The impact of the ideology of 'the market' on the English state school system

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Abstract

Analysis of key education policies since 1988 reveals the rationale for the central importance given to three key components of market ideology: 'consumer choice', 'competition' and 'freedom'. This thesis investigates their impact on the structure of the English state school system. Data was collected through twenty semi-structured interviews with educationalists. All those interviewed have worked in the Shire County that is the focus of this research. Thus, 'policy rhetoric' is compared with 'policy reality', as seen through the eyes of those actively involved.

This approach traces the impact of 'consumer choice', 'competition', and 'freedom' over a thirty-year period, in one local authority. This contrasts with other studies that have a single aspect, such as academisation, researched in several locations at one particular point in time. Findings demonstrate that 'consumer choice' and 'competition', in particular, have not led to the improvements envisaged in policy rhetoric. There is evidence that fear-induced defensive actions taken by some school leaders and the breakdown of trust and partnerships between schools, have impacted detrimentally on vulnerable children. Moreover, the 'market-model' has ultimately led to the erosion of its central element, 'freedom', as Multi-Academy Trusts introduce standardisation and pooled budgets. Multi-Academy Trusts are emerging as 'quasi local authorities'; history has almost gone full-circle.

This research suggests that applying market ideology to education was flawed from the outset. This ideology is inherently incapable of fulfilling the fundamental purpose of the state school system: achieving the best outcomes for all children. The particular failure of 'market ideology' in responding to a crisis, is illustrated through a reflection on the current coronavirus pandemic and its impact on schools. In this crisis, government has had to call on local authorities to provide local leadership for a fragmented system, unable to cope with the level of communication and support needed.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of this thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

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Glossary

Academies	Publicly funded schools, independent of local authority control
Academy convertor	A school which converted to academy status voluntarily (usually high performing at the time of conversion), having previously been a local authority (LA) maintained school
Academy sponsor led	A school which converted to academy status with the support of a sponsor (usually lower performing at time of conversion)
City Technology College (CTC)	State funded schools, established in 1988, outside the control of local authorities, but with involvement and partial funding from private business sponsors
Community School	Maintained schools where the LA is the employer, owns the land and buildings and sets the admissions criteria
Centre for Policy Studies (CPS)	A think tank, founded in 1974 by Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher, which promotes policies based on free market principles
Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG)	Funding from central government to the LA, the majority of which is delegated directly to schools through the LA's funding formula
f40	A pressure group representing education authorities in England, where government-set cash allocations for primary and secondary pupils are the lowest in the country
Foundation School	Maintained schools where the governing body is the employer, owns the land and buildings and sets the admission criteria
Free School	A type of academy, either a new school set up in response to parental demand, a new school required to meet basic need for additional school places or a previously fee-paying school joining the state system
General Annual Grant (GAG)	The budget share for an individual school
Grant Maintained School (GM)	Introduced in 1988, these were state schools which opted out of local government control, being funded directly from central government. GM status was removed by New Labour in 1998. Former GM schools were renamed as Foundation schools, which were still largely independent of the LA
League Tables	Generic name for published tables containing school performance data. First introduced in 1988

Local Governing Body (LGB)	A term used to describe a committee of a trust board for an individual school in a MAT. The role and responsibility of the LGB is set out in the MAT's Scheme of Delegation
Local Management of Schools (LMS)	Introduced in 1988. School funding, which had previously been held by the local education authority, had to be delegated to schools, so that heads and governors could take responsibility for financial decisions
Maintained Schools	Publicly funded schools overseen by the LA. These schools must follow the national curriculum and national pay and conditions
Middle Tier	The system of support and accountability connecting individual schools and academies to central government (a function previously held by the LA)
Multi-academy trust (MAT)	Where two or more academies are govern**ed** by one Trust Board
National Curriculum	This was established by the 1988 Education Reform Act to ensure provision of a broad and balanced curriculum. Academies do not have to follow the National Curriculum, but many still choose to do so
Neoliberalism	An intellectual and political movement based on free-market ideas
National Schools Commissioner (NSC)	A civil servant responsible for co-ordinating the work of the eight Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs)
Off-rolling	The practice of removing a pupil from a school roll without using a permanent exclusion, when the removal is primarily in the best interests of the school, rather than the best interests of the pupil
Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)	The body which inspects education and training for learners of all ages and inspects and regulates care for children and young people
Open enrolment	Introduced in 1988, parents can express a preference for their child to attend any school. Schools are obliged to admit pupils up to their agreed number
Pupil premium	Funding allocated to schools to support children eligible for free school meals, those in care, or who have parents in the armed forces
Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC)	Eight regional civil servants that act on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education. Their responsibilities include intervening in underperforming academies and free schools, deciding on

academy conversions and **approving** applications for academy sponsors

Scheme of Delegation	A document defining the lines of responsibility and accountability in a MAT
Schools Forum	Statutory body with elected representatives from schools (governors and headteachers) which advise the LA on the allocation of funding for schools
Stand-alone academies	Academies which are not part of a Multi-academy trust. Otherwise known as a Single Academy Trust (SAT). The majority achieved academy status through conversion (see Academy Convertor)
Studio Schools	Introduced in 2010. A studio school is a small academy for around 300 pupils aged 14-19, which aims to give pupils practical skills in work environments
Teaching Schools	Schools that work with others to provide continual professional development for school staff
University Technical College (UTC)	Government funded academies, established by companies and universities to provide technical specialism required by local industry partners. Usually for pupils aged 14-18

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Chapter 1:   The Prologue

'*All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players'*
(As You Like it, Act 2, Scene 7)

1.1   Personal Motivation

I have spent almost forty years working in education. This has been a time of radical change to all aspects of the education system, most of which I have experienced first-hand during the various stages of my career: classroom teacher, Head of Faculty, Senior Leader, Headteacher, Director of Education in a large Shire County and currently Chair of Governors of a Free School in a Multi-academy trust (MAT) and Member of an Academy Trust. Hence, this study is in part an auto-ethnographical quest. In their introduction, Abbott et al, point out that, when they met as a group of authors to talk about their experiences, 'it became clear that during our time 'at the chalk face' there had been comparatively few occasions when we had time to stand back and think about how education policy was being formulated at the highest level' (Abbott et al, 2013, p. xi). This accords with my own experience. As a teacher and educational leader, my focus has been on how to respond and make sense of policies, rather than to reflect on the theories and ontological positions underpinning them. However, this study is not purely an auto-ethnographical study. During my professional journey I have been fortunate to work alongside a wide range of colleagues who have shared the same motivation, to make a positive difference to the lives of young people. The experiences and insights of twenty of these colleagues provide breadth and depth to this study.

1.2 The unfolding drama

On reflection, it is as though I and my colleagues have been actors in a drama which has gradually unfolded over time. We are the 'Dramatis Personae' as set out in Table 1 (names anonymised). As actors, we have played different roles, but we have shared a common stage, the Shire County (anonymised as Ayeshire) which is the setting for this research.

Dramatis Personae

Headteacher (Community School)	Daniel West
Headteacher (Stand-Alone Academy)	Paul Fellows
Retired Headteacher (Foundation School)	William Benson
CEOs of Multi-academy trusts (MATs)	Jane Green
	Keith Grey
	Rebecca Jones
	Simon White
Regional Director of Multi-academy trust	Stephen Dawson
Chair of Governors in Stand-Alone Academy	Linda Grant
Trust Board Chair in MAT	Richard Johnson
Local Governing Body Chairs in MATs	Susan Briggs
	Catherine Taylor
Education Consultant (Ofsted Inspector)	Julie Smith
Local Authority Officers	Paul Black
	Fiona Evans
	James Williams
Director of Education (retired)	Jo Grills
DfE Officials	Michael Phillips
	Ruth Thomas
Member of Parliament	Peter Dixon
Former Member of Parliament	John Baker

Table 1: Current Role of each 'actor'

See Appendix 1 for a detailed summary of all previous and current roles played by these actors.

The core script of our drama is derived from the education policies of successive governments since the time of Margaret Thatcher. However, rather than prescribed lines, delivered by rote, our script is dynamic, being interpreted and re-interpreted by

all the actors involved. The plot has unexpected twists, reflecting 'real life' interventions, whether these be political or a global pandemic. The drama outlined in this study has reached a particular point, but this will not be the end of the drama itself. Inevitably, there will be further Acts to come as the drama is 'to be continued...' My research will consider what that might entail.

1.3   My Purpose: to understand 'the plot' and the mind of the writer(s)

The drama under consideration in this thesis, relates to one aspect of the radical transformation of education which has taken place over the last thirty years, namely the changes made to the way the state mainstream school system is structured. Hence, detailed analyses of other aspects, such as curriculum, assessment and pedagogy are not within the scope of this thesis, although some reference is made to them. My research is not purely concerned with what has happened, but the rationale behind it and the impact it has had. The drama is not a straightforward story, told to entertain. It requires critical thought and analysis to explore its deeper meanings, character analysis to understand motivations and beliefs, and consideration of its place in history.

My analysis of education policies will demonstrate that the ideology of the market is reflected in the rationale underpinning policy initiatives of successive governments, whatever their political persuasion. 'Ideology' can be defined as 'a system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory or policy' (Oxford English Dictionary, 1979). For the French philosopher, Michel Foucault, 'ideology' is 'the types of discourse which it (*society*) accepts and makes function as true' (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). In simple terms, the ideology of 'the free-

market' is the belief that 'providers' of goods or services, should be freed from the restrictions of bureaucracy and central control so they can respond to local knowledge and innovate. 'Consumers' should be able to choose from a range of providers, instead of one provider having a monopoly. Thus, providers would compete to attract consumers by offering the best products. Successful providers would expand, and weak providers decline, go out of business or be taken over by those who are successful. The structure of this thesis is built on the three main components of market ideology: consumer choice, competition and freedom.

1.4   Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical perspectives are important tools to utilise when categorising and making sense of research data. I am particularly drawn to the description of theoretical perspectives as 'nets to catch "the world" to explain it' (Grix, 2010, p. 103). My 'nets' consist of two very different theoretical perspectives. The first, the thinking of the German economist, Friedrich von Hayek. This presents me with a personal challenge, since he embodies a very different approach to the world from my own. Hayek has the dogmatic position of a writer who believes that there is a definitive truth, whereas I am uncomfortable with a 'black and white' view of the world and find simplistic approaches difficult to accept. I adopt a relativist ontology, because I believe there are multiple realities. For this reason, I am more at home with my second 'net to catch the world', that of the French philosopher and historian, Michel Foucault, which sits within the interpretative paradigm.

1.4.1 Friedrich von Hayek, 1899 - 1992

Friedrich von Hayek is regarded as 'the key architect of the ideology of the free market' (Linden and Broton, 2017, p. 6). Although he was an economist, he declared at the outset that his seminal book, *The Road to Serfdom*, published in 1944, was 'political' (Hayek,1986, p. vii). His thinking is widely recognised to have played a critical role in inspiring and co-ordinating the intellectual and political movement which came to be known as Neoliberalism (Davies, 2014, p. 2). Indeed, Hayek has been described as 'the grandfather of neoliberalism' (Metcalf, 2017).

Hayek's fundamental theory was that the market, and hence competition, is natural to the human condition and that people basically act in their own interest. For Treanor, Hayek's theory answers stereotypical philosophical questions such as, 'Why are we here?' and 'What should I do?' by asserting, 'we are here for the market and we should compete' (Treanor, 2005, p.10). Hayek's basic assumption was that all human activity is a form of economic calculation. The market is akin to a 'mind' structuring all reality based on a model of economic competition. Objective truth could be determined by the market, with all other values being, 'mere opinion or relativist hot air … the market didn't just facilitate trade in goods and services; it revealed truth' (Metcalf, 2017, p.4).

In, *The Road to Serfdom*, Hayek argued that since freedom of choice is a key requirement of individual freedom, economic power should be taken away from central authority:

> An authority directing the whole economic system would be the most powerful monopolist conceivable … it would have complete power to decide what we are to be given and on what terms …The state should confine itself to establishing rules

applying to general types of situations, and should allow the individual freedom in everything which depends on the circumstances of time and place, because only the individuals concerned in each instance can fully know these circumstances and adapt their actions to them (Hayek, 1986 p. 69).

Decisions should be devolved to the front line, since local knowledge has more validity: 'real knowledge is gained and true economic progress made as a consequence of locally generated knowledge derived from a particular circumstance and time – the state is not privy to that knowledge' (Hayek, 1986, p. 52). Rather than the state holding a monopoly, Hayek argued for competition between suppliers and customers because, where there is only one available producer or only one available purchaser, there is a monopoly, and the price can be fixed. Competition allows the price to rise or fall. Thus, for Hayek, 'our freedom of choice in a competitive society rests on the fact that, if one person refuses to satisfy our wishes, we can turn to another. But if we face a monopolist we are at his mercy' (Hayek,1986, p. 69). Even where a monopoly was inevitable, Hayek thought that it should not be in the hands of the state because, 'the machinery of monopoly becomes identical to the machinery of the state and the state itself becomes more and more identified with the interests of those who run things than with the best interests of the people' (Hayek, 1986, p. 147).

Hayek argued against the rigidity of those who wanted a meticulously worked out plan. For him, the appeal of market competition was that its outcome was unpredictable, 'where effective competition can be created, it is a better way of guiding individual efforts than any other' (Hayek, 1986, p 27). By this Hayek did not mean that there should not be any rules or framework within which to operate, 'an effective competitive system needs an intelligently designed and continuously

adjusted legal framework as much as any other' (Hayek, 1986, p. 29). Competition still needs experts and authorities to create rules, league tables, prizes and to discipline and punish (Davies, 2014). It is the role of government to determine these rules and act as umpire to interpret and enforce them (Bottery,1992).

In a competition it is generally understood that competitors should not try to rewrite the rules. However, in reality, competitors may attempt to 'play the system' by interpreting rules to gain advantage. As Davies points out, 'Adam Smith's moral vision of the market-place was a competition overseen by an imagined invisible hand, but ultimately dependent on the moral 'sympathy' of traders with one another' (Davies, 2014, p. 63). A dictionary definition of 'competition' is, 'the activity or condition of striving to gain or win something by defeating or establishing superiority over others', the implication is that those taking part should not co-operate, and indeed it can be argued that competition invites 'gaming' (Oxford English Dictionary, 1979). 'A wholly strategic competitor acts according to political necessity in response to the contingent inequalities and threats within the contest, rather than out of any sense of a priori fairness or common humanity' (Davies, 2014, p. 64).

Hayek's belief that humans naturally act in their own self-interest, is characterised by Treanor as a personal ethic where 'every human being is an entrepreneur managing their own life, and should act as such' (Treanor, 2005, p.10). Hayek was not interested in equality, although he did accept the need for a minimum of public assistance or poor relief to ensure food and shelter. This applied even to those in extreme need, who would still only receive minimal support (Seldon, 2017). This aspect of Hayek's thinking has attracted widespread criticism: 'it celebrates personal

interest and desires of individuals and obscures and deprecates egalitarian concerns' (Ball, 1994, p.130); 'the emphasis on economics debases and sacrifices other important values such as equality, social inclusion, democratic deliberation and justice' (Rodrik, 2017). 'Equality' is an important theme explored later in Chapters 3 and 8. It is important to note that, at the time of writing, the acute need for 'public assistance' caused by the global pandemic, has resulted in a British Conservative government that supports 'the small state', as advocated by Hayek, going far beyond minimum levels of intervention. The government has introduced extreme measures, such as the state directly paying the wages of millions of people. The question of whether Hayek's ideology is viable in a time of extreme crisis is explored further in Chapter 3 and in 'The Epilogue' which concludes this thesis.

The structure of this thesis is based on the three cornerstones of Hayek's philosophy: consumer choice, competition and freedom.

1.4.2 Michel Foucault, 1926 – 1984

In contrast to Hayek, Foucault's work sits within an interpretivist paradigm. He challenged the view that 'truth' is often characterised as the empirical product of science, by examining 'truths' which he argued were generated by social relations, economics, medicine and the human sciences. He accepted that the conditions required for the production of truth within these knowledge systems, were much less stable and difficult to control than those presented by 'science' (McHoul and Grace, 1993, p. 580). In his book, *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault asserted, 'we are subjected to the production of truth through power, and we cannot exercise power except

through the production of truth' (Foucault, 1980, cited in McHoul and Grace, 1993, p. 93).

In contrast to Hayek's 'free market', Foucault was not interested in devising an ideal model of society, instead, he concentrated on how power actually operates within society (Rainbow, 1984, p. 6). He questioned the idea that power only operates from the top downwards, from the powerful to the powerless. Instead, he argued that power can also be exercised from below. Ideologies exist, but for Foucault, they were less important than the instruments and procedures which produced them, that is, the historical conditions of this knowledge. He highlighted the essential link between power relations and their capacity to 'produce' the truths we live by, which he termed, 'regimes of truth':

> Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth, that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (Foucault, 1980, cited in McHoul and Grace, p. 131).

This is the type of power which is constantly executed by means of surveillance. For Foucault:

> we must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces: it produces reality; it produces domains or objects and rituals of truth' (Foucault, 1977, cited in McHoul and Grace, 1993, p 64).

Foucault suggested that power is intelligible in terms of the techniques through which it is exercised. He provided a helpful illustration of what he calls 'disciplinary power' by comparing it with Bentham's Panopticon. This is a design for a prison which had a tall tower at the centre, surrounded by a ring-shaped building divided into individual cells. This instilled a state of docility amongst the prisoners, since as long as prisoners believed that they were being watched, there was no need for physical displays of force (Foucault 1977, cited in McHoul and Grace, 1993, p. 65).

In this thesis, Foucault's analysis of 'regimes of truth', his description of power being 'bottom up' as well as 'top down' and his theory of 'surveillance' as a means of exercising power, act as a theoretical perspective to shed light on my research data.

1.5   Definitions

Throughout this thesis, reference is made to 'Neoliberalism' and the 'Education Market', therefore it is useful to outline brief definitions at this point. Further detail can be found in Chapter 3. Since the term 'Education Policy' can be defined in a number of ways, I will set out the definition I have chosen to adopt.

1.5.1 Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is an intellectual and political movement, based on Hayek's 'free market' ideas, which started to become mainstream in the late 1970s and early 80s when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan came to power. They accepted Hayek's central premise that 'competition' was 'the defining characteristic of human relations' (Monbiot, 2016). Their central belief in the importance of the market, led them to argue that governments should rule from a distance through devolved

management, reduction in state services through privatisation and competitiveness as a mechanism for quality and efficiency (Olssen et al, 2004, p. 138). They asserted that 'free-market' ideology could, and should, be applied in all contexts, not just the economy. The market demands that we 'commodify things that were not originally produced to be exchanged in the market, such as Health and Education' (Somers and Block, 2005, p. 265). Therefore, Neoliberals advocated extending market rules and principles to public and private sector organisational restructuring (Olssen et al, 2004, p 153). Their ideas have had global impact, as exemplified by the widespread deregulation of trade, and the introduction of outsourcing and competition in public services in countries across the world (Monbiot, 2016).

The enduring nature of Neoliberal ideas has prompted the comment that Neoliberalism is the 'reigning ideology of our era' (Metcalf, 2017). In Foucault's terms, its tenets have become the 'regime of truth', the discourse which society 'accepts and makes function as truth … the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth' (Foucault, 1980, cited in McHoul and Grace, p. 131). Ironically, although the creation of 'the small state' and reduction of bureaucracy are central to neoliberal ideas, it can be argued that the increased accountability measures needed to guide the system, have resulted in a strong state and expensive bureaucratic systems (Davies, 2014). Critics argue that it has led to, 'individualism, privatisation, competition and control over standards' (Hill and Cole, 2001, p. 56). Arguably, accountability systems have gone far beyond the oversight Hayek envisaged as being necessary to regulate competition. This point will be explored in Chapter 8.

1.5.2 The Education Market

In the 1980s, the Thatcher government singled out education for radical change on the lines of market ideology. The 1988 *Education Reform Act* (ERA) brought radical changes to the structure of the education system. It laid the foundations for consumer choice, competition and freedom to shape the school system. The debate about whether 'Education' should be more accurately described as a 'quasi-market', rather than a pure market (because money does not directly transfer from consumer to provider) is explored in Chapter 3. However, it is clear from the review of primary sources in Chapter 2, that terms associated with Hayek's ideology of the free market, such as choice, competition and freedom, have become embedded in educational discourse:

> The proposition that schools should compete for students in an educational marketplace and the related assertion that individuals (or their parents) should have greater freedom to choose the kind of education they will receive, has become the basis for widespread educational reforms (Olssen et al, 2004, p.198).

The *Education Reform Act* (ERA) sought to empower parents to act as consumers, for example, by giving parents choice over which school their child should attend. It introduced a national curriculum and assessment system, with the publication of performance tables encouraging competition between schools. It also freed headteachers to manage their own budgets and take their own decisions at the front line. These are all fundamental to the operation of a free market. Successive governments have built on the foundations set by ERA, so that consumer choice, competition and freedom are firmly embedded in the education system to this day.

1.5.3 Education Policy

It is important to note at the outset that my strategy is based on a particular understanding of what is meant by 'educational policies'. At its simplest, 'policy' can be described as 'a specification of principles and actions, related to educational issues, which are followed, and which are designed to bring about desired goals' (Trowler, 2003, p. 95). This 'face-value' definition influenced an approach to policy studies, termed 'Policy Science', where the focus is on policy statements themselves, as actions to be implemented, rather than the wider political and ideological context of those policies. Those who have adopted this straight-forward definition of 'policy' generally provide sequential commentary on successive government policies, with little or no discussion of ideology or impact, for example: Mackinnon and Statham, 1999 Abbott et al, 2013. If I were to adopt this approach, I would expect the 'script' of my drama to have been pre-set by the wording of education policies. Hence 'the actors' would deliver their lines by rote without adding their own interpretations and improvising.

However, the narrow approach of 'policy scientists' has been criticised as: 'seductively concrete' (Whitty, 2002, p. 14); 'mindless empiricism, contributing relatively little to knowledge and serving no science' (Halpin and Troyna,1994, p.18). For Ball, the domination of policy analysis by commentary and critique, failed to capture, 'the messy realities of influence, pressure, dogma, expediency, conflict, compromise, intransigence, resistance, error, opposition and pragmatism in the policy process' (Ball, 1990, p. 9). This is a phrase I will return to later in this thesis, because it resonates with my own experience and that expressed by the other actors

in my research. Hence, in line with Ball and those who take the approach of 'policy sociology', this research will be concerned with the complete journey of a policy from formulation to reception and implementation (Trowler, 2003). This approach defines policy as a 'politically, socially and historically contextualised practice or set of practices' (Olssen et al, 2004, p. 3). The actors in my research operate within the physical context of a Shire County and a particular historical context. The 'script' they deliver is one which is shaped by their own interpretations and modifications. Hence, my interest is in the differences between policy rhetoric and policy reality, an approach which Potterton (2020) terms 'critical policy research'.

1.6   Research Design

The sections below set the scene for my research. However, the strategy for my inquiry, including the rationale for adopting a qualitative approach and choice of semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection, is set out in detail in Chapter 4.

1.6.1 Aim and Objectives

As already stated, my research interest is in the structure of the school system, rather than other aspects of education. The aim of my research is to explore why and how the ideology of the market economy has been applied to the way the English state school system is structured. There are four key objectives. Firstly, to analyse how the rationale for the adoption of the 'market model' has been expressed, through the de-construction and interrogation of relevant education policies and documents. Secondly, to reflect on the perspectives, motivations and opinions which have guided the response of education professionals to this rationale. Thirdly, to

explore the impact the core elements of market ideology: consumer choice, competition and freedom have had on the school system. Fourthly, to consider what may happen to the structure of schools in the future.

1.6.2   Research Questions

I initially drew up three research questions:

1. How has the rationale for the 'market model' been expressed in key educational policies since 1988?
2. How have members of the education community responded to this rationale and why?
3. What have been some of the impacts of the 'market model' on the school system?

As explained later in Chapter 4, some early interviews inspired me to add a fourth question:

4. How do educational professionals envisage the structure of education evolving in the future?

1.6.3   Research Context: 'the stage'

The 'drama' is set in one particular geographical location, a large Shire County, which for the purpose of this thesis is anonymised as Ayeshire. It is a county of contrasts between rural and urban, areas of high deprivation and extreme affluence, many small villages, market towns and two larger urban areas. The state school system is diverse and fragmented. There is a marked difference between the

proportion of primary schools which are academies (19%) and secondaries (90%).

There is a long tradition of autonomous secondary schools in the county, with 67% converting as Grant Maintained (GM) Schools in the early 1990s. By 2000, 76% of Ayeshire's secondaries were Foundation Schools (New Labour's renaming of GM). The autonomy secondaries already enjoyed made conversion to academy status very straightforward. Indeed, the 64% of secondaries that converted, did so at the first opportunity, most within the first year. On the other hand, the majority of primary schools have not sought autonomy, with very few converting to GM in the 1990s and a correspondingly low response to the offer of conversion as stand-alone academies.

In January 2020, of the 249 mainstream primary state schools, almost half (44%) were faith schools (mainly Church of England). Only 30 primaries (12%) were in a MAT and 19 (7%) were stand-alone academies. A particular feature of Ayeshire is the high number of very small primaries, with 68% having fewer than 210 pupils and of these, 11 have fewer than 50 pupils. Historically, this has created division between larger and smaller schools because of the pressure small schools placed on the primary sector share of the county's funding for schools. Small schools have also faced challenges of viability.

The secondary sector is similarly diverse and fragmented. In January 2020, of the 39 mainstream secondary schools, 26 (66%) were stand-alone academies and 9 (23%) were part of a MAT. Of the remaining four secondaries, three are Foundation and one is a Community School. Arguably the greatest division between secondaries stems from the existence of seven grammar schools. There is also a University Technical College (UTC) located in the south of the county. Another significant

feature is that all five of the schools 'sponsored' by National Academy Chains pre-2017, have had to be re-brokered, two for a second time, and one has recently been allocated to a third sponsor. The significance of this fragmented nature of provision, coupled with the fact that the county has historically been amongst the lowest funded in the country, as well as a high number of surplus school places, is explored in depth in Chapter 5.

1.6.4 Research Context: the drama's historical setting

The period of time in which this thesis is set is also significant. The education policies under scrutiny span the last thirty years, from those enshrined in the *Education Reform Act* of 1988 to the significant changes enacted in the *Academies Act* of 2010, although reference will also be made to an abortive attempt to introduce new policy in the White Paper of 2016 (DfE, 2016). The outcome of the European referendum in June 2016 has dominated politics since that time, with no significant education policies affecting the structure of schools being enacted. My research interviews were conducted in the Autumn of 2018. Several participants commented on the lack of national political focus on education and the uncertainty this engendered. At that time, Brexit had been described as one of the biggest and most complex challenges in the country's history (Wright, 2018). Little did anyone know that two years later, as I write, a global pandemic has trumped all other challenges and provided some interesting insights, considered in the Epilogue to this thesis.

1.6.5 Research Strategy: understanding the script

My strategy for inquiry into my four research questions is two-fold. Firstly, in Chapter 2, I will analyse key educational policies through a review of primary sources. In my

analogy of the drama, this equates to the study of the 'script' and the mind of the writer(s). My analysis will fill, what I perceive to be, a gap in literature which deconstructs education policies in order to expose the rationale on which they are constructed. Secondly, I will analyse the way in which these education policies have been received and acted upon by 'the actors' in the drama through the method of semi structured interviews. These views, together with information from the literature review in Chapter 3, will inform the answers to the remaining three research questions.

