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# Academisation, neoliberal technologies of governance and the rapid growth of multi-academy trusts (MATs) in England

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## ABSTRACT

Academisation of schooling in England is a significant development with consequences for the disavowal of the role of community and democracy in education at the local level and wider resonance for geo-policy jurisdictions where neoliberal education reforms play out. This study analyses the operation of power and control of Multi Academy Trust (MAT) boards and the apparent diminution of local oversight and accountability, the bedrock of an inclusive, democratic polity. The explanatory and conceptual contribution made to understandings of the phenomenon of MATs is seen in the problematising of academisation and MAT formation as a technology for the operation of power, foreclosing democratic community engagement with their local schools. This has implications for the vitality of a democratic polity. Yet, more optimistically, generative possibilities of a renaissance of schools' relations with their communities and reinvigoration of the public realm are envisioned as restorative of local democratic engagement in school governance.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Academy schools; multi-academy trusts; education policy; power; school governance; neoliberalism

The starting point for this paper is an examination of the rapid rise in the academisation of schools in England and the continued government commitment to full academisation of the English school system, accompanied by a drive to group academies together into Multi Academy Trusts (MATs). Arguably, this development represents a substantial shift in the locus of power, which undermines and limits opportunities for community engagement in school governance, thereby raising concerns about the future of local democratic accountability. We further contend that the process of academisation unravels the constitutive connection between education and democracy 'as a mode of associated living' (Dewey, 2009, p. 49) and is corrosive of democratic community. Taken together with the reduction of English local authorities' role in education, through both a deliberate policy direction and large-scale reductions in their funding, these developments indicate the dominance of the discourse of marketisation and business logic in public service and social provision.

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The tradition and practice of community involvement in the governance of schooling have a long history (Ball, 2018; Baxter, 2016) and forms of local governance have been enshrined in legislation and evolved in tandem with efforts to democratise social institutions more widely. Whilst the power and control over schooling has never been completely devolved or surrendered by the state, the legal framework and the presumption of local control have allowed de-centralised and locally based arrangements to develop and offered space for a range of community engagement and democratic participation (Ranson, 2018). The neo-liberal turn since 1979 has created a centralising tendency, with the central government seeking to control all aspects of schooling. Despite this, under the guise of fiscal and operational devolution embraced by Local Management of Schools, there were sufficient social and political spaces for local democratic governance to continue. Arguably, the drive to academisation and creation of MATs represents a decisive turn away from such localised community-centred possibilities (Pennington et al., 2023) and the denial of opportunities to renew and re-invigorate citizens' democratic engagement and participation in the shaping of schooling at a local level. Such a denial contributes to what Pennington et al. (2023 p. 19) highlight as 'democratic decay, centralisation of decision making and control away from communities and neighbourhoods and growing disenchantment with the structures and functions of representational democracy'. Such a decay opens spaces for populist and authoritarian sentiment and political movements, a move which, according to Arendt (1958), threatens plurality and our ability to act and speak together, the essential condition of all political life. As Arendt makes clear, when plurality is under threat, authoritarianism and tyranny, the auguries of totalitarianism, come to the fore.

The process of academisation and MAT formation involves what amounts to the takeover of schools and their associated communities, something that has been characterised as colonisation by 'a market rationality and entrepreneurial logic' (Thomson, 2020, p. 54). The presence and pervasiveness of the interconnected policies and technologies that constitute this market rationality has been well documented (see, for example, Glatter, 2017; Greany & Higham, 2018; Papanastasiou, 2019; Wilkins, 2017a, 2017b; Wilkins & Olmedo, 2019; Wood et al., 2021). This is essentially a process in which private corporations assume the functions of the state and take control of community and public assets such as schools. Whilst acknowledging that it would be wrong to suggest that local authority stewardship of schooling provided a wholly satisfactory local democratic polity, the associated model of school governance provided a space for democratic community participation and citizens' engagement in public life (Ranson, 2018). Its erosion removes an important site in which to renew this engagement and develop new modes of community involvement. Insights and understandings from the work of Hannah Arendt (2017) on the origins, operation and legacy of imperialism are drawn upon to frame and illuminate some of the arguments in the paper. Case-study data are drawn on in support of the substantive argument for the imperative to restore local community engagement in school governance made pressing at a time when arguably the dominant rationalities of MAT governance disavow other modes of being in community and create cultures of hierarchical accountability.

