

Imitation is not always flattery! The consequences of academy schools in England for further education policy

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Abstract

This article explores the consequences of the introduction of academy schools in England for Further Education. It is argued that the uncertainty of the remit of academy schools has indirect consequences for Further Education and that the employability agenda of the sector is challenged by academy schools. This appears to be happening because of years of government neglect of the Further Education sector in England. The research participants in the article are critical of the employability skills of young people in general and there is criticism of Further Education as the sector is regarded as not having developed employability skills in young people effectively. The research is based on a funded evaluation of an employability programme introduced into two academy schools in the north-east of England. The article applies the work of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard by arguing that the academy schools are simulating the Further Education agenda. In simulation, a model of reality precedes what is real. The uncertainty surrounding the exact purpose of the academy schools appears to enable them to adopt agendas that have been traditionally associated with other sectors of education. This original argument forms the basis of the new knowledge in the article.

Keywords: further education; academy schools; philosophy of education; qualitative research; research evaluation

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Introduction

Hayes (2007) refers to English Further Education as ‘the Cinderella sector’. The argument runs that whereas school and university education in England have been well looked after, Further Education is like Cinderella, a ‘poor relation’ (Tummons and Ingleby 2014, 59). The implication is that Further Education in England is in need of a ‘fairy godmother’. This article exposes the vulnerability of the Further Education sector in England. A fascinating consequence of the uncertainty within the Further Education sector with regards to teaching, learning, management and administration (Burton, Lloyd and Griffiths 2012) has resulted in other ‘suitors’ vying to take ‘maidens’ to ‘the ball’ (Tummons and Ingleby 2014, 59). We argue that there are other educational institutions in England who are keen to embrace practices that are traditionally associated with Further Education. The content of the article is based on a funded evaluative research project on two academy schools in the north-east of England. Selwyn (2011, cited in Ingleby 2015a) draws attention to some of the ambitious educational policies of the Coalition and Conservative governments in England from 2010. These policies have included reforming the examination system and increasing the number of academy schools (Ingleby 2015a). The academy schools are grounded in what Selwyn (2011, 365, cited in Ingleby 2015a) refers to as ‘an ambition of absence’. As opposed to championing the merits of aligning schools to local authority control, the academy schools are based on encouraging self-regulation (Machin and Veroit 2011). The research that is reported here reveals that the two academy schools are very keen to engage in agendas that have been typically associated with Further Education in England. The schools are particularly keen to develop vocational skills within their students. The two schools have adopted an employability programme that has been devised by their local authority in conjunction with local employers. The schools appear to have taken advantage of the ‘contestation’ that currently exists within the Further Education sector in England (Creasy

2013) and placed themselves as key players in realising an educational employability agenda. Although school adoption of employability agendas is not something new, the academy schools appear to be interested in taking over what is traditionally regarded as a key preserve of the Further Education sector in England (Hayes 2007). Their agenda appears to imitate the Further Education context. In the article, we argue that this experience of imitation is not flattery. The academy schools do not wish to do what the Further Education sector does because of sentiments of admiration. We argue that this fascinating situation is happening because of the fluidity of understanding of the purpose of the two academy schools. There is a palpable sense that almost anything is possible. In explaining this educational context, we apply the work of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard 1983; 1993; Gane 2000; Lane 2000). Baudrillard's (1983; 1993) concept of 'simulacra' is explored to argue that the two academy schools are able to invent and develop educational agendas due to the lack of certainty surrounding their remit (Clarke 2014). Baudrillard (1983) reflects on the importance of signs and images within societies we can describe as 'late modern'. The basis of this argument is that the social world has evolved beyond a tangible material reality into something else. The 'signs' within this late modern world become transformed to such an extent that they acquire a potent reality. Baudrillard (1983) exemplifies this argument with 'Disneyland'. A make-believe world of stories and images becomes a form of life in itself. The world has become nothing other than an immense script, a motion picture that is constantly moving. In the article we argue that this 'stealing of educational agendas' is a fascinating example of educational simulation. The article considers the challenges that exist for education policymakers in view of the complex educational system existing in England.

