

Macadamia Primary School: the Forced Academisation of a Failing School.

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Abstract

This research reports upon the initial phase of a longitudinal qualitative case study of a primary school in the north of England undergoing forced academisation as a result of an unsatisfactory inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). The aim of the study is to describe how the process affects key stakeholders and their perceptions of their individual role and of education more widely. Data collection commenced from the moment when the school received the judgement about its performance from Ofsted and this paper will examine the emerging themes during the ensuing 'acknowledging failure' (Stark, 1998) part of the process of school transformation.

The study is atypical in multiple dimensions: historically researchers have experienced difficulties in accessing such sensitive and delicate educational contexts and as a consequence this exclusion has led to a paucity of empirical research in the domain of failing or ineffective schools (Nicolaidou and Ainscow, 2003). In addition, however, as one of the first schools to undergo the most recent, and arguably the most challenging yet, Ofsted inspection framework the school became one of the first so called "failing" primary schools in England to be required to convert to an Academy under the coalition government's school improvement policy and in this sense the research is highly current.

The study seeks to capture the perceptions of the full range of stakeholders involved in this process, including the responses of pupils, parents and non teaching staff alongside the more traditionally sampled voices of education professionals and governors. The early findings suggest that the adult stakeholders have, if temporarily, negatively reframed their view of their role and of education, with many experiencing substantial professional identity issues. The nascent findings provide useful insights for school improvement in the dawn of a new era characterised by the rapid expansion of forced structural change in primary schooling.

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The destiny of this primary school (hereafter called Macadamia) was radically altered following the publication of its most recent Ofsted report in October 2012. From an overall grade of 'Satisfactory' in the previous inspection in January, 2011 Macadamia Primary School was now judged to be 'Inadequate' in three of the four categories used in the amended School Inspection Framework which became operational in September 2012. Subsequently the school was placed in Special Measures which thus made it prone to the opportunity for the Secretary of State to require it to become an Academy. This option was invoked and this research reports upon the effects of the early stages of the forced academisation process on key stakeholders at the school.

Macadamia is a mixed gender primary community school based in a city in the north of England. The school is larger than average size with 536 pupils aged 3 to 11 years. Almost all pupils are of White British heritage with the proportion of pupils known to be eligible for the Pupil Premium being below average. The proportions of pupils supported through School Action and School Action Plus are below average as is those with a statement of special educational needs. Although the school meets the current government floor standard, the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress, and has done for a number of years, there has been some fluctuation in the most recent set of three year rolling averages of end of Key Stage (KS) results, the main performance metric employed by school inspectors and the Department for Education (DfE). The 2011 KS1 and KS2 results for English (Reading and Writing) and Mathematics, which dipped below the national averages, were atypical of the school's general historical trend of producing year on year improved results which maintained parity with rising national averages. At the time of inspection, the school's most recent assessment results, those of 2012, which arguably demonstrated that the 2011 results were anomalous or merely a 'blip' in the upwards trajectory of improvement, had not been posted on RaiseOnline, the DfE's database of validated school performance data. The implication of this was that Ofsted, (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) excluded the 2012 results during their inspection process and their subsequent determination of school performance was based on the data for years 2009-2011, inclusive of the unrepresentative 2011 data.

The changing Ofsted process

Ofsted inspection criteria have become increasingly more stringent as time progresses and the current School Improvement Framework (SIF) is the most severe yet. The 2012 reformulation of Grade 3, previously held to be indicative of broadly satisfactory performance, into a new category entitled "requiring improvement" has

raised the bar with regard to what Ofsted consider to be acceptable performance at both the organisational and individual level. The re-designation of Grade 3 is a current exemplification as the mechanism by which the constantly evolving SIF is used by Ofsted to attempt to achieve a permanent improvement in performance across the state school system. Now, there is no scope for an inspector to make a bland or satisfactory assessment, the judgement must now be framed within a deficit perspective, for they must decide whether the object of inspection is either not yet good or not yet adequate rather than satisfactory. With the removal of the grade 'satisfactory', therefore, Ofsted has determined that school and/or individual teacher are either good (or outstanding) or not.