## Academisation of schools in England since 2010

Academies are state-funded but in other respects independent schools without a coherent legal framework, established and overseen by parliament, governing their operation (West & Wolfe, 2019). Instead, each one has an individual contract, or funding agreement, with the Secretary of State for Education. They are therefore not subject to the local democratic stewardship and oversight exercised by elected local authorities, but are under the control of unelected, self-appointed boards of trustees (Wood et al., 2024). This model of the self-managing school as a business in a competitive marketplace has become the basis of a transformation in school organisation and governance in England (Gunter & McGinity, 2014).

Prior to 2010 there were approximately 200 academies in England. Today the school system in England has evolved from a local authority (LA) led-system to one in which nearly half of all schools have been academised and which educates over half of the country's children (Lucas et al., 2023). Since 2015, academies are being subsumed into multi-academy trusts which are part of a government-sanctioned model for the organisation of English state schooling. This process brings groups of schools under the governance of MAT Boards, corporate entities constituted as limited companies with charitable status. A MAT is thus made up of a number of individual academies which forgo their legal status as individual schools and cede power to the central board of trustees of the MAT. Individual academies within a MAT may (but are not required to) have a governing body. Where such a governing body exists, it has no formal powers and any responsibilities it holds are delegated by the MAT in a scheme of delegation that may be amended or dispensed with at any time. The current government policy direction, set out in the 2022 Schools White Paper, is for all schools to be in a strong MAT with at least 10 schools or 7500 pupils by 2030 (Department for Education DfE, 2022), although what constitutes a 'strong MAT' remains elusive and difficult to define. Furthermore, there remains a lack of evidence for the quality and effectiveness of larger MATs (Lucas et al., 2023), resulting in a system lacking strategic direction, coherence at a local level or connection to local priorities. There is no apparent geographical, strategic or local community logic in the way schools are incorporated into MATs, or the kind of school provided in a particular area. As Ball (2018), p. 209) observes, the kind of schooling available depends only on where you live, not on any assessment of needs or community priorities. The sector is therefore characterised by many individual academies and MATs, each with its own contractual relationship with the state, creating a situation in which schools in the same area can be governed by different rules and rendering democratic engagement in the process of oversight difficult, if not impossible. This turn is not solely an English phenomenon. Writers such as Sahlberg (2012) and Rizvi and Lingard (2010) show processes of marketisation and business logics affecting the organisation and governance of education in jurisdictions across the globe.

Arendt (1958, p. 244) highlights the limitations of the proliferation of contracts as the mechanism by which public institutions are governed and relationships are managed, and suggests that they only partially mitigate 'the unpredictability of human affairs and the unreliability of men (sic) as they are'. What is required to protect plurality, 'the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all', is a sovereignty achieved through an agreed purpose that binds a group of

people together. Contract as a basis for governing a body politic without the accompanying sovereignty of common and agreed purpose works against a democratic polity and enshrines an approach to governance characterised by ‘a bureaucracy as a substitute for government, and of its inherent replacement of law with temporary and changing decrees’ (Arendt, 2017, p. 241). A danger here, she argues, is the emergence of the strong man or woman who uses the absence of such sovereignty to exercise control over the organisation through force of personality and individual whim and preference, even if underpinned by benevolent intentions. Arguably, the model of hierarchical and individually driven leadership often cited as essential for MATs (Wood et al., 2018) is a manifestation of this approach. In the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, discussing the case of Lord Cromer as British Counsel General in Egypt in the nineteenth century, Arendt (2017) analysed the shift from colonialism, in which the motives colonisers attributed to themselves were concerned with ‘self-sacrifice’ and a ‘sense of duty’ towards ‘backward’ populations, to imperialism, which was driven by expansion of the empire as an end in itself. Those overseeing and managing this form of governance of necessity become bureaucrats who, in Arendt’s terms, ‘shun every general law, handling each situation separately by decree because a law’s stability threatens to establish a permanent community in which no one could possibly be a god because all would have to obey a law’ (Arendt, 2017, p. 282). MATs operate in an environment governed by individual contracts (or funding agreements) without an overall legal framework and become increasingly preoccupied with the business of expansion and growth, often in pursuit of financial sustainability and organisational stability, with educational aims or community benefit a second-order consideration. Arguably they exhibit an analogous process and the growth of this model of strong leadership resembles that of the imperial project exemplified in Arendt’s view of imperial leaders such as Lord Cromer. This model of leadership and the contractual framework of state relationships with MATs can be considered inimical to the creation of the kind of inclusive community suggested by Arendt. It forecloses the opportunities for democratic engagement of citizens and communities in governance and instead privileges atomised, market-led, corporatised and bureaucratic control of schools.