Research context

The research reported in this article is based on two academy schools in the north-east of England. Machin and Veroit (2011, 2) refer to the 'controversy' surrounding the

introduction of academy schools in England since 2002. These schools are ‘independent, non-selective, state funded’ and ‘outside the control of local authorities’ (Machin and Veroit 2011, 2). The schools are managed by an independent team of sponsors. The sponsors of the schools ensure that their management is delegated to a largely self-appointed set of governors. Machin and Veroit (2011, 2) note that an academy usually has around 13 governors with seven typically appointed by the sponsor. The ‘controversy’ surrounding the academy schools can be traced back to this independent arrangement of sponsors. Who are the sponsors? What are they trying to achieve? What sort of curriculum is being introduced? These questions are pursued by the academics who have explored the consequences of the introduction of these schools in England (in particular Clarke 2014; but also Ball 2010; Caldwell and Harris 2008; Glatter 2013; Greary and Scott 2014; Gunter 2011; Hatcher 2011; Machin and Salvanes 2010; Machin and Veroit 2011; and McCrone, Southcott and George 2011). The ‘loose’ arrangement of the academy system appears to enable the possibility of the emergence of radical and even threatening curricula (Clarke 2014). Academic researchers have commented on the shifting responsibilities that are made manifest within the academy schools (Gunter 2011). In this article we argue that the fluid nature of the academy schools enables them to partake of curricula that have been traditionally the preserve of other sectors of education in England, for example the Further Education sector.

Further Education in England is a separate educational context with its own characteristics. Tummons and Ingleby (2014, 59) refer to Further Education being characterised by ‘a range of educational institutions offering an even more varied range of educational programmes’. The Geertzian (1988, 2) phrase ‘Heraclitus cubed and worse’ may be applied to Further Education in England to reveal an educational context that appears to be constantly changing. In exemplifying this argument, what was once referred to as ‘Further Education’ and then as the ‘Learning and Skills Sector’ is now referred to as ‘the Lifelong

Learning Sector' (Tummons and Ingleby 2014, 59). The complexity of this sector of education is revealed through considering the diversity of learners that it caters for (Tummons and Ingleby 2014, 59). In what Hayes (2007) refers to as 'the Cinderella sector' there appears a vulnerability that epitomises Further Education in England. Various governments in England have all but neglected this sector of education. In a rare attempt to address this neglect, the Wolf Report was commissioned in 2011 (Tummons and Ingleby 2014, 155). The report was commissioned by Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education in 2010. The report provides a comprehensive account of the state of vocational education in England for those aged 14-19 years. The report draws attention to the variable quality of vocational education in England to reveal several key challenges. Three key points are made within the report (Tummons and Ingleby 2014, 156). Too many young people, aged 14-19 years, are noted as failing to achieve good grades in English and mathematics. This appears to be regardless of whether they are studying within an academic or a vocational curriculum. The vocational curriculum is also described as being rigid and unresponsive. The term used within the report to describe the curriculum is 'sclerotic'. Vocational education is further critiqued for being 'expensive and overly-centralised' (Tummons and Ingleby 2014, 156). The curriculum in this area is described as being characterised by too many awarding bodies offering too many qualifications. This can make vocational education in England appear to be bamboozling and difficult to fathom. Of critical importance to the content in this article is the argument that the proliferation in vocational qualifications within the school and Further Education sector in England does not enable young people to find employment and/or routes into higher education. We argue that the shortcomings of vocational education in England revealed within the Wolf Report 2011, present the academy schools with opportunities. In an environment where vocational education appears to be 'failing' due to the neglect of successive English governments (Atkins 2013), the academy schools have the opportunity to

make vocational education a key part of their remit. This opportunity is helped because the academy schools appear to have the flexibility to make this area their concern (Machin and Vernoit 2011). Glatter's (2013) argument that the academy school system is 'flawed' draws attention to the permissive culture of governance that characterises professional power within what Hatcher (2011, 51) describes as 'free schools'. The rise of what Glatter (2012) argues is effectively the autonomy of the academy schools, provides them with a perfect opportunity to take advantage of a 'Cinderella' sector of education. Academies can make what was once the preserve of Further Education (vocational education), a key part of their agenda. This background to the research context helped frame the research questions within the evaluation of the work of the two academy schools in the research project.