The fundamental implication of this is that if you are not 'good' (or better), then intervention is required. This means that schools and teachers who cannot or will not become at least 'good' are likely to be removed from the system, voluntarily or forcibly. Furthermore, any claims to parity between chronological Ofsted judgements has now been utterly disavowed and on this basis many schools who have in the past been signed off as satisfactory will be now extremely vulnerable to Ofsted's special measures category. With the benefit of hindsight and the benefit of the above analysis, it is perhaps now not entirely surprising that Macadamia fell to the new Ofsted regime.

Ofsted and Macadamia Primary School

Macadamia did not experience an ordinary and uneventful time between the Ofsted inspections of 2011 and 2012. The Grade 3 awarded in the 2011 Ofsted report painted an optimistic picture for the school going forward and acknowledged that significant staffing difficulties of the previous two years had been resolved. With a new senior leadership team having been recently appointed the conditions for "rapid improvement" had been noted (Ofsted, 2011, p.13). Unfortunately the school encountered severe budgetary pressures caused by an inherited, significant and otherwise unbeknown overspend on the budget leading the Local Authority (LA) to invoke their statutory powers to serve the governing body with a warning notice in relation to the future removal of the delegated budget should the deficit issue remain unaddressed. This warning notice persisted even though the governors' and headteacher's efforts at the deficit reduction soon became successful. Compelled to act therefore, the resolution of the financial situation led to a whole school restructuring exercise. A number of support staff were made redundant in this process and many of those surviving the restructure did so the cost of a downgrading. The process was lengthy, time consuming and traumatic for all those involved.

Special Measures

Typically, once a school goes into special measures, particular processes are always invoked: the LA is required to prepare and have approved a school improvement plan which addresses the concerns and recommendations of the Ofsted report. Her

Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) subsequently visit the school regularly to monitor and report upon the school's performance against the improvement plan. In an HMI inspection the school is subject to performance measurement against the same SIF criteria, however, the difference is that HMI have a much shorter turn around time for publication of their report. Both the Ofsted and HMI judgments are only verbalised to usually to those who "need to know". The Chair of Governors, selected SLT and the LA normally comprise those who must promise confidentiality in order to receive the Ofsted and HMI briefings. Parents or staff must wait until the official reports are published on the Ofsted website before they can have access this information, which in the case of Ofsted can be as long as 4-6 weeks before it arrives in the public domain. Furthermore, schools in special measures are vulnerable to the ability of LA to exercise their not inconsiderable statutory powers in this domain of school underperformance. Such discretionary processes include the removal of the Governing Body and the imposition of an Interim Executive Board (IEB), the membership of whom is selected for by the LA (but paid for by the school). The LA can also reconstitute the school's senior leader team (SLT) in whole or in part and this also includes appointing an Executive Head Teacher to oversee the SLT even if they remain in place.

The LA improvement plan invariably includes the provision of school to school support and more often than not some extra allocation of funding by the LA. Typically a neighbour school that has received an "outstanding" or grade 1 at its last Ofsted inspection will be partnered up with the failing school or failing this, a "good" school with a high performing headteacher can also be used to provide this service. In a coaching style model, the partner school will be expected to guide and support the failing school towards an achievement of a level of performance which brings them out of special measures at the very least and ideally establishes a firm footing for obtaining a "good" at the next Ofsted inspection. This action draws upon notion that near peer support is often the most effective because it is the good or outstanding schools that have the most suitable expertise offer in these situations (National College for Teaching & Leadership, 2013). The LA will also provide extra support of its own in the form of its own school improvement personnel which it will direct in a similar manner.