Greany and Higham (2018, p. 15) argue that this process is located within business and corporate logics and is analogous to the process of ‘acquisition and merger’, as MATs jostle for position and seek to grow through acquiring more schools by the use of strategies of business growth seen in the commercial world. This process can be viewed through a neo-colonial lens and is driven by a logic of expansion. According to Arendt (2017, p. 281), this underpinned the growth of British imperialism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as it transformed from existing colonial relationships based on securing economic advantage to a national mission in which ‘expansion was everything’ and colonies were not ‘desirable ends in themselves but merely as means for some supposedly higher purpose’ (p. 277). Arguably, an analogous process of expansion is evident in the formation and growth of MATs, as MATs determine the knowledge, values, modes of organisation and staffing to be deployed by constituent schools. In the case study on which this paper draws, we see examples wherein new staff are recruited (in a process characterised by one of the participants in the case study as bringing in a ‘new regime’), policies on curriculum, behaviour and organisation are modified and changed in line with the MAT’s view of both what is required and what is best, and resources

transferred to the central MAT. The idea of ‘mission’ is often deployed by participants in the case study in which schools and communities can be portrayed as a problematic ‘other’ in terms of lacking the necessary knowledge, competencies and values to address difficulties themselves and in need of intervention from the MAT. Whilst acknowledging that all MATs are different, on the basis of the case-study data this can be conceptualised as belief in a mission or moral purpose to remedy such shortcomings and bring about improvement.

## The study

This study explores how MATs and their relationships with communities are understood and shaped, particularly by individuals in positions of leadership, power and influence in the organisation. The aim of the research was to understand the perceptions of those charged with leading and governing three case-study MATs, seeking to identify and critically examine the implications of academy status and the creation of MATs for school governance, relations and engagement with communities, as well as the accountability of schools in England. This paper draws on insights and ideas from work on neo-colonialism and ‘domestic colonialism’ (Crossley, 2017) and applies Arendt’s thinking about the processes and conditions that give rise to totalitarianism and a critical examination of relational forms of accountability. The application of these conceptual and theoretical tools illuminates the critique of a model of hierarchical, high-stakes, high-pressure accountability which, it is argued, is associated with the MAT-dominated model of school organisation.

Three MATs participated in the research and these were given the pseudonyms ‘Iris’, ‘Heath’ and ‘Orchid’. All participants, their affiliations and organisations were given anonymity by the use of pseudonyms. The research was not concerned with the personal beliefs of the participants but with the wider discourses that structure and validate what is reasonable and accepted in a sector that has come to be dominated by the ‘market rationality and entrepreneurial logic’ identified by Thomson (2020, p. 54). The research was granted ethical approval through one of the authors’ university research ethics committee processes.

The selection of cases was purposive and driven by opportunistic and convenience considerations. Existing personal contacts and connections with those working in MATs were drawn on initially as potential participants. Three MATs agreed to take part in the research and these became the sites of this case-study research. Pragmatically, three sites was a practical number in terms of the time and resource available. Whilst not claiming to be representative of all MATs, each being differently situated, it can be argued that they all face many similar pressures and concerns and so the data may have wider explanatory power beyond these three specific settings.

Two methods of data collection were used: documentary analysis of the formal published minutes of the case-study MAT board meetings and interviews with personnel from each case-study MAT. The interviewees included the chief executives from each case-study MAT; three headteachers of some schools (two in Heath and one in Iris) within these MATs; and the three chairs of the MAT boards (11 in total).

In terms of the selection of minutes as a documentary data source, Scott’s typology (as set out by Jupp et al., 2006, p. 277) provided criteria to assess suitability for the study



purposes. The selected minutes were analysed using a framework from Wellington (2000), p. 117) focusing on questions of authorship, audience, production, presentation, intentions, style, content and context. Three levels of analysis were employed: overall sense-making of each selected document; a systematic and enumerative approach; and textual analysis involving the interpretation of meanings. A schedule of themes was derived from this documentary analysis process and these indicated issues and pointers to explore in the subsequent interviews.

The interview format was semi-structured to balance scope for spontaneity with the specific research focus. They were conducted in person, with the exception of one telephone interview, and in the main they took place on school premises. The interviews were recorded (with permissions) and subsequently transcribed. The analytical work of interpreting and making meaning from the interview transcript data gathered was located within an abductive approach, which involves a continuous circular interaction among data, literature and written analysis and interpretation which resembles the abductive approach set out by Brinkman (2017), p. 113). This approach was concerned with the process of immersion in the data through continual reading, reflecting, separating and recombining data and relating data to ideas and insights from the literature. This continuous iterative process of analysis was careful to ensure procedures for conclusion drawing and to have due regard for the context in which the data were generated.