Simulating educational agendas

The research reported in this article is based on an evaluation of an employability scheme introduced within two academy schools operating in the north-east of England. The research was guided by the question, 'how is the employability project perceived by key stakeholders?'. As the academy schools appear to be simulating the Further Education agenda in England, the research findings relate to the work of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1983; 1993). Gane (2000) argues that Baudrillard has made three linked theses famous within social science. The first thesis is that the cultures of the West have developed a specific notion of what Gane (2000, 34) describes as 'the real world'. In exemplifying this argument, in England, there are shared understandings of 'real' educational contexts (primary, secondary, further and higher education contexts). The second key thesis in Baudrillard's (1983; 1993) work is the argument that in Western culture we witness what Lane (2000, 86) refers to as 'a simulation of the real taken to extremes'. There are examples of what Gane (2000, 34) refers to as 'hyperreality'. The two academy schools in the research evaluation are more than physical spaces. They have shared identities holding them together

beyond their physical spaces. They appear as ‘hyperreal’ (Gane 200, 34) when they are understood as being complex manifestations of government education policy. The third key thesis of Baudrillard (1982; 1993) is that there is a problematisation of the real in Western culture. The real is absorbed into the virtual through a ‘shattering into fractal dimensions’ (Gane 2000, 34). Some of this philosophy on individuals and their ‘will’ is based on Nietzsche (Audi 1995). Other influences come from the philosophy of Plato and Kant (Audi 1995). Whereas Plato may be associated with the quest for answers to ‘big questions’, (for example ‘what is love?’), Kant’s philosophy reveals what Audi (1995) alludes to as a Copernican revolution of thought. Just as Copernicus is famous for revealing that in fact, the earth travels round the sun (and not the other way round), so Kant changes philosophical questioning. As opposed to seeking the answer to ‘big questions’, Kant asks ‘smaller questions’, for example ‘how do you as an individual perceive your world?’. There is always likely to be an answer to this question. Baudrillard’s (1983; 1993) work appears to be influenced by a philosophical trend acknowledging that there are forces shaped by individuals, alongside an imaginary discursively constructed world that outlasts and is beyond individuals.

Baudrillard’s (1983; 1993) philosophy is used as a theoretical basis for exploring the research question. The two academy schools in the research project appear to be simulating the Further Education agenda. Baudrillard’s (1983; 1993) work can be used to explain this occurrence as an example of ‘a third order of simulation’ (Gane 2000, 86). A first order of simulation occurs with a representation of what is real. A Blog post by a Further Education lecturer in ‘The Higher Education Network’ of ‘The Guardian’ is one such example. The Blog post outlines what it is like to be a Further Education lecturer, but this is not the same as actually being a Further Education lecturer. A second order simulation occurs when there is a blurring of the boundaries of reality and representation (Baudrillard 1983). Baudrillard

exemplifies this with maps. A map of New College Durham is such an exact representation of New College Durham, that the map and the place become similar. They exist together, as real as each other. In a third order simulation, the model precedes reality (Gane 2000). There is a detachment of reality from what is simulated. In this research project, the two academy schools are not simply imitating a Further Education agenda. They appear to have moved beyond the context of what is typically understood as constituting a school education. They seem to have adopted an employability agenda because this has been allowed to happen. As opposed to expressing a view that 'we had better not be part of an employability agenda because this is the preserve of Further Education', the academy schools in this research project have made employability agendas a fundamental part of their identity. The model of the academy school, as free and able to do whatever it wishes to do within reason (Hatcher 2011) is therefore, preceding its actual identity.

Research project and research approach

The lead author was approached by the director of his research institute in September 2014 and asked to complete an evaluation of an employability scheme that had been introduced in two academy schools by the local council. The research methodology is based on a qualitative inductive approach. Three focus group meetings were completed with key participants involved with the employability project from December 2014 to April 2015 (each focus group meeting included 10 participants and lasted for a duration of two hours). The focus group meetings were separated by intervals of six weeks. This gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on the employability programme over time. This reveals that the management of the focus group strategy was considered and that the size of the group was determined by the recommendations of educational researchers (for example Morgan 1988 and Newby 2010). The focus groups were constituted from teachers (n=2), Further Education staff (n=2), local employers (n=3) and members of the local council (n=3). All these