1.7   Thesis Outline

In Chapter 2, rather than following the more usual historical, sequential approach of examining individual education policies in their entirety, I have chosen to structure my analysis on the three key themes of Hayek's ideology: consumer choice, competition and freedom. Through this approach, I intend to demonstrate the consistency of the rationale at the heart of education policies since the time of Margaret Thatcher. This consistency applies equally to governments of all political persuasions: Conservative, Labour and the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition. In contrast with most other analyses I have read, I have also chosen to explore 'behind the scenes' with a range of primary documents, rather than relying purely on the wording of White Papers, Acts of Parliament and secondary texts. The insights revealed in original papers, for example those from the Margaret Thatcher Foundation Archive (some with her personal comments scribbled in the margin), shed light on the intense debate leading up to the *Education Reform Act*. The autobiographical writing of key figures such as Kenneth Baker, Andrew Adonis, Tony Blair and David Cameron have added further insight, as have papers from Policy

Groups and Think Tanks. Chapter 2 concludes by observing that there is a clear thread of discourse that can be traced throughout education policies. Since ERA, it has been accepted as 'common sense' that consumer choice, competition and freedom, will drive school improvement. In Foucault's terminology, these three key components of Hayek's ideology have become accepted as 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1980, cited in McHoul and Grace, 1993). That is, the proposition that 'consumer choice, competition and freedom' will automatically lead to school improvement, has become a generally accepted 'truth'.

This exploration of primary sources is followed in Chapter 3, by a review of theoretical and research-based literature. This review aims to set out 'the field of study' on which my own research rests and lays the ground for the contribution my research can make to the existing body of analysis. Contemporary reflections and analysis of neoliberalism provide a critique of neoliberalism's general impact in terms of the pervasive nature of its discourse, global reach, accountability measures, inequality and transfer of public funds to the private sector. The specific application of neoliberalism to the 'quasi-market' of education is considered under the same headings used in the previous chapter: consumer choice, competition and freedom. This analysis reveals the unintended consequences of consumer choice, including the advantage exercised by more affluent parents and the risk engendered by the 'flip-side' of parental choice, the right to remove a child from school. The impact of competition is explored through responses of school leaders to league tables, which have included attempts to 'game the system'. The breakdown of partnership between schools, as a result of reinforced school hierarchies and the emergence of a new elite of school leaders, is also discussed. The chapter also explores the

response of school leaders to additional 'freedoms' and whether individual schools in a MAT have 'freedom and autonomy', given the increasing pressure for accountability. Reflections on two aspects of the possible future direction of education are outlined: a further extension of market ideology through the privatisation of education; the creation of a new 'Middle Tier' of oversight. The Chapter concludes with a reflection on the contribution my own research can make to the existing body of knowledge.

Chapter 4 sets out my Research Design and explores my methodology, as well as my approach to data collection, analysis and evaluation. The chapter also sets out further analysis of the theoretical perspectives and my personal ontological position which has guided my choice of a qualitative approach to this research. As acknowledged earlier, I am 'on the stage' alongside the rest of the cast in my analogy of a drama. Chapter 4 explores the challenges and opportunities this presents and concludes that, to aid transparency, my personal contributions will be clearly marked in the text as 'Vignettes'. This chapter also includes the rationale for my choice of semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection and a consideration of the ethical issues which need to be addressed. The chapter concludes with reflections on 'the story' behind the data collection process, what Holliday (2002) terms 'the workings out'. The, often unexpected, insights I have gained from these reflections has brought greater depth to the data I have collected.

Chapter 4 is followed by a suite of three chapters presenting my research findings. Chapter 5 serves as an introductory background to the research context and my participants. Its purpose is to provide an overarching analysis of the context of my

research and to aid reflection on how far its findings can be generalised and replicated elsewhere. It includes an analysis of the physical location of my research encompassing: the geography, types of schools, local politics, funding and culture. The chapter also includes reflections on what the data suggests about, not only the personal beliefs and motivations of the actors, but also the language they use to express their views. It concludes with a reflection about the influence of pragmatism, as opposed to ideology, at a local level.

Chapter 6 presents an analysis of research findings under the headings of consumer choice and competition. It examines the impact of diversity of choice, coupled with surplus school places. These are seen as creating a 'buyers' market' for affluent parents and driving competition between schools. Lack of trust, reinforced hierarchies of schools and school leaders, fear of future compulsion to become academies, or to join MATs, and the negative impact on disadvantaged children are all identified as perceived consequences of competition. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the recurrent theme of 'fear' expressed by actors describing their own experiences and that of others. This sense of 'fear' is explored through the lens of Foucault's assertion that the state exercises power, through instilling a sense of constant surveillance in order to engender compliance from its subjects (Foucault 1977, cited in McHoul and Grace, 1993).

Chapter 7 presents an analysis of research findings on the third aspect of Hayek's ideology: freedom. The data questions the reality of the freedoms offered by academy conversion and opens up the question of whether individual schools in a MAT can accurately be described as possessing 'freedom and autonomy'. This is

particularly the case in MATs which have introduced standardised procedures and processes. The source of the power, behind what some participants consider to be a concerted drive to introduce standardisation, is explored through the lens of Foucault's thinking about power and knowledge (Foucault 1980, cited in McHoul and Grace, 1993). The chapter concludes with actors' speculations about the plot developments they predict for the next series of our ongoing drama.

In conclusion, the final chapter sets out my response to each of the research questions. It asserts that the repetition of the three central tenets of Hayek's ideology on which this thesis is structured, has created what Foucault would term, a 'regime of truth' (Foucault 1980, cited in McHoul and Grace, 1993). The centrality of consumer choice, competition and freedom to school improvement have become an accepted reality or truth. The core 'truths' that, parents should act as consumers, competition drives up standards, and freedom leads to innovation, are rarely analysed and questioned. Education policies are more concerned with the practicalities of these market conditions being embedded in practice, rather than a fundamental discussion of whether they are desirable and will have the desired outcomes. It is apparent from my data that school leaders and others have not always reacted as politicians might have expected, confirming the view held by many, including Ball (1990) and Potterton (2020), that there is a difference between policy rhetoric and policy reality. In my conclusion, I consider the unintended consequences of education policies, particularly on equality of opportunity for disadvantaged pupils. I also conclude that there is evidence to suggest the imposition of greater levels of accountability and increased control by central government and Trust Boards, threatens the freedom of individual schools in a MAT,

and furthermore, that a case can be made for characterising MATs as quasi-Local Authorities. I discuss whether the drive to apply 'market ideology' to the education system was inherently flawed from the outset.

My thesis concludes with what I have termed 'The Epilogue', since it seemed remiss not to make reference to one of the most significant events in history, the global coronavirus pandemic that is taking place as I complete this thesis. Two aspects have relevance to my research. Firstly, the challenge presented by an unprecedented level of need, to a conservative government which has traditionally accepted Hayek's ideology of 'small state' government. Secondly, the need for local leadership to manage school provision for vulnerable children and to facilitate the reopening of schools. Regional School Commissioners and Multi-academy trusts whose remit crosses several LA boundaries have not been well placed to provide this leadership hence the role has fallen to local authorities once again.

Chapter 2:   'The Prescribed Script'

2.1   Introduction

Through a review of primary sources, this chapter will explore the influence of Hayek's free market ideology on the educational policies that have shaped the structure of the English state system since 1988. Section 2.3 sets out the overarching philosophical positions of the governments of Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and David Cameron, tracing the direct relationship between Margaret Thatcher's free-market ideology, the 'Third Way' of New Labour, and 'Big Society' under David Cameron. The short-lived nature of the government under Teresa May led to no major education policies being enacted (although there was an initiative to encourage grammar school expansion, referenced in section 2.4). The rest of the chapter tracks the three key themes of Hayek's ideology: consumer choice, competition and freedom. Ball uses the term 'policy technologies' for these types of concepts, 'Policy technologies constitute a 'one-size-fits-all' model for the 'transformation' and 'modernisation' of public sector organisations and systems…they provide a new language… they articulate new ways of thinking about what we do' (Ball, 2013, p. 49). For Ball, policy works in 'very practical and material ways', through the installation of these policy devices (Ball, 2013, p. 17). Thus, in my analogy of the drama, these policy technologies are the basis of the 'prescribed' script for delivery by my actors. Consumer choice, competition and freedom are explored individually and the rationale for each one analysed and tracked over time. An overview of the relevant education policies and White/Green Papers is presented in Table 2.

Year	Act or White/ Green Paper	Prime Minister	Secretary of State	Structural Change(s)
1988	*Education Reform Act* (ERA, 1988)	Margaret Thatcher (Conservative)	Kenneth Baker	Local Management of Schools (LMS) Open Enrolment Grant Maintained Status (GM)
1992	*Choice and Diversity – A New Framework for Schools* (DfES, 1992)	John Major (Conservative)	John Patten	Extension of GM status School specialisms Ofsted formed
2003	*Every Child Matters* (H.M. Treasury, 2003)	Tony Blair (Labour)	Charles Clarke	LEAs became LAs Education departments combined with Children's Social Services under a Director of Children's Services (DCS)
2005	*Higher Standards, Better Schools for All: More Choice for Parents and Pupils* (DfES, 2005)	Tony Blair (Labour)	Ruth Kelly (Andrew Adonis, Minister of State)	Academies
2010	*The Importance of Teaching* (DfE 2010)	David Cameron (Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition)	Michael Gove	Academy conversions ('stand-alone) Free Schools University Technical Colleges (UTCs)
2016	*Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE, 2016)	David Cameron (Conservative)	Nicky Morgan	All remaining maintained schools to be academies by 2022. Most academies to be in MATs Further Free Schools and UTCs

Table 2: Key Acts of Parliament and White/Green Papers

2.2   Primary Sources

The Margaret Thatcher Foundation Archive (MTFA) is a rich source of information about the intense ideological debate carried out behind the scenes in the 1970s and throughout all of Thatcher's time in government. Since many of these documents have been declassified under the thirty-years rule, this level of background detail is not yet available for more recent governments. The ideological debate revealed in the Archive, not only led to the *Education Reform Act* (1988) (ERA), but also laid the foundation for future reforms, including academies and free schools. The archive reveals the powerful influence of political advisors and Think Tanks, who Chitty asserts, 'usurped the key function of the Education Department's bureaucracy' (Chitty, 2014, p. xv). The Archive includes personal briefings for Margaret Thatcher, in which her policy advisors commented on proposals drawn up by civil servants. The Policy Unit was the Cabinet, 'in all but name' (Chitty, 2014, p.124). Proposals from the Policy Unit and Think Tanks were seen to be vital to counteract the Department for Education and Science's (DES), 'strong in-house anti-market ideology' (Baker, 1993, p 168). This is a significant assertion since Baker had first-hand experience of working with civil servants in the DES when he was Education Secretary from 1986 to 1989.

The Centre for Policy Studies' (CPS) website is a further rich source of policy ideas underpinning Conservative party education reforms. The CPS was established by Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph in 1974. Kenneth Baker described it as 'an influential power-house of ideas and policies for 1980s conservatism' (Baker, 1993, p. 162). It is interesting to note that some ideas were well ahead of their time in

terms of implementation. Some proposals, not enacted until the *Academies Act* (DfE, 2010) are set out in documents published decades earlier (for example, Cox and Marks, 1981; Williams, 2000). This influence continues to the present day, with the CPS described in a recent survey as: 'the most influential think tank among Conservative MPs' (CPS, 2019). Clearly, the CPS web site is not an unbiased source, but the article does state that the survey was carried out by ComRes, an independent research company, which does provide some credibility to the statement.

Other primary sources referenced in this chapter are Parliamentary papers (including official records of Parliamentary debates from Hansard), speeches, letters, media articles and autobiographies of key political figures including Kenneth Baker (Education Secretary 1986 - 1989), Andrew Adonis (Minister for Schools 2005 - 2008), Tony Blair (Prime Minister 1997 - 2007) and David Cameron (Prime Minister 2010 – 2016). It is of course important to note that autobiographies are usually written several years after the events they describe, opening them up to the criticism that they may be coloured by hindsight. In addition, the book, *Take Care, Mr Baker!* edited by the political journalist, Julian Haviland (Haviland, 1988*)* is a particularly rich source of competing views about ERA. It contains an edited selection of the 18,000 responses made to the Government's official consultation on *The Education Reform Bill*. In his Editor's Preface, (Haviland, 1988, p. v – viii) Haviland addressed potential criticism that the responses he had selected were overwhelmingly critical. He defended his selection, arguing that he had accurately reflected the 'weight of advice offered' (p. viii). He asserted that he had particularly sought out responses from 'eloquent Conservative witnesses' (p. viii), for example, by quoting at length from the

Centre for Policy Studies (CPS). On its cover, the book is described as 'neither polemical nor partisan… intended to promote the widest and best-informed debate possible on this crucial piece of legislation' (Haviland, 1988, outside back cover). It is noteworthy that many of these contributions echo my own research findings outlined in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

2.3   Political Philosophies

When Margaret Thatcher came to power, the Conservative Party already had a clear ideological position based on free-market ideas. In contrast, New Labour's political philosophy of 'The Third Way' emerged once in office. For David Cameron, 'Big Society' became a central theme.

2.3.1 Margaret Thatcher and Market Ideology 1979 - 1990

The Margaret Thatcher Foundation Archive (MTFA) has 110 references to Hayek, revealing the influence his thinking had, not only on Thatcher herself, but also on Cabinet members such as Norman Tebbit (Bourne, 2012). The Archive reveals the enduring influence Hayek had on Margaret Thatcher. There is evidence of frequent communication between Hayek and Thatcher. In 1979, Hayek sent a congratulatory telegram to Thatcher when she became Prime Minister, worded, 'Thank you for the best present on my eightieth birthday anyone could have given me'. Thatcher replied, 'I am very proud to have learnt so much from you over the past few years, I hope that some of these ideas will be put into practice by my Government in the next few months' (Thatcher, 1984). In his biography of Thatcher, Campbell describes her producing a well-worn copy of *The Road to Serfdom* from her handbag at a CPS seminar declaring, 'This is what we believe' (Campbell, 2000, p. 365). In a personal

letter to Hayek in 1989, Thatcher asserted that, none of what she and President Reagan had accomplished, 'would have been possible without the values and beliefs to set us on the right road and provide the sense of direction' (Metcalf, 2017, p.8). Regular articles from Hayek were published in the British press, including *The Economist* and *The Times*. Such was Hayek's influence, Keith Joseph had originally proposed calling The Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) think tank, 'The Hayek Foundation' (Bourne, 2012).

In 2011, when the archive of documents on Thatcher's relationship with Hayek was first published, Bourne (Head of Economic Research at the Centre for Policy Studies) commented that Thatcher was not, 'a slavish follower of any thinker', but Hayek had 'a symbolic significance to Thatcherites in their search for a new approach. It was as a political and economic philosopher that Hayek mattered, not as an economist' (Bourne, 2012). As early as 1981, the link between Hayek's ideology and Conservative Party policy was explicitly expressed in a paper for the CPS, 'we need to replace socialist, totalitarian uniformity with Conservative diversity and freedom of choice' (Cox and Marks, 1981 p. 17). This approach was summed up by Thatcher in her speech to the Conservative Central Council in 1986, 'We believe that given opportunity, offered the chance, the human spirit will find a better path than the State could ever devise…the task of government is to provide a framework within which everyone is free to pursue a better life' (Thatcher, 1986). This encapsulates both the 'freedom' advocated by Hayek, and the 'framework' Hayek accepted was necessary to ensure that competitors in the market abided by the same rules. On the 3rd of June 1995, in a speech of tribute to Keith Joseph (Secretary of State for Education 1981 – 1986) following his death, Thatcher said,

'Keith, and all who took part in the work of the Centre, thus played a leading part in the ideological battles which swept the century and have shaped our times' (Thatcher, 1995).

During the Thatcher government, *The Education Reform Act* (ERA, 1988) was the key education policy. It radically changed the structure of the education system. During its second reading, Baker summed up its 169 pages in three words, 'standards, freedom and choice' (Baker, 1987). Words echoed by Thatcher in a speech to the Conservative Party Conference held in Cheltenham in October 1990, when she summarised reform of education as being based on: 'freedom, choice and competition' (Thatcher, 1990).

2.3.2 New Labour and 'The Third Way' 1997 – 2010

The link with Hayek's market ideology is less explicitly articulated in reforms under the Labour government of Tony Blair, but elements are clearly identifiable, particularly the notion of 'freedom'. In contrast to Margaret Thatcher, when Blair became leader of the opposition, and subsequently Prime Minister, there was no clearly articulated policy direction for the Labour Party. In his autobiography, Blair states, 'We hadn't anything like a fully formed corpus of policy. We were much less prepared for government than we should have been' (Blair, 2010, p. 87). Blair outlines his determination to re-write Labour's 'Clause IV' which expressed the party's commitment to socialism, calling for 'common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange' (Blair, 2010, p. 76). Blair had concluded that Britain needed the industrial and economic reforms of Thatcher, rather than the vision espoused by Clause IV. However, he criticised Thatcher for 'the way she did

it, which was often very ideological, sometimes unnecessarily so' (Blair, 2010, p. 99).

Blair wanted a new direction, which would combine social justice with 'new ways to

fit the modern world' (Blair, 2010, p. 84). In 1996, he said that his three priorities for

government would be, 'Education, education, education'. This strap line was

intended to illustrate that New Labour saw the role of the state as 'enabling the

fulfilment of potential, not controlling lives or business' (Blair, 2010, p. 103).

Blair called this new approach, 'The Third Way'. This has been described as 'New

Labour's attempt to build itself an ideological foundation… a new ideological

compass' (Mellbye, 2003). In an article outlining the 'Third Way', published in *The

Independent* newspaper, Blair argued:

> Liberals asserted the primacy of individual liberty in the market economy;
> social democrats promoted social justice with the state as its main agent.
> There is no necessary conflict between the two, accepting as we do now that
> state power is one means to achieve our goals, but not the only one and
> emphatically not an end in itself (Blair, 1998).

In the same article, Blair disagreed with one of the central tenets of Hayek's

ideology, arguing that, 'Human nature is co-operative as well as competitive, self-

less as well as self-interested'. He criticised the Thatcher government for preaching

'the language of national competitiveness and individual self-improvement'. In his

account of the early years of New Labour in government, Andrew Rawnsley (political

journalist) quoted from a pamphlet for the Fabian Society, written by Blair in 1999:

'This is the Third Way. A belief in social justice and economic dynamism, ambition

and compassion, fairness and enterprise going together' (Blair, 1999, cited in

Rawnsley, 2001, p. 311).

Blair's emphasis on social justice is incompatible with Hayek's ideology. Hayek accepted that a basic level of support should be provided for those most in need, but it should be no more than that. It was up to each individual to create their own success. However, in line with Hayek, 'The Third Way' also advocated the policy technologies of freedom and support for consumer choice. In his autobiography, Blair quoted from a speech he made to Labour's National Policy Forum in 2005: 'It is now time to push forward, faster and on all fronts, to open up the system, break down its monoliths, put the parent and pupil and patient and law-abiding citizen at the centre of the system' (Blair, 2010, p. 576).

In his autobiography, *A Journey*, Blair (2010) explained that, at the outset, he had thought it possible to raise standards without structural change to schools, but a major structural change was instigated in local government by integrating services for children and young people in order to improve outcomes. *Every Child Matters* (H.M. Treasury, 2003) brought radical change which combined local authorities' Education Departments with Children's Social Care under the leadership of a newly created role of Director of Children's Services (DCS). Local Education Authorities (LEAs) became Local Authorities (LAs). Eventually Blair, frustrated by the lack of progress in turning round failing schools, came to realise that structural change to the school system was also necessary, 'unless you change structures, you cannot raise standards more than incrementally' (Blair, 2010, p. 480). This led to the adoption of a more overtly 'free-market' approach to 'free the system up' by introducing competition and blurring distinctions with the private sector. Blair argued:

> the distinction between public and private sector was bogus at all points other
> than one: a service you paid for; and one you got free…this should not define
> how it is run, managed and operated… Just as private sector service was

driven by risk taking and innovation, so we should be freeing up the front line of public services to do the same (Blair, 2010, p. 284).

The main distinction between Blair's reforms and those of Margaret Thatcher was that, whereas Thatcher had given 'freedoms' such as Grant Maintained (GM) status to schools which were already performing well, Blair wanted to focus on the poorest schools. This was in effect market ideology coupled with social justice (Blair, 2010, p. 581).

2.3.3 David Cameron and 'The Big Society' 2010 – 2016

In his autobiography, *For the Record*, David Cameron described Blair as, 'the post Thatcher leader the British people wanted. He combined pro-enterprise economics with a more compassionate approach to social policy and public services' (Cameron, 2019, p. 53). In 2005, Cameron had recognised that Conservatives needed to be 'heirs to Blair', in the same way Blair had been 'heir to Thatcher' (Cameron, 2019, p. 53). He wanted to show that 'the Conservative means that had worked so well in delivering prosperity in our economy: decentralisation, choice, competition, transparency, accountability, could also deliver better public services and a stronger society' (Cameron, 2019, p. 205). In his view, 'the right had focused too much on markets; the left had focused too much on the state. Both forgot the space in between: society' (Cameron, 2019, p. 205). Thus 'Big Society' became a key theme of David Cameron's period as Prime Minister. In terms of restructuring the school system, Cameron wanted to go beyond Thatcher and Blair, whose policies he characterised as 'lacking scale', so that all schools 'would be free to excel' (Cameron, 2019, p. 220).

2.3.4 Future Direction?

Since David Cameron left office in 2016, there has been no clearly articulated political vision for the future direction of the education system. Historically, the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) think tank has been at the forefront of exploring ideas implemented many years later. A CPS article by Dominic Raab (Conservative MP), '*10 ways to strengthen competition and extend customer clout*', is a possible indication of future direction. In this article, Raab proposed that the government should lift the bar on profit-making companies running academies and free schools, as long as a minimum of half the profits are reinvested in the school (Raab, 2013).

On the other hand, in an interview with Nicola Woolcock, the Education Editor at *The Times* newspaper, Damian Hinds, Secretary of State for Education under Theresa May, indicated a move away from a 'business-model' for schools, suggesting that academies should abandon business jargon and corporate names. They should stop using the terms, 'multi-academy trust', 'CEO', 'academisation' and 're-brokering' in order to help parents understand the academy system better. Woolcock quotes Hinds as saying:

> In the early days of academies, we used to talk about autonomy and freedom; these days it is a more balanced message, about autonomy but also the trust you join. Schools on a human scale being able to share experiences and resources, enhancing career pathways and taking the burden off individual schools. Some trusts are looser federations, some are tighter-knit groups (Woolcock, 2019).

However, a month after this interview, Teresa May resigned as Prime Minister and Damian Hinds was replaced, resulting in no changes being made to legislation.

2.4   Consumer Choice

Consumer choice was integral to Hayek's ideology of the market. He argued that it would drive competition, forcing providers to improve their efficiency and effectiveness in order to succeed in the marketplace. There were three main aspects of consumer choice in the *Education Reform Act* (ERA): funding for school places, open enrolment and diversity of provision. The extensive discussions taking place behind the scenes, are explored in some detail below because they are central to all future reforms to the school system. Indeed, the fundamental elements of consumer choice as enacted in ERA are still in place to this day.

2.4.1   Consumer Choice: School funding

One stark difference between the state education system and 'the market', as described by Hayek, is that education is funded directly by the state with no money changing hands between consumers (parents) and providers (schools). The conundrum of how to facilitate parents to act as 'consumers' exercised the minds of free-marketeers from the early 1980s onwards.

In accordance with Hayekian principles, Selsdon, the free-market pressure group formed in 1973 by a group of libertarian Conservatives, argued that the open market was not only applicable to 'groceries' but should also extend to 'human commodities' such as education (MTFA, 1973). Their early focus was on how parents could be empowered to be consumers, despite no money changing hands. Their initial proposal was a 'voucher redeemable by parents as they find appropriate'. In a 'policy-study' prepared by the Education Study Group at the CPS, *The Right to Learn: A Conservative Approach to Education* (Cox and Marks, 1981), the same

challenge was addressed. Cox and Marks substituted the term 'voucher' with 'education allowance', proposing that these would be given to parents to spend in schools of their choice. They argued that this would give parents more power and influence and ensure that schools responded to what parents wanted. As a consequence, financial decision making would be de-centralised and full financial responsibility given to those running schools.

The notion of 'vouchers', 'education allowances' or 'credits' (the latter term suggested by Margaret Thatcher herself), was a contentious subject of debate for over a decade. Proponents argued that vouchers would enable education to be a 'market' in a more traditional sense, particularly if parents were able to exchange their voucher at any school, including independent schools. In this way, choice and diversity in the market would be extended. Documents in the MTFA, such as those referenced below, reveal that the Treasury strongly favoured this approach, seeing it not only as a way of furthering free-market ideals but also as a way of reducing public expenditure on education. Politicians, such as William Whitelaw (Home Secretary), welcomed vouchers as a means of achieving a parallel ideological purpose, that of reducing the power of local education authorities. He described education as, 'the cuckoo in the nest which has grown so huge and greedy' at the expense of other services. Rather than a national system, locally administered, Whitelaw characterised education as 'largely nationally financed but almost wholly locally controlled'. He concluded, 'the "education problem" is one and the same as the "local government problem". It is impossible to solve one without solving the other.' His solution was to 'decentralise power to parents...some form of education ticket or allowance is the rational outcome' (Whitelaw,1982). The Treasury

suggested a 'more thorough-going market approach' by generating income from school fees and drastically scaling down, or abolishing Local Education Authorities, 'many of whose functions would be rendered superfluous' (H.M. Treasury,1982). A further letter, from the Treasury to Keith Joseph, in January 1983, explicitly favours vouchers because 'at a stroke some 60% of local authority spending would have been transferred to central government' (H.M. Treasury,1983). In his article, *Power to the People!* the philosopher, Anthony Flew (a libertarian-leaning conservative) argued that vouchers would give parents 'the power of the purse…to start a voucher scheme is to begin to introduce competition and disciplines of the market into what has become, and is, a bureaucratic and state monopolist system' (Flew, 1983, p. 10).

Despite the enthusiasm for vouchers shown by Keith Joseph and the Treasury, political advisers were less convinced. The Policy Group on Education advised against any mention of vouchers in the 1983 *Conservative Election Manifesto* because of the strength of public opinion against them. An assertion by the Policy Group that 'many parents lack the knowledge and motivation to make the best choices for their children' is underlined in red by Thatcher, with a question mark in the margin. However, the paper supported the idea that there should be financial autonomy for schools (MTFA, 1983). Reflecting back on his time as Education Secretary, Kenneth Baker asserted that civil servants in the Department for Education and Science (DES) had deliberately 'scuppered' education vouchers by, at first delaying them and then subsequently proposing a scheme which was so radical it, 'frightened Cabinet and was rejected as unacceptable' (Baker, 1993, p. 167).

The Policy Group's suggestion of financial autonomy for schools was taken further in a very detailed 'Secret and Personal' paper headed *More Efficient Schooling* by Keith Joseph in December 1984. This laid the foundation of the *Education Reform Act* of 1988. He argued that LEAs should be empowered to convert some or all of their schools into 'largely free- standing institutions with a qualified autonomy'. The role of parents as consumers would be achieved by making each school's income dependent on the number of pupils it attracted so that the school would 'fashion its educational provision in response to demand' (Joseph, 1984). In an earlier paper, Joseph had proposed that legislation should be prepared to devolve financial responsibility to schools and introduce open enrolment (Joseph, 1983b). By 1986, proposals for a new type of school, which at that time were called 'Grant Aided Schools', were under development, although some politicians still argued for a top-up fee to be paid by parents (MTFA, 1986). A strongly worded briefing from Keith Joseph to Thatcher, in March 1986, advocated 'a sweeping reform package' for education, which included amongst other things, converting maintained schools into autonomous bodies competing for parental custom via a system of 'credits' (vouchers), (Joseph, 1986).