## Findings

### ***MATs: vision, moral purpose and improving mission***

Analysis and interpretation of interview responses yielded a strong theme of ‘vision’ and ‘moral purpose’ within the governance of the case-study MATs. This theme is rooted in the participants’ belief in an ‘improving mission’ in which MAT relations with schools are framed as a partnership with mutuality and obligations on both sides and in which the power imbalances between schools and the MAT board are minimised through the strength of personal relationships and the support provided by the MAT to schools and their communities.

Seen through our analytical framing, arguably the language of moral purpose and vision is reflected in the portrayal of the MAT and its relations with schools and their communities. The CEO of one of the case-study MATs employs the language of moral purpose and vision in talking about the MAT and its relations with schools and their communities. The CEO was asked about how this vision came about and described a coming together of the management and those involved in governance of the constituent schools, but in terms that suggest an imposition of a predetermined MAT vision, as in this extract:

But I think one of the fundamental things that the trust has tried to do, on the trust board, is to get across the vision and the values. So, we had a big launch event, which then brought in all the governance of the trust together, and key staff in those three schools, of which clearly within the room, there were parents that are active members of those local advisory committees, and we shared what we, as a trust, wanted the Orchid Trust, what was its mission statement. (CEO, Orchid Trust)



The Orchid Trust here is identified as an organisation with a centrally determined mission statement and a predetermined vision, values and mission ‘to get across’. As Courtney and Gunter (2015), p. 401) suggest, ‘visions are the property of leaders, who should enact them relentlessly and are authorised to have them enacted by their objects, who are all the other actors in and within the sphere of schools’. What is described here does not appear to be a collaborative process of organisational development in which the constituent schools have the role of equal partners in the genesis and development of the new Trust. This is in keeping with what several writers have consistently maintained, which is that MATs are not partnerships (e.g. Greany & Higham, 2018, p. 85), since a MAT is a single legal entity with no formal status for individual constituent schools which are incorporated into the MAT upon its formation. A process appears to be at work here of absorption of the periphery into the centre in which there is a loss of individual identity and rights, as well as the imposition of the purposes, practices, ideas and beliefs of the centre.

### **Creating the ‘other’**

For two of the case-study MATs, because of the number and variety of constituent schools, participants tended to focus on the socio-economic and class make-up when discussing the communities served by the different schools. There are suggestions in these responses that different kinds of engagement and interaction with the schools were explained by reference to issues of the class composition of the community served by the school. Crossley (2017) suggests that this process might be termed ‘othering’ and was both a characteristic of the imperial project and also what he terms ‘domestic colonialism’ (p.17) amongst social commentators and reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it is also present in some of the social policy responses to poverty and disadvantaged communities in contemporary Britain. The following interview extract is perhaps suggestive of an approach that implies a differential response to schools rooted in perceptions of the communities served:

Teasel is a little bit more middle class ish but it’s still in <town> which is a very nice but ordinary <sub-region> town. Then you have got three schools; Foxglove and Arnica and Self-Heal and a totally different clientele. Arnica, quite a lot, we only took Arnica on last year, near <town>, totally different group of children, parents, a lot of issues that we haven’t encountered in many of the other schools. And it’s not winning parents over but making sure that parents understand what this school stands for and how we want to move it forward and taking the children with it. And that takes longer there because of the sort of families that you are actually dealing with. (Chair, Iris Trust)

Whilst this is a description of the community served by a school in more challenging circumstances that the MAT has taken on and the approach it takes to serving that community, the chair suggests that the approach to a community which is not ‘middle class ish’ is different in communities who have a ‘totally different clientele’. Here, the chair suggests the MAT is less concerned with an approach that wins the trust and cooperation of the community and more about imposing a particular approach to schooling: The chair’s view that ‘making sure that parents understand what this school stands for and how we want to move it forward’ appears directive, arguably conveying a will to impose the MAT’s approach. This would appear to focus less on finding ways to

recognise and build on the strengths of the community and working alongside them to address difficulties that a partnership approach might imply. This, the chair suggests, requires a more directive approach from the MAT in working with the community 'because of the sort of families that you are actually dealing with', which perhaps implies a class-based value judgement of the capabilities and attitudes found in the school community.

Another approach to dealing with questions of class can be constructed from the interview with one of the CEOs in the study.