The LA (which itself received criticism in the Ofsted report of 2012) suspended the governing body and appointed an IEB. The LA made no changes to the SLT, but partnered the school with a smaller local primary school which had received a "good" from Ofsted in 2011. Although the LA did make some extra funding available, control of the budget was given to the headteacher of the partner primary school. Subsequently LA primary consultants for the core subjects and the Senior School Improvement Officer made additional visits to the school. Support on the ground from the partner primary and the LA included the undertaking of lesson observations and provision of feedback, attendance at a range of school meetings, the provision of advice on school improvement matters to all staff and in the case of the partner

primary, team teaching, the sharing of resources and Macadamia staff visiting the partner primary to observe lessons and systems to see “good practice” in action.

Forced Conversion to Academy Status: Processes

Until 2011, only in severe cases of lack of school turnaround at the end of the two year process of Special Measures was the final solution of structural change adopted by the DfE in relation to tackling school underperformance. The most well known of these structural initiatives was *Fresh Start* (National Audit Office, 2006) which was founded on the assumption that where leadership and management were determined to be the root cause of the underperformance which prevented their schools from coming out of special measures only a new school with a new identity and culture could create the conditions necessary for educational success. Now it would seem that structural change has become the preferred school improvement methodology of the Coalition government, if even a neutral interpretation of the intent behind the amendments to the 2011 Education Act and Section 4 of the Academies Act of 2010 is adopted. Currently, with this legislature available, the Secretary of State can force intervention on any maintained school which falls into any of one of the following three specific categories:

1. Where the local authority has given the governing body a warning notice in relation to low standards of performance at the school, a serious breakdown in management or governance which is prejudicing standards of performance, or a risk to the safety of pupils or staff due to a breakdown in discipline and the school has failed to comply with the warning notice to the satisfaction of the authority.
2. When a maintained school requires ‘significant improvement’ if, following an inspection of the school, Ofsted has given notice that the school requires ‘significant improvement’.
3. Where a maintained school requires ‘special measures’ if, following an inspection of the school, Ofsted has given notice that the school requires special measures.

A school which satisfies any of the three conditions above is deemed to be a school which is “eligible for intervention”. Secretary of State for Education can, therefore, now ‘force’ any maintained school to convert into an academy due to perceived poor performance at the school at the outset of special measures. Macadamia Primary School was deemed eligible for intervention following its 2012 Ofsted inspection and thus was irrevocably locked into the forced process of academisation from the point at which the Ofsted report was made public.

Upon conversion to an academy the school will become independent of the local authority and will be managed by a sponsor who will become proprietor. The process of conversion will now follow the same route as a school that has voluntarily chosen to be an academy. Consultation will take place by the proposed new academy proprietor which the Secretary of State will consider before confirming the

Academy Order and the conversion date. Then the academy arrangements and funding agreements will be made with the proprietor prior to re-opening as an academy. Currently, therefore, the school is being managed by the IEB but the final act of the deposed governing body was to approve the preferred sponsor.

The rights of teachers, parents and the local authority in forced conversions

The evidence from elsewhere in the school system suggests few rights exist. In Downhills Primary school in the London Borough of Haringey, for example, the forced conversion was made even though 91 per cent of parents objected to the change. A spirited campaign by parents and teachers, heavily supported by the Anti-Academy Alliance, failed to halt the process with the school being re-opened as an academy sponsored by the Harris Foundation. Meanwhile in a different local authority (Staffordshire) a primary school was forced to convert despite being able to demonstrate continued improvement over several years and being above the government floor standard for performance. Members of both school communities claimed they were able to demonstrate collusion between the local authority and the Secretary of State, with the Department for Education (DfE) effectively bullying through the conversion (Anti-Academy Alliance, n.d.). In Staffordshire the school eventually succumbed to pressure and voluntarily applied to convert whilst in Haringey the opening of the new academy was greeted with the new school sign being graffitied with the name of the former school, an act which demonstrated the school community had not willingly participated at any stage of the conversion. Since then fresh information has emerged in regard to Roke Primary School in Croydon and Abbey Meadows School in Cambridge that even schools with data errors have been forced into the academisation process with no remission offered even when such data errors have been corrected (Saveroke, n.d.; Hands off our Schs, n.d.).