This proposal was the basis for the system of 'Local Management of Schools' (LMS), which is still in place today. School budgets, which had previously been held by LEAs, were delegated to schools so that heads and governors could take responsibility for financial decisions. The level of funding was determined by the number of pupils each school attracted. Although parents did not 'pay' for a school place, the link was made between a school's popularity and the funding it received.

Reflecting back some years later, in his autobiography, Baker described this as, 'real choice for parents, and schools which responded to that choice by improving themselves' (Baker, 1993, p. 212). This aspect of ERA was generally welcomed by those who contributed to the government's consultation. Philip Merridale, Conservative Chairman of Hampshire Education Authority, asserted, 'Few sensible people would wish to defend the notion that the head of a multi-million-pound enterprise should have to seek consent before having a broken window repaired' (Haviland, 1988, p. 137). However, some consultees, for example, South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council (Labour), argued that the assumption that greater freedom led to greater efficiency in the use of resources had not been proven (Haviland, 1988, p. 148). The Secondary Heads' Association (SHA) recognised major advantages in LMS, such as 'effective decisions made at the point of action', but they also highlighted three potential problems: the difficulty of identifying an equitable formula for allocating school funding; schools being blamed for decisions about future funding cuts; lack of training for school leaders (Haviland, 1988, p. 151). The National and Local Government Officers' Association warned of the potential lack of accountability for public funds (Haviland, 1988, p. 155). The Secondary Heads' Association's recognition of the difficulty of determining a fair formula for allocating individual school budgets, is particularly pertinent to Ayeshire. This is discussed in some detail in Chapter 5. Findings from my research (Chapter 7) also raise concerns about lack of accountability for public funds.

In his autobiography, *Education, Education, Education*, Andrew Adonis (2012) stressed the importance of LMS. He recognised that LMS had been accepted by all political parties and had 'became the bedrock of subsequent reforms to enhance

school autonomy' (Adonis, 2012, p. 29). *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010) included an echo back to the discussion in the 1980s about empowering parents to be more involved with the monetary exchange for school provision. 'Greater transparency in the funding system will mean every parent will know the money which is allocated for their child's education, the amount spent by local government, and the amount available for the school' (DfE, 2010, p.12).

Over time, historical anomalies resulted in schools in different parts of the country receiving different levels of per-capita funding. Campaign groups such as the f40 group, representing the 42 lowest funded English local authorities, of which Ayeshire is one, lobbied for a national formula to equalise funding. The government finally agreed a new funding formula (DfE, 2017), but, at the time of writing, this has yet to be fully implemented. However, despite intense debate about the amount of money schools should receive, the principle of per-capita funding, with school budgets largely determined by the number of pupils they attract, has become integral to the English state education system.

2.4.2 Consumer Choice: Open Enrolment

During the second reading of the *Education Reform Bill* in December 1987, Baker described open enrolment as 'a natural extension of our concern to maximise parental choice' because it would prevent local education authorities putting artificial ceilings on the number of pupils a school could admit, in order to spread intakes evenly between popular and less popular schools (Baker, 1987). As Margaret Thatcher had announced at the Conservative Party Conference in 1987, popular

schools would be able to take in as many children as space would permit (Thatcher, 1987).

According to the consultation responses collated by Haviland, this proposal attracted criticism at the time from across the political and professional spectrum. Some comments have proved to be prophetic in the light of future experience. Many LEAs, including: North Yorkshire County Council (Conservative), Birmingham City Council (Labour), Buckinghamshire County Council (Conservative) and Surrey County Council (Conservative), argued that the operation of market forces would prevent them from being able to take a strategic approach. The governors of Hove Park School, East Sussex expressed their view strongly using a 'market' analogy, 'Planning education provision becomes impossible – this is not simply closing one supermarket because it is unprofitable and opening another somewhere else' (Haviland, 1988, p.188). Other consultees, such as York Diocesan Council of Education, indicated the threat to the quality of successful schools from the pressure to admit more pupils (Haviland, 1988, p. 172). The Secondary Heads' Association and the National Association of Inspectors and Education Advisers both pointed out the naivety of the phrase, 'popular schools' and the volatility of a school's reputation. They argued that parents sometimes made judgements based on incomplete, biased or out-of-date information (Haviland, 1988, p. 174 - 178). Perhaps surprisingly, the Conservative Education Association (CEA) concurred with that judgement, pointing out that popularity went in phases, often linked to a particular popular headteacher, 'The idea that unpopular schools can simply be left to decline and ultimately close through lack of business is not one the CEA can support. We do not believe that market forces alone should determine educational provision' (Haviland, 1988, p 184).

York Diocesan Council of Education expressed concern for disadvantaged pupils (Haviland, 1988, p. 172). Nottinghamshire County Council (Conservative) Education Committee also questioned whether, 'in a system of market forces, what choices are available for those who are neither socially mobile nor academically able?' (Haviland 1988, p. 171). The Children's Legal Aid Centre pointed out, 'in other areas of consumer choice, purchasers who make the wrong decision suffer the consequences themselves, but in the field of schooling, it is their children who suffer. So, the simple 'justice' of the marketplace is clearly inappropriate' (Haviland, 1988, p. 180). The Assistant Masters' and Mistresses' Association and the Commission for Racial Equality pointed to the risk of open enrolment resulting in racial segregation (Haviland, 1988, p. 179 - 182). The National Confederation of Parent-Teacher Associations questioned the practicality of all parents having a genuine choice of a school outside their local area because of transport costs (Haviland, 1988, p.173). These criticisms of 'market ideology' resonate with my research findings, discussed in Chapter 8.

Documents in the Margaret Thatcher Foundation Archive (MTFA), referenced below, reflect the tension between the reluctance of civil servants to implement radical change, and the determination of policy advisers and politicians for that change to happen immediately. The Policy Unit accused the DES of giving 'feeble arguments' and responses 'which the private sector would simply not put up with'. In particular, they accused the DES of failing to appreciate the significant benefits of greater choice for parents and therefore the urgency of getting something started. 'At the time when the new Education Act comes into force it is far more important that the

government is seen to be helping parents than supporting creaking bureaucracies' (MTFA, 1988).

In 2005, the role of parents acting as consumers to drive improvement in schools was accepted, and indeed, reinforced by New Labour. The White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All: More choice for parents and pupils* (DfES, 2005) introduced several measures to ensure 'the system as a whole is increasingly driven by parents and by choice'. These included: support for good schools to expand or federate to meet consumer demand; improved information for parents; measures to make the admissions system fairer at secondary level. 'Choice advisers' were appointed to help 'the least well-off parents to exercise their choices' and the right to free transport to schools further away was introduced, to give those on low incomes some of the advantages exercised by more affluent families. In addition, 'where there is strong demand or dissatisfaction with existing choices, local authorities will have to respond to their concerns' (DfES 2005, p. 10). Although the Academy programme was targeted at failing schools in disadvantaged areas, Adonis sought to make them 'attractive to aspirational parents, including middle class parents' (Adonis, 2012, p. 128).

In the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010), the Coalition Government put into practice ideas that had actually been put forward ten years earlier by Sean Williams, when he was a member of the No.10 Policy Unit. Williams had argued that there should be no restriction on parental freedom of choice (Williams, 2000, p. 33). Good schools should be able to expand, and bad schools should improve or face closure. He admitted that 'dangers of the market system are

inherent in the school system' because there are 'very few products or services consumers are legally obliged to buy, but parents are obliged to send their children to schools' (Williams, 2000, p. 34). 'LEAs should have no direct role in provision of education in their areas and should be abolished' (Williams, 2000, p. 38). In a direct echo of Hayek's ideology, David Cameron was as keen to empower the people who used public services, as much as those who delivered them, by giving 'patients, passengers and parents real and meaningful choices, including the ability to take their custom elsewhere, otherwise we would be swapping one monopoly for another' (Cameron, 2019, p.123). In his speech to the CPS, Michael Gove, recognised that 'richer parents can either go private or move-house in order to get the school they want …parents in some parts of the country do not have 'a preference' among local schools because they consider them all bad' (Gove, 2009, p. 16). *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010) advocated that good schools should be able to expand in order to meet parental demand. Academies were allowed to increase the number of children they could enrol above their planned admission number (PAN). Significantly, those academies that were also grammar schools, were able to expand for the first time since the ban on additional grammar places was introduced in 1998.

2.4.3 Consumer Choice: Diversity of Provision

In addition to empowering consumers through changes to the funding mechanism and open enrolment, the Thatcher government wanted to extend the range of choice for parents by increasing diversity of provision and thus end the monopoly of suppliers. In an interview with a journalist from the magazine, *Woman's Own* in 1987, Thatcher is reported as saying that she was 'giving a wider choice of public provision for people who are not satisfied so that those who produce the services

shall not be able to say 'Look! This is it! Take it or leave it!' (Keay,1987). Thus, ERA extended the choice for parents to include City Technology Colleges (CTC) and Grant Maintained schools (GM) as well as comprehensive, grammar, faith and non-denominational schools. In the following thirty years, choice was further extended to include: Specialist Schools; Academies of different types: sponsored, stand-alone and those in Multi-academy trusts; Free Schools; University Technical Colleges; Studio Schools.

CTCs were secondary schools which had a specialised curriculum. They were outside LEA control, with employers and industry involved in their funding and running. In his autobiography, Baker describes CTCs as:

> key in the process of educational reform because they were the first element to be announced and incorporated many of the changes that I wanted to introduce to the whole system – parental choice, per-capita funding, local managerial control, and independence from the LEA (Baker, 1993, p.188).

An initial, small-scale introduction of CTCs had persuaded the DES and Treasury that these types of reforms could be successfully implemented. Thus, leaving the way open for Grant Maintained (GM) schools, which were modelled on CTCs. During the Second Reading of the *Education Reform Bill*, Baker stated that the rationale for GM schools was to 'widen choice for many parents in the state-maintained sector for whom, all too often, the only choice is to take it or leave it' (Baker, 1987). The Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) wanted to go even further by opening brand new GM schools (Haviland, 1988, p. 105) but this was not to be introduced until 2010, with the advent of Free Schools. The ERA consultation raised several issues relating to GM schools, particularly the parent ballot required before a school could apply for

GM status. The Association of Metropolitan Authorities argued that 'choice will be exercised by particular groups of parents and a particular time and will bind future generations of parents and children to a given form of education and type of school' (Haviland, 1988, p. 121). Indeed, the Association of County Councils pointed out that a proposal for GM could be carried by the votes of parents of children who would have already left the school by the time it opted out (Haviland, 1988, p. 123). In, *The Turbulent Years: My Life in Politics,* Kenneth Baker (1993) reflected on the contentious background to the introduction of GM schools. He asserted that he had been forced to give assurances that GM schools would retain their character and reflect this in their admissions policies. Eventually, after much opposition from Labour-held LEAs, in 1992, the Labour Party recommended that local authorities should no longer oppose applications for GM status (Baker, 1993, p. 220).

In 1992, John Major's government continued the theme of diversity with the White Paper, *Choice and Diversity*, based on 'the great themes of quality, diversity, parental choice, school autonomy and accountability'. Parental choice was to be enhanced by 'opening the way to greater variety in education through the formation of new schools and by encouraging specialisation' (DfES, 1992, p. v). These schools would have a distinctive ethos, based on a specific curriculum area such as technology, languages and sport and would be allowed to select pupils with aptitude in the school's specialist area.

According to Adonis, New Labour's Academy Programme was primarily to address the problem of failing schools. However, academies also needed to be attractive to more advantaged families because, as Adonis had observed, 'schools with very high

proportions of pupils from very poor families only flourish where they also recruit from among the aspirant in their local communities' (Adonis, 2012, p.129). The White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (DfES, 2005) committed New Labour to having 'schools that parents are pleased to choose between… a more diverse set of providers that allows parents to choose the school that suits their child…to respond to parental demand, we need to expand choice, create real diversity of provision, and to ensure that the benefits of choice are available to all' (DfES, 2005, p.17). This diversity would be created by harnessing 'the energy and talents' of educational charities, faith groups, parents and community groups and other not-for-profit providers to run schools' (DfES, 2005, p. 20).

The next major step in widening the diversity of provision, was the extension of New Labour's academy programme under the Coalition Government. This will be discussed in more detail in section 2.4, since its driving rationale was 'freedom' rather than 'consumer choice'. However, a further structural change of relevance to consumer choice, was the creation of 'Free Schools'. Parents and others would be supported to set up their own new 'Free School' if they were dissatisfied with schools in their local area (DfE, 2010). In fact, this proposal had been put forward a decade earlier (Williams, 2000). Free Schools were to be run in the same way as academies, outside LA control. Michael Gove said that 'Free Schools had provided parents 'with choice they've been denied by local bureaucratic monopolies' (Gove, 2011). Suella Braverman M.P. (Conservative) described Free Schools as a 'flag-ship policy' because it demonstrated that the education system could adapt to consumer demand (Braverman, 2019).

One of the few interventions in education by Teresa May's government, which is discussed further in Chapters 5 and 6, was the financial incentive for grammar schools to take more children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This was in recognition of the need to expand the number of good school places available to all families 'not just to those who can afford to move into the catchment areas of the best state schools…' (Greening, 2016). Justine Greening, Secretary of State for Education, announced that £50m a year would be made available to support existing selective schools to expand as long as they could demonstrate that they would increase admission for children from disadvantaged families (Greening, 2017). Sixteen grammar schools across twelve counties were selected to receive a share of this grant, in return for pledging to prioritise disadvantaged applicants, either through quotas or lowering pass marks for those below an income threshold (Whittaker, 2018b).

At the time of writing, depending on where they live, parents have a diverse range of schools to choose from: local authority run schools, academies (either stand-alone or in Multi-academy trusts), faith schools, grammar schools, Free Schools, University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools. In practice, consumer choice is limited by several factors, one of which is a school's popularity, with some schools only admitting pupils who live in very close proximity to the school. In some areas there are no grammar schools or Free Schools from which to choose. Parental bids to set up Free Schools are frequently turned down unless there is a proven need for places. There is also evidence that more affluent parents have a wider range of choice since they can afford to buy houses next to popular and successful schools. They can also afford the transport costs to schools not in their immediate locality.

2.5   Policy Technology: Competition

The conservative approach to education set out by Cox and Marks (1981) specifically included the policy technology of 'competition'. Open enrolment and money given directly to parents, would force individual schools to compete for pupils. If parents were to be supported to act as consumers, they needed to be able to compare the quality of providers. Cox and Marks argued for a measure of standards which would be uniform year by year. Consequently, in *The Education Reform Act* (ERA) attainment targets were set for children aged 7, 11, 14 and 16, which would be reported in Performance Tables. Many responses to the government's consultation, including those from the School of Education at the University of Exeter, the Secondary Heads' Association and the National Union of Teachers, argued that published test results would not reflect all relevant factors (Haviland, 1988, p. 80 -88). Hertfordshire County Council (no overall political control) pointed out that schools serving more disadvantaged areas were likely to do less well, 'there is no merit in giving the inevitable position of a school in a national ranking order the stamp of statistical authority... The rank will not necessarily reflect the merits of the school' (Haviland, 1988, p. 92). Prophetically, the British Association for Counselling questioned 'the atmosphere of competition' engendered by national testing, 'all members of staff will need skills to support their pupils and their parents through a system of testing which cannot but be anxiety-provoking' (Haviland, 1988, p. 96). The British Dyslexia Association and the National Association for Remedial Education warned that schools might refuse to take children with Special Educational Needs because of the negative impact they may have on a school's published

results (Haviland, 1988, p. 94). Similar reservations about testing and League Tables are reflected in my research findings (Chapter 6).

In his autobiography, Kenneth Baker still maintained that parents were in favour of League Tables. He explained that he had deliberately ensured that the requirement to publish tables was embedded in legislation, 'otherwise successive Secretaries of State might well have been persuaded to go soft on this' (Baker,1993, p.199). Baker dismissed arguments that results would not reflect the social background of the school and accused educationalists of wanting to justify poor performance, since even in poorer areas it was still possible for some schools to achieve at a high level. John Major's government introduced regular school inspections, the outcomes of which, would be available to parents. Tables comparing the exam results of different schools would be published each year in local newspapers (DfES, 1992).

New Labour was equally committed to performance tables and inspections, not only because they provided information to guide consumer choice, but also because it was 'an important pressure on schools to improve… because parent choice can be a powerful driver for improved standards' (DfES, 2005, p. 3). This pressure was increased by making inspections 'more frequent, shorter and sharper with minimal advance notice' although, 'high performing schools might receive minimal inspection' (DfES, 2005, p. 35).

In, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010), a further driver for the Coalition government's widespread changes to education was competition with other countries such as Finland, Hong Kong and Canada. For this reason, 'floor targets' were

introduced into League Tables. Schools falling below the benchmark would be classed as 'failing' and 'considered for conversion to become academies' (DfE, 2010, p. 52). Further changes to accountability measures were designed specifically to stop some schools 'gaming the system' to improve their position in the league tables. These included primary schools over-rehearsing tests and secondaries adapting their curriculum to include 'easier' qualifications such as GNVQs, which were 'equivalent' to up to five GCSE passes. Outstanding schools would be exempt from routine inspections, with inspections only taking place if there was evidence of decline (DfE, 2010, p. 69). Schools were encouraged to work together in academy chains, rather than being in competition with each other. However, it could be argued that a new competitive arena was opened up with some school leaders being singled out 'to play a leading role in driving the improvement of the whole school system' (DfE, 2010, p. 57).

Thus, successive governments have retained performance tables and published inspection reports as a means of public comparison of schools. In response to accusations that tables create unfair comparisons between schools, successive governments have made changes to the headline measure, from 'value added' (2002-2005) to 'contextual value added' (2006-2010) to 'expected progress' (2011 – 2015) to 'progress 8' (2016 – current) (Leckie and Goldstein, 2016).

2.6   Policy Technology: Freedom

In a speech to the Conservative Central Office in London, in March 1986, Margaret Thatcher outlined '*The Conservative Vision*': 'We believe that, given opportunity, offered the chance, the human spirit will find a better path than the State could ever

devise…the task of government is to provide a framework within which everyone is free to pursue a better life' (Thatcher, 1986). This encapsulates both the 'freedom' advocated by Hayek as essential to the free-market and the 'framework', which Hayek accepted was necessary to ensure that competitors in the market abided by some rules.

In October 1986, in a recently declassified briefing paper, *Education without LEAs*, Kenneth Baker proposed establishing schools which would be separate legal entities run by their own governing bodies. Governors would own premises and equipment, employ staff and determine admissions and curriculum. Each school would be funded on a per-capita basis so that financial viability would depend on how far it was responsive to customers (Baker, 1986). These proposals were eventually shaped into what would be termed, Grant Maintained (GM) Schools. Baker maintained that the government wanted to put decision making into the hands of schools, so that Governors and Headteachers could control their own budgets and take decisions locally, echoing Hayek's belief that decisions should be made at the front line rather than a distant bureaucracy. Baker asserted that by taking on Grant Maintained status, schools would have the opportunity to run themselves and Local Authorities would face competition for the first time in eight years, 'so standards will rise in all schools as we introduce a competitive spirit – at no extra cost to the consumer' (Baker, 1987).

The proposal for the imposition of a National Curriculum attracted widespread criticism, including from two right-wing think tanks: The Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) argued for even greater freedoms for GM schools, such as exemption from

the National Curriculum (Haviland, 1988, p. 107); The Institute for Economic Affairs, a free market think tank established in 1955, also expressed strong opposition: 'the most effective National Curriculum is that set by the market, by the consumers of the education service… the Government must trust market forces rather than some committee of the great and the good' (Haviland, 1988, p. 28). The proposal was also unpopular with some parents. The National Confederation of Parent-Teacher Associations argue that, 'Legislation to impose a national curriculum will be seen by many as an undesirable move towards central control of the education system' (Haviland 1988, 33). A view shared by David Hart, General Secretary of the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT): 'it is my belief that the Bill heralds not just a shift of power downwards from local authorities to schools, but a shift from local authorities upwards towards central government' (Hart 1988, p. 170).

In the section of his book examining the constitutional dimension of the Education Reform Bill, Haviland referred to a speech by Sir Peter Newsam, Secretary of the Association of County Councils. In this speech, delivered on 26 October 1988, to the Standing Conference on Education organised by the Council of Local Education Authorities, Newsam raised the prospect of a future Secretary of State, 'possessed with a narrow vision of what education in a democracy should aspire to be, coupled with a degree of self-regard and intolerance of the opinion of others, that caused him or her to seek to impose that vision on others' (Haviland, 1988, p. 261). Years later, *The Guardian's* assessment of Michael's Gove time as Education Secretary, echoes Newsam's warning. The article quotes Professor Sir Richard Evans, historian, president of Wolfson College, Cambridge accusing Gove of attempting to foist 'his own rather ignorant and partial version of history on the national curriculum' (Tickle

and Ratciffe, 2014). During the Second Reading of the Bill, Andrew Smith (Labour) argued, 'as the debate proceeds it becomes ever clearer that the Bill has nothing to do with choice, freedom and standards…but has everything to do with the toxic mixture of free market ideas and centralism of our education system' (Smith, 1987). Jack Straw (Labour) also pointed to a parallel ideology, which he believed was behind the reforms: distrust of local democracy, 'the Bill is not about parents and pupils but about power, the Secretary of State's power' (Straw, 1987). Some of the criticisms that ERA did not go far enough with market ideology, were taken up thirty years later, with the introduction of Free Schools and the removal of the obligation for Academies to follow the National Curriculum (DfE, 2010).

When New Labour came to power, in his autobiography, Andrew Adonis (2012) documents the struggle the government faced with the problem of 'turning-round' failing schools. In their first term in office, New Labour had concentrated on 'standards' rather than 'structures', but this had not stopped schools from failing. Adonis attributed the lack of success of their first initiative, relaunching failing schools as 'Fresh Start' schools, to the fact that LAs that had allowed a school to fail in the first place, would be unlikely to be able to re-open a new good school (Adonis, 2012, p 53). Searching for a new structural model, Adonis identified the City Technology Colleges (CTCs), set up under Baker, as a more promising basis for a new type of school. These schools were set up and managed by successful leaders in business and social enterprise, while being not-for-profit and without fees. Adonis visited all fifteen CTCs and concluded that their success was rooted in governance, independence, leadership, ethos and standards. Governing sponsor managers ran their schools, 'free from the shifting sands of local and national education

bureaucracies… the sponsors set ambitious goals and ran their governing bodies in a business-like way to achieve these goals' (Adonis, 2012, p. 56). This was what Baker had set out to achieve, inspired by Hayek's ideology. Thus, CTCs became the model for New Labour's new type of independent state school which were named 'Academies'. Blair attributed their success to the freedom they had, 'the academy school seemed to belong not to some remote bureaucracy, not to the rulers of government, local or national, but to itself, for itself' (Blair, 2010, p. 376). For Blair, what marked out New Labour from the previous Conservative government, was that Labour gave independence to the poorest schools, as opposed to GM status which had generally freed schools which were already doing well (Blair, 2010, p. 580). Sponsored Academies exemplified the philosophy behind 'The Third Way', individual freedom and ambition, combined with social justice.

Adonis was aware that academy chains were open to the criticism of being 'a series of mini fiefdoms, controlled by powerful interests, who are permitted to run schools as they see fit' (Adonis 2012, p. 135). In response, he argued that they were not-for-profit and 'are commissioned by democratically elected government, local or national, or both' (2012, p. 135). Adonis predicted a time when a school in an Academy chain, which had become 'outstanding', might resent paying a top slice to the chain. His solution was that such a school should have the right to leave a chain and either 'become a free-standing academy subject to its own governance or to join another'. He concluded that 'it would be quite wrong for academy chains to become resented local authorities in a new guise' (Adonis, 2012, p. 207).

In his introduction to the White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*, Blair asserted that the success of the academies opened so far was because they had a 'can do' attitude and were 'willing to innovate and use their freedoms imaginatively' (DfES, 2005, p. 3). New Labour wanted more schools to be free to drive reform and to extend the same freedoms GM schools had enjoyed to other schools. On taking office, Labour had renamed GM schools as 'Foundation Schools' but had not removed any of their freedoms. They now wanted any schools to be able to apply to become a Foundation School, so that they could control their own assets, set their own admission arrangements and apply to the Secretary of State for additional flexibilities. They would be 'independent state schools but will remain part of the local authority family of schools' (DfES, 2005, p. 28). Echoing Hayek's ideology, New Labour was committed to 'freeing schools from excessive bureaucracy' and promised 'unprecedented freedoms and flexibilities' (DfES, 2005, p. 99). The White Paper promised 'a spectrum along which schools have the freedom to develop further: if they want to control their own assets and staffing, they will do so by acquiring a Trust; if they want to build strong links with external partners, they should be able to do so; for others, Academies will be the best option' (DfES, 2005, p. 3).

Whilst New Labour was in power, behind the scenes, the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) was actively exploring what the next phase of Conservative education policy should be when they regained power. Radical ideas for increasing freedom further, had already been formulated (Williams, 2000). In *Freedom for Schools,* Williams asserted that GM schools had demonstrated that giving schools freedom can work, 'however, despite these freedoms GM were still heavily regulated. Not enough converted because of parental ballots and opposition by local politicians. In the next

administration all schools should be granted independent legal status' (Williams, 2000, p. 5). He argued that this transition should be accomplished 'swiftly and universally' in order to 'decentralise decision making, to establish authority and competence as close to the classroom as possible, and to strip away the bureaucracy and empower the people who work there.' He described this as 'large scale privatisation' as assets are transferred from LAs to new school bodies. Schools should be free to sell or mortgage their assets and take out loans. These freedoms would encourage sponsors to take on the challenges presented by poor schools and 'in order to make a profit, new private sector capital would therefore have to make a return on capital by running schools more efficiently than the state sector' (Williams, 2000, p. 20). He also thought schools should be free to set their own admissions criteria, including the right to select pupils and also freedom over curriculum, examinations and teaching practices. Williams concluded, 'By releasing schools from the clammy grip of state control, new leadership can be attracted to schools once again' (Williams, 2000, p. 40). 'This agenda is designed to be a coherent logical whole. It involves the reconstruction of the whole of the supply side of education. But that is not the whole story. Once the system is rebuilt, the division between private and public education could be eroded. With the right funding mechanisms, the whole of the education system of the country would once again be in the private sector' (Williams, 2000, p. 41). Many of these proposals, were adopted by Michael Gove when he became Secretary of State for Education in 2010, although he did not go as far as Williams in terms of privatisation.

Whilst he was Shadow Schools' Secretary, in a speech at the Centre for Policy Studies, on 6 November 2009, Gove spoke about a 'post bureaucratic age' with a radical shift in power:

> We want to see heads and teachers given greater freedom from bureaucracy…the current, over-centralised system has failed …We will allow existing schools which are able to take advantage of academy freedoms to become independent, to take the money currently spent on their behalf by LAs (Gove, 2009, p. 5).

Reflecting back in his autobiography, *For the Record*, Cameron acknowledged that New Labour had built on the model of GM and CTCs with the creation of academies, 'no longer answerable to their local town hall, but to parents' (Cameron, 2019, p. 220). His assessment that 'allowing heads to steer their own ship worked wonders', underpinned the *Academies Act* (2010) which invited schools rated by Ofsted as 'Outstanding' or 'Good', to convert to Academy status. For schools which had previously been GM, this was relatively simple. Failing schools were forced to join Multi-academy trusts (MATs).