Now I said before, you know, Marjoram School and Primrose School, if the middle classes get into a tiff with you they will put in a formal complaint, you know, and go for Freedom of Information requests to prove some kind of legal case. Whereas here [Bilberry School] they will storm in but if you can take time with them you can calm them down and they walk out the door and then forget it, that's it, it's finished. (CEO of the Heath Trust)

The CEO makes the point that communities with a high proportion of middle-class and professional parents interact with the school in a rational, rules-based manner using the correct procedures and official channels, thus demonstrating knowledge of and familiarity with the language and discourse of public-sector and professional bureaucracy in which the school is located. Working-class communities in the catchment of the school are described as volatile, with parents exhibiting loud and aggressive behaviour. This suggests there may be class-based value judgements about the working-class communities informing the responses the MAT makes. This 'tough but necessary' approach can be located in the discourse of mission: things have improved since the MAT takeover of the school which has brought order and improvement. The intervention 'calms them down' and creates 'calm', perhaps even the subduing of an unruly other.

### ***MATs and their 'approved' knowledge***

Claims of what could be termed 'approved' knowledge on behalf of the MAT are evident when the Chair of Iris Trust talks about a group of MAT personnel dealing with schools that the MAT board is concerned about:

We have what we call wrap round meetings. And at those they have the CEO, they have the school improvement partner, they have three Trustees, they have the Chair of governors, they have another governor, and they have the Head and maybe the Deputy if necessary. And they talk around how we can move this school forward. . . . So everything is done from an Ofsted perspective. (Chair, Iris Trust)

What seems to be suggested here is an inspectorial gaze and application or imposition of external knowledge which will address the schools' difficulties. The chair stresses this when adding, 'So sometimes like the due diligence that we have had where people go in and they do what they think is right', confirming the chair's view that the imposition of knowledge and expertise from outside the school is the way problems will be resolved. The chair seems convinced that this approach by the MAT with its concentration on the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) judgements and test results is the right one because 'having people coming in

and judging you, in the nicest possible way, but being very thorough and, you know, you have got outcomes from it, so this is what you need to improve, it works a treat.’

An interpretation here is that the MAT has a system of benevolent intervention and imposition (‘in the nicest possible way’) backed up with hard power (‘being very thorough’). This is contrasted with the chair’s experience of the approach taken by local authorities to school support and intervention.

You don’t want to be reactive which is what Local Authorities always were unless you were very, very lucky but in the ones I have worked in [names removed] they left you alone and then if something goes wrong and then whoosh, that’s no good. So sometimes like the due diligence that we have had where people go in and they do what they think is right, the HMI come and search through everything. (Chair, Iris Trust)

Local authorities had an approach to their schools which the chair characterises as non-interventionist (‘they left you alone’, ‘that’s no good’). The reference to His Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI) would seem to reinforce the imposed approved knowledge and imported experts at work: a former HMI is working with the MAT on its ‘due diligence’ process of interrogation of schools and imposition of external solutions. ‘The HMI come and search through everything’ is perhaps suggestive more of a centralised and directive approach than a process of community engagement in school improvement.

The establishment and growth of the Iris Trust begins with an inclusive vision of a partnership of schools which is gradually changed by the neoliberal requirements of the academy world and the business logics and financial pressures imposed by the DfE and other actors in the sector. This leads ineluctably to a single approved mode of organisation. The Iris Trust CEO explained that at its inception, inclusivity underpinned the governance of the MAT. However, as the Trust developed, its original ideals of a collaborative, mutually supporting partnership came up against the rigid, hierarchical business logics and corporatism of the DfE and its agents and agencies, as explained in the following:

Now when we were asked to support or invited to sponsor Arnica School, the Regional Schools Commissioner said there needs to be clear separation between the local governing boards and the Trust board. And therefore we, at the time, were realising that maybe this structure that we put in place of all inclusivity of everybody, one member from each school, was not going to work and it was certainly not going to work if we were going to get bigger because of how many people we were going to have. And we realised that we needed more specialists on the board.

The logic underpinning the DfE’s approach to MAT development privileges and promotes governance arrangements which favour specialist business skills and knowledge characteristic of the corporate world above more democratic and locally based structures.

### ***The power of higher authority and approved knowledge***

Greany and Higham (2018) argue that the Self Improving School-Led System (SISS) is promoted by government as a core element by which schools in the new dispensation of academisation function as a mutually supporting system, but that it is better understood as a narrative embracing a range of policy positions and initiatives. These policy positions are not necessarily consistent or coherent, but typically promote markets, choice,

competition and business orientation. They are characterised by hierarchical control and the centralising of power through the imposition of targets, emphasis on Ofsted inspection judgements and test results, and high-stakes accountability processes (Greany & Higham, 2018, p. 25). An important element of these policy positions and reforms seeking to make a reality of the SISS is the role of National Leader of Education. According to Greany and Higham, this is a central if largely undefined component of the government's construct of the Self-Improving School System intended to create a cadre of headteachers who will take on a leadership role across a group of schools in place of the cohesion and mediation provided by the local authority (Courtney & McGinity, 2020, p. 3).