individuals were involved with the planning and implementation of the employability programme. The data from the focus groups was used to generate themes that were explored during semi-structured interviews involving five key participants who helped to implement the employability scheme within the academy schools (the interviews were completed from May to July 2015 and each interview lasted two hours). These participants were considered to be a theoretical sample because they had actually implemented the project within the academy schools (Silverman 2005). The interviewees included a headteacher of an academy school, three academy school teachers and one local employer. All the interviewees were involved with all aspects of the project. The interviewees were selected purposively as they were recommended by staff working at the council who implemented the employability project. They were described as ‘key participants’ who would be able to reflect on the successes and challenges of the project. The interview process followed Newby’s (2010) recommendation of exploring what is meaningful to and valued by the participants. The interviews explored the attitudes, emotions and opinions of the participants about the impact of the employability project. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using a professional research transcribing service. The lead researcher used NVivo 10 software through 2015 to enable thematic analysis of the data. The final report was presented to the local council in September 2015. As noted previously, the research question ‘how is the employability project perceived by key stakeholders?’ guided the research evaluation. The local council introduced the employability project in the two schools in order to address concerns over youth unemployment. The project enables local employers to go into the schools to outline potential employment opportunities to the students. The scheme has attempted to provide employers and students with a network of contacts and employment experiences. The ideal aim of the scheme is to raise awareness in students about employment opportunities alongside providing local teachers with opportunities to see how the academic

curriculum can be taught alongside input from local businesses. One of the employers involved with the scheme was a local building company and they were regarded as an ideal partner to work alongside teachers and students in order to develop the business studies curriculum. The council believe that young people do not have access to the required labour market information, advice and guidance to meet current and future employment opportunities. In view of this, they have introduced the employability scheme and worked in partnership with the two academy schools.

The approach taken here has been informed by a particular philosophy of research. We argue against the traditional divide that is placed between qualitative and quantitative research (Cooper, Glaesser, Gomm and Hammersley 2012). We reject the implication that qualitative research is subjective and lacking in scale or wider applicability and transferability. In fact, as this research reveals, sets of qualitative data can be constructed through the use of qualitative data analysis computer software for data management, storage, and analysis (Bryman 2008; Tummons 2014; and Tummons, MacLeod, and Kits 2015).

Key themes

Three key themes emerging from the focus groups and interviews are:

1. Academy schools are responsible for developing employability skills.
2. Academy schools ought to develop employability skills in new and innovative ways.
3. Academy schools ought to be servants of the local community.

The subsequent section of the article amplifies these 3 key research themes.

Key theme 1: Academy schools are responsible for developing employability skills

The respondents repeatedly made reference to the importance of the academy schools contributing to employability agendas. The neoliberal association of ‘education’ and ‘employability’ is mirrored by the research respondents. ‘Respondent 1’ (a head teacher) reflects that ‘I think one thing that I’ve been particularly impressed with is the vision behind

what we're trying to do in the academy schools, to raise awareness of employability skills'. This respondent went on to say that the employability project has the merit of drawing attention to the employment vacancies that exist within the locality. 'There are actually a number of vacancies in the local area. I think you sometimes get the impression that there aren't these vacancies' ('Respondent 1'). A key benefit of the project according to this respondent is the enhanced awareness of the importance of working together collaboratively through partnership. 'What we're trying to do with the academy schools, is to identify issues to resolve, so that youth employment can be improved in partnership with key local stakeholders' ('Respondent 1'). The employability project is seen as an opportunity for the academy schools to develop employability skills in young people. 'Respondent 1' observed that 'employers came to the meetings because they were concerned about what is happening. It seems like employability skills are not being developed effectively'. The respondents argue that the academy schools ought to be developing employability skills in students because this skills acquisition is not occurring effectively elsewhere. This is regarded by the respondents to be a central purpose of the academy schools' agenda. 'We make what we teach link to local businesses and this helps us to understand what's happening with local businesses but this area of education is missing elsewhere' ('Respondent 2', a classroom teacher).