After the Conservative Party won an outright majority in the 2015 election, in the White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE, 2016), there was a move to compel all schools to become academies by 2020. There was less emphasis on freedom for individual headteachers with most new academies expected to join Multi-Academy-Trusts. Existing converted academies could continue as they were, as single academy trusts. In a clear echo of Hayek's ideology, Nicky Morgan, Secretary of State for Education explained the rationale,

> we believe in supported autonomy: aligning funding, control, responsibility and accountability in one place, as close to the front line as possible, and ensuring

that institutions collaborate and access the support they need to set them up for success… Autonomy will be both earned and lost, with our most successful leaders exerting their influence, and weaker ones doing the opposite. To put these principles into practice, we will move to a system where every school is an academy (DfE, 2016, p. 4).

The editor of *Schools Week* pointed out the irony of government promising schools, 'freedom', but only if they signed up to an academy chain. She concluded, 'Forcing freedom on schools is bizarre. Planning not to enforce it until 2022 is even stranger unless you are hoping that people will do the hard work for you and convert before you even need to pass a law' (McInerney, 2016). There was widespread opposition to compulsory academisation from teacher unions, including the National Union of Teachers who threatened strike action (Espinoza, 2016) and protests from Conservative members of the County Council network, who were opposed to high performing schools in their areas being forced to convert (Burns, 2016).

In the light of this opposition, Morgan, announced that the legislation would not go ahead, saying that the government had decided 'it is not necessary to take blanket powers to convert good schools in strong local authorities to academies at this time' (Morgan, 2016). In response, the Shadow Education Minister (Labour), welcomed the signal to school leaders that 'the foot is off their throat and that they should not feel they have to jump before being pushed' (Powell, 2016).

2.7   Conclusion

In the first chapter, I referred to policy discourses making particular sets of ideas appear 'obvious, common sense' (Ball, 2013, p. 7). I asserted that these policy

discourses had become what Foucault terms, 'regimes of truth' which are: 'the types of discourses (*society*) accept and makes function as true' (Foucault, 1980, cited in McHoul and Grace, 1993, p131). For Foucault, 'truth is linked in a circular relation with the systems of power which produce and sustain it, and which extends it' (Ball, 1990, p.13). In this chapter, I have traced a clear thread of discourse which can be tracked from the earliest discussions that shaped the *Education Reform Act* of 1988, to the rationale expressed by successive governments. The rationale behind policies to introduce and enhance 'consumer choice, competition and freedom', has been produced, sustained and extended, in education policies since 1988. In this way, as Foucault, suggests those in power have created 'a regime of truth'. It is accepted as 'common sense' that the 'policy technologies' of consumer choice, competition and freedom will drive school improvement. As this chapter has demonstrated, acceptance of the key role of parents as 'consumers' is embedded in the educational policies of all subsequent governments, albeit with some modifications in recognition that some parents were more able than others to exercise their consumer rights. The belief that 'Competition' will drive success has also been accepted by successive governments as, 'common sense' and part of the 'regime of truth'. A school's position in Performance Tables, inspection judgement or financial implications of a school's popularity are seen to be necessary pressures to force schools to improve. It is expected that popular, successful schools will expand, and the unsuccessful will close. Many of the responses to the consultation on the *Education Reform Bill* questioned the basic premise that 'competition' would drive improvement and warned that disadvantaged pupils would suffer. However, successive governments have accepted the need for competition and have systematically increased the pressure on schools until the consequence of poor results or inspection grade can

be take-over by a Multi-academy trust. At the same time an elite group of school leaders has emerged, whose views are respected by government ministers.

Freedom and autonomy are at the heart of Hayek's ideology. From the time of ERA onwards the benefit of freedom for schools is not challenged. Throughout the years there has been a repetitive message about the need to free schools from bureaucracy and remove the monopoly exercised by the local authority. At the same time there has been a move to centralise critical areas such as curriculum and assessment, starting with the National Curriculum and standardised tests of the ERA and culminating in the reforms of Michael Gove which narrowed both the curriculum and assessment methods. This is at odds with the similar rationale which Blair and Cameron both gave for 'autonomy' for school leaders. Blair expressed it as freedom to innovate, Cameron as a 'can do' attitude. As with 'consumer choice' and 'competition' there is no political debate about whether 'freedom' will bring improvement, just a belief that it will.

In terms of the structure of the school system, the journey from local authority control of schools started with GM schools and CTCs in ERA, continued with the Foundation Schools and Sponsored Academies of New Labour, culminating in the current diversity of stand-alone academies, Multi-academy trusts, Free Schools, UTCs and Studio Schools, which are all outside LA control. The common sense 'truth' that local authorities have held schools back, is repeated in primary sources dating back to the time of Margaret Thatcher, the autobiographies of Tony Blair and Andrew Adonis, and the speeches of Michael Gove. Anti-LA-ideology, runs alongside market ideology as part of the 'regime of truth'.

Having set the background through this exploration of primary sources, the next chapter will review the work of academic writers. This literary review will not only set out the 'field of study' on which my own research rests, but also begin to identify the contribution which my research can make to the existing body of analysis.

Chapter 3:   The Drama – 'what the critics say'

3.1   Introduction

The last chapter traced the influence of Hayek's ideology on policy initiatives that have shaped the current structure of the state school system. I have likened the rationale expressed in these policies to the 'prescribed script' given to 'actors' to perform and act out. This 'script' has been subject to much debate and analysis in theoretical and research-based literature. My purpose in reviewing some of this literature is to set out 'the field of study' on which my own research rests. It will lay the ground for the contribution my research can make to the existing body of analysis.

This chapter begins with a critique of the wider impact of neoliberalism, before exploring the specific application of neoliberalism to the 'quasi-market' of education. The rest of the chapter reviews theoretical literature and relevant recent research, to establish what is currently known about the impact of market ideology. Appendix 2 provides an overview of the research studies cited. As in the previous chapter, this analysis is set out under the three key themes of Hayek's ideology: consumer choice, competition, freedom. The chapter also includes discussion of what the future may hold. It ends by identifying the gaps I have perceived in existing literature on this field of study, and thus the contribution my own research will make.

3.2   Neoliberalism

This section begins with a reminder of the origins and ideology of neoliberalism, followed by a review of contemporary analyses into neoliberalism's impact on the

school system. Although my research is specifically about the field of education, some of the generic critique of neoliberalism is very relevant to its application in education. The most relevant strands of the critique will be covered including: the pervasive nature of neoliberal discourse; the dangers of heavy-handed accountability measures; inequality; the transfer of public funding to the private sector. The present context of the coronavirus pandemic has raised questions about the viability of neoliberal ideas at a time of crisis, particularly the notion of 'the small state'. This discussion also has relevance to research into the education system.

In his critical assessment of neoliberalism, the journalist Stephen Metcalf, explains that in the period following the Second World War, emphasis was placed on the importance of working for the good of all. At that time, the prevailing economic ideology was that of John Maynard Keynes, which favoured state intervention in order to accelerate economic growth (Metcalf, 2017). Neoliberal ideas did not become mainstream until Margaret Thatcher (Prime Minister 1979 – 1990) and President Ronald Reagan (US President 1981 – 1989) came to power. During the 1970s, the sharp rise in oil prices led to a recession, with increased government spending fuelling inflation. Bottery (1992) asserted that the wasteful and inefficient practices which ensued, prompted Margaret Thatcher to adopt neoliberal economics. The following analysis of neoliberal ideas by *The Guardian* columnist, Monbiot, reflects Hayek's ideology:

> Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency. It maintains that 'the market' delivers benefits that could never be achieved by planning. Attempts to limit competition are treated as inimical to liberty. Tax and regulation should be minimised, public services should be

privatised. Inequality is re-cast as virtuous: a reward for utility and a generator of wealth, which trickles down to everyone (Monbiot, 2016).

According to Monbiot, inspired by these ideas, Thatcher and Reagan gave tax cuts to the rich, curbed the powers of trade unions and introduced deregulation, privatisation, outsourcing and competition in public services. Monbiot (2016) argues that neoliberalism was particularly attractive because it provided an innovative, coherent and clear plan of action. At that time, there was no correspondingly clear framework of economic thought articulated by those on the left and centre of the political spectrum.

In the absence of alternative approaches, the dominance of neoliberalism spread across the world. This global reach has been mapped by several writers (Olssen et al, 2004; Lingard and Ozga, 2007; Small, 2011; Ball, 2012; Monbiot, 2016; Ostry et al, 2016; Metcalf, 2017). The 'simple, one-size-fits-all formula for success' of neoliberalism has been identified as key to achieving global agreements on the 'deregulation of trade, financial exchange and even social policy' (Small, 2011, p. 259). In a paper commissioned by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the authors assessed the global trend towards neoliberalism since the 1980s, by measuring the extent to which countries introduced competition in various spheres of economic activity to foster economic growth (Ostry et al, 2016). In many parts of the world, governments have introduced privatisation with the sale of public services to private providers:

> Market mechanisms displace the state, there is the outsourcing of services to hybrid public-private organisations … from government as an enabler of provision, then as a market regulator and more recently the driver of

'integration' of action and delivery with a range of partners in the provision of services (Ozga, 2011, p. 307).

This was exemplified in England by the dismantling of nationalised industries such as energy and railways. Where governments were unable to immediately privatise a state activity, they 'sought to corporatise it' and residual state services were, wherever possible, 'funded separately from their provision, with a preference for private provision and competitive markets' (Small, 2011, p. 259). In England, a demarcation between commissioners and providers was drawn, for example, budget holding GP practices acting as commissioners, purchasing services from providers in competition with each other, such as hospitals.

The pervasive nature of the language of neoliberalism is recognised by many writers (Small, 2011; Monbiot, 2016; Metcalf, 2017). They describe neoliberalism as becoming so embedded that it is seldom recognised as an ideology (Monbiot, 2016). It constructs 'neoliberal people' forcing individuals to adopt an entrepreneurial perspective (Small, 2011). It can be regarded as a 'rhetorical weapon' where 'we are now urged to think of ourselves as proprietors of our own talents and initiatives… you see the extent to which a language formerly confined to chalkboard simplifications describing commodity markets has been applied to all of society' (Metcalf, 2017). Thus, the tenets of neoliberalism have become, what Foucault would term, 'regimes of truth'.

Despite neoliberalism's belief in having a 'small state' and reduced bureaucracy, critics point to the accountability systems central government has imposed to regulate 'the free market'. Whilst Hayek advocated the need for a framework within which the market should operate, the writers referenced below, argue that central

government has gone far beyond what he had envisaged. They assert that neoliberalism has led to extended government intervention and accountability measures, describing them as: 'heavy handed regulation' (Small, 2011); 'robust modes of centralised control' (Olssen et al, 2004); 'produce performativity' (Lingard and Ozga, 2007); 'governmentality' (Ball and Olmedo, 2013); 'stifling regime of assessment and monitoring' (Monbiot, 2016). These accountability measures also trigger unintended responses, for example, people 'gaming' the system and subverting the rules to their own advantage (Davies, 2014). Nevertheless, the drive for a 'small state' continues. The political journalist, Andrew Marr, has asserted that for hard line Brexiteers, Brexit is the second phase of the Thatcher revolution, 'if you want to slash taxes; cut welfare; open more areas of public life to privatisation; and radically reduce regulation, from employment law to food and the environment, then membership of the EU has long been an infuriating barrier' (Marr, 2019). Indeed, Liz Truss, (Secretary of State for International Trade) is reported in an interview with a Sunday Times journalist, as saying that we should use our departure from the European Union (EU) to cut taxes, reduce red tape and move away from the big-state European model: 'this is a huge opportunity to remake the case for free market conservatism' (Coates, 2019).

In their evaluation of neoliberalism, Ostry et al (2016) point to the positive outcomes it has achieved. They argue that the expansion of global trade has rescued millions from abject poverty and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises has increased efficiency and reduced costs. However, others such as Small, (2011) and Olssen et al, (2004) have questioned this assessment, asserting that neoliberalism has increased inequality. Its approach of cutting taxes for the rich and cutting benefits for the poor, depends on the wealth of the rich trickling down to benefit the poor.

Neoliberals placed less emphasis on equality and more on the values of competition and freedom. Indeed, some argue that inequality is desirable; the rich are incentivised to take risks for financial reward, whilst lack of wealth provides the poor with disincentives to remain poor. Thus, the greater the levels of inequality, the greater the incentive for everyone to lead more productive lives (Small, 2011, p. 260).

James Tooley, an academic known for his work on low-cost private education, agreed with this position, questioning whether equality is in fact desirable. Tooley argues that what philosophers and economists mean by 'equity' is actually, a level of 'adequacy'. 'There is a respectable tradition in moral philosophy which points to the interpretation of equality, or equity, as meaning 'adequate opportunities for all' (Tooley, 1998, p. 277). Thus, for Tooley, as long as there is a satisfactory minimum, those at the top are justified in having more than they need. This type of approach can be exemplified by the 'bedroom tax' introduced in the *Welfare Reform Act* (Parliament, House of Commons, 2012), which reduced the amount of housing benefit paid to tenants in social housing, if the property they were renting was judged to have more bedrooms than necessary.

At the other end of the scale, Monbiot (2016) argues that over the last forty years, wealth has not only been transferred between rich and poor, but also between ranks of the rich with more money being made by those who control assets and harvest rent, interest and capital gains, than by those who produce new goods and services. The journalist, Gerald Baker also asserts that the key driver for growing inequality in America is that large companies, which have become monopolies despite market

ideology, generate profits for shareholders thus widening the disparity between those at the top and bottom (Baker, 2019). Political commentators (Rodrik, 2017; Metcalf, 2017) have linked the disillusion felt by the poor with the rise of populist political campaigns which led to the election of Donald Trump in America, and Brexit in Britain.

There are other challenges currently facing neoliberalism, including the impact of the financial crisis of 2007 – 2008, which Small (2011) argues was fuelled by economic deregulation. In some cases, companies have had to be bailed out by government because vital national services cannot be allowed to collapse, which means competition cannot take its course, 'business takes the profits, the state keeps the risk' (Monbiot, 2016). This was exemplified in Britain in 2018 with the collapse of Carillion. This company had extensive public sector contracts to provide construction and maintenance services for a range of essential services, such as Network Rail, schools and the NHS. When the company failed, the government had to step in to keep services running. A Parliamentary Inquiry concluded that Carillion's collapse was 'a story of recklessness, hubris and greed, its business model was a relentless dash for cash' (Parliament, House of Commons, 2018). In July 2018, the government was also forced to admit that their semi-privatisation of the Probation Service had failed, leading to the termination of contracts with twenty-one private providers (Ford, 2018). At the time of writing, the coronavirus pandemic is a further challenge to the ideology of the 'small state'. At a time of intense national crisis, rather than allowing 'the market' to take its course, the government has had to step in at an unprecedented level to become a safety net. As, *The Times* political columnist,

Rachel Sylvester, asserts in her article, '*Crisis gives Tories a chance to show they care*':

> Traditional assumptions are being upended, ideologies challenged, orthodoxies destroyed, and prejudices overturned with every extraordinary day that goes by. A Tory party that has always been in favour of a smaller state is embarking on the greatest peacetime expansion of government the country has ever known (Sylvester, 2020).

This point will be explored further in 'The 'Epilogue' at the end of Chapter 8.

3.3   The 'Education Market'

The influence of neoliberalism is not confined to the world of economics. Writers such as, Olssen et al, 2004; Small, 2011, have traced its impact on the education system. Advocates of neoliberal ideas were particularly keen to apply them to education (Small, 2011, p. 258). The question of whether the education system can accurately be described as a 'market' has been debated amongst academics. Some argue that the term 'market' should only be applied to an education system which is not state provided and funded (Tooley, 1997). Ball (2013) points out that although it is not a 'free market', ERA provided the infrastructure for an education market and a neo-liberal vision for the education system. Others, such as Whitty (2002) and West and Pennell (2002), prefer to use the term 'quasi market', in recognition of several factors that prevent 'education' from being a proper 'market'. For example, the highly regulated nature of education 'with the government controlling entry by new providers, investment, the quality of service and the price' (Whitty, 2002, p. 47). Payment is not directly exchanged between customers and providers (West and Pennell, 2002, p. 3).

As established in Chapter 2, it is clear from the rationale for Local Management of Schools (LMS) that it was designed to provide per-pupil funding, as a quasi-payment by the consumer (parent). Despite these differences, there is general acceptance that the term 'market' can reasonably be applied to the education system because several key components are in place.

Hill et al describe the way neoliberalism has led education down 'a marketized and competitive road, with a customer/client split imposed across public services, competitive tendering and the substitution of commissioned rather than directly provided services by local authorities' (Hill et al, 2016, p. 6). National research by Greany and Higham, found evidence to support the education system being classed as a 'market'. In their report, *Hierarchy, Markets and Networks – Analysing the 'self-improving' school-led system in England*, they identify the key components of the 'education market':

> Incentives and deregulation aimed at encouraging choice, competition, contestability and commercialisation, including through existing parental choice and funding mechanisms that encourage schools to compete for pupils and through new policies of academisation and free schools and encouragement for a marketplace in school improvement services (Greany and Higham, 2018, p. 10).

The review of primary sources in the previous chapter, and theoretical and research-based commentary from academics, provides substantial evidence for describing state education in England as 'a market' with choice, competition and freedom as its hallmarks.

As already set out in Chapter 2, the *Education Reform Act (ERA)* of 1988, was the first systematic application of the ideology of 'the market' to the structure of state education in England. ERA's transformative potential was recognised by academics at an early stage (Ball, 1990; Halpin and Troyna, 1994; Gerwitz et al, 1995; Tooley, 1997; Trowler, 2003). Some went as far as asserting that it would transform the terrain on which research would be conducted (Halpin and Troyna, 1994). However, others, including Lawton (1992), thought ERA was an ambitious attempt at radical transformation that was unlikely to provide the basis for lasting change. His reasoning was based on his assessment that ERA was attempting to achieve too much, too quickly, but also that it would damage partnership with LEAs without a satisfactory alternative to put in its place. History has proved Lawton's assessment to be incorrect, since the current structure of state education clearly has its origins in measures introduced by ERA. However, contemporary researchers: Simkins et al (2019); Greany and Higham (2018); Riddell (2019) would endorse Lawton's fears about LEAs, and agree that there is still a vacuum in the space they used to occupy.

3.4   Consumer Choice

As already established, in Hayek's concept of the market, consumer choice was of central importance because it would drive competition, forcing providers to improve their efficiency and effectiveness in order to succeed in the marketplace. A diverse range of suppliers would ensure that there was genuine choice and prevent monopolies. Hence, education policies have enhanced the power of parents as consumers through mechanisms such as LMS, open enrolment and diversity of provision. Theoretical and research literature has sought to analyse how this empowerment has impacted on educational provision. Writers including: Bottery

(1992); West and Pennell (2002); Bell and Stevenson (2006), have debated who should actually be classed as 'the consumer' in the 'education market'. Arguments have been advanced for it being the parent, since they 'pay' for education through taxes (Bottery, 1992), whilst others argue that the pupil is the consumer with their parents acting as 'proxies' (West and Pennell, 2002). Yet others assert that businesses are the ultimate customer, since they need skilled employees, 'if the market is the driving force, the purpose of education is to produce 'human capital' … the sum of education and skill that can be used to produce wealth' (Bell and Stevenson, 2006, p. 42). Some have criticised the market approach for treating children as commodities, thus a means to an end which loses sight of children as ends in themselves (Bottery, 1992; Gerwitz et al, 1995). For the purposes of my research, I regard parents as 'consumers' who 'purchase' the commodity 'education' (Tooley, 1998) on behalf of their children, from schools who are the 'providers' (Bottery, 1992).

3.4.1 Middle Class Advantage

Prior to ERA, Local Education Authorities (LEAs) had, what Hayek would term, 'a monopoly' over state education. They decided which school a child would attend and directly controlled individual school budgets. LEAs allocated school places, sometimes taking a degree of parental choice into account, but also deliberately mixing children of different bands of attainment to ensure a largely comprehensive intake (Hill et al, 2016, p.12). As previously discussed, the rationale for open enrolment and LMS was to empower parents and incentivise schools to improve performance in order to attract more pupils, thus receiving additional funding. The impact of this has been a focus for academic research, from the earliest days of the

implementation of ERA until the present day (for example, Gerwitz et al, 1995; West et al, 2004; Cullinane, 2020). Despite this wide timespan, research findings have remained remarkably consistent in concluding that middle-class parents have greater consumer choice than those from less affluent backgrounds.

Research by Gerwitz et al (1995) in three contiguous London boroughs, found that open enrolment favoured the children of middle-class parents. Indeed, schools, driven by league tables, were marketing themselves specifically to attract the children of middle-class parents and shunning children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). These findings were replicated by West et al (2004) who found that a considerable amount of selection was still being carried out by some schools, enabling them to secure higher places in league tables. This applied, 'particularly in schools which were their own admission authority in urban areas where the "quasi market" is most highly developed' (West et al, 2004, p. 364). A report by the Sutton Trust (Cullinane, 2020), based on a national survey of 1500 teachers, found that a quarter of high performing schools take in substantially fewer poorer children than the makeup of their neighbourhood. The report concluded that middle-class parents were 'gaming' the system, including moving to live in close proximity to good and outstanding schools. According to *The Times*, an on-line mortgage broker has calculated that the extra cost of buying a house near an outstanding English state school was £180,000 (Woolcock, 2019b). Middle-class parents also have the means to pay transport costs to enable their children to access high-performing schools some distance away (Hill et al, 2016). A survey by the *Mumsnet* online forum reported in *The Times*, found that parents living in London and the suburbs went to extraordinary lengths to get their children into a favoured primary school. These

included, paying a premium to rent a house, attending a church when they were not believers, and temporarily living close to a school until the first sibling was enrolled (Bennett, 2018a). There is also contemporary evidence that some schools deliberately market themselves to attract middle-class parents. *The Times* reported that a state school (academy) in London spent fifteen thousand pounds on Farrow and Ball paint and Jo Malone candles. The school justified the expense, pointing out that 'the ability to generate income and donations depends in part on the impression made by the school to visitors' (Bennett, 2019).

Despite acknowledging that the system favoured middle-class parents, Tooley (1997) argued that parental choice was desirable because it acted as a check on the monopoly of power. He advocated greater support for parents, including increasing their awareness of the purchasing power of children with SEN and support for travel expenses. Financial incentives in the form of 'dowries' to make less-desirable pupils more attractive were suggested by West and Pennell (2002). The Pupil Premium, introduced by the Coalition Government in 2011, could be seen as such an incentive. In a speech to the City of London Academy, Blair acknowledged inequality in the system, 'Let's be brutally honest…in schooling, the better off do have choice and power over the system' (Blair, 2005). To mitigate this, New Labour introduced free transport for poorer pupils to cover the three nearest schools, rather than just the nearest, and the appointment of 'Choice Advisers' to help poorer parents decide which schools to apply to (DfES, 2005). However, Choice Advisers found that the parents they advised, often had little real choice because the most popular schools were consistently over-subscribed (Blatchford and Gash, 2012).

In 2020, the Association for School and College Leaders (ASCL) argued that although there were generally enough school places, there were particular pressures in some areas with the main issue being that 'many families had applied for over-subscribed popular schools' (ASCL, 2020). In 2018, the smallest catchment area for a primary school in England was reported to be 93 metres from the school gate (Bennett, 2018a). Research by the Education Policy Institute found evidence that middle-class parents are more likely to win admission appeals, with Black and Asian children most likely to miss out on their first -choice school (Woolcock, 2019a).

3.4.2 Failing schools

The 'education market' does not respond in the same way to consumer choice as business settings, for example the commercial market. In Hayek's model of the 'market' successful businesses would thrive and expand whilst failing businesses would close or be taken over. In the same way, ERA envisaged that 'informed choosers (parents) would select the best performing schools for their children, schools would respond by expanding their intakes, poor performing schools would improve themselves, or face bankruptcy' (Ball, 2008, p. 187). In this way, choice should protect consumers. Thus, Tooley (1997) argues that a more authentic market mechanism would ensure that failing settings would quickly go out of business and be taken over by others, even before customers noticed failure. However, in practice in the 'quasi' education market, failing state schools 'limp on'. This point was acknowledged by Sir David Carter, as he left his post as National Schools Commissioner. He identified his greatest regret as the failure to deal with failing schools quickly enough (Dickens, 2018b). Currently, although good and outstanding schools are legally able to expand, they are dependent on government funding for

the necessary capital investment. There is also some evidence that successful schools are reluctant to take additional pupils because this may put at risk the very factors which led to their popularity in the first place.

3.4.3   The Flip Side

Hayek's ideology is clear: 'our freedom of choice in a competitive society rests on the fact that, if one person refuses to satisfy our wishes, we can turn to another' (Hayek, 1986, p.147). Thus, the 'flip-side' of empowering parents to act as consumers, being free to 'choose' which school their child should attend, is that parents also have the right to remove their child and transfer them to another school, or indeed to home-educate. There is growing research evidence of the practice of 'off-rolling', particularly in secondary schools. 'Off-rolling' is 'the practice of a school asking a parent to remove a poorly performing or disruptive child without a formal exclusion process' (Office of the Schools Adjudicator, 2019). In 2019, 20,000 children left state schools between Years 10 and 11 according to the Annual Ofsted Report (Ofsted, 2020a). The drivers for this behaviour by schools are discussed below (under competition), but it is a concerning footnote to the unexpected consequence of parent choice.

3.5   Competition

For Hayek, competition drives improvement, however, 'an effective competitive system needs an intelligently designed and continuously adjusted legal framework' (Hayek, 1986, p. 29). Rules are needed to ensure that competition is carried out fairly, and as Hill et al (2016) pointed out, neoliberalism requires a system for testing the efficiency and value of products. The review of primary sources in the previous

chapter, demonstrated that 'competition' is at the heart of measures introduced in the ERA. As a consequence of open enrolment, schools needed to compete in order to attract pupils since school budgets were determined by the number of pupils on roll.

Once the element of competition was introduced into the system, it followed that there needed to be a framework of rules and a means of comparing one school with another. Parents, as consumers, needed information on which to base their choice, hence the introduction of other measures in the ERA, including, the National Curriculum, statutory testing and the publication of league tables. Shortly after the introduction of ERA, Bottery (1992) summarised the impact of its measures as: schools working in competition with each other as independent institutions, offering wares which consumers decide to buy or not, and schools motivated to improve the produce by competing for bottoms on seats. In so doing, the school could increase their quality, improve their output and provide greater freedom for the consumer. Successive governments have built on the concept of competition, modifying league tables, introducing new tests and making continual changes to Ofsted frameworks for inspection, first introduced by John Major's government (Major, 1992).

3.5.1 League Tables

The impact of competition has been subject to intense analysis by academic writers and researchers. Some of the earliest empirical research was undertaken by Gerwitz et al during 1991-1994. They concluded that pressure from league tables was leading to inequity in the school system, with disadvantaged children being at risk. They found an increase in exclusions as a quick fix to enhance a school's position in the league tables, and the persuasion of parents to remove children by voluntary

withdrawal, termed, 'constructive exclusion' (Gerwitz et al, 1995). It is concerning that this was identified as an inherent danger in the competitive system so soon after the introduction of league tables. There is strong contemporary evidence to support the relevance of their findings to the current day. What they termed 'constructive exclusion' is now defined as 'off-rolling', as mentioned above. Ofsted has identified that schools are 'gaming the system' by 'off-rolling' and chasing 'success without substance' to move up the league tables. In addition to 'off-rolling' the number of permanent exclusions has increased with more than 40 children a day permanently excluded from state schools in England. In her account of two weeks spent inside a Pupil Referral Unit for excluded children, the *Sunday Times* journalist, Sharon Hendy, asserted that exclusion put pupils at risk of being recruited by county lines drugs gangs (Hendy, 2020).