The CEO of the Iris Trust suggests that this position as a National Leader of Education (NLE), and the recognition of the sanctioned knowledge it confers, was helpful to develop relationships with other schools with the intention of bringing those schools into the Iris Trust's sphere of influence. This then becomes an explicit condition: that the support leads to considerations of becoming part of the MAT that the CEO is seeking to establish.

So they asked, the governors at Teasel School came to see me supported by the Local Authority to ask that if we would consider doing an NLE contract for Teasel School which is just a mile down the road. . . . we agreed but we said we would do this contract but we wanted them to consider, at some point in the year, becoming a member of a MAT. (CEO of the Iris Trust)

The position as an NLE has enabled influential relationships with local schools to develop. What NLE designation and system-leader status appears to give is a credible claim to superior knowledge and a voice of authority to prescribe a future direction for supported schools that brings them in the MAT.

The ensemble of policy and performative technologies encompassed by the self-improving system with its techniques and tools of data collection and its use in the business of target setting and monitoring are manifested in the governance of MATs in high-pressure, high-stakes monitoring and accountability systems and the processes of inspection by which they are enforced.

In the Iris Trust CEO's account, the business and corporate logics soon come head to head with the more collaborative partnership aspirations of the nascent Iris Trust. The cost pressures and income-generating imperatives of NLE and support school work quickly lead to consideration of annexation and financial integration of partner schools by taking them into the MAT.

Doing the NLE contracts is all very well but as soon as you start one NLE contract you are looking for the next and that is because in your home school you are taking on additional staff to backfill. And that was . . . we were starting to think potentially about becoming a sponsor for, and taking on schools, rather than just doing the NLE support for them. (CEO of the Iris Trust)

The deployment of this knowledge bestows authority and position in the MAT sector marketplace and this supports the Trust in pursuing its expansion by bringing other schools into the MAT. Arguably, this brings reward to those with higher authority. As Courtney and McGinity (2020), p. 3) put it, 'system leaders accepting that label are de facto policy ambassadors, and may be rewarded through empire enlargement'.

The deployment of approved knowledge and expertise as external solutions on schools with difficulties, problems and inadequacies that the MAT has exposed and the obligation to act is also suggested by the Chair of the Orchid Trust:

We've highlighted that we've got some real concerns in one of our primary schools. That obviously I feel that by becoming a MAT that has opened that up, whereas before it wasn't . . . but actually the CEO coming in, externals coming in has made such a difference because it's unravelled a lot of things in there . . . I feel we're already thinking, oh my God, we are the Orchid Trust we've got to do something about this, this is one of our schools, these are feeding children through, we've got a real responsibility to these. (Chair, Orchid Trust)

Here the power of the MAT and its knowledge combines with benevolent intentions and moral responsibility to assert control and direction over its schools.

The interpretation of the interview data offered here is that something akin to an 'improving mission' can be seen by the case-study MATs in developing relationships with schools, and the communities within which they operate. If taken together with the power that is vested in MATs and the individuals who constitute them to control and direct schools in pursuit of a vision and mission determined centrally by the MAT, this provides an indication that aspirations of partnership and mutuality are tempered and constrained by the technologies of governance that MATs are directed towards. This is not about the individual personalities or motivations of individuals working in MATs, who work hard and are dedicated to improving the lives of the children, families and communities they work with. Rather, it is about the discourses within which they work which shape and constrain the structures and operational possibilities. But alternative narratives are possible, and the history of colonial relations shows the importance of individual actors working in wider systems in initiating change. Actions of individual leaders in schools to create a narrative of caring more about people and away from caring about performance (Stern, 2018, p. 17) is the basis of a more relational accountability (Moncrieffe, 2011). The creation of such narratives involves identifying and using gaps in the official discourse, which allow for: 'ambivalence, ambiguity and compromise. It is necessarily both confusing and creative. Headteachers read between the lines of reforms to play, reappropriate, mask and reinvent; to interpret and translate policy reforms in the context of a particular school' (Fuller, 2019, p. 44).