The respondents emphasise the importance of teachers and staff who are beyond the school coming together and working towards shared agendas of employability in order to meet a curriculum need. 'What we have to somehow resolve, is the dilemma that there are vacancies, there are employment opportunities for young people, but for whatever reason these vacancies aren't being filled' ('Respondent 3', a careers school officer). The dissemination of this shared agenda is regarded as being a key purpose of the academy schools. 'We have a good bank of employers that our careers advisors have built up and this

has been really helpful in enriching the curriculum but this doesn't seem to be happening beyond the school' ('Respondent 3'). The failings of Further Education are regarded as being a particular concern. 'We hear of students who do little other than a bit of photocopying or a bit of tidying up or something which isn't going to be at all challenging and I just think they're being so let down' ('Respondent 4', a classroom teacher).

The academy schools are regarded as holding the potential to challenge ineffective employability strategies in dynamic ways. 'We need to be enabling employability in our new academy schools. The schools represent a new approach to meet a need that's not being met elsewhere' ('Respondent 5', a local employer). The respondents appear united in the view that past agendas on employability have not delivered effectively. The academy schools are regarded as 'a fresh approach' ('Respondent 1') and they are seen as holding the potential to deliver a new agenda that will realise employability skills in young people. 'Other sectors of education should be doing this but it just hasn't happened' ('Respondent 4').

Key theme 2: Academy schools ought to develop employability skills in new and innovative ways.

The 'fresh approach' that is associated with the academy schools by 'Respondent 4' is used to criticise previous approaches to developing employability skills. The Further Education agenda is regarded as 'having become stale' ('Respondent 2') and the need for a zealous agenda of dynamic change was commented on by 'Respondent 1'. The importance of a pedagogical philosophy for employability was emphasised by 'Respondent 2'. 'We need to reflect on how we are going to base what we do on pedagogical principles if this skills shortage is going to be met'. The respondents comment on the importance of developing the pedagogical principles of the project through dialogue between the teachers, the employers and the council. This successful development is regarded as holding the potential to develop employability skills in ways that are new and innovative. 'Previous attempts to improve

employability in the Further Education sector appear to have become ineffective. We have to ensure that we resolve the traditional issues that have been associated with developing employability skills- communication between partners' ('Respondent 2').

The existence of employability projects that are based on a clear vision of pedagogy are highlighted as examples of best practice that could be adopted by the academy schools. 'Respondent 1' noted the presence of one such scheme that was based on sound pedagogical principles. This is regarded as enabling 'innovative pedagogy'. This theme is commented on by 'Respondent 3' who notes that 'the precise definition of employability should be apparent in our agenda'. The respondents consider that this new, innovative pedagogy can be realised through 'longevity' (or 'being in it for the duration'). This phrase is a direct contrast to the image of 'staleness' that is applied to the Further Education sector. 'As the length of the project narrows, so those opportunities lessen. This is how I view previous attempts at raising employability skills, especially in the Further Education sector' ('Respondent 3'). A new approach to developing employability skills is recommended by the respondents. This 'new approach' ('Respondent 3') is possible because the academy schools are perceived as being innovative and dynamic new schools that are able to make this agenda a key part of their work. There exists a possibility of a new exciting approach to developing employability skills because of the introduction of the academy schools according to the participants. 'We are characterised by optimism and a fresh approach in the academy schools' ('Respondent 2'). This theme is reinforced by 'Respondent 1' who reflects that 'we are actually able to bring employers into the school in innovative ways'. This 'dynamic approach' to developing employability skills is considered to be a key part of the academy schools' remit. 'We're actually able to think about being innovative and enterprising, precisely because we are new kids on the block' ('Respondent 3'). This is perceived to be a way of avoiding a situation where there are 'kids who just don't have a clue' ('Respondent 4'). 'Newness', 'freshness'

‘dynamic’ and ‘innovative’ ideas from the academy schools emerge as ways of replacing the ‘stale’ practices of the Further Education sector. The positive feeling about the academy schools is amplified by ‘Respondent 1’ in the reflection that ‘we’re able to be creative about the curriculum. We have more opportunity to be flexible. We’ve been given the resources to adapt the curriculum according to where we want to take it’.

Key theme 3: Academy schools ought to be servants of the local community.