The role of the Secretary of State

The concept of a school 'eligible for intervention' was developed for the purpose of providing a framework and a trigger to cause appropriate remedial steps to be taken and not, as some believe, to aid the political objective of the Secretary of State in turning maintained schools into academies (Romain, 2011). The current postholder, Michael Gove, states the purpose of the forced conversion is to "liberate and emancipate teachers and school leaders" from local authorities in order that they may meet the needs of the children more effectively (Anti-Academy Alliance, n.d.). Whilst there is much doubt over the veracity of this declared motive, the legislation is quite clear that the Secretary of State has limited powers to force conversion which can only be achieved where a school is eligible for intervention. Nevertheless the National Union of Teachers (NUT) indicates it has evidence of schools being heavily lobbied by local authority and academy sponsor "brokers" who have been employed by the Department of Education to visit schools and local authorities in targeted areas to "persuade" them to apply for academy status for their school (Romain, 2011). This is part of a political ideology, driven by the current coalition government,

to remove as many maintained schools as possible from local authority control. Under the terms of 'eligible for intervention' Gove claims there are 200 such primary schools that should be forcibly converted.

Gove seeks to claim the moral high ground in this debate by claiming that endemic underperformance of some schools in England has contributed to the 'decline' of our standing in international league tables. As would be expected there is much doubt over the accuracy of his claims and of the statistics employed as evidence, but despite such opposition the pattern of events continues to follow the policy dogma that independence of schools is a vital part of the drive for improvement. The reasons he offers for opposition are breathtaking at times, including the allegation that the Anti-Academy Alliance is an offshoot of the Socialist Workers Party and the active parents of Downhills Primary School are all Trotskyites.

A new school system?

The consequence for the system, however, is that adequate support has yet to be established for the newly converted academies. The onus seems to be on academy sponsors to effectively replace school improvement services of local authorities with their own improvement services. Consequently it appears that federations of sponsor schools are favoured, especially where secondary schools and highly effective primary schools can be twinned with schools eligible for intervention. Sponsors, such as the Harris Federation, are heavily promoting their support services based on concepts such as mentoring, modeling and coaching. In the case of Macademia School they have been directed towards a preferred sponsor who has already has sponsorship responsibility for many other schools within the local region. In fairness, concern was exhibited that one sponsor should not be dominant in the region and other schools within the local authority who are similarly designated as 'eligible for intervention' are likely to be directed towards other sponsors.

There is genuine concern that rises above cynicism, however, that sponsors will not be able to provide an effective support service for academies once the numbers increase. In other words it is not possible to run a national system comprised of thousands of independent schools, answerable only to the Secretary of State. A form of intermediary services will have to be created which, at the moment, are being offered by sponsors who seem to be working on the premise that involvement with academies can be a profit making venture.

The changing nature of Macademia School

It is this context that Macademia Primary School is going through the special measures process and the process of forced conversion to academy status at the same time. The research reported here is drawn from interviews with the governors, headteacher, senior leaders, teachers and parents of the school. The research study was, what might be called opportunistic in its nature, in that the research project

“found” the researchers rather than the researchers instigating the research process. The principal researcher had been a member of the governing body of Macadamia Primary School since 2009: during the initial series of extraordinary governing body meetings convened to consider the implications of the situation arising from the Ofsted report, she realized that she was ostensibly a participant in a unusual and potentially novel research environment, in that Macadamia was one of the very first English primary schools to become eligible for intervention utilizing the special measures criteria available to the Secretary of State. She was able to secure the support of the then major actors within the school including both the headteacher and the Chair of Governors, who not only gave permission for the research study to proceed, but were able to facilitate the interview part of the field work during school time. Whilst the main part of the field work commenced in January 2013, the researchers were also able to access participant data and documentation retrospectively, going back to the date of the Ofsted inspection in November 2012.