Qualitative and quantitative research conducted in four localities during 2014-17, by Greany and Higham (2018), found that schools were facing increasingly greater 'punitive' national accountability. The consequence of one poor Ofsted report meant that a school could be forced to join a MAT, after which a school ceased to be a legal entity. The fear of take-over and the wider consequences of being downgraded by Ofsted, had led many schools to focus relentlessly on national test outcomes. School leaders felt obliged to put the 'market position' of their school above all else, even if it meant taking decisions which went against their professional values. The emphasis which schools placed on testing (rather than the tests themselves) was leading to rising levels of anxiety in children, according to Amanda Spielman, the Chief Inspector of Education (Bennett, 2018c). It is interesting to note that this potential consequence of league tables had been identified decades earlier by the

Confederation of British Industry, during the consultation on ERA (Haviland, 1988, p. 96).

This culture of accountability is described as one of 'performativity' by Ball. He defined this as 'a regime of accountability that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of control, attrition and change' (Ball, 2013, p. 57). Foucault argued that 'power is intelligible in terms of the techniques through which it is exercised … power is exercised through a net-like organisation' (Foucault 1977, cited in McHoul and Grace, 1993, p.89). Thus, if school leaders feel constantly under surveillance through external scrutiny of their school's performance data, government can exercise power over how school leaders act.

Hayek was well aware that competitors needed to have a framework within which to work. 'Neoliberalism requires that in a market, it is necessary to be able to test the efficiency and value of the products' (Hill et al, 2016, p. 12). Since League Tables were first introduced in 1992, they have been criticised for presenting only a partial picture of a school's performance, for example, not taking individual school or pupil circumstances into account. Successive governments have responded by changing the measures included in tables, for example the addition of 'value added' in 2002 and contextual value-added in 2006. An analysis of 30,000 DfE records for the three years (2014 - 17), by an investigation team from *The Sunday Times,* concluded that pressure to 'perform' has led to schools attempting to 'game' the system in a number of ways, in addition to the tactics of 'off-rolling' and exclusions outlined above (Morgan- Bentley, 2018). In some schools, vocational courses were introduced in which a single qualification was equivalent to four GCSEs grades. Schools also

prioritised pupils working at a borderline Grade C to boost results, arguably to the detriment of lower ability pupils. Some schools had entered pupils for subjects perceived as being 'easier'. However, writing in *The Times*, Andrew Halls, headteacher of King's College School (a prestigious independent school), argues in favour of league tables. In spite of the problems associated with them, he asserts that schools have been strengthened by the influence of tables. Moreover, they have helped to identify endemic problems which can be addressed, for example, the faltering progress of white working-class boys. Attention has also been drawn to poorly performing areas of the curriculum, such as maths, science and technology. He points out that, at a time when everything from a meal out to surgery is 'rated' we expect to see some accountability for the services we use (Halls, 2018).

3.5.2   Breakdown of local partnerships

At an early stage, writers such as Bottery (1992) pointed to other dangers inherent in a competitive school system, such as the breakdown of local partnerships and shared concern for local children. Bottery urged school leaders to 'learn from the insights of the free market' but move beyond the ideology….to retain the local and the personal' (Bottery, 1992, p. 111). National research by Higham and Earley (2013) found that strong competition between schools was most common in areas with surplus school places as a result of demographic decline. They concluded that, 'increasing operational powers for schools, changing external support and differentiated school autonomy have the potential to intensify existing hierarchies between schools' (Higham and Earley, 2013, p. 715). This was also a finding from research carried out in four localities by Greany and Higham (2018). They found that schools were organised by choice and competition into local status hierarchies.

School leaders were encouraged to enhance their own positions by selling services in new markets for school improvement and by working in new regional and sub regional networks (Greany and Higham, 2018, p.17).

The existence of a new group of 'elite school leaders' was also identified by: Coldron et al, 2014; Simkins et al, 2015; Glatter, 2017 (see Appendix 2). New kinds of careers have opened up for some school leaders, leading to the rise of powerful individuals, particularly in the vacuum left by the scaling back of the local authority. There are opportunities for heads to lead a number of schools by becoming the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a Multi-academy trust (MAT), sitting as a member of a regional headteacher board advising the Regional Schools Commissioner, or becoming National and Local Leaders in Education (NLEs and LLEs), as well as the Heads of Teaching Schools. Coldron et al (2014) found tensions between headteachers as they struggled for prestige, particularly between selective and non-selective schools and between primary and secondary.

On the other hand, some leaders had chosen not to put themselves forward as CEOs because they were concerned the success of their own school might be threatened. Others had less capacity to look outwards and make useful networks. School leaders interviewed by Coldron et al (2014) thought that increasingly competitive local fields were creating winners and losers. There was a breakdown in local partnerships as heads decided which 'club' to belong to. Many chose to partner with schools outside their local neighbourhoods rather than those they were in direct competition with. In areas where a significant number of schools belonged to different national academy chains, local partnerships were further weakened. MATs

also contributed to fragmentation, Greany and Higham (2018). This danger was also identified by Glatter (2017). He argued that emphasis on separate units, whether stand-alone schools or larger groupings, competing against each other, 'breeds fragmentation and segregation, instead of a coherent, intelligible and equitable system' (Glatter, 2017, p. 122). As early as 2002, Whitty had warned of the loss of cohesion, pointing to the dangers of, 'old values of community, co-operation, individual need and equal worth' being replaced by 'market-place values that celebrate individualism, competition, performativity and differentiation' (Whitty, 2002, p. 80). Tim Brighouse, Schools Commissioner for London (2002 – 2007), asserted that the success of the initiative 'London Challenge', widely recognised as transforming educational outcomes in London, would not have been possible if local schools had not worked together (Brighouse, 2016).

Two research projects carried out between 2011-2013, Simkins (2014) and Smith and Abbott (2014), reached remarkably similar conclusions about the impact of the prevailing discourse of competition on partnerships (see Appendix 2). Simkins' research was based in three LAs: County, Town and City. Smith and Abbott researched two LAs located in the Midlands. Both identified that, in LAs where schools had traditionally been more autonomous with a non-interventionist approach from the LA, schools had been quick to embrace academisation. On the other hand, in the LAs (based on a City, in both studies), the LA had been more interventionist in nurturing families of schools and partnerships. In these LAs, the rate of academisation was much slower. Both sets of researchers point to the competitive nature of the more autonomous schools. In those LAs the discourse was one of independent schools working for individual advantage and power, whereas in the

other (City) LAs, the discourse was one of collaboration. For Simkins, this raised a central question of the balance between individualistic competitive approaches and those based on concepts of public value, such as those espoused above by Brighouse. Recently published research, with field work conducted between May 2015 and July 2016, also found that heads of the ten primary schools sampled, were keen to have local partnerships because they were motivated by professional concern for all the children in the area. They had a moral purpose which was wider than their own school (Simkins et al, 2019). A strong sense of moral purpose, particularly in primary schools was also a finding in research conducted by Simon et al (2019).

3.6   Freedom

Hayek argued that the government 'should allow the individual, freedom in everything which depends on the circumstances of time and place, because only the individuals concerned in each instance, can fully know these circumstances and adapt their actions to them' (Hayek, 1986, p. 69). For Hayek, freedom is freedom from coercion, that is, freedom 'from' rather than freedom 'to'. In the last chapter, I pointed to the rhetoric of successive governments echoing Hayek's belief in the importance of freedom. Numerous measures, including LMS and Grant Maintained (GM) schools in 1988, sponsored academies in 2002, stand-alone academies in 2010, have all centred on devolving decision making to the front line. Freedom is used synonymously with 'autonomy', which has been defined as concerning 'the degree to which those at lower levels of the system are given the power to take decisions independently of requirements or expectations at higher levels' (Woods and Simkins, 2014, p. 325). However, there is evidence in my own research findings

(outlined in Chapter 7) that 'freedom' for school leaders has been weakened rather than enhanced.

3.6.1 Questionable freedom

In a national survey carried out in 2012, half of the heads and chairs of governors who responded, were positive about the potential for greater autonomy (Higham and Earley, 2013). This was shortly after the introduction of stand-alone academies. The financial incentive of additional funding was one of the main drivers for conversion. However, half of headteachers surveyed, did not think that their school would gain more autonomy in practice, with only a quarter thinking they would. Most had converted to academy status to stay the same and did not envisage taking advantage of the additional freedoms of changes to the curriculum and teachers' pay and conditions. This finding was replicated by Woods and Simkins (2014) who also found little evidence that the additional freedoms offered to academies were reasons for conversion. One of the conclusions drawn by Greany and Higham (2018), from research carried out in 2014-2017, was that the freedom offered to stand-alone academies was really 'coercive autonomy', in that schools were being required to use more discretion and to take more responsibility, while also being closely monitored from above. Thus, 'any increase in operational autonomy is more than balanced out by the accountability system' (Greany and Higham, 2018, p. 35). The 'revolutionary' shift from the situation pre-1988, when there was minimal control of what went on in schools, for example in terms of the curriculum and assessment, to the current position of much greater political control, is also a conclusion drawn by Pring and Roberts (2016).

3.6.2 Freedom in Multi-academy trusts

Academies, when first introduced by New Labour in 2002, were sponsored by leading business leaders (such as Harris), religious groups or charitable organisations. Some academics, such as Hill et al, assert that this was based 'on the neoliberal ideological belief that 'private business knows best' and can run public services better than can the public sector (Hill et al, 2016, p. 13). On the other hand, Ball (2008), viewed New Labour's motivation as being 'pragmatic and experimental' rather than ideological. Academies are free from local authority oversight and operate as Trusts. The academy programme can be seen as a reflection of the 'Third Way' commitment to combine private principles, values and ways of working with the those of the public sector (Woods et al, 2007). Hence, New Labour's main aim was to challenge the culture of educational under-achievement, produce improvements in standards and play a key role in the regeneration of communities, thereby helping to break the cycle of underachievement in areas of social and economic deprivation, (Woods et al, 2007). This aim is in tension with policies to promote marketisation and competition such as Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs) and target setting (Olssen et al, 2004). There were just over 200 sponsored academies opened by the time the Coalition Government came to power in 2010. These original academies were largely in Multi-academy trusts (MATs). The stand-alone academies introduced by the Coalition government in 2010, by definition are not in a MAT but are a Single Academy Trust (SAT). Since 2010, some stand-alone academies have formed their own MAT, or joined MATs, motivated either by free choice, compulsion to join a MAT following poor Ofsted inspections, or even just the fear of future compulsion (Coldron et al, 2014; Greany and Higham, 2018).

A Multi-academy trust (MAT) can be defined as 'a charitable company that has a single set of articles, and therefore is a single legal entity, accountable for a number of academies (Greany and Higham, 2018, p. 85). Glatter echoed this point, 'in MATs the individual units become in effect, sites for the delivery of education, rather than 'self-standing schools' (Glatter, 2017, p.118). MATs are controlled and regulated by central government, contracted out to a highly diverse range of private not-for-profit companies. Their prescribed models of governance and leadership are largely derived from the private, and to a lesser extent, voluntary sectors (Greany and Higham, 2018). Initially, groups of school leaders were of the opinion that they could create a MAT in which they were equal partners. Indeed, Simon et al (2019) found from their research, that some MATs established soon after the 2010 Act, were mutually supportive alliances of two or three schools focused on school improvement, with some proposing to take turns as Chief Executive Officer. However, the National Governors Association (NGA) issued guidance, warning schools that being in a MAT brought intrinsic change to the accountability structure of the individual school. Despite retaining their individual DfE numbers, these schools no longer exist as an individual legal entity. For this reason, the DfE was mandating that there should be one permanent senior executive leader and therefore the role could not rotate (Fellows et al, 2019).

By 2019, the NGA were very clear that the language used to describe the benefits of the academy system, such as autonomy, should only be applied to the trust itself, and not to individual schools. 'Autonomy is the right to freedom from external rule and influence, something which is not attainable for schools once they become part of a MAT' (Fellows et al, 2019). West and Wolfe (2019) go further, raising the

question of whether academies in MATs are actually 'schools' in the eyes of the law, or whether it is the MAT itself which can be defined as a 'school' operating on a split-site basis. They reach a stark conclusion, 'despite the academy programme having been initially driven by a wish to give schools freedom and autonomy, those (the majority of academies) that are now run by a MAT, have no freedom' (West and Wolfe, 2019, p. 81). This is a sweeping generalised assertion which is at odds with a Benchmark report published in January 2019 by the Kreston Academy Group (a network of independent accounting and business advisory firms). The report was based on data from a national survey of 350 MATs representing nearly a thousand schools. The authors found evidence of a shift by MATs to operate on a far more commercial basis and a trend towards slightly larger and more centralised MATs. They analysed the number of MATs considering General Annual Grant (GAG) pooling, which is when individual school budgets are centralised so that the Trust decides how much money to allocate to each school. Only a few MATs had already adopted this with a further 5% seriously considering it.

GAG pooling has been described by Lord Agnew, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the School System, as 'one of the greatest freedoms a MAT has' (Parliament. House of Lords, 2018). However, this practice could also be characterised as the ultimate loss of freedom for individual schools. What Agnew describes as the 'greatest freedom' for a MAT is potentially the elimination of freedom for individual schools, both symbolically and in practice. As the Kreston Academy Group report stated, in practice few MATs have so far adopted this practice.

There is a growing body of literature on MATs supporting the assertion that the freedom of individual schools within a MAT is being eroded (Walford, 2014; Woods and Simkins, 2014; Salokangas and Chapman, 2014; Glatter, 2017; Fellows et al, 2019). In an interview, David Carter, on retiring as National Commissioner for Schools, admitted that autonomy for academies 'is probably not the same' as it was for early converters. Carter supported this change on two grounds, firstly that Trusts had become more aware of what the 'chief accounting officer' being accountable for the performance of all schools actually meant. Allowing every school to be autonomous relied on all schools having an effective leader. Secondly, Carter felt that there was an inequality issue if all schools were autonomous because all pupils in the Trust should benefit if there was particularly strong practice in one school. He agreed that by definition, that got in the way of autonomy (Dickens, 2018).

The extent of devolved autonomy within individual MATs has been the subject of recent research. Research into two national academy chains, by Salokangas and Chapman during 2011-2012 (see Appendix 2), found that the notion of centralised governance was stronger in one chain than the other. Participants described this as 'policy heavy' and 'top down'. However, there was a strong sense of 'earned autonomy' in both chains, depending on how well the academy was doing. Thus, the autonomy to experiment and make local decisions without sponsor permission, varied across chains as well as within. The researchers concluded that rather than referring to academies as autonomous schools, the policy discourse should highlight the autonomous nature of sponsors and their decision-making competence over the schools they run (Salokangas and Chapman, 2014). This notion of 'earned-

autonomy' was also identified by (Ryan-Atkin, 2018) in her research into four MATs of different sizes and phases.

Other research has found an increasing emphasis on standardisation across MATs. Greany and Higham (2018) pointed to a drive for tighter prescription about MAT structures and stronger vertical accountability. The researchers attributed this to 'the litany' of recent cases of corruption in MATs, such as those examined in the television documentary, *How School Bosses Spend Your Millions* (Channel 4, 2016). Several other high-profile cases have revealed examples of fraud, nepotism, failing to declare business links with suppliers, spending school funds on expensive holidays and trips abroad as well as inflated salaries for CEOs (Hill et al, 2016; Bennet, 2020).

The lead organisation in a MAT has considerable control over the operation of the chain as a whole (Woods and Simkins, 2014). Analysis of documents and other written material by West and Wolfe (2019), also identified a drive by MATs to standardise the schools they run, 'giving less freedom and flexibility than the schools enjoyed when they were maintained schools (West and Wolfe, 2019, p. 8). This dilemma was recognised by David Carter when he acknowledged the risk that outstanding schools would be put off from joining a standardised MAT (Dickens, 2018b). The NGA also acknowledged that individual schools feel 'entitled to their budget' and struggle to accept that funding for all schools in a MAT belongs to the MAT (Fellows et al, 2019).

3.6.3 Freedom from Local Authority control

Chapter 2 has already set out the ways in which the role of the Local Authority has been eroded. This began when *The Education Reform Act* (ERA) transferred control of school funding from the local authority to all schools (LMS), along with other measures such as open enrolment and Grant Maintained (GM) status. Expansion of the academy programme, through the invitation to individual schools to convert to academy status, removed further funding from local authorities directly to schools. Initially, the amounts transferred from the Local Authority Central Spend Equivalent Grant (LACSEG) were well in excess of what local authorities actually spent on central services. Greany and Higham (2018) found evidence that civil servants believed that these drastic funding cuts to local authorities would 'coerce' primary schools to convert in the belief that LAs would no longer be viable and able to support them. LAs have had to re-shape themselves in the light of budget cuts. Despite cuts in local authority capacity, some school leaders continue to be supportive of the role of the local authority and the need for local democratic governance. Many have decided to continue as maintained schools and were fiercely resistant to the proposal to force all schools to become academies by 2022 (DfE, 2016).

Currently Local Authorities retain some statutory responsibilities for special educational needs, provision of school places and a nebulous responsibility as the 'champion of children and families' (DfE, 2010). The Local Government Association (LGA) has drawn attention to the challenges faced by LAs in carrying out their duty to provide sufficient school places, when they have neither the power to force academies to expand or the power to open new maintained schools. The LGA has forecast that by 2020-21, fifteen councils will face a shortfall in secondary places and

that this will rise in successive years until 2024-25, when 71 councils will face not being able to meet demand (Bennett, 2018b).

There is recurrent use of the terms 'fragmented' and 'complex' to describe the current education system (Hill et al, 2016; Pring and Roberts, 2016; Glatter, 2017; Greany and Higham, 2018 and West and Wolfe, 2019). For some, the diversity of provision is seen as a positive response to meet the needs of the consumer, but for others it is a threat to educational coherence and unity (Simkins et al, 2014). Some argue that the absence of a clear role for the LA has resulted in a loss of local democracy (Hill et al, 2016; Pring and Roberts, 2016; Glatter, 2017). In the past the LA acted as 'the Middle Tier' between central government and individual schools. The term 'disintermediation' was used by Lubienski (2014) to refer to the withdrawal of power and influence from the middle-layer authorities that operate between local schools and national entities. He argued that this leaves opportunity for new policy players to occupy that space. Indeed, Greany and Higham (2018) found tensions between policy players for this new 'middle tier' in new regional structures (RSCs, Ofsted, National College for Teaching and Learning (NCTL) and LAs. There has also been well publicised tension between Ofsted and the National Schools Commissioner, over who should hold MATs to account in each region, alluded to in David Carter's interview with *Schools Week Magazine* (Dickens 2018b). Damian Hinds, Secretary of State for Education, settled the argument in Ofsted's favour in his speech to the NAHT conference, published in full in *Schools Week*, 'no more RSC initiated visits that can feel like inspections with those extra demands for data, adding to bureaucracy – more time for schools to get on with the job that they're doing well' (Whittaker, 2018a*).*

3.7   The Future?

Several academics and researchers have speculated on what will happen to the education system in the future. Two particular themes which have emerged are firstly, extending the application of market ideology to education through further privatisation and secondly, creating a new middle tier to replace the functions previously carried out by LAs.

3.7.1 Privatisation

Some writers predict increasing 'privatisation' of education (Olssen et al, 2004; Ball, 2008, 2013; Woods and Simkins, 2014 and Hill et al, 2016). Small, incremental policy moves, have 'disseminated, embedded and naturalised privatisation within public sector provision' (Ball, 2008, p.185). These include the introduction by New Labour of Private Finance Initiatives and state contracts to directly deliver education services (Olssen, 2004, p. 210). Some believe that eventually, there could be the wholesale privatisation of schools, 'ideologically the neoliberal developments …. can be interpreted as the 'businessification' of education, the softening up, the preparation for whole-sale privatisation' (Hill et al, 2016, p.110).

Even though academy chains are run on a 'not-for-profit' basis, Woods and Simkins (2014) and Hill et al (2016) pointed to the fact that many chains have major commercial interests, including consultancy and professional development. In the case of Pearson, the company operates the public examination system with a proportion of exam fees going to shareholders. Some predict that the next stage will be allowing MATs to make a profit, with businesses running chains of schools, contracted by the government, but making a profit for the owners and shareholders

(Ball, 2013). Political support for moving in this direction is evidenced in an article by Dominic Raab, *Capitalism for the Little Guy - 10 ways to Strengthen Competition and Extend Customer Clout*. Raab proposed that the government should lift the bar on profit-making companies running academies and free schools as long as minimum of half the profits are reinvested in the school (Raab, 2013). However, the NGA has warned against the 'incorrect and damaging accusation of the 'privatisation' of state schools'. The Association is critical of the DfE for comparing trust membership to company shareholders leading to antagonist attitudes from communities and negative reporting of trusts (Fellows et al, 2019).

3.7.2 A New 'Middle Tier'

There is general agreement amongst researchers and writers that there is a need for a 'Middle Tier' to mediate between central government and local regions. Pring and Roberts, 2016; Greany and Higham, 2018; Simkins et al, 2019, all argue for the importance of having a middle tier organisation with a democratic element, although they do not specify exactly how this might be structured. RSCs have proposed a new 'middle-tier' comprising representatives from MATs, dioceses and private providers. This body would be co-ordinated by the RSC at regional and sub regional level, with LAs helping 'to guide some of the decision making' (Greany and Higham, 2018). However, these researchers found that this proposal was not supported by Ofsted, who considered that LAs who had managed to retain some of their School Improvement functions, were more effective than RSCs. Since the role of the RSC not only crosses traditional county borders, but also LA and diocesan boundaries, it is difficult for them to provide effective oversight (Simon et al, 2019).

Some researchers are optimistic that groups of schools can form a new middle tier, 'slowly evolving collaborative school groups within wider collaborative arrangements, provides the beginnings of an institutional architecture to enable effective joint decision making' (Simkins et al, 2019, p. 344). Others have argued that LAs should continue to have an important role. Action research, jointly commissioned by the DfE and LGA, studied the response of nine selected LAs to changes arising from the *Academies Act* (DfE, 2010). In their report, *Action Research into the evolving role of the local authority in education*, researchers proposed that LAs should be given a wider remit for helping to shape effective commissioning and also democratic accountability for securing good outcomes (Parish et al, 2012). In addition to suggesting the introduction of common frameworks for governance, admissions and financial reporting for all types of schools (whether maintained or academies), West and Wolfe also recommended the restoration of links with LAs, 'These would enable policy makers to create a more coherent publicly funded school system, which is transparent as regards governance and financial matters, and is democratically accountable at local level' (West and Wolfe, 2019, p. 82). Research in two LAs in 2018, found agreement that the LA was the only body that could understand local needs and claim legitimate oversight of all services in their communities (Riddell, 2019).

3.8   Conclusion

The 'critics' reviewing the ongoing drama that is the focus of my research, have questioned the impact of the policies examined in the previous chapter. Whilst some 'critics' are advocates for neoliberalism (for example, Ostry et al, 2016) and for applying market ideology to the school system (for example, Tooley,1997), the

majority of writers and researchers have found a mismatch between policy rhetoric and policy reality.

3.8.1 Consumer Choice, Competition, Freedom

There is a consistent body of evidence, gathered over the last thirty years, to support the assertion that more affluent, 'middle-class', parents exercise 'consumer choice' preferentially to those from more disadvantaged backgrounds (Gerwitz et al, 1995; West and Wolfe, 2004; Blair, 2005; West et al, 2014; Hill et al, 2016 and Cullinane, 2020). The pressure of competition and fear of the consequences of poor performance has driven some schools to 'game' the system. There is also repeated evidence of schools formally, or informally excluding ('off-rolling') pupils whose potential examination results might have a detrimental effect on the school's position in the league tables (Gerwitz et al,1995; Greany and Higham, 2018 and Ofsted, 2020a). There is also evidence that, as a result of competition, hierarchies between schools have been reinforced, local partnerships are breaking down and a new breed of 'elite' school leaders has emerged (Higham and Earley, 2013; Coldron et al, 2014; Smith and Abbott, 2014; Simkins, 2015; Pring and Roberts, 2016; Glatter, 2017; Greany and Higham, 2018; Simon et al, 2019 and Simkins et al, 2019).

One of the strongest findings emerging from recent research, is the erosion of school leaders' autonomy and freedom despite the consistent rhetoric of successive governments. For all schools, whether maintained or academies, there is increasing government control over schools (Ball, 2013; Pring and Roberts, 2016; Glatter, 2017; Greany and Higham, 2018; Simon et al, 2019 and West and Wolfe, 2019). There is also mounting evidence of the erosion, or even eradication of autonomy for leaders

of individual schools within a MAT. CEOs are gaining considerable control over the operation of the chain as a whole. In some MATs, autonomy is differentiated with the possibility of 'earned autonomy' for high performing schools (Salokangas and Chapman, 2014; Woods and Simkins, 2014; NGA, 2016; Greany and Higham, 2018; Ryan-Atkin, 2018; Riddell, 2019; Simon et al, 2019 and West and Wolfe, 2019). Some of the research studies cited above were carried out contemporaneously with my own field work in Autumn 2018, referenced in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

3.8.2 Critics' predictions about future 'Acts' in the drama

Some academics anticipate a future where the ideology of the market is further embedded into the English state system through privatisation, with the possibility of for-profit organisations running schools (Olssen, 2004; Ball, 2008, 2013; Woods and Simkins, 2014 and Hill et al, 2016). There are conflicting opinions about a future role for the LA, although there is general agreement that a 'middle tier' is necessary (Pring and Roberts, 2016; Greany and Higham, 2018 and Simkins et al, 2019). Recent research has proposed a re-emergence of the importance of the LA, given a diminished role in School Improvement for RSCs following the intervention by Damian Hinds (Riddell, 2019). Some speculate about what structure(s) may emerge to replace LAs (Lubienski, 2014; Simkins and Woods, 2014; Pring and Roberts, 2016; Greany and Higham, 2018; Riddell, 2019; Simkins et al, 2019 and West and Wolfe, 2019).

3.8.3 Gaps in the existing field of study

The theoretical literature and research findings referenced in this chapter, critique key aspects of market ideology and their impact in a variety of geographical locations. However, there is a gap in understanding the collective impact of 'market

ideology' inspired policy developments, over several decades, in one specific location. The majority of studies referenced in this chapter, examine a particular point in time or a particular policy change. There are two main exceptions to this, Abbott et al (2013) and Pring and Roberts (2016). In *Education Policy*, Abbott et al (2013) set out to present an overall account of the development of post war education policy through the policy insights of ten former Education Secretaries. However, the accounts are descriptive rather than analytical and are concerned with policy formation rather than impact. *Generation of Radical Education Change: Stories from the field* (Pring and Roberts, 2016) has some similarities with my own research. It is a compilation of first-hand accounts by thirteen education professionals reflecting on educational changes over the last thirty years. However, with only two exceptions, these accounts are descriptive and focus on the practicalities of policies rather than the response of those responsible for implementation and the impact. The lack of a common template for these 'stories' also makes comparisons and over-arching conclusions difficult to reach.

My research analyses the journey, from the 'market-ideology' rhetoric of education policy, to its impact 'on the ground' in one particular Local Authority, over a period of three decades. This approach goes beyond description of historical policies and events or the compilation of descriptive anecdotes about the past. My research seeks to contribute further knowledge and insight into the journey between past decisions and the current landscape, to understand to what extent the rhetoric of 'market ideology' has become established in discourse over time, as well as the long-term impact of consumer choice, competition and freedom. By focussing on a single large Shire County, rather than several research sites, I can explore this

journey in depth. Moreover, this exploration is informed by twenty research participants, who each have deep personal knowledge and experience of working in that County, many over several decades.

