armstrong, Bunting and Larsen (2009) were employed by the PwC organisation, which in turn, funded their research examining Academy schools. For this reason, the question arises as to whether the findings obtained from this investigation can be taken as valid or reliable, although there is no external evidence to suggest this.

When analysing evidence pertaining to the theme of strategies, a number of interesting findings come to light. Firstly, Gorard’s (2005; 2009) research suggests that nearly all Academies, opened from 2002 to 2007, annually reduced their FSM student intake and increased their rates of exclusion, in order to decrease the population of ‘typically’ underperforming students. This in turn, led to Academies presenting false gradual academic improvements (Gorard, 2009).

For example, of the students who attended Manchester Academy in 2005, 62% of them were eligible for FSM’s, however by 2007 this figure had been reduced to 50% (Gorard, 2009). In correlation with this reduction of student intake and increase in exclusions, the school reported a substantial raise in numbers of students achieving GCSE Level 2 (Gorard, 2009). This reduction in FSM and increase in exclusions in some academies was corroborated by Curtis et al (2008). This pattern can be seen in Haringey Academy, whereby the most recent improvement in GCSE scores “...*comes in a period when the school was taking a declining share of local FSM students...*”(pp.374). This pattern of “*relative decline in FSM students in Academies does lead to the concern that any „improvements” in GCSE outcomes are attributable to a change in student intake more than innovative approaches to management, governance, teaching and the curriculum’* (Gorard, 2005, pp.375).

These findings lend support to Beckett (2007), who purposed that

some Academies strategically employ the use of exclusions in order to improve annual educational results. Based on Gorard's (2005; 2009) evidence, it can be argued that the alarming pattern of changes in student populations within the majority of Academies negate any evidence of true improvement in achievement, as these results have been attained through exclusions and reductions in intake numbers, rather than raising academic standards. In addition, these findings again do not demonstrate the '*the steady upward progress' and 'real improvements in educational standard*', proposed by the DfES (2004a, para.6, emphasis added), and further supported by government funded research (Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons, 2007; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007; 2008).

Another strategy found to be used by some Academies focuses on the process of changing curriculum structure in order to alter educational performance (Armstrong, Bunting & Larsen, 2009; Gorard, 2009). For example, Armstrong, Bunting and Larsen (2009) suggest that 'some Academies have used vocational courses to secure higher and faster improvements in attainment' (pp.121). This is supported by Gorard's (2009) research which show that Academies are more likely than LEA schools to enter students for alternative qualifications, other than traditional GCSEs. Armstrong, Bunting and Larsen (2009) argue that this strategy is used by some Academies in order to better reflect diverse student pathways and to provide alternative GNVQ courses which are more suitable to some academic abilities. However, '*in some cases this was, initially at least, at the expense of ensuring a broad and balanced curriculum, particularly in relation to core subjects such as English, maths and science*' (Armstrong, Bunting & Larsen, 2009, pp.122). These findings support existing literature such as that by the Anti-Academies Alliance (2010a), Wrigley (in press) and Titcombe (2008), who argue that Academies strategically restrict access to challenging mainstream GCSE subjects and replace these with vocational alternatives such as GNVQs, in order to gain rapid improvements in student educational achievement scores.

The final strategic theme to be addressed relates to Beckett's (2007) argument that Academies are selecting more academically able students from wider affluent catchment areas, in order to improve annual educational achievement scores. This claim has been supported by the NUT (2008) and TES (2005, cited in Beckett, 2006, pp.132). However, given the anti-academy political stance by the NUT and Anti-academies alliance, objectivity does have to be called into question.

Evidence from Armstrong, Bunting and Larsen (2009) suggests that

This 'academic selection' is not the case, as they found that the 'average level of prior achievement of pupils entering Academies was well below the England average in 2007. This would suggest that Academies were not 'cherry-picking' the brightest pupil's' (pp.120). As already discussed, the reliability and validity of Armstrong, Bunting and Larsen's (2009) research findings can be questioned in light of apparent government funding however, this is not to say that this evidence should not be considered. Future research should explore this strategy in greater depth, across all existing Academies; in order assess the extent to which it is used.

Conclusion

On the whole, the findings obtained from this investigation suggest that Academies are generally unsuccessful in reaching government targets of improving educational achievement. In light of this, it can be argued that the Academies programme provides primarily an opportunity for students, rather than any apparent educational gains (Gorard, 2009; Farnsworth, 2006).

Although the aim and research questions of this investigation have been successfully explored and answered, there are limitations in this study which must be addressed as they do impact on the study. Firstly, the principle problem encountered within this study was the lack of research material; particularly that which focuses upon the same aspects explored within this investigation. This is almost certainly due to the fact that Academies are still very much a recent phenomenon within the English education sector and as such, little research exists which examines this type of schooling institute (Beckett, 2009; Chitty, 2008). Another limitation is making comparisons between different cohorts of school populations. Stability or instability in such populations and the assessment system are influencing factors.

This study set out to examine educational achievement within Academies (2002-2010) and the strategies used to attain academic success. Along the way certain factors arose that impacted on the study. For example, although the evidence suggesting that some Academies are failing is convincing (Farnsworth, 2006; Gorard, 2005; 2009), it has to be noted that variables such as school population figures for students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) or Special Educational Needs (SEN), known to affect annual academic performance scores (Wilson, 2000), has yet to be examined within any existing independent Academies research. It is possible that some Academies have larger populations of lower-academic-ability children (Wilson, 2000), which in

turn, could decrease schools' overall educational achievement scores. As this theme does not appear to have been explored, it would be a valuable topic of future research, enabling a more in-depth analysis of Academies success or failure in improving student attainment. This research started with asking a question about Academies and Educational Achievement, a question that is more contentious than originally envisaged.

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