Methodology

The key research questions adopted were;

- ⦿ How has the process of forced academisation affected each of the key stakeholder groups?
- ⦿ Have the perceptions of the school staff, governors and LA staff on education and their individual roles been influenced as a result of the forced academisation process and if so, how?
- ⦿ Have the perceptions of the parents and pupils of the school changed as a result of the forced academisation process and if so how?

The most relevant methodology was considered to be that of a case study. This is because the research study ostensibly seeks holistic answers to a series of ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions in relation to the effects on user groups within an English primary school of the external application of the two concurrent processes of special measures and forced academisation, the combination of which to date are relatively uncharted. A case study design allows the study of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and as such it is a comprehensive strategy that allows the researcher to focus on a number of variables, to use multiple sources of evidence, and to use predefined theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. In conclusion, therefore, in seeking to study Macadamia in its whole and as a unique entity facing an unprecedented and unparalleled set of what are in effect change processes, we have adopted guidance that the case study method should be employed when the researcher seeks to concentrate on ‘one thing’ in detail and specifically when ‘what is of interest is the uniqueness of the thing and the thing in its completeness’ (Thomas, 2011). Consequently this was deemed to be the most appropriate and efficacious research methodology in this instance.

Data Collection Methods

Bryman (2012) recognises that case studies can consist of both or just qualitative or quantitative approaches. This case study, although predominantly qualitative, encompassed some aspects of quantitative data as well. Because of the emergent and instantaneous nature of the research project, a pilot study was impossible to execute. The key data collection methods employed consisted of the following;

- Individual semi structured, audio recorded interviews with representatives of each of the key user groups lasting between approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour except those relating to pupils, where focus groups were used instead. Respondent validation techniques were employed to improve the accuracy of the interview data;
- Focus groups of about 3-4 KS2 pupils, audio recorded;
- Participant observation of the range of governing body meetings;
- Non-participant observation of parent information events and staff meetings;
- Documentary analysis of any relevant documentation. In practice this consisted of non-confidential component of governing body meeting minutes, and other information provided to governors by the headteacher; material published on the school website and/or given to parents together with other such similar documentation provided by the LA; sponsor material provided to parents and published on their website, and finally any documentation published in respect of the school's performance on the DfE or Ofsted websites.

Longitudinal Nature of the Research Study

At the conceptualisation stage, it was envisaged that the data should be collected spanning the time period from the commencement of special measures to, if possible, a full year after the school had undergone academisation to fully charter the effect of the processes on the key user groups at Macadamia. The headteacher and Chair of Governors agreed to the longitudinal nature of the study and gave conditional permission for the study to continue once the school had been academised should they remain in post. In the intervening period, therefore, full access was granted to the principal researcher and an interview schedule was agreed upon as equating to once per term for the teachers, the support staff, the parents and the pupils. Subsequently, however, as the governors had been removed by the LA in December 2012 and replaced with the IEB, only one interview was conducted with each of the governor participants as, unless they had some other role in the school, they would not be party to the unfolding processes.

Data collection

The key data collection tool employed to enable the 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) necessitated by the interpretivist paradigm was that of interviews. Of the different types of interview formats available, semi-structured interviews were selected as

they allowed for new questions, follow up replies, departures from the schedule or even the re-interviewing of participants if necessary. The selection of participants from each of the key stakeholder groups was originally envisaged at the outset of the research project is illustrated in Table 1. A purposive participant selection strategy was combined with, in the tradition of qualitative research, those who demonstrated a willingness to participate.

Location	Type of personnel	Initial Sample Number	Type of data tool
School	Teachers	3-5	Individual Interview
School	Non- teaching Support Staff	3	Individual Interview
School	Children	6-8	Focus Group (3-4 per group)
School	Senior Leadership Team	2	Individual Interview
LA	School Improvement Team	2	Individual Interview
Community	Parents	3-5	Individual Interview
Community	Governors	3-5	Individual Interview

Table 1 Original selection of research participants

This paper reports only on data collected in the first term of special measures, which is designated for the purposes of this paper as Term 1. Table 2 details the nature of the data harvested from each of the key user groups identified.