My research has the potential to contribute an additional dimension to the field of study. Most of the theoretical writing and research papers reviewed in this chapter have been written or researched by academics. There appears to be a gap in research carried out by senior professionals whose entire careers have been spent working at the front-line in schools or local authorities. I have worked at the front line in education during the thirty-year period I am researching. For twenty of those years, I have worked in the Shire County which is the locus for my research. I bring a range of perspectives to my research, as a former secondary headteacher and Director of Education and current governance positions. Thus, my personal role is one of 'actor' as well as researcher. This presents both opportunity and challenge, since I am seeking to be simultaneously 'on the stage' and in the audience as 'critic' (a point explored in the next chapter).

Finally, the unexpected dramatic twist of a coronavirus pandemic, presents an early opportunity to contribute to knowledge through a reflection on the impact of the pandemic on the school system and the role of the local authority in particular.

Chapter 4:   'Behind the Scenes'

4.1   Introduction

My research seeks to explore why and how the ideology of 'the market' has been applied to the English school system, and to understand its impact in one particular Shire county. As previously explained, my professional career has been played out against the backcloth of education policy developments since 1988. I have compared my research to the analysis of a drama. Having envisaged my research in this way, I discovered a precedent for a similar model, 'picture the research arena as a theatre in the round and try to locate interviewees with different vantage points on what is going on centre stage. You then talk to individuals from these vantage points' (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 67). I am taking a similar approach of exploring different vantage points, but these are based on the actors' different contributions to the drama itself as opposed to external observers, 'in the audience'. Furthermore, in my 'drama', as well as being the researcher, I am also 'on the stage' and my voice needs to be heard alongside the other voices. Thus, my research method needs to facilitate an exploration of my personal role, as well as that of my selected cast of actors.

The 'prescribed' script for the drama is drawn from the educational policies of successive governments, as analysed in Chapter 2. The discussion of what constitutes 'policy analysis' in Chapter 1, indicates that there is likely to be a difference between 'policy rhetoric' and 'policy reality' (Potterton, 2020). If this proves to be the case, I will find that the 'actors' have not delivered the 'prescribed script' by rote, but through a dynamic process of constant improvisation and re-interpretation. I will find what Ball described as 'the messy realities in influence, pressure, dogma,

expediency, conflict compromise, intransigence, resistance, error, opposition and pragmatism in the policy process' (Ball, 1990, p. 9). I need to consider my research method in light of these 'messy realities'.

This chapter begins with an exploration of theoretical perspectives including a philosophical exploration of my personal view of 'truth' and 'knowledge'. This is important for any researcher, but it is particularly pertinent in the light of my personal role 'on the stage' and what I bring in terms of my own interpretation of the 'prescribed script'. I am far from being a detached observer. In the light of my personal role as both researcher and actor, 4.3 rehearses my rationale for rejecting autoethnography as an approach, whilst at the same time ensuring that my voice can be 'heard' transparently through the use of clearly marked 'Vignettes'. The opportunities and challenges of conducting 'real world research' and 'insider research' are also considered in this section.

4.4 offers a rationale for my strategy of inquiry, research questions, and choice of semi-structured interviews as my chosen method of data collection. In this section, there is an explanation of the criteria used to select the research participants, 'my cast', and consideration of the particular challenge of interviewing 'elites'. There is also an explanation of practical decisions such as methods of recording and transcribing interviews. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the ethical implications of my research.

4.2   Theoretical Perspectives

I am conscious that my personal view of the world will have an impact on all aspects of my research. Indeed, all researchers are philosophers in the sense that their ontological and epistemological positions shape their view of the world (Denzin and Lincoln,1998). I will begin by exploring my personal philosophy of 'truth' before discussing my qualitative approach and the theoretical perspectives I will use to gain further insight into the data I collect.

4.2.1 Truth

As a student and teacher of the philosophy of ethics, I have given deep thought to my own perspective on the world and the question 'what is truth'? I adopt a relativist ontology in that I believe that there are multiple realities. For example, in ethics, I am drawn to the teleological approaches of Utilitarianism (Mill, 1971) and Situation Ethics (Fletcher,1966). This approach asserts that no action is intrinsically morally right or wrong, an action's morality can only be determined by its consequences. This is in contrast to Kant's deontological approach which asserts that certain actions are intrinsically morally right or wrong, irrespective of the circumstances (O'Neill, 2000, p. 181).

Knowledge for me is something that is constantly being created and recreated, therefore I work within an interpretivist paradigm. I am uncomfortable with a 'black and white' view of the world which is dogmatic about what 'truth' is. I find simplistic approaches difficult to accept. An example of this from my professional experience is Lee Canter's regime of 'Assertive Discipline', which was in vogue for a time in many schools (Canter and Canter, 2001). This approach set out hard and fast rules with

specific penalties attached to pupils' behaviour. For example, lateness was a 'fact' to be punished rather than a symptom of a cause to be explored and support provided. This regime adopted a 'black and white' approach to the 'right' response to poor behaviour, whereas in my experience, there are multiple interpretations which need to be weighed before decisions are made.

My affinity with critical policy research, as opposed to that of policy science (see Chapter 1), is in line with this ontological position. The critical policy researcher analyses the interpretations placed on events, rather than purely examining the empirical facts of what has occurred. My review of primary sources in Chapter 2 demonstrated that politicians, inspired by the ideology of the market, have constructed policies based on what they perceive to be, the 'truth', of what creates the most effective school system. How far those responsible for acting out those policies have personally accepted the given 'truth' or applied their own interpretations or versions of the truth, is a key question for my research. As Robson et al pointed out, 'people unlike the objects of the natural world, are conscious, purposive actors who have ideas about their world and attach meaning to what is around them. In particular their behaviour depends crucially on these ideas and meanings' (Robson et al, 2016, p.17). I also hold the view that meaning is constructed by human beings as they interpret ideas, rather than there being an objective truth. Hence my expectation that I will discover a range of responses and interpretations to education policy from the actors in my research.

4.2.2 A qualitative approach

In the light of my philosophical position and the purpose of my research, I have chosen to adopt a qualitative approach. This approach has been characterised as, 'pragmatic, interpretative and grounded in the lived experiences of people' (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 2). I have considered whether a purely qualitative approach will serve my purpose, or whether a mixed method which also includes analysis of quantitative data would be beneficial. Arguably this could widen my research findings, for example, through an analysis of numerical data compiled from Ofsted reports and school performance tables. After careful consideration, I have concluded that the usefulness of this data would be limited. Generalised data can be misleading because the context of individual schools needs to be taken into account. Moreover, constant changes to performance tables make year on year comparisons problematic, for example the move to grading all GCSEs numerically from 2018 and the elimination of coursework. Frequent changes to Ofsted Inspection Frameworks also make comparisons difficult, further compounded by the fact that some 'outstanding' schools have not been inspected for over a decade. Pertinently, such quantitative data would not help me to answer my research questions which seek interpretation rather than quantifiable fact. For these reasons, I have decided to concentrate exclusively on a qualitative approach.

4.2.3 'Nets to catch the world': Hayek and Foucault

In order to make sense of my research data, I am aware of the need to construct a framework to assist me. Grix identify 'Concepts, paradigms and theories' as some of the tools to aid 'categorising, understanding and explaining social phenomena'. He described theories as 'nets to catch "the world" to explain it' (Grix, 2010, p.103). I will

draw on the two theoretical perspectives previously outlined in Chapter 1, as my metaphorical 'nets': the social and political theory of Friedrich Hayek; Michel Foucault's theory of truth, knowledge and power.

I find myself in an unexpected position drawing on Hayek's theory since it is based on the 'black and white' stance rejected above. Hence, Hayek could more accurately be described as my 'theoretical foe' rather than 'friend'. Hayek's theory sits within the positivist paradigm since he argued that the market presented 'truth'. It was a kind of 'mind' structuring all reality on a model of economic competition (Metcalf, 2017, p.4). Hayek's subjective epistemology is at odds with my personal relativist ontology. However, my review of primary sources in Chapter 2 confirmed that successive governments have accepted the 'truths' about market ideology, to the extent that the school system has been radically changed in line with its principles.

A further theoretical perspective will be provided by Michel Foucault's theory of knowledge, truth and power. Foucault's position has been described as, '*epistemic relativism*, which claims that all beliefs or knowledge are socially constructed so that knowledge is contingent, neither the truth values nor criteria of rationality exist outside of historical time' (Olssen et al, 2004, p. 21). Hence, Foucault sits within the interpretative paradigm with which I am more comfortable. In Chapter 1, I outlined Foucault's theory of the complexity of discourse around policy and the operation of 'power' in relation to their acceptance and implementation. For Foucault, power produces 'the truths we live by'. In Chapter 2, I asserted that the policy technologies of 'consumer choice, competition and freedom' had become akin to what Foucault defined as the 'truths we live by; 'a regime of truth' (Foucault 1980, cited in McHoul

and Grace, 1993, p. 131). Thus, the policy technologies of market ideology have become generally accepted as vehicles for school improvement, despite no compelling evidence that this is the case. In Chapter 3, I have also drawn attention to the way in which the culture of, what Ball would term 'performativity' (Ball, 2013, p. 57) exercises power over decisions made by school leaders. The culture of conformity is reminiscent of what Foucault (1977) terms, 'disciplinary power' which he illustrates through the image of a prison which is designed to convince inmates that they are constantly under surveillance from guards in the watchtower, even when no guards are actually present. I would assert that this image encapsulates the sense of 'surveillance' which school leaders feel under. My interest in this research is to reveal the social construction on which the beliefs and knowledge of my cast of 'actors' is based and to understand if the 'truths' as expressed by Hayek in his ideology of the market economy are shared by those working in education. Foucault's thinking about the operation of power will provide a perspective through which the analyse the data I collect.

4.3   The role of self

According to Denzin and Lincoln, every researcher brings themselves to their research and needs to develop the skill of 'reflexivity', which is 'conscious experience of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the processes of research itself' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 283). Reflexivity has been defined as 'the realisation that researchers and the methods they use are entangled in the politics and practices of the social world' (King and Horrocks, 2010, p.126). Thus, researchers bring their own theoretical perspectives, emotions, skills and opinions to their research. 'Reflexivity' defines the

process by which the researcher reflects and is aware of the impact they themselves have on the research process. I am aware that in analysing my interview data, I need to factor in my personal view of the world. For example, I am mindful that some participants in my research may subscribe to the 'truths' of market ideology and I need to guard against my personal ontological perspective impairing my impartiality to their views.

My role as researcher is complex. As previously explained in Chapter 1, my research is in part a quest to make sense of my own professional journey at the operational 'chalk face' of implementing government policy. In the light of this, I considered whether to adopt autoethnography as my principal research methodology, thereby focusing my research almost solely on my personal experience. However, after further reading, I discounted this method for two main reasons. Firstly, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) describe autoethnography as being almost exclusively concerned with the voice of the individual author exploring personal experience. They warn against self-indulgent approaches saying it should not be 'the opportunity to put the ethnographic 'self' ahead of the 'others' about whom she or he writes' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 205). This warning rings true since I am well aware that the senior position which I previously held, gave me a particular view of the world (although it can be argued that everyone has their own particular view of the world). Secondly, I am no longer working professionally 'in the field' following my retirement in 2016, and thus not as involved in changes still happening in the school system, which may be relevant to my research. Thirdly, autoethnography would not enable me to give sufficient weight to understanding the experiences and perceptions of other educational professionals who are also 'actors' in this drama.

Having discounted autoethnography as an approach, I still need to determine how I can build on, what I consider to be, an important contribution that I can bring to this research. I have worked closely alongside the majority of the participants in my research in a variety of roles. I also have current roles as Chair of the Local Governing Body (LGB) of a Free School in a Multi-academy trust (MAT) and governance roles as a 'Member' in a MAT and also in a Single Academy Trust (SAT). In this respect, I am still 'on the stage'.

The definition of 'real world' research aptly describes what I am seeking to achieve. 'Real world research looks to examine personal experience, social life and social systems, as well as related policies and initiatives. It endeavours to understand the lived-in reality of people in society and its consequences' (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p. 3). This reflects my research purpose, to understand how education policy is lived out in the 'real world' by my range of selected actors. I also have the personal characteristics identified as being needed for this type of research, 'the 'knowledge, skills and expertise in areas outside the likely competence of most academic researchers' (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p. 7). My professional experience and the shared knowledge and history I share with the other actors in my 'drama' will undoubtedly have an impact on the depth of reflection and dialogue which emerges during interviews. However, this does raise significant ethical responsibilities and considerations which will be discussed below.

In some respects, my research also sits within the model of 'insider research' which is defined as, research done within 'the researcher's own work practice' (Costley et al, 2010, p. 1). I have worked alongside the majority of the research participants in a

work situation. Thus, I possess many of the advantages they identify, in that I share understanding, have the trust of my participants and have easy access to people and information. I believe I also have what has been described as 'street credibility' and have 'in my head a great deal of information which it takes an outsider a long time to acquire' (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p. 399). It could be an advantage that I have retired, since it gives me a more detached view, as someone looking in more objectively than if I was immersed in the every-day reality. However, I need to be mindful that my knowledge and experience are not current. In the fast-moving world of education, I must be under no illusion that things are exactly as they were when I was in post. This has proved to be absolutely the case in the light of the challenges faced by my successors in supporting schools throughout the impact of the global pandemic.

I am aware that if I am to include my personal experience and views, I need to be transparent and able to challenge my own assumptions, some of which are deeply embedded. Mindful that critical researchers should 'enter into an investigation with their assumptions on the table' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 453), I have decided to include my personal views in a transparent way by marking them clearly in the text as 'Vignettes'. I am intrigued to think that this will serve the function of 'observing myself observing' (Jones et al, 2013, p.10).

4.4   Research Design

Research requires what has been described as a 'strategy of inquiry … which comprises a bundle of skills, assumptions, and practices that the researcher employs as he or she moves from paradigm to empirical world. Strategies of inquiry put

paradigms of interpretation into motion' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 36). This 'bundle' includes my personal role in terms of skills and assumptions as well as the practices, which are the methods I will employ in my research.

4.4.1 Research Questions

Mindful of advice that research questions should be 'general enough to permit exploration but focused enough to delimit the study' (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 39). I initially drew up three research questions:

1. How has the rationale for the 'market model' been expressed in key educational policies since 1988?
2. How have members of the education community responded to this rationale and why?
3. What have been some of the impacts of the 'market model' on the school system?

A detailed rationale for my approach to data analysis, including the unfolding account of how I came to add a fourth research question is set out later in this chapter. I considered delaying the introduction of this additional question until that point, however, there is a cogent argument to be made that a research thesis is not like a crime thriller, where the twists of the plot are integral to the genre. A research thesis needs to provide a clear rationale, not only to strengthen its academic status but also to act as a blueprint for others to follow, if they want to replicate the research. Hence my decision to introduce the fourth question at this point:

4. How do educational professionals envisage the structure of education evolving in the future?

4.4.2 Strategy of Inquiry

My strategy for inquiry into these four questions is two-fold. Firstly, in order to explore the theoretical aspect of my research, namely answering my first research question, I have conducted the analysis of primary sources already set out in Chapter 2. In my analogy of the drama, this equates to study of the 'prescribed script' and the mind of the 'scriptwriter'. Secondly, in order to collect the interpretations and indeed modifications to the script made by the 'actors' in the unfolding drama, my chosen strategy is to seek their reflections through interviews.

My second, third and fourth research questions seek to analyse the experiences and perceptions of a range of educational professionals, 'actors' who have been involved in the formation and implementation of education policy. All these 'actors' have worked in the location for my research, and with very few exceptions, they have had some form of involvement in Ayeshire for a long period of time. This is key to the contribution my research offers to this field of study, in that I am researching one local authority in depth and taking an historical approach, in order to understand the significance of the past to what is happening now. This understanding will be deepened through applying Foucault's thinking as a theoretical perspective. In this way, I can seek to understand how power has operated from above (from central government) and below (those on the operational front line). I can also explore how Foucault's 'regimes of truth' identified in Chapter 2, have been received and acted on. My aim has been to select a research method which enables me to uncover the ways 'policies are contested, mediated and differentially represented by different actors in different contexts' (Ball, 2015, p. 31).

4.5 Interviews

I considered various data collection methods, including questionnaires, surveys, case studies and interviews. Questionnaires are regarded as being of use when there is 'a characteristic or belief which can be described or measured accurately through self-reporting' (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 125). This does not apply to my research since I am interested in deep understanding which may need to be teased out. Moreover, in my personal experience, professionals are unlikely to prioritise completing questionnaires. For similar reasons, I have also discounted using surveys. Most recent research relevant to my field of study, has been conducted in more than one location, for example two or more local authorities (see Appendix 2). There are advantages to this in terms of being able to draw comparisons. However, I have decided that my research can make a distinctive contribution by concentrating in depth on one LA area, taking 'the long view' of a drama having unfolded over time. I am aware that this will limit my ability to draw generalised conclusions, but the same could be true of research conducted across different LAs.

4.5.1 Interview style

Interviews have been categorised as: structured: predetermined, standardised questions; unstructured: free flowing, allowing the interviewee to respond in a leisurely way; semi-structured: combining elements of the other two types (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 120). In order to access rich data, I need a method which uncovers the 'layers of mystery' which lie beneath the raw data (Holliday, 2002, p. 4). This would be inhibited by a very structured approach. On the other hand, a very unstructured approach could undermine my professional credibility, creating the impression of

being ill prepared. It was important to me that I was perceived as business-like and knowledgeable and that I could send my interviewees a 'professionally' constructed letter with questions to prepare them for the interview (see Appendix 3). Moreover, an unstructured approach could have resulted in rambling conversations which were difficult to analyse. Therefore, I have chosen to use semi-structured interviews 'in order to explore ideas with the participants but also to get fixed responses for some criteria' (O'Reilly 2012, p. 120). In the event, I found that this approach resulted in free-flowing conversations of the type described by Marshall and Rossman:

> qualitative, in-depth interviews typically are much more like conversations than formal events with pre-determined response categories. The researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant's views but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p.101).

4.5.2 Selection of interview sample

Rubin and Rubin (2005) advise that, in order to convince readers that the research does not have an unintended slant, interviewees should reflect views from contending perspectives to elicit nuanced understanding. As has previously been explained, the 'actors' I select will be known to me already. I need to be able to justify my selection in the face of possible criticism that I am selecting my 'friends' or close colleagues, or that this is a very random selection because it is merely shaped by people I have personally met. I am mindful that Dale criticised Stephen Ball for merely stating that the interview sample for the research reported in *Politics and Policy Making in Education: explorations in policy sociology* (1990), had been drawn from those 'associated with the administration of education', rather than giving a full justification. Dale argued that 'the relative importance and relevance of those

interviewed should be made explicit rather than being left to be assumed' (Dale,1994, p. 39). Moreover, my research will be weakened if I am unable to gather data which reflects the experiences, motivations and interpretations of a wide range of educational professionals and others who have been involved. My sample has therefore been constructed to mirror the range of actors needed on stage to perform the drama and to tell the story from their individual vantage points. In order to address Dale's challenge, Table 4 sets out the principal role(s) currently or recently played, by participants in the 'drama' (note that a name can appear more than once).

Principal role	Actor
Headteachers/Principals (Secondary):	Retired: *William Benson* Non-academy (Community School): *Daniel West* Stand Alone academy: *Paul Fellows* Executive Principal in National MAT/Regional Director: *Stephen Dawson*
CEOs:	Small/Medium MATs: *Simon White, Rebecca Jones* Large MATs: *Jane Green, Keith Grey*
RSC H.T. Board	*Simon White, Keith Grey*
Governors:	Chair, Stand-Alone Academy: *Linda Grant* Chair LGB of MAT: *Susan Briggs* MAT Trust Board: *Richard Johnson*
Politicians:	Labour M.P: *Peter Dixon* Former Conservative M.P/former Education Select Committee Chair: *John Baker* Former County Councillor: *Susan Briggs*
Local Authority Officers:	*Fiona Evans, Paul Black, James Williams*
Schools Forum	Former Chair*: Linda Grant* HT Representative: *Simon White*
Education Consultants	*Julie Smith, Linda Grant, John Baker, William Benson*
Inspection:	Ofsted: *Julie Smith* *Former HMI: Jane Green*
DfE Officials:	RSC office: *Ruth Thomas* National: *Michael Phillips*

Table 4: Current or recent roles played by 'actors'

Appendix 1 is a more detailed list of the range of roles actors have played over time, in order to demonstrate their total breadth of experience.

Although I had been optimistic that I would receive a positive response to my personal emails, I was overwhelmed by the immediate and warm responses I received. In two cases, I resorted to social media for contact, in the absence of email addresses. This proved to be a more convoluted process with one success and one failure. My final sample matched my original list in all but two cases. However, in some respects this was serendipitous, since I used the opportunity to substitute a 'role' which emerged as being under-represented in my original sample, namely a young Executive Principal with significant experience of working at a senior level in several MATs. My second substitution proved to be equally productive. My original approach to someone in the Regional Commissioner's Office received no response but through an introduction from a third party, I was able to substitute a more senior officer from the RSC's office. The final sample reflects a greater gender imbalance than I had originally planned, with men outnumbering women 12:8 and despite the inclusion of a younger Principal, the majority of those interviewed were of middle age or above. However, I would assert that this sample reflects both the age profile of those working at a strategic level and the higher proportion of men in senior roles in education (in 2018 in Ayeshire: 77% of secondary headteachers/principals were male).

4.5.3 Interview Questions

Having rejected using a rigid list of questions, asked robotically of each participant, I trialled a very minimalist approach using two very broad questions. However, I realised that this might make future data analysis problematic. Moreover, it would hinder participants who might want to prepare in advance and arguably would not provide sufficient information for informed consent. I therefore developed a range of questions or prompts customised for each participant. Sample questions can be found in Appendix 4. A week before each interview, I sent the proposed questions to each participant, although I was clear to point out that these were prompts for a conversation rather than a set list. It is interesting to note the variety of levels of preparedness of participants. Some participants had clearly not read the questions, a few had made rough notes which they referred to as prompts and one participant had handed me detailed printed notes for each individual question. Irrespective of the level of participants' preparation, all interviews were highly productive and revealing. The absence of a rigid approach enabled me to have a free-flowing conversation as described by Marshall and Rossman (2006, p. 101), although this required careful time management.

4.5.4 Issues of status: interviewing elites

It is important to consider status issues. This applies equally where an interviewee perceives the interviewer to be markedly of higher or lower status and vice versa. Status can have both a direct and indirect impact: directly by inhibiting interviewees from discussing particular topics, perhaps because they are concerned about appearing ignorant or losing face; indirectly by preventing rapport (King and Horrocks, 2010). At the outset, I needed to consider the possibility that because of my former professional roles, I may be seen by some interviewees as of 'higher

status', particularly those I used to line manage. With this in mind, I needed to consider how I presented myself and conduct the interview so that I could mitigate this potential effect. Since I also wanted to interview some very senior education professionals and current and former Members of Parliament, I also needed to give thought to interviewing 'high status' interviewees, or 'elites' as they are described in research literature. 'Elites' have been defined as 'individuals considered to be influential, prominent, and/or well informed in an organisation or community' (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p.105). It is important to note that, 'elite status is not static since individuals can gain or lose status over time' (Harvey, 2010, p.198). This was pertinent to my research since some of my interviewees no longer hold the important roles they once held in the past, but they are nevertheless important sources of information for my research.

There are several advantages to interviewing elites, such as the valuable information they hold, but Marshall and Rossman (2006) point out that there are also disadvantages, not least in gaining access. During my career, I have met, and worked closely with, high profile education professionals and politicians, so at the outset I was hopeful that my personal networks would enable me to gain this access. In the event, this proved to be the case. Informal emails sent directly to those I wanted to interview resulted in rapid and positive responses. I did, however, take heed of the advice given by Harvey (2010) that choice of location and times of year influence the willingness of elites to take part. Politicians proved to be more available during the summer holiday, whereas the beginning of the academic year proved to be a good time to approach school leaders because their diaries were relatively free. I also needed to be sensitive to how much time elites could spare and the possibility

that an interview may be postponed at the last minute but, in the event, this only

happened in one instance.

It was essential that I gave careful consideration to my own role during the interview

because I knew that it would be important to establish my professional credibility,

and where relevant, remind the interviewee of when we had previously met. I needed

to be succinct and transparent about the purpose of my research and well briefed in

order to avoid wasting time asking questions I should already know the answer to. I

was also aware that elites are often adept, and indeed have been trained, in

controlling communication. I knew from previous experience that this certainly was

the case with one of my participants. However, I do have experience in dealing with

such situations and my training as an Executive Coach and Leadership Mentor has

honed skills in facilitating conversations and asking open questions. I was heartened

by the assertion that, 'the personality of the interviewer and his or her commitment to

the task become critical to the outcome. Interviewing elites can be a source of great

challenge, inspiration and not a little joy' (Harvey, 2010, p. 205). Although my

reading had prepared me for potential difficulty in gaining access to elite participants,

I experienced very little difficulty, other than minor logistical obstacles such as

meetings needing to be re-arranged or in the case of one interview, the substitution

of a telephone conversation for a face-to-face meeting.

4.5.5 Data: Recording and Transcription

My reading convinced me that it is preferable, or indeed essential to have a full

record of each interview. I felt that taking copious notes would make it difficult to hold

a free-flowing conversation. I decided that I would aim to record each interview using

my iPhone, as long as the participant agreed, and with the proviso that I would send the transcript to them for approval or amendment. I had expected that some would refuse to be recorded and others might feel restricted by it, making them less willing to share controversial or confidential views. However, in practice, I found that all my participants were happy to be recorded and only one requested any amendments to the transcript. I also made occasional notes in my Fieldwork Notebook and wrote up some observations immediately after the interview. I was fortunate to be able to employ a family friend who is a trained transcriber and co-incidentally, as a PhD student herself, was familiar with the purpose and requirements of transcription for a doctoral thesis. The slight drawback was that she is an American living in America and therefore unfamiliar with some technical language, jargon and geographical and political references relating specifically to the English school system and my research in particular. However, this drawback proved to some extent to be an advantage since it meant that I needed to review each transcript very carefully, listening to the recordings to make amendments and fill in some gaps. This ensured close engagement with the recording which helped me to reflect more deeply on the data. The verbatim transcriptions proved to be a rich and fascinating body of data. Interestingly an unexpected bonus of this transatlantic arrangement emerged, in that my transcriber gave me her unprompted insights on the interview data from her viewpoint as a totally impartial, objective observer of the English education system. These comments are in themselves yet another source of data which I consider in my analysis.

4.6   Ethical considerations

As the Ethical Guidelines drawn up by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) assert, researchers have ethical responsibilities, not only to those

who participate, but also to other researchers and those for whom the knowledge is produced. I need to be mindful of how my research might be interpreted and used in the future. As previously mentioned, I feel empowered to carry out this 'real world research' because of the previous roles I have held and the knowledge I hold. However, I am acutely aware of the weight of responsibility I carry because my privileged position has enabled me to gain access to a wide cross section of participants, some of whom hold high profile posts. I gained willing and immediate agreement from almost every person that I contacted, they gave freely of their time and responded in open and at times outspoken ways. As Costley et al point out, 'when researchers are insiders, they draw upon the shared understandings and trust of their immediate and more removed colleagues' (Costley et al, 2010, p. 1). This position demands high levels of professionalism and integrity from me as the researcher.

4.6.1 Informed consent

My reading highlighted the need to gain informed consent, both to record interviews and make use of the data collected. King and Horrocks (2010) stress the importance of informed consent being an ongoing process rather than one-off, since busy people may forget what they have consented to when the interview was set up. My first contact with most participants was an informal email which was followed by a detailed 'formal' letter (Appendix 3) outlining the purpose and scope of my research as well as assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. I also alerted them to my desire to record the interview and that this would be discussed before the interview started. At the outset, I also needed to be prepared for the possibility that an interviewee might want to withdraw from the process. The BERA Guidelines stress

that it must be made clear to participants that they can withdraw at any point without needing to provide an explanation (BERA, 2018, p. 15). Potentially this would be problematic if I had already included their data in my analysis and used it to form specific conclusions. Nevertheless, I ensured that the consent form made it very clear that the participant could withdraw, up to the point of the completion of my thesis. In my letter I stated that I would provide a formal consent form (Appendix 5) for participants to read and sign at the end of the interview.