The respondents emphasise the importance of the academy schools needing to become ‘servants of the local community’. This phrase is particularly interesting as it is traditionally associated with Further Education (Tummons and Ingleby 2014). The academy schools are regarded as needing to ensure that moral values that are perceived to be important are being reinforced. ‘Respondent 1’ makes reference to the importance of ‘being on time’, of ‘presenting yourself well, meeting people who are new, representing your school and being proud of who you are’. The academy schools are regarded as needing to ensure that this agenda is met successfully. The phrase ‘servants of the community’ is used to highlight the importance of skills that are going to be beneficial to the local community in the future. ‘Respondent 2’ makes reference to the importance of ensuring that students who are ‘bright as buttons’ are also able ‘to look someone in the eye and shake their hand with confidence’ (‘Respondent 2’). The academy schools are regarded as being present in order to deal with what are phrased as ‘entrenched problems’ (‘Respondent 3’). ‘Respondent 3’ goes on to note the challenges that appear from ‘deprivation’ and ‘year upon year of employment’. The academies are seen by the respondents as existing to serve those families who have experienced ‘generation upon generation, upon generation of unemployment’ (‘Respondent 3’). The consequences for employers who believe that ‘time’ literally is ‘money’ are considered by the respondents. There is the acknowledgement that ‘inexperience’ (‘Respondent 1’) is not good for business where ‘every second’ goes towards ‘making a

profit'. Developing the 'skills-set' that is necessary to succeed is regarded as being 'a key part of what we should be doing' ('Respondent 3). The 'pastoral care' that is required to develop employability skills so that the students 'can shake someone's hand or look them in the eye or have the correct manners' ('Respondent 4') is perceived to be a central part of the agenda of the academy schools. The academy schools are regarded as being vitally involved in helping a generation of young people in England who have been 'let down' ('Respondent 3'). 'Respondent 3 went on to reflect that 'this has happened for all sorts of complex reasons. But, young people have been let down by other schools and other sectors of education and we can make the difference'. The 'newness' and 'vitality' of the academy schools is regarded as 'powerful, as this enables change' ('Respondent 5'). The 'changing times' are regarded as necessitating 'new types of school' that are 'free' and 'capable of making a difference' ('Respondent 5'). This 'new form of school' is regarded as necessary because we have 'a generation like no previous generation' ('Respondent 5'). 'Respondent 4' claims that 'Further Education Colleges used to be seen as the servants of the community, but they appear to have lost their way'. The new 'servants of the community' are perceived to be 'vibrant academy schools' ('Respondent 1'). A sense of purpose and optimism characterises the reflections about the employability programme. 'We're definitely on a mission. For the first time in a number of years I find myself feeling really optimistic about what we're about and how we can make a difference' ('Respondent 1').

Concluding discussion

The Association of Colleges (2016) website outlines the role that Further Education colleges are expected to play in English education. Their key purpose is to ensure that future workers have the skills that employers require and that young people are provided with the training that they need to succeed in the workplace. The participants in this research do not agree that this is happening effectively. They think that academy schools ought to enable young people

to have employability skills in order to fill a missing gap. In stating that there ought to be an avoidance of a situation where ‘kids don’t have a clue’ (Respondent 4), there is the acknowledgement that the employability agenda in England needs strengthening. A number of academic commentators have drawn attention to the challenges existing within the Further Education colleges in England. There can be an absence of a developmental imperative that enables students to be nurtured by teaching learning and assessment (Bathmaker and Avis 2005). The curriculum in Further Education in England can evidence managerialist discourse that is associated with audit and measurement (Strathern 2000, cited in Ingleby and Gibby 2016). The consequence can be a standards-driven curriculum that is not meeting the needs of students (Ingleby 2014; Lucas 2007, cited in Ingleby and Gibby 2016). In ‘HE in FE’ (Higher Education in Further Education) in England there are differences in student retention and achievement (Schofield and Dismore 2010), differences in governance (Harwood and Harwood 2004; Trim 2001) and variable levels of teaching staff within academic programmes (Burkill, Rodway-Dyer and Stone 2008; Feather 2010, 2012; Wilson and Wilson 2011; Young, 2006). The sector is not robust and this accounts for the dim view taken by the research participants with regards to what is happening in the development of employability skills in young people in England. It is as if the research participants view previous attempts to realise employability skills in England as a ‘house that Jack built’ (Ingleby 2015b). In a ‘Cinderella sector’ that has been neglected by the English policymakers, there has emerged a perception that Further Education is not doing its job (Hayes 2007). This presents the academy schools in England with opportunities. Their role is not clearly defined so they are able to move into territory that was not initially associated with their remit (Clarke 2014).