For example, one headteacher in a case-study MAT spoke about co-constructing knowledge through engagement with the student community in school as an alternative to it being externally imposed:

Essentially the feedback that comes back from students informs CPD, so it informs staff development and informs how staff then deliver lessons and that can be on a really wide range. . . . where do we need to build more in and how do we improve the scheme of learning through having listened to young people. (Headteacher, Heath Trust)

What the headteacher suggests here is an epistemological process of engagement with the student community which produces knowledge that is both powerful and influential because it prompts change in teaching. It fosters accountability as a reciprocal relation with the communities involved in and served by the school and is characterised by dialogue, humility and focus on the future.

## Discussion: multi-academy trusts and diminution of the conditions of plurality

We have argued that the process of academisation and MAT formation denies opportunity for democratic community engagement and thus threatens plurality. Such a decline in opportunities for political participation is something Arendt felt contributed to a crisis in democracy (Stonebridge, 2024) and which she (Arendt 2017) argued is one of the conditions for the development of totalitarianism. The political, social and cultural processes driving colonialism and imperialism also underpin totalitarianism and these elements are present in modern political systems which embrace neoliberalism (Stonebridge, 2024). Academisation is clearly not on a par with the brutal operation of imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but through the analytic process, the forces at work in the academisation process have been identified as, in some respects, analogous to those underpinning imperialism. In this study, the analysis suggested the academisation process was conceptualised in terms of acquiring schools to be part of a bigger grouping, with one effect being the relinquishing of aspects of control of school resources to the MAT in support of MAT growth and sustainability. It is to these neoliberal influences and the broad themes derived that our attention now turns.

Whilst this is a small-scale study and it would not be appropriate to generalise widely from it, it does have some explanatory power. The data from research participants suggests that the case-study MATs and their schools are recast as corporate business organisations operating in a marketplace which requires the adoption of behaviours and processes associated with the corporate world: close attention is paid to those perceived as competitors in the sector; performance is closely monitored and managed against externally derived metrics on finance and student outcomes; risk management and organisational reputation become powerful influences on planning and action; and the language of business, finance and audit supplants educational discussion. The imposition of external control and neoliberal technologies of governance in pursuit of improvement and betterment of their schools becomes central. The impact of this shift in focus is pervasive and long-lasting and is shown in three interrelated domains (Shahjahan, 2011, p. 182). Firstly, neoliberal discourse gives impetus to more bureaucratic and authoritarian modes of governance, with the attendant dangers to pluralism and creation of the conditions for totalitarianism highlighted by Arendt (2017). As Stonebridge asserts (2024, p. 112), it is not only the obvious and extreme manifestations of totalitarianism (terror, constant surveillance, fear) that require vigilance: it is the lack of thought and the thoughtlessness of those who do not feel the need or inclination to examine dominant morals and values which Arendt (1977, p. 406) argues pose the greatest threat to our defences against totalitarianism.

Secondly, there is the issue of an improving 'mission'. MATs are deemed to exhibit superior knowledge, technology and moral values which are applied to improving both the educational outcomes and the wider social well-being of the communities they serve. Such a discourse and its assumptions are widespread in official government documents, for example the government white papers setting out important developments in the academies policy, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010) and *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (Department for Education DfE, 2016), that are replete with assertions about the role of academies in improving educational outcomes for children and young people.



The creation of others ‘who must be dominated’ within the discourse of colonialism (Said, 1978, p. 36) also finds its echo in these assertions. Said (1994), p. 286) also notes that integral to the idea of colonialism ‘is that it was (or claimed to be) an educational movement; it set out quite consciously to modernise, develop, instruct and civilise’. The idea of an improving mission also privileges a positivist epistemological paradigm with a focus on objective and quantifiable knowledge to the exclusion of other ways of knowing (Shahjahan, 2011). This exclusion is a feature of the discourse in official policy on English education, for example through the Government’s emphasis on test and examination results, the use of data-driven methodologies and approaches and the measurement of performance in schools (Biesta, 2010, p. 11).

Thirdly, there are hierarchical ways of operating which privilege particular and approved knowledges, and which seek to narrow the field of what is acceptable and permissible in the content and organisation of schooling (Shahjahan, 2011, p. 189). As such they also act to diminish and decay the ‘human condition of plurality’ (Arendt, 1958, p. 7) which Arendt identifies as so central to the existence of public realm (p. 220), in the way in which policy discourse promotes and enforces academy status as a part of a MAT as the only valid and acceptable mode of operation and governance for a school.

Our analysis suggests that the translation of these values into action at a local level might be at work within the academy sector of schooling through the adoption of business logics, the hegemony of market-based practices, and the monitoring, accountability and testing culture of performativity affecting children, young people and staff in schools. Arguably there is a cruel paradox here, in that the project of academisation and formation of MATs is premised on autonomy and authority delegated to schools and the professionals who run them, but the effect of the neoliberal discourse has been a reduction of delegated power within educational institutions, the growth of hierarchical forms of power relations, overbearing systems of performance monitoring and management and a diminution of the place of schools in the public realm.