Researchers have an ethical responsibility to ensure that the data is accurate. 'Data that are internally and externally valid are the coin of the realm, experimentally and morally' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 219). By commissioning a skilled transcriber and thoroughly reviewing each transcript against the recording, I endeavoured to ensure that the data was as accurate as possible. In addition, I sent the transcript to each interviewee and made all amendments requested.

4.6.2   Confidentiality and anonymity

My previous professional roles in children's services have given me extensive practical experience of the importance of confidentiality and working in accordance with the Data Protection Act, now updated in the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR). At the outset, I was aware of the importance of ensuring that all personal and sensitive data is only used for the purpose for which it has been agreed. I am acutely aware that the unique roles held by some of my interviewees raises a dilemma. Firstly, how I can realistically anonymise the data and secondly, whether it could be argued that people who have held significant national roles should be willing to be held to account for their views. Richards (2015) outlines the

dilemma facing qualitative researchers such as myself, who are concerned that the 'rich data and vivid accounts' they have produced will be less rich if they are anonymised. She acknowledges that this is even more of a dilemma when participants are easily identifiable as public figures, or by others in the study. Nevertheless, it is Richards' view that, 'All writers of Qualitative Research have resorted to modes of obscuring identity, and almost always they feel that the report is less because of the ethical requirements. But those requirements of course are commitments you can't avoid' (Richards, 2015, p. 208). BERA Guidelines recognise that 'few ethical dilemmas have obvious or singular solutions …researchers will take different and creative approaches to resolving them'. Adherence to 'the *spirit* of the guidelines' is what is most important (BERA, 2018, p. 7).

The BERA Guidelines (2018) state,

> The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data is considered the norm for the conduct of research. Researchers should recognise the entitlement of both institutions and individual participants to privacy and should accord them their rights to confidentiality and anonymity. This could involve fictionalising approaches when reporting and where using such approaches researchers should fully explain how and why they have done so (BERA 2018, p. 27)

In the light of this, I have decided to 'fictionalise' my data by naming the Shire County in which my research is based 'Ayeshire' and allotting character names to my 'actors' and anonymising institutions referred to. This approach sits comfortably with the analogy of a 'staged drama' which I have described.

The power of the interaction I have experienced has underlined the ethical responsibilities and obligations I have to my interviewees. It has been asserted that 'responsive interviewers have an obligation going beyond any rules set up to deal ethically' (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p.97). These include such obligations as: reporting interviews accurately and fairly; keeping promises; ensuring no harm is caused. Rubin and Rubin refer to the tension between reporting accurately, whilst at the same time not breaking confidences or sharing unflattering information. 'Writers need to be aware of the tension between accuracy and balance on the one hand, and protecting interviewees on the other, and perhaps not automatically come down on the side of literal truth. Some truths are not worth the pain they cause' (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 104).

4.7   Data Analysis

The 'prescribed script' has been analysed, the 'stage' set, and the 'cast' selected. My purpose in data analysis is to access 'the layers of mystery' beneath the raw data of my transcripts (Holliday, 2002, p. 4), whilst being mindful not only of my own position and influence as a fellow 'actor' on the stage, but also of my ethical responsibilities. I had assumed that my 'research data' would be contained in a file of interview transcripts and that my analysis would purely centre on what I could learn from those transcripts. In reality, the process behind the collection of data proved to be an additional source of data. This 'story' behind the transcripts, is part of 'the total experience' (Holliday, 2002, p. 99). In this section, I will also outline the process I used to make sense of transcription data, 'making sense of, sifting, organising, cataloguing, selecting, determining themes' (Holliday, 2002, p. 99). As previously explained, this analysis will justify my decision to introduce a fourth research question part way through my programme of interviews.

4.7.1 The 'story' behind the data collection process

I conducted twenty interviews between 30th July and 17th December 2018. These took place in a variety of locations (see Table 5 below). Two things took me by surprise. Firstly, although I had been intrigued by the description of interviews being, 'as ordinary as a conversation and as intrusive as a spy camera' (Richards, 2009, p. 42), I was not fully prepared for the power of this method to collect such personal, rich and insightful data. Secondly, although I had considered my personal role in the drama in advance (see above), I was surprised by just how much I was 'on the stage'. During the interviews, frequent mention was made of shared experiences and my personal relationship with participants. For example, John Baker vividly recalled a particularly contentious public meeting about a school closure that had taken place over ten years ago. I had not even realised that he had been present. My interview with Paul Black was punctuated with laughter, as we remembered some shared experiences. Whilst I would argue that the nature of my relationships with participants contributed to the richness of my data, after reflecting on an early interview, I was aware that I needed to guard against being defensive of the local authority because of my former role. This came home to me particularly during the fifth interview, when the participant commented, '*I can see from your face that you don't believe that*'. In future interviews I made a more conscious effort to maintain a neutral stance. Holliday (2002) asserts that this 'total experience' is integral to data analysis because the researcher is part of the 'unfolding story in which the writer gradually makes sense, not only of her data, but also of the total experience of which it is an artefact' (Holliday, 2002, p.131). These reflections are integral to what Holliday calls 'the workings out' (p. 23) which lead to research findings.

4.7.2 Unexpected "real life" interventions

There was one aspect of my chosen methodology that I felt had not been adequately covered in the literature I read. This was how 'real life' and the location of the interview itself can intervene, from the everyday barking of a pet dog, distraction of a cute cat, loud conversation from a neighbouring table in a café, to the totally unexpected knock on the door to tell me that my interviewee's neighbour had just crashed into my parked car, or indeed, the train on which I was travelling to an interview being delayed for two hours after hitting a deer. In the light of 'real life' it is remarkable that only two interviews had to be rescheduled; one caused by the accident with the deer and the other a last-minute cancellation by a participant needing to be in London.

4.7.3 Location of Interviews

The physical location of interviews also brought different aspects to consider. As illustrated in Table 5, four interviews were held in my own home and five in participants' own homes. The majority, nine were conducted in the participant's office at their place of work. Of the remaining two, one was in a busy café and the other took place over landlines from our respective homes.

Table 5: Location of Interview

My home	Participant's Office	Participant's home	Other
Linda Grant	Peter Dixon	Fiona Evans	Jane Green (café)
Paul Black	Simon White	William Benson	Michael Phillips (phone)
Catherine Taylor	Daniel West	Susan Briggs	
Julie Smith	Rebecca Jones	Richard Johnson	
	Paul Fellows	John Baker	
	James Williams		
	Keith Grey		
	Stephen Dawson		
	Ruth Thomas		

My initial email to each prospective participant varied in terms of suggested location. Since the majority of participants were headteachers, CEOs or other senior post-holders, there was a tacit assumption that I would interview them at their place of work to take up less of their time. All but four opted for this arrangement. The nine interviews located in participants' offices raised the issues of status examined earlier. However, in practice, I did not feel at a disadvantage in what could be considered as the participant's 'power base' because I had previously visited all but two of these locations in my previous professional role. On each occasion I was warmly welcomed and given hospitality. This should not however, deflect me from careful reflection when analysing the data from these interviews.

A quarter of the interviews took place in the homes of participants, at their own suggestion. Reflecting on their 'Elites Project' research, which involved participants mainly being interviewed in their own homes, Ozga and Gerwitz comment, 'At the time we felt that this arrangement was appropriate in that it gave them control of the

event; however, there are issues raised by this that merit consideration' (Ozga and Gerwitz, 1994, p.130). They thought that the hospitality offered by participants had resulted in them offering an 'unthreatening, interested and sympathetic version of ourselves' (Ozga and Gerwitz, 1994, p.131). My data must be open to the same scrutiny since I was also offered hospitality, although I was not conscious of feeling obligated to treat the interview any differently. In contrast, four interviews happened in my own home, with me offering hospitality. This had the potential for participants to feel obligated to me by accepting my personal hospitality. Since three of these participants did not have a fixed workplace, I had suggested meeting in a coffee shop, my home, or any other location which suited them. All four chose to come to my house because it was in a convenient location. Moreover, they had all previously visited my house on social occasions. Whilst I need to reflect on the impact of the location, I think this raises deeper issues of an ethical nature which go beyond a consideration of my hospitality. The aspect of 'friendship' will be examined below, because I would argue that the nature of these relationships has led to some very honest, and in some cases, quite controversial views being shared. Thus, the ethical implications discussed above are further heightened.

The remaining two locations also warrant comment. One participant chose to meet in a café close to her workplace, to avoid interruption from work colleagues. This created an informal atmosphere, but noise from neighbouring tables was a distraction at times and made transcription more problematic. The interview I had been most apprehensive about was the one conducted by telephone with a very senior national figure. I was unable to find extensive reference in academic literature to telephone interviews as a data collection method. A telephone interview was

Michael Phillips' suggestion, since he had relocated from the local area. I find telephone conversations more difficult than face to face because body language is important to my understanding of what is being said. I was also apprehensive about how clear the recording of the interview would be, since I was using my iPhone to record from my land line. In the event, this was a highly productive conversation for several reasons. Firstly, the positive relationship I had previously established with this participant through my professional roles, helped the conversation to flow with references to past shared experiences and knowledge. Secondly, Michael Phillips was well prepared, directly referring to the list of proposed questions/prompts which I had emailed to him. Thirdly, I was able to take notes during the interview in a way which would have been intrusive in a face-to-face interview and fourthly, my fears about the quality of the recording proved to be unfounded. The dimension of the impact of locations on interview data adds further confirmation to the importance of the researcher's use of a Field Journal to note unexpected and personal dynamics which can enrich the data from transcripts and provide the 'workings out' behind data analysis (Holliday, 2002).

4.7.4 The Recordings and Transcription

My reading had prepared me for the possibility that some participants, particularly those in senior positions, would refuse to be recorded and others might feel restricted by it, making them less willing to share controversial or confidential views. Using my mobile phone proved to be an efficient and non-invasive method of recording. Although a few appeared to be more circumspect and glanced at the phone, demonstrating their awareness of the recording, for most, it did not appear to hinder them from sharing some deeply personal and sensitive information. In

addition to the recording, I occasionally made notes in my Fieldwork Notebook and always noted my observations and reflections immediately after the interview. In the signed consent form (Appendix 5), I made it clear that I would send transcripts to participants to amend if they wished. However, several openly admitted that it would be pointless sending transcripts, since they were unlikely to read them. Only one came back with a significant amendment, asking me to remove a sensitive passage about a senior colleague. However, this did not have an adverse impact on my data. Some participants commented on the experience of reading a verbatim account, for example: *'Gosh I never realised how incoherent I am – what a ramble'; 'Looks fine, although it reads like me spouting a load of rubbish'*. As mentioned earlier, my transatlantic transcription arrangement forced me to review each transcription in detail by listening to the recording, in order to ensure accuracy. I also ensured that my Field Notes included aspects not included in the transcripts such as hand gestures, for example one participant illustrated the differing levels of performance of two schools by the position of his hands. The impartial observer's view provided by my transcriber was fascinating. She was bemused by how diverse schools seemed to be in the UK and where the funding came from. However, her lack of understanding of the structure of the English education system did not preclude her from drawing some interesting conclusions. She demonstrated that she was not merely transcribing 'words' without thought for their meaning. For example, her comment on James Williams' interview was particularly inciteful:

> *I thought this was a particularly interesting interview because he pointed out a tension between a system that was meant to offer 'more freedom' but really centralized the decision-making process on a larger scale by bringing the power to the central government, as opposed to Local Authorities. Freedom on different scales I suppose, but interesting tension, nevertheless. I guess*

that's the difference between market freedom and democratic freedom' (EM email of 12.10.18).

I had not anticipated that the transcription process itself would provide further data and insight, a further aspect of Holliday's 'workings out'.

4.7.5 Impact of my relationship with interviewees

As previously mentioned, I have worked alongside all but two of my interviewees in my professional roles. I think this contributed to the positive response I received to my request for interviews. There was also enthusiasm and support for the need for this type of research and a genuine interest expressed in reading the final thesis. I was particularly struck by the comment in an email from an elite participant, *'research is much needed in this field'* (Ruth Thomas). This places further ethical obligations on the researcher, 'we should be reciprocating – those whom we are researching are putting time and effort and perhaps some degree of emotional labour into our research – we should therefore produce work which they feel is of some value' (Ozga and Gerwitz 1994, p. 124).

I also had a sense that for some participants the interview was a cathartic opportunity to reflect on their deeply held concerns and frustrations. For example, James Williams was frustrated with what he described as '*a national crisis and a disgrace'*. Several spoke about 'morality' in terms of the morality of decisions they had felt compelled to take. For example, Rebecca Jones spoke of a personal '*moral imperative*' and Linda Grant referred to '*not being able to sit on our little moral high horse any longer'*. There was also a sense that there should be more 'moral purpose' at national level, '*You'd like to think that everybody in education has the same sense*

*of moral purpose' (*Linda Grant*).* On several occasions, reflecting about the future

resulted in the interview ending on a low note: '*I feel as though my mood has gone*

*down' (*Fiona Evans*); 'not a very happy note to end on*' (Catherine Taylor); *'It's just*

*all rather depressing frankly' (*Daniel West*).* On these occasions I felt an ethical

obligation to ensure that the mood was lifted before I left.

Having conducted four or five interviews, I was struck by the honesty and

perceptiveness of my interviewees and by the strength of the bond between us as a

result of our shared knowledge, experience, and in several cases, friendship. This

motivated me to read more widely to understand some of the thinking behind the

style and effectiveness of interviews as a research methodology. I found Rubin and

Rubin's (2005) description of 'responsive interviewing' struck a chord with my

experience and I could attach a meaningful 'name' to the style of interviewing I had

instinctively developed. This model of responsive interviewing emphasises the

relationship which is created between the interviewer and interviewee:

> Personal involvement is a great strength of the responsive interviewing model,
> because empathy encourages people to talk, and yet active involvement in
> the interview can also create problems, as your own emotions and biases can
> influence what you ask and how your interviewee responds. To be a
> successful interviewer you have to be sensitive yourself to these biases and
> learn to compensate for your own slant (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 31).

I have been struck by the way that data is 'created' through the interaction of the

interview. Responsive interviews search out deep, rather than broad data with the

researcher as 'the instrument, the tool of discovery'. 'The researcher's self-

confidence, adaptability, and willingness to hear what is said and change direction,

to catch a wisp of insight or track down a new theme are what makes responsive

interviews work' (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 37). Indeed, a new theme, 'a wisp of insight' emerged from my early interviews. It was clear that there was anxiety and speculation about the future. In my very first interview, Linda Grant mentioned '*this cannot be the end game*' and Paul Black spoke about his belief that in future someone in central government would, '*put their foot on the ball and look at the education landscape and say, 'This is just a mess, and it's not working in the interests of children and families. Let's straighten it out'.* Paul Black also spoke of his personal *'Nirvana'* option for the future. This prompted me to revise my subsequent interview questions to seek views on the future structure of the education system: the structure participants would put in place if they had a "magic wand" (*Nirvana*) and the 'crystal ball' approach predicting what they thought might actually evolve. Responses to this question in turn led me to add the additional research question referred to above:

4. How do educational professionals envisage the structure of education evolving in the future?

A further 'wisp of insight' was gained in my very first interview when Linda Grant said, *'…this business about a school having its distinct ethos and – I think, Really? Is that really deliverable when you start standardising'.* The idea of standardisation across schools in a Multi-academy trust was new to me at this point. However, in the interview with Simon White it started to emerge as a critical theme for my research, when he expressed the view, *'I think you have to be totally standardised'.* My reading reassured me that this was a normal pattern, 'after several interviews you will be interviewing differently, seeing different things, learning from your earlier efforts'

(Richards, 2015, p. 96). This underlines the importance of revisiting records and logging steps in the process.

4.7.6 Initial analysis

My raw data comprised just over twenty hours of recordings transcribed into thousands of words. Having printed out the transcripts, the thickness of the file alerted me to the warning:

> Mountains of data will distance you from an understanding of the topic if you have no way of finding the data you need to think about. You can't expect to explore threads of meaning and patterns of responses if you have to rake through those mountains (Richards, 2015, p. 77).

Clearly, I needed a systematic approach. I began by adopting a deductive approach with a pre-determined list of key words arising out of my research questions, for example '*freedom*' and '*competition'.* I manually underlined these key words on the transcripts. However, it was soon clear that a more interpretative, inductive approach was required to do justice to the meanings behind the words. Participants did not always use precise words such as '*competition*' but referred to anecdotes, and phrases such as '*unfair marketing practices'*. There is a danger of 'trying to tie things up too neatly, packaging and re-packaging, to produce a finely coherent text in which the ragged edges of the original social setting are clipped off and disposed of' (Holliday, 2002, p. 176).

Data analysis has been described as 'the process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to a mass of collected data. It is messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative and fascinating' (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 154). Thus, I stepped

back from looking for key words, or indeed searching for an immediate technological solution. I immersed myself in the individual transcripts, reading each one several times, visualising where the interview had taken place and reflecting on the location. I also recalled the mood of the interviewee and how the relationship and past history I had with each person might be colouring what was said. I re-read the relevant sections from my Field Notebook and noted the thoughts triggered by my reading, rather than attempting to assign codes at this stage. Richards asserts that 'first meetings with the data are precious, because this is when you are most able to be surprised by the research situation and everything about it' (Richards, 2015, p. 88).

This approach began to reveal the 'layers of mystery' which lie beneath the raw data (Holliday, 2002, p.4). Having immersed myself in the transcripts I subsequently found that I was broadly following the first stages in the seven-step process outlined by Marshall and Rossman (2006, p.156): organising the data; immersion in the data; generating categories and themes; coding the data; offering interpretations through analytic memos; searching for alternative understanding; writing up my findings.

4.7.7 NVivo

The number and complexity of the emerging themes persuaded me that a technological solution was needed before I could move on to the next stage of generating categories and themes. I needed to be able to see across the data rather than just in separate individual transcripts, for example, was there a unified view from all the Academy CEOs? I was aware that software could facilitate this process but was mindful of the potential tension between efficiency and creativity in relation to the use of computers (Richards, 2015, p. 126). Richards stresses the need to

understand what software can and cannot do, for example a mechanical process cannot be relied on for interpretation. She also warns against the danger of procrastination by becoming immersed in creating multiple layers of codes rather than thinking deeply about the emerging patterns. This can lead to becoming so bound up in ever finer levels of coding that you never finish your project (Richards, 2015, p. 119). Hence the purpose of software is to 'assist' not 'supplant' traditional methods of analysing data (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013, p. 2). Richards concludes that, 'directed well by the researcher, software searching allows us to focus on a growing interpretation, seeking and verifying the bits of an emerging picture and driving a project forward' (Richards, 2015, p. 180). With this in mind I chose to use software, but with a determination to ensure that I did not lose sight of the insight I could bring, which the software could not achieve.

I took advice from other researchers on the choice of software. NVivo emerged as the standard choice. The availability of this software free of charge from my university, clinched the decision to use it. A short demonstration from a university member of staff, reading instructions online and reading *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo* (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013), gave me the confidence to explore the software for myself.

4.7.8 Coding

'Codes', or 'Nodes' as they are termed in NVivo software, are, 'labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during the study' (Miles et al, 2014, p. 71). I started with a provisional list of deductive codes stemming from my research questions, *competition, freedom, parental choice (*Hayek*)* and *fear* (Foucault). Other codes also began to emerge. These 'inductive

codes' show the researcher is open to what is said, rather than 'force-fitting the data into pre-existing codes' (Miles et al, 2014, p. 81). For example, as previously mentioned, '*standardisation*' began to emerge as a significant theme. This was for me an 'aha' moment, as described by Richards, and although she warns that you should not trust every 'aha' moment. Richards asserts that it 'may signify the researcher has succeeded in getting above the noise of the data to see an over-riding pattern or theme' (Richards, 2015, p.153). This was the case for me. What began as a passing comment, which I did not pick up to explore further in the very first interview, became a major topic of conversation in later interviews, particularly with senior leaders in Academy Trusts and DFE officials.

This initial stage of analysis identified over 25 nodes. In early interviews, '*money*' emerged as a code to reflect the motivation for initial academy conversions. However, later interviews provided different motivations, so I decided to create a new node of '*motivation*' which provided a wider category overarching '*money'*. This has been termed 'second cycle coding' which has the aim of 'pulling together a lot of the material from the first cycle coding into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis' (Miles et al, 2014, p. 73). Some codes such as: *accountability, competition, freedom and local authority* contained richer data than others, triggering the need to 'revisit and code on from that broad category to codes reflecting finer dimensions' (Richards, 2015, p. 116). These are 'sub-codes', defined as a 'second order tag assigned after the primary code to detail or enrich the entry' (Miles et al, 2014, p. 80). The table below illustrates some of these sub-codes.

Primary Code (Node)	Sub-codes
Accountability	- for other schools - for pupils - from DfE/RSC - in a MAT - in a Stand-Alone - by governors - alternative models - in a future structure
Competition	- between CEOs - breakdown in relationships - monopoly - survival of the fittest - unfair
Fear	- forced into MATs - losing jobs - need for protection - of MAT failure - Ofsted - DfE/RSC
Local Authority	- anti-LA ideology - better with LA - current/future role - as common enemy - MATs becoming LAs - pre1988 - weakness of LA

Table 6: Sub-Codes

I was concerned that several pages in some transcripts resulted in no coding and felt that I might not be doing justice to the data. However, my reading reassured me that this was a common feature, 'Not every portion needs to be coded. Most transcripts have some dross' (Miles et al, 2014, p. 85). I found this occurred most frequently at the beginning of interviews as the scene was being set.

4.7.9   Themes and linking with theoretical frameworks

'The human mind finds patterns almost intuitively … trust your 'plausibility' intuitions but don't fall in love with them' (Miles et al, 2014, p. 278). The analogy of a 'spider's web' is also used to explain how strong understanding is built from linked nets, not from the individual threads (Richards, 2015, p. 93). This inspired me to construct a large, physical mind map to test whether the emerging patterns did fit together in support of the conclusions I was beginning to reach. Not only did this help me to clarify my own thinking, but it enabled me to explain my emerging findings to others as a way of checking their coherence. I was mindful of the view that 'the validity of your study will depend on you adequately representing your ideas and their relation to the data' (Richards, 2015, p. 133). The 'big picture' revealed by my mind map enabled me to return once more to the transcript data to look for what have been called 'threads which can be woven into a fabric of an argument' (Richards 2015, p. 148). This 'big picture' also helped me to prioritise themes and ideas from my rich array of data. In particular it also helped me to highlight where the theoretical perspective provided by Foucault's thinking would enhance my analysis.

I examined whether further insights could be gained by comparing data from specific groups of participants. I concluded that there were two factors which made this type of analysis highly problematic. Firstly, my sample of twenty participants included a wide range of professional roles. The largest group of 'actors' currently in similar professional roles comprised the four CEOs and a Regional Director but, in some cases, my sample only included two 'actors' in the same role, for example Members of Parliament (and they were from different political parties). Where there were similarities, small sample sizes made generalisations problematic. Secondly, most of my 'actors' had previously carried out a number of roles (as set out in Appendix 1).

Thus, when interviewing the 'actor', Michael Phillips, although his current role is that of a DfE official, it is highly likely that his views also reflect his previous experience as a headteacher and Academy CEO. Likewise, although the 'actor' Richard Johnson is currently on the Trust Board of a Multi-academy trust, he has previously served as a secondary headteacher and LA Director of Education. For these reasons I have not systematically compared data by current role of participant.

There were numerous individual comments I could have explored further, but it was necessary to concentrate on the main themes to ensure that I met my research aims and answered my research questions. I found the experience of analysing my data to echo that of Richards, as she, 'steadily reduced noise, removed hunches and guesses that didn't hold up, brought together clues that increasingly pointed to a denouement, tested and dealt with alternative explanations, strengthened the fabric of the theory' (Richards 2015, p. 157).

4.8   Conclusion

This chapter has explored 'behind the scenes' of the drama, which is the focus for my research. The 'stage' has been set, the 'actors' selected, the 'prescribed script' identified, and the methodology for analysing actors' improvisations and interpretations has been explored. The method of data analysis has been described in detail because I subscribe to the assertion by Holliday (2002) that the 'workings out' are illuminative in truly understanding research data. The following chapters analyse the rich data I have been privileged to collect.

Chapter 5:   The Stage and the Actors

5.1   Introduction

This chapter is the first of three analysing my research data. In the following two chapters, the data is analysed under the three key themes used in previous chapters: consumer choice, competition and freedom. By way of setting the scene, this chapter provides an overarching analysis of the context of the research site ('the stage'), as seen through the eyes of my research participants, 'the actors'. The context is explored, not only in terms of geographical location, political history and perceived culture, but also the historical moment in time the research study took place. As well as painting a picture of the particular 'stage' on which the research is set, this will also aid reflection about how far the findings of my research can be generalised and the study replicated elsewhere.

I have characterised my research as being akin to the critical analysis of a drama, which has been played out in a particular location, over the last thirty years. The plot is the unfolding story of the application of the ideology of 'the market' to the English state school system, through the education policies of successive governments. As set out in the last chapter, the 'cast' is not a random selection of twenty people. They all share a common experience of working within the local authority selected as the locus of my research, albeit in a range of roles and points in history. Moreover, two thirds of these actors have worked there for at least two decades. As critically examined in the previous chapter, I am also a member of this 'cast'. I am 'on the stage', either explicitly through the vignettes of my own experience, or implicitly through the relationship and past experiences I have shared with the other 'actors',

some of which are referenced in the research data. It is important to remember that these individuals are more than just their professional roles. They each have their own motivations, moral stance and political opinions that they bring to the delivery of the script. In turn, these views have shaped the way education policies have been realised 'on the ground' rather than the rhetoric of government ideology examined earlier. This means that the 'script' of the drama is complex and multi-layered. The 'core script' is drawn from the education policies of successive governments since 1988 and is shaped by the ideology discussed in detail in Chapter 2. I have asserted that the policy technologies of 'consumer choice, competition and freedom' have become central to this 'core script'. In Foucauldian terms, they have become a 'regime of truth', that is the types of discourse which (society) accepts and makes function as true (Foucault, 1980, cited in McHoul and Grace, 1993, p. 131). However, Taylor et al (1997) assert that 'policy text' is subject to modification and interpretation through political discourse and its practical implementation. Therefore, I would anticipate that the core script will be given added depth and dimension by the contribution of each member of the 'cast', 'as it is re-contextualised across the policy cycle' (Taylor et al, 1997, p. 35). Hence, members of my 'cast' are adding to the core script and I want to understand, not only their interpretation, the terminology and words they use to express themselves and whether 'the actors' demonstrate what Foucault describes as 'the exercise of power from below' (Rainbow, 1984, p. 6) to challenge 'the 'regime of truth' imposed 'from above'.

5.2   The research context in terms of physical location

In *Local Responses to national policy: the contrasting experience of two Midland cities to the Academies Act 2010,* Smith and Abbott (2014) concluded that the

context of the local authority area had a significant impact on how school leaders responded to education policy. This was also a finding from research by: Coldron et al 2014; Simkins, 2015; Simkins et al, 2019. These studies were carried out in the same three contrasting local authorities: a large metropolitan, large rural and smaller 'town' (see Appendix 2). They found that the local authority context was particularly important when studying how leaders had responded to the invitation to convert as stand-alone academies in 2010. They concluded that the relationship a local authority had established with its schools influenced school leaders when they were deciding whether to convert. These researchers also pointed to differences in the way primary and secondary schools responded, with secondaries more likely to convert as stand-alone academies than primaries. In this chapter, I will explore how far the single Local Authority selected for my own research, reflects these findings. However, I will also seek to understand what has happened over time to shape the current relationship between the local authority of Ayeshire and its schools.

