

Playing Fields and Political Football: The Case of Forced Academisation

by *Anonymous*



The recent ‘**budget**’ **announcement** that all schools in England should become academies by 2022 has sparked a flurry of public concern. Academies have been called “**unpopular**”, are said to **lack evidence of success** and **fall short in accountability**. **Multi-Academy Trusts** (MATs) have been accused of steering and disproportionately benefiting from the **privatization of education**. For me (and many other sociologists and educational researchers) the recent announcement to roll out the academies programme was neither unexpected, nor did it feel ‘new’. **Here** Goldsmith’s Christy Kulz pre-warned of its accelerated nature back in 2014. More importantly, our research shows how the academy reforms have already been experienced at force and for a good number of years by some of the most disadvantaged communities in England. My home town is one of these, here’s our story.

As a kid I loved sports days at school. We’d gather in pairs and be escorted across the road to the school playing field. The sun was shining and grass freshly cut. My friends’ houses surrounded the field so if parents were at home they’d come out to cheer us on in our races. Then one year this changed. Half of the field was fenced off and dug up, and sports day moved back to the tarmacked playground we encountered every day. This I came to realise was my first experience of ‘privatisation through the back door’. Named as an ‘unpopular estate’ by council authorities and developers, the houses where my friends’ parents had once stood had now been handed over to a housing association as part of a **Large Scale Voluntary Transfer scheme**. They were demolished, and part of the playing field was used for housing renewal that followed. Little did I know, this and similar kinds of land transfer from local authority to ‘independent’ body would not only be a continuous feature of ‘renewal’ in the town, but would (quite literally) form the foundation for Academy conversion of a local school.

Placed in ‘special measures’ in 2002 and in an area of ‘disadvantage’, ‘Town Academy’ as I shall call it, was considered as prime for conversion under the **New Labour academies** initiative. It was in 2004 that the now academy sponsor expressed an initial interest in the takeover; at the same time the government ‘**Pathfinder**’ **scheme** had earmarked a central area of the town for demolition/renewal. Sponsorship came in the form of an educational charitable foundation, set up by a billionaire business man, turned philanthropist. Similar to the **Harris Federation Multi Academy Trust** (MAT), the sponsor proposed that the academy be built in the name, image and spirit of the founding business man. As part of the deal, the newly converted academy was also gifted with a £49 million building (£47 million costed to government and £2million to the sponsor), to be built on land cleared through ‘opportunity purchases’ and ‘housing relocation packages’ This

made it the most expensive academy opened at the time. Interestingly, and often left out of this narrative, or rather, downplayed and denied, it just so happens the 'sponsor' was also a top ten donor to the New Labour government; just like Harris and the Tories, the same outcome is evident. The company where he earned his billions was also part of the consulting body for the Pathfinder scheme.

If this wasn't bad enough, a large proportion of local people living in the houses marked for demolition on the proposed site of the academy didn't agree their homes were 'not fit for purpose'. Residents were served with **Compulsory Purchase Orders** (CPO) and a legal battle ensued. So, within the £49 million cost to the building itself, local government had to find around £50,000 for legal fees. This whole CPO process is now cited as an example of 'bad practice'. Not alone in their experience, a number of CPO schemes at the time are now given as examples of 'how not to do CPOs'.

What of the academy since it opened its doors? There has been an increase in the number of students achieving 5 A*– C GCSEs including Maths and English; from 23% in 2009 to a peak of 64% in 2013. However, in 2014, a change to how the league table results were calculated, so that the tables reflected a student's first exam rather than their best result over a number of attempts saw a drop in the number of students achieving the coveted 5 A*– C grades from 64% to 33%.

Since then, the academy sponsor has gone from overseeing one academy in the town taking over a primary school and the only other pre-existing high school. In a non-democratic ballot framed as a 'consultation', 88% of parents, staff and local councilors said 'NO' to academy conversion of this second school, and a further 'NO' to the Town Academy sponsors taking over. It made no difference. The sponsors now run both schools. The ONLY two mainstream high schools. Again by the government's own standards, where's the 'parental choice'?

As with the playing field all those years ago, the decision making process has been fenced off from the local community. The current landscape of academy conversion and MAT takeover has become a game of ideological political football being played out by the Department for Education and venture philanthropists. Communities like mine have known for far too long what it's like to face the cold hard face of this kind of back-handed, 'legitimised corruption', wielding ignorance and incompetence.

Cementing the final part of this story firmly in place I return to my old primary school playing field. Partially a foundation for renewed homes the remainder of the field has now re-opened for sports days, except now, and for the next 125 years, the field is leased to the same undemocratic, unaccountable MAT monopolising secondary education in the town.

It's time to tear down fences and take back what's ours.

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