The research that has been completed on academy schools in England outlines that this form of school does allow more autonomy and flexible governance, owing to the changed school structure (Ball 2010; Caldwell and Harris 2008; Glatter 2013; Greary and

Scott 2014; Gunter 2011; Hatcher 2011; Machin and Salvanes 2010; Machin and Veroit 2011; and McCrone, Southcott and George 2011). The gradual emergence of academy schools in England since 2002 has, however proved controversial. The participants in this research study identify opportunities for academy schools. Their autonomy enables them to have the potential to influence areas of the curriculum such as developing employability skills in young people (Machin and Veroit 2011). On the other side of the debate are the critics of the academy schools who outline that autonomy can exacerbate segregation in society (Ball 2010; Clarke 2014). Machin and Veroit (2011) reveal some of the educational consequences of the autonomy of the academy schools in England. It is argued that academy schools are able to ‘sharply increase the quality of their pupil intake’ because of this autonomy (Machin and Veroit 2011, 45). This is particularly pronounced in schools that converted to academy status in the early years following their introduction in England in 2002. The consequences for the schools that are not academies are not however, necessarily ‘obvious’. The presence of a new form of school can actually provide ‘significant beneficial effects’ for the schools that are not academies (Machin and Veroit 2011, 46). The argument runs that a new form of competitor school provides incentives for the schools that are not academies. This can lead to improvements in their educational performance. Machin and Veroit’s (2011) findings help to explain why academy schools in England have increased in number since their introduction in 2002. Their autonomy is perceived to be beneficial by some of the educational policymakers in England. The research in this article reveals that academy schools are able to adopt other educational agendas, especially when these areas of education have been allowed to stagnate (Tummons and Ingleby 2014).

We argue that this simulation of educational agendas links to the work of Baudrillard (1983; 1993). Baudrillard (1983; 1993) draws attention to the consequences of what is hyperreal in societies like England (Gane 2000; Lane 2000). Institutions, for example

academy schools, acquire an identity that is an invention. They appear in social discourse about policy as exaggerations. They can be portrayed as ‘very good’ or ‘very bad’. The emotive discourse that is associated with academies is an example of what Lane (2000, 100) refers to as ‘the society of the spectacle’. It is on the one hand portrayed by the policymakers as ‘fundamentally good’, yet critiqued by others who are opposed to its hyperreality as ‘fundamentally bad’ (Lane 2000, 100). In hyperreality, there is neither a ‘false’ nor a ‘fake’ existence. There is not a blurring of reality. We just witness the emergence of another form of reality (Baudrillard 1983; 1993; Gane 2000; Lane 2000). We see a form of virtual reality that is produced by models of what we want reality to be. Hyperreality is covering up what is happening in the world. Education is complex as it is influenced by profound social, economic and biological factors. This complexity is however, disguised by the policymakers and their critiques’ portrayal of the academy schools. In this article, we argue that the belief that academy schools can somehow solve educational challenges is duplicitous. We argue that the academy schools are examples of educational policy where a hyperreal school system has been introduced and operates ‘as a testing ground’ for a form of education (Lane 2001, 101). The fluid understanding of academy schools has consequences. It allows them to become part of educational agendas that have been previously associated with other domains of education in England. The research reveals that the academy schools are able to become part of an employability agenda. What was once regarded as the preserve of the Further Education colleges is now part of the hyperreal agenda of the academy schools. The academy schools are doing more than imitating the Further Education colleges. They have been allowed to make vocational education a key part of their hyperreal agenda and this has consequences for Further Education in England.

In a wider critique of the forces influencing education in England, Ingleby (2016) argues that there is an absence of educational philosophy across the sector. There is neither a

Rudolf Steiner nor a Maria Montessori informing English educational contexts. Instead, a void is filled with initiatives that are based on political and socio-economic imperatives. The academy schools are one such example of an educational initiative that is influenced by political ideology. It is interesting that the research respondents reflect on the importance of having ‘a vision of pedagogy’. The Further Education sector in England appears to be devoid of a coherent philosophy of education. As such, the stealing of its agenda by hyperreal institutions is happening and its context continues to suffer accordingly.

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Word count: 7,094