Location	Type of personnel	Term 0.5	Term 1
School	Teachers	5	2
School	Non- teaching Support Staff	0	3
School	Children	0	0
School	Senior Leadership Team	1	1
LA	School Improvement Team	0	1
Community	Parents	1	1
Community	Governors	0	4

Table 2: Data collected during first two half terms in special measures

Each of the participants has only been interviewed once during this first term. There are a small number of respondents who occupy multiple roles within the framework presented in Table 1. One parent is also a governor and two support staff are also parents: all three of these multi-role interviewees wished to provide representation for both demographic groups they belong to, hence they are effectively double-counted in Table 2. The headteacher did not wish the pupils or the parent groups to be interviewed until after the official academisation consultation process had been conducted, which took place during the latter stages of the Term 1, hence no parents, other than governor-parents or staff-parents or any pupils were interviewed during Term 1.

Data results

Half Term 0.5: In the first half term of Term 1 (HT 0.5) from January to February 2013, five teachers were interviewed. Although by this stage, the school had been in special measures since November 2012 and the Governors had already “appointed” the new academy sponsors, this time period saw the actual manifestation of the impact of the special measures processes rather than any substantial mass application of the forced academisation processes, which were instead, mainly directed at the headteacher and the IEB. This period could perhaps be best described as the “shock and awe” period for those involved.

Key Theme	Description of Theme
The Big Four	Perceptions of the LA, HMI, Ofsted(in a general context) and the Government
Academies	Specific perceptions relating to academies and the proposed new academy
Before Ofsted	What they perceived the school to be like before the inspection
The New Reality	What they perceived the new reality to be like
Truth and Conspiracy	Perceptions covering the inspection process, the truth of the Ofsted judgment and whether there were any specific motivations behind the inspection and the ensuing judgment
Social and Emotional Aspects	Perceptions relating to the social and emotional aspects of the processes and experience
Professionalism	Perceptions relating to dimensions of professionalism
The Future	How they perceived the future to be
People and Processes	Any other perceptions not covered by the other themes

Table 3: Areas of Investigation

The main themes which emerged during this phase (number of responses in bracket) were those of:

1. Conspiracy Theories (36)
2. Personal Effects (36)
3. Rationalisation of the Ofsted Judgement (28)
4. The Involvement of Third Parties (the LA and the partner primary) (26)
5. The Ofsted Inspection (24)

Key theme	Top 4 Sub themes in order of importance			
The Big Four	Ofsted – the inspection framework	HMI - Tactics	The Government – finance	The LA – monitoring role
Academies	Current assessment	Concerns =	Knowledge	Academy Policy
The New Reality	3 rd party involvement (26)	The new culture	Workload	Data
Truth and Conspiracy	Conspiracy theory (36)	Rationalising the judgement (28)	The inspection (24)	The truth
Social and Emotional Aspects	Personal (36)	Staff Morale	Effects outside school	Coping strategies
Professionalism	Changes in dimensions of professionalism	Being judged	Flight	Views on the professional self
Processes and People	Processes	SLT	Parents	Pupils

Table 4: Key emerging themes in first half-term

Second Half Term

In the second half term, from March to April 2013, the school was in second stage of special measures processes and layered upon this, the forced academisation processes began to filter down to staff. This period could best be entitled as the “coming to terms and making progress” phase.

The main themes which emerged during this phase included those of;

1. Academy Concerns
2. The Effects of Being Judged
3. Views Relating to the Professional Self
4. The Ofsted Judgement itself
5. Comments on the New School Culture

Overall Analysis of Term1

Taking an overview of Term 1, therefore, the dominant themes arising were;

1. The Effects of Being Judged
2. Academy Concerns
3. Comments on the New School Culture
4. Conspiracy Theories
5. Rationalisation of the Ofsted Judgement

Endnote

This research is a work in progress and this is where we are at the moment. If you would like further information in due course please contact us.

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