This study suggests that the formation and growth of MATs and the models of governance MATs employed is associated with denial of democracy, ‘othering’ of communities, imposition of values and suppression of agency. Technologies of governmentality founded on high-stakes accountability and inspection, have contributed to increasing levels of pressure and stress on teachers and children. When a school becomes part of a MAT, not only does it cease to have any legal status as a separate institution, but the school community is denied agency and influence over the school and its operation. Our analysis suggests school and community relations are now becoming hierarchical and tend towards controlling. Community engagement by the MAT boards in this study is under-developed or lacking and community voices, perspectives and values appear to have little influence on governance processes and decisions. Where they exist in MATs, individual academy-level governing bodies are closer to community concerns, but their scope for action and influence has been emasculated: any power they do have is delegated at the absolute discretion of the MAT Board. Lastly, democratic participation in education is discouraged and problematised, both at the level of national and local policy and its ideological roots, as well as through the structures and practices that the DfE and its agencies direct and cajole MATs to adopt.

Viewed historically, in the context of the development of compulsory schooling for all in England, our conclusions are perhaps not unusual or unexpected. As Lowe (2002)



argues, the beginning of free compulsory schooling for all at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was marked by a strong expectation that schools would assume responsibilities for the health and welfare of children, as well as their education. This was driven as much by the economic imperative of ensuring a workforce with the necessary aptitude, intellectual development and physical ability for the factory-based model of capitalism as by any moral or ethical concern for individual and family wellbeing. The involvement of schools in responding to real and emergent needs in their communities may therefore be seen against this historical background. We have also argued that the processes underpinning academisation and the growth of MATs are inimical to plurality, what Arendt identifies as the essential condition of speaking and acting together. Indeed, an Arendtian analysis highlights how the processes of MAT growth and governance facilitate the increase of bureaucracy as a form of governance and the reduction of citizens' opportunities for political participation. Herein lies a threat to plurality which weakens our collective defences against totalitarianism.

The consequences of the interplay of these discourses in the organisation and governance of schooling today can be seen in the way in which MATs pursue their expansion and growth through the takeover of schools and the imposition and enforcement of technologies of governmentality marked by the dominance of market rationalities and hierarchical and high-stakes forms of accountability. Enforcement is both direct, through external inspection, and indirect via an internal inspectorial gaze of self-surveillance in which school leaders assume responsibility for the constraints of power and their own subjection (Foucault, 1977, p. 202).

## Concluding remarks

Drawing on the qualitative data from the case study, we have argued for a renaissance of schools' relations with their communities and an affirmation of the importance of these relations for fostering democracy as part of a reinvigoration of the public realm. The analysis also suggests the possibilities of an alternative to the neo-liberal discourse. As Foucault reminds us (Foucault, 1984, p. 245), 'possibilities of resistance' are always there. Shahjahan (2011, p. 183) points out that such a discourse is not one way: there is both the potential and actuality of resistance. Alongside the pervasive influence and impact of neoliberal business logics and the threats to plurality constructed in the analysis and interpretation of the interview data, there is a sense from some of the case-study participants of a commitment and orientation to more liberatory and emancipatory modes of working, conceptualising schooling as a means of encouraging and supporting children, young people and families, as well as developing more relational forms of accountability with communities. In order to develop an alternative vision for school governance and community relations, it is important to reflect on the damage caused by instrumental and marketised schooling approaches, as well as encourage a public debate on the purposes of education and its role in fostering democratic engagement and supporting pluralism by engaging local communities. The explanatory and conceptual contribution of this work to understandings of the phenomenon of MATs is seen in the problematising of academisation and MAT formation as a technology which forecloses democratic community engagement with schools at the local level. This has implications for the vitality of a democratic polity. Yet, more optimistically, the generative possibilities

of a renaissance of schools' relations with their communities and reinvigoration of the public realm are envisioned as a route to democratic engagement in the governance of schools.

Lastly, we acknowledge some potential limitations of this study. For example, due to the nature of qualitative research, generalisability needs to be made cautiously with acknowledgement of the ways in which the researchers, the research design, the relatively small sample size (three MATs in England) and the context shaped the findings. In addition, to safeguard the future of public education in England, we believe that more research is needed to investigate other key stakeholders' perspectives and experiences of the current governance of MATs. These stakeholders should include policy makers, teachers, parents, children and young people, as well as local communities served by MATs.

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