Transcript data suggests several unique characteristics about the location of Ayeshire. My interview sample was unanimously of the view that Ayeshire had several characteristics that made it different to elsewhere. Participants asserted that there was a less cohesive school system than in other parts of the country. Many attributed this to the county's geographical size, rural and urban divide, and its relatively remote location away from other major conurbations. For others, the diverse range of schools, particularly the existence of grammar schools and high proportion of very small primary schools, was of greater significance. The low level of funding allocated by central government for education in the county, was also identified as an important factor. Others also spoke about what they considered to be

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a culture amongst school leaders, which was inherently parochial and conservative. Michael Phillips summed these up as, '*a set of unique circumstances*.'

5.2.1 Geography

Some felt that, in contrast to smaller unitary authorities, the physical distance between schools prohibited leaders from working closely together, *'if you're in a unitary authority or an urban area where schools are close together, then there is a more fluid working arrangement between the schools already (*Paul Fellows*). There was also what Michael Phillips described as the '*real spectrum of urban and rurality'*. John Baker referred to the challenges which rurality brings:

> I think the reason is in part Michael Wilshaw's rather brilliant report of 2013, 'A Long Tail of Underachievement', where he points out that too many rural schools … are badly led, under resourced, too small, too this, too that. And of course, in Ayeshire, you've got that quite well demonstrated, haven't you? (John Baker).

Ruth Thomas found the geographical location of the county a particular challenge when attempting to attract national Academy chains to take on under-performing schools:

> I think Ayeshire is a bit in the shadow. It's not in Birmingham and it's not affected by the draw from there. It's too far from Bristol. It's too far from Swindon, and it's got Wales on that side. So, I think it misses out on some of the sort of chatter from the big cosmopolitan areas, and also resourcing-wise, it's very difficult to take some of the big MATs into Ayeshire because of the geography (Ruth Thomas).

5.2.2 Different types of schools

There were 288 mainstream state schools in Ayeshire at the time of my research. In Chapter 1, I referred to the marked difference between the proportion of primary schools which are academies (19%) and secondaries (90%). There are several important characteristics, including the fact that a majority of primary schools have fewer than 210 pupils, eleven with fewer than fifty. 66% of secondary schools are stand-alone academies, of which seven are grammar schools. The latter aspect is relatively unusual. Only 37 English LAs have any grammar schools, with ten only having one. There is also a recently opened University Technical College (UTC), one of only 48 in England. Another significant feature referenced in Chapter 1, is that all five of the schools 'sponsored' by National Academy Chains before 2017, have needed to be re-brokered, two for the second time and one has recently been allocated to a third sponsor in the light of its continued failure to improve.

For Keith Grey, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a large Multi-academy trust (MAT) which spanned several different LAs, this '*diverse culture'* resulted in schools, '*not necessarily diametrically opposed, but certainly tugging at each other rather than pushing together'.* As an LA officer*,* Paul Black shared this view, arguing that the grant-maintained legacy of, '*not being collaborative in their general approach',* had contributed to the division between schools, and in particular to the lack of close working between secondary and primary sectors. He felt this was the reason why primary schools were reluctant to join secondary school-led MATs. Paul Black also thought that grammar schools were a particularly important part of the context:

> *I also think, and this is where I get a bit controversial, that the grammar school dimension is an important part of the context as well, because whatever your personal view of grammar schools is …, it does introduce a hurdle—let's put it that way—to that sense of collective responsibility (*Paul Black)*.*

Grammar schools and to a lesser extent, the UTC, were frequently mentioned as fuelling competition and the breakdown of relationships. This is analysed in the next chapter under 'Competition'.

5.2.3   Local Politics

Many 'actors' attributed the fragmented, and for some, inefficient school system to local political decisions taken many years ago. For the headteacher, Daniel West, who had worked in Ayeshire for most of his career, there were political reasons for the current fragmented system of comprehensives and grammar schools. He explained that when individual districts had been responsible for schools in each of their areas, different political affiliations meant they had taken different approaches. This was particularly the case in the mid-1960s, when central government had issued an order requesting local authorities to convert all their schools into comprehensives. '*Going back then, nobody grasped the nettle, and nobody produced for the county a uniform system across the piece.*' Some of the district councils had refused to move to a comprehensive system, hence the continuing existence of grammar schools in some parts of the county to this day.

Daniel West was clear that, as far as his own school was concerned, it was the political views of governors in the 1990s, that had influenced the decision to remain as a local authority school, despite the drive to convert schools to GM status. More recently, his governors had taken a similar political stance in resisting

academisation: '*the governors here are quite – believed and believe in decisions, political decisions, about education being made locally by democratically elected people'.* He joked that his school, and one other in the county, had been described as '*trendy, lefty, Pinko 1980s comprehensives'.* The importance of the political views of governors was corroborated by a retired secondary head, William Benson, who believed that in the past, governing bodies had taken decisions about whether or not to convert to GM status on political grounds: '*it was the governing bodies who didn't want to go…especially those that were heavily dominated by other political parties other than the Conservatives'.*

Although Ayeshire has been under a Conservative administration since 2005, there was greater political support for the model of sponsored academies, devised by New Labour, than for Michael Gove's academisation programme in 2010. Susan Briggs, a former County Councillor, explained that she had embraced Adonis' early plans for academies as, '*the new way forward for failing-schools*'. She had especially welcomed the emphasis on breadth of curriculum, particularly vocational courses:

> *For me it was more, 'Well if we can't do it ourselves, what can these entrepreneurs that are out there, what can they offer? And a mixed bag would be great. But on reflection, I'm not sure that they had all the answers (laughter)'* (Susan Briggs*).*

> **Vignette One**: **Oak: The first 'Sponsored Academy'**

> *When I joined the LA in 2005 as Director of Education, the LA was part way through commissioning an external provider to 'turn-round' a failing inner city comprehensive school. A federation led by a 'super-head' was appointed. This arrangement differed from that of a sponsored academy in that it was for a fixed term of three years and included a substantial amount of LA money, on top of per-pupil funding. This political decision was unpopular with other*

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secondary schools, although, interestingly, none had come forward to bid for the commission. This early experiment of 'outsourcing' proved to be unsuccessful, with many of the measures introduced being those of the 'quick-fix' adoption of vocational qualifications to 'massage' the number of GCSEs achieved by pupils (a practice discussed further in the next chapter). In hindsight, the contract should have been clearer about the targets set. After many highly contentious meetings and public consultations, the school was subsequently amalgamated with another failing secondary to create a 'New Labour' style academy (Oak), which eventually opened in 2010, sponsored by a not-for-profit organisation. At that time, I felt this was a positive move since the LA had been unable to turn either school around or attract heads willing to take on such challenges. I thought that a national sponsor would be able to access some highly skilled leaders and bring innovative ideas. Unfortunately, this proved not to be the case. Ten years later the Oak Academy has had twelve Principals, has been in special measures for most of that time and re-brokered twice.

This vignette sets out the background to Susan Brigg's comment above, about academies not 'having all the answers.' It also explains the views, expressed by Fiona Evans, Paul Black and Ruth Thomas below, that the county's early examples of MATs may have put heads off the idea of setting up their own MATs.

Despite its Conservative administration, the LA did not actively champion Michael Gove's proposal for successful schools to convert to academy status.

*Gove was very keen to push forward the idea of academies. Every possible shape and form that you could. It was push, push, push, outstanding schools should go first, outstanding schools should be academies. But I always said, 'Well, no. It's up to them if they want to'. – And we didn't – it was a bit of a clash on that one (*Susan Briggs).

Susan Briggs had taken this approach because she felt that schools should: '*do what is right for the school'*. She thought that '*a lot of them just weren't ready to be left on their own'*.

5.2.4 School Funding

As alluded to in Chapter 1, Ayeshire has historically received one of the lowest levels of government funding for education in the country. It belonged to the f40, a group representing the 42 lowest funded local authorities. This group was established to lobby central government for a fairer funding formula. For example, before the recent national change to school funding, guaranteeing a national minimum amount per-pupil, a secondary school in a LA bordering Ayeshire received around £900 extra per-pupil funding than a secondary in Ayeshire. There is evidence that this has shaped the county's school system in three major ways. Firstly, by encouraging school autonomy at secondary level. Secondly, reducing the level of intervention by the LA and thirdly, creating division amongst primary schools as a result of the contentious issue of funding for small schools. It has also resulted in a large number of primary schools remaining as maintained schools, wary of taking on the additional responsibilities of academy status. In the last respect, this is similar to the findings of other studies: Coldron et al, 2014; Smith and Abbott, 2014; Simkins, 2015; Simkins et al, 2019. However, none of those researchers refer to funding levels as a driver for change in their selected LAs. An analysis of historical funding levels in those locations would be an interesting area for further research. From the interviews I conducted, it appeared that funding had been a stronger motivating force than any ideological considerations, when it came to decisions about GM status and academisation.

The low level of the county's funding for education was acknowledged by almost half of those I interviewed, *'as we both know, Ayeshire is particularly badly funded'* (Simon White). This was a historical problem that predated 1988, *'the problem was – all the indices that were used to calculate funding formulas, we got right – you know this – right at the bottom' (*William Benson*).* Grant Maintained schools (GM) the precursor of Academies, had brought increased government spending on education. Reflecting back, William Benson asserted that the motivation behind 28 of the 42 secondary schools converting to GM status, was down to money not philosophy, *'the reason we all went was money. It wasn't anything to do with philosophy or educational advantage …it was just about money'*. Paul Black recalled attending a number of Parent-Governor meetings in the 1990s. As a LA officer, his role was to try to dissuade schools from becoming GM by, *'pushing the greater good…the financial advantage that you gained as an individual school could only be gained at the expense of other schools'.* However, he recognised that there had been a very strong motivation for schools to adopt GM status, because Ayeshire received some of the lowest levels of government funding for education in the country. He reasoned that this in turn had triggered wide-spread conversion to stand-alone academy status immediately after the *Academies Act,* 2010. School leaders had learnt, through GM, that there was more money to be gained by going early, plus it was a straightforward transition for schools which had previously been Grant Maintained. As Paul Black explained, *'Those who had been in Grant Maintained Status territory felt more comfortable with the idea … it's a bit like babies and toddlers learning to walk. They've done it the day before; you're going to be more comfortable the day after'.* He described it being, *'like a step back to grant-maintained'.*

The main source of central government funding for schools is the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). The DSG is allocated by the Schools Forum, which is a body of elected representatives from schools and other institutions who decide how much money a LA can keep centrally. They also advise the council on the funding formula for schools. When a school decided to become a stand-alone academy, the government required the centrally held DSG, the Local Authority Central Spend Equivalent Grant (LACSEG) to be allocated to the academy. In line with market ideology, this gave the academy the freedom to 'buy' the support and services they required. However, historically, Ayeshire LA has retained much less of the DSG centrally than other LAs, particularly to support the secondary sector. This meant there was a large disparity between the amount the government stipulated should be handed over to schools when they converted as academies in Ayeshire, and the amount the LA had actually kept centrally. Paul Black recalled the '*hoo-ha*' about early academy funding:

> *The LACSEG was calculated according to each Local Authority's costs, so the extra that the academies were getting in Ayeshire was low because our central costs were low, so they (DfE) were hugely suspicious of the Local Authority, that we were fiddling the books, so Heaven forbid! (laughter). And then they moved to a standardised rate, which was more than our costs so that was a problem (*Paul Black).

For this reason, there was a large financial incentive for schools in Ayeshire to convert. Indeed, it was cited, by many of those I interviewed, as their reason for accepting Michael Gove's invitation to convert as stand-alone academies. '*The reason why we converted was very simple… there was a financial incentive to convert*' (Paul Fellows). Simon White explained that the motivation for the primary

school, where he was headteacher at the time, to convert as an academy was, '*cashing in on that last bit of the academisation golden handshake*'. Jane Green spoke of converters being '*awash*' with extra funding. James Williams was clear, '*the early incentives to become a stand-alone academy, absolutely, it was financial*'. For the early converters it had been '*bonanza time and they got protection over the years*' (Paul Black).

A further issue raised by low funding was that of small schools, with school leaders critical of local politicians for failing to close unviable schools. The Schools' Forum regularly discussed the inefficiency of spreading sparse funding over so many unviable schools with large numbers of surplus school places. Indeed, Forum representatives used the rationale of 'market ideology' to argue that businesses that are not viable should not survive in the marketplace. However, this was a difficult nettle for politicians to grasp, as Susan Briggs explained:

> *No-one wants to close schools, let's face it. It's worse, I suppose when you are a politician and a councillor and you live in an area and people knock on your doors and say, 'we will never vote for you ever again because you closed my school, and I will never forgive you ever again'. And yes, you have to have the skin of an old rhino* (Susan Briggs).

This issue will be discussed further in the next chapter in relation to 'consumer choice'. In the absence of a political solution, the issue of small schools remains an unresolved issue and a source of ongoing tension between primary schools. In my experience, this has prevented primaries from presenting a unified view and reduced their power as a collective group of school leaders. A further consequence of having a large proportion of small schools was that there was a correspondingly large number of primary heads, who were working as classroom teachers for most of the

week in order to balance the budget. Arguably, this was a factor in the reticence of many primary schools to academise, because 'teaching heads' did not have the time to take on additional responsibilities.

Primary school reticence was in marked contrast to the confidence and independence shown by secondary schools. Susan Briggs highlighted this dichotomy, '*lots of (secondary) heads were way before their time really*' whereas primaries, *'a lot of them just weren't ready to be left on their own'*. Some participants argued that this had led to the local authority taking a different attitude to primary than secondary. Peter Dixon argued that as far as schools deciding whether to academize, '*the attitude of the LEA had a lot to do with that – if people felt that the LEA was really supportive, which it was towards primary …*'.

> **Vignette Two**: **The Primary/Secondary divide**
>
> *From my experience, Peter Dixon is accurate in his portrayal of the LA's differing approaches to primary and secondary schools. On taking up my post as Director of Education, I was surprised by, what I characterised as, a paternalistic approach to primary schools. Each of the 250 primary schools had a named adviser the head could call on for support. There was a joke that some heads would phone us about how to deal with a dog in the playground, and this was not far from the truth. This reflected the reality that heads of small primary schools were essentially classroom teachers. When budget cuts began to hit shortly after I joined the council, I had to drastically reduce the number of advisers, resulting in some primary heads complaining about feeling adrift.*
>
> *In contrast, from the moment I joined the LA as a secondary headteacher in 1999, it was apparent that the majority of my fellow secondary heads were fiercely protective of their autonomy and suspicious of the LA, who had just*

been given a new monitoring role over Foundation Schools (formerly GM) by New Labour. The county's Association of Secondary Heads was a formidable group. Indeed, the Council's CEO once confessed that there had been a time when the council was 'afraid' of the Association. Its strength was based on the vision and expertise of some key headteachers, the effectiveness of sub-groups, particularly the one dealing with financial issues and the practical point that it was possible for 42 headteachers to meet round one table. This was in contrast to the Primary Heads Association which struggled to achieve the same unity, with over 250 schools of very varying sizes. Primary schools tended to have greater affiliation to their local geographical groups, and this remains the case. In recent years, the Secondary Heads' Association has diminished in its power with many schools, particularly those in MATs, no longer actively taking part because of competing loyalties. This is in line with findings by Glatter (2017) and Greany and Higham (2018).

From the data, there is clear evidence of a chain of consequences arising out of the fact that the LA received a lower level of funding in comparison with other parts of the country. The chain began when well over half (66%) of secondary school heads took advantage of the additional funding which came through GM status. This in turn reduced the amount of central funding for the LA necessitating a 'non- interventionist' approach by the LA to the secondary sector. The next step in the chain was the opportunity for schools to repeat the GM type experience of gaining additional money through academy conversion, thereby reducing LA capacity even further. Simkins and Woods (2014) and Smith and Abbott (2014) concluded that schools had been quick to embrace academisation in areas where schools had traditionally been autonomous and the LA non-interventionist. However, I would assert that in Ayeshire there is a clear rationale for this, rooted in low funding levels. This aspect is not considered by the researchers cited above. Indeed, these studies provide no

discussion about the historical reasons behind some schools being more autonomous in some local authorities than in others.

5.2.5 The culture

For a county with a large number of very high performing, autonomous secondary schools, it is surprising that there are very few 'home-grown' MATs, in contrast with other parts of the country. Several of those I interviewed thought this was something to do with 'the culture' of the county.

> **Vignette Three**: **Reticence of outstanding leaders to set up MATs**
>
> *On numerous occasions, in my role as Director of Education, I tried unsuccessfully to persuade heads of outstanding secondary schools to 'sponsor' failing schools. It was frustrating when DfE academy brokers proposed MATs led by schools from other parts of the country, which were clearly not as successful as those within our own county. I made many fruitless visits, alongside DfE brokers, attempting to persuade Ayeshire school leaders to take on this role. The most commonly articulated reason for refusal was that heads were wary of risking the success of their own school. The end result was that several national chains took over Ayeshire schools, often with poor outcomes, as in the case of Oak Academy in Vignette One. Indeed, three of the earliest national chains to enter the county had to be replaced in the light of continued failure.*

Several participants referred to what they considered to be a '*parochial'*, '*conservative'* culture in the county. Michael Phillips reflected about his own experience of being a headteacher in the county, *'Ayeshire was quite unique in many ways in terms of—it was at headship level, particularly, incredibly parochial, I found'.*

Paul Black referred to governors who had been in post for a long time and had a fierce sense of loyalty to their individual school. For Michael Phillips, *'The heads come and go, whereas the governors have been there for a long time. Certainly, through the academisation era. I think they are the ones in Ayeshire that are the gate-keepers.'* Jane Green, CEO of a MAT and former Ayeshire primary headteacher, described the county as a place that watches for others to go first, '*It is quite reticent to stick its head above the parapet, so it watches, and it waits. It sees what is successful*'. Fiona Evans also felt that headteachers in the county were, *'not entrepreneurial*' and reticent to take risks. Paul Black put a slightly different slant on this conundrum. He thought that headteachers, who since GM days had become like '*barons and baronesses'*, were so fiercely independent that they did not want to take on responsibility for others.

Several pointed to the failure of the three national multi-academy chains that had taken on schools in the county, mentioned in Vignette Three above. From observing headteachers, the LA officer, Fiona Evans thought that:

> School leaders saw the poor experiences of MATs in Ayeshire, of sponsors in Ayeshire, and they didn't want to be in that tribe really. So, I think there was something about the sponsor that had come in from elsewhere and failed, that made them a little bit more apprehensive about doing it (Fiona Evans).

As Paul Black put it, *'the early examples of multi-academy trusts, we had, were not very shiny'.* Ruth Thomas concurred with this view, '*I think we made some mistakes early on which have rebounded'.* She described a recent meeting with the county's Secondary Heads' Association at which she had been told, '*Yeah, we get it, but we haven't seen an example that works*.' This reluctance to set up MATs was clearly frustrating for Ruth Thomas, '*I have never known anywhere like it!'.* However, at the

time of the interview she was optimistic, '*I think there is hope you know… we've identified four or five smaller emerging trusts which we want to put a lot of effort and attention to'.*

Paul Fellows spoke of the '*moral dilemma'* he found himself in as the head of a successful secondary school:

> *You think, okay, do I have a duty to support the system and to try to look after and help develop a school that is struggling? Or knowing that if I do that, there may be a dilution of resources in my own school…or do I carry on doing the best I can for my own school? Because that is what I came into the job to do'* (Paul Fellows).

James Williams could see, '*absolutely no incentive for someone in their right mind to set up a MAT',* because '*why would you want to take on additional responsibility, particularly with a high-cost inspection regime where you lost your job in a second if your school goes down?*'. Paul Black also gave the example of the head of an outstanding school who had been repeatedly invited to set up a MAT. This head had been concerned about the impact on his own school because, '*his accountability as chief executive of the trust would be at trust level not school level*'. Some of the secondary school leaders I interviewed had explored setting up a MAT, but the recognition that their school would be an equal partner with the other schools in the MAT, had persuaded them to step back (this is discussed further in Chapter 7 in relation to 'freedom and autonomy').

5.3   The 'Cast'

The rationale for the selection of the twenty 'actors' to interview for my research is set out in the previous chapter. The breadth of roles they have played, some at a

very local level, others regionally, some nationally, adds to the richness of my interview data (see Appendix 1). Each of the actors in my drama, including myself, have their own motivations, moral stance and political opinions which they bring to their delivery of the script.

5.3.1 Personal Motivations

The professional roles (or voluntary roles in the case of governors) of the 'actors' have qualified them for their place on 'the stage', but in the interviews, I was interested to explore whether their personal philosophical and moral stance had influenced their response to education policies. I wanted to understand how far their views were in line with the rationale of 'market ideology'. The transcripts reveal some very deeply held personal views and some moral dilemmas.

When interviewing Peter Dixon, I was particularly interested to understand what had motivated him and his fellow Labour MPs to vote for the introduction of academisation during the Blair government. He was blunt that their acceptance was not down to a belief in the philosophy or strategy, but purely because of the additional funding it attracted, particularly capital investment:

> *It was all down to money, and the fact is, they put serious money in, particularly into inner cities…so most of us bit our lip when we knew some of the stuff that was going on was about trying to restructure and move away from bog standard comprehensives….so it was a kind of compromise. The problem was, as time progressed, more and more evidence was that they were trying to re-engineer, revolutionise the way in which education was being provided…Our issue was please give us the money … so this was new money doing things, but changing the nameplates was kind of what came with it… it became more of an issue because then some schools exploited it on the*

back of, you know, previous ways in which they could exploit additional
*funding. Then it broke down the LEA (*Paul Dixon*).*

It is interesting to note that Paul Dixon is echoing the same pragmatism as the headteachers quoted above. In both cases, it appears that additional funding was the motivating factor driving decisions, rather than affiliation with ideological beliefs.

Paul Dixon went on to express a cynical view of academisation under Michael Gove, asserting that '*money*' had been used as an '*inducement*':

> *…well hang on a minute, where did the choice go? If you were a failing*
> *school, you were told you had to. If you were a successful school, you were*
> *told, of course, 'it's worth your while if you do it and you will get even more*
> *money … there was not a lot of choice about it. So, choice went out of the*
> *window … It's basically inducement or it's compulsion* (Paul Dixon).

Some MAT CEOs (Simon White, Keith Grey and Rebecca Jones) were clearly driven by their moral stance, personal vision and motivation to make a positive difference. For Simon White, school improvement was the driving motivation for him to set up a MAT, '*we believed in terms of school improvement, we knew what we were doing and more children needed what we were doing because we felt we had a moral imperative to do that*'. Rebecca Jones was clear about the purpose of her newly formed MAT:

> *I think we have always been outward-facing and willing to share. We don't*
> *know all the answers, but I think the spirit of working together to make a*
> *difference to children and young people has to be a key driver. We will act*
> *with moral imperative and work with the Local Authority because we are*
> *educating Ayeshire's young people* (Rebecca Jones).

Keith Grey also explained that his MAT is '*values based*'. Everyone employed by his Trust receives a copy of '*The Little Green Book'* that contains*, 'a set of promises that, as colleagues, we make to each other and to our organisation for the ultimate benefit of the children and families that our schools serve'.* He explained that, when a school wants to join the MAT, he will, '*go and spend time before I waste anybody else's time just checking out that our visions and values are compatible, because otherwise we will spend more time arguing about who and what we are*'. In this way, Keith Grey keeps '*the moral integrity and virtue of what we say we do*'. He summed up, '*I'm really proud of the high – not high in terms of being pious, but the really strong moral background*'.

In my very first interview, I was struck by Linda Grant's honesty in describing her personal moral dilemma as a school governor considering academy conversion. She had felt that the large amount of additional money given to schools when they converted as stand-alone academies, was '*immoral*' and '*wrong*'. When asked why she thought it was wrong she replied:

> *it didn't seem right when we knew how short money was that that should be possible, particularly that it should be the schools that were already performing at the highest level that were getting the benefit of that! That didn't seem right. We wanted to be part of a local system as opposed to cut and run and doing what was best for us* (Linda Grant).

However, when faced with the alternative of having to make redundancies, Linda Grant and her governors had decided, '*we can't sit on our little moral high horse any longer*' and converted as an academy:

> *I think we carry that responsibility for the education of those young people, and that is why there is always a tension...it's about children's lives…you want*

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to think that everybody in education has the same sense of moral purpose
about it, but that cannot be the case, given the decisions that are made and
the things that happen (Linda Grant).

In contrast, two of the local authority officers argued that there had been a breakdown in the sense of moral ownership, '*you've lost that moral obligation that schools and head teachers used to feel for the common good*' (James Williams) and '*academisation has given a sense to schools that we can do what we like…. all those principles have been diluted I think*' (Fiona Evans).

Some interviewees were open about the way their personal ethics had influenced decisions about their career. Daniel West, wrestling with what would happen if his school was faced with forced academisation, had decided he would fight it and then leave, which would '*mean others would not be tainted.*' Stephen Dawson spoke about his previous experience of working in some roles where he had felt uncomfortable. Although he was proud that, as a first-time head at the age of 30, he had been able to lead his school out of Special Measures, he felt that he had just been, '*chasing performance matrices'*. Whereas, in his next post he had worked for a CEO who he described as, '*having a good heart … who was going to make significant changes for the better in schools'*. He now felt he had a clear view of, '*who I want to work for*' and his personal approach to leadership, '*I'm absolutely passionate about the children, but also really, I just want the staff to have a better deal as well'*.

Ruth Thomas was particularly explicit about the importance of her personal ethical stance:

*With the history and background, I've had, as you'd imagine, you examine yourself all the time. Can you ethically get with the programme? For me the Multi-academy trust model is absolutely where we should be going, particularly in an era of financial tightness, particularly in an era of recruitment limitations, because it provides a model of professional growth for teachers and leaders across more than one school, which could be more efficient than individual schools. So, for me, it makes eminent sense as a model; otherwise, I wouldn't be selling it, as it were (*Ruth Thomas*).*

According to *The Little Green Book*, the aim of Keith Grey's MAT is, '*to ensure that no child is left behind*'. Similarly, the MAT initiated by Rebecca Jones has as its purpose, '*improving the learning and life chances of children'*. In both cases, these aims about equality, are at odds with Hayek's market ideology. Likewise, the moral dilemmas described by Linda Grant and Stephen Dawson would not arise for a hard line free-marketeer intent on making the most of market forces to further their own position, or that of their organisation.

5.3.2 The language of 'the market'

*In Philosophical Investigations (*1953*),* the philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that words acquire meaning by their use. He coined the term 'language game' to illustrate the way in which words are tied up with social practices, so that words used in one context may have a different meaning in another (Wittgenstein,1953). I was interested to reflect on how far words, phrases and analogies in the transcripts demonstrated that members of my cast were engaging in the 'language game' of 'the market', even though they do not appear to share some of its ideology. Although I did not phrase my questions explicitly using 'market' terminology, I was surprised by the frequency and ease with which the terminology entered conversation and was

used in analogies. Although, I do need to bear in mind that my interviewees were aware of the title of my thesis, it is significant that some readily compare the school system to 'shops' or supermarkets'. Several also argued that the language of 'business' helped governors to understand school practices. However, some expressed philosophical objections to the concept of education being expressed using commercial language.

Some interviewees felt that conversion as an academy, which had brought with it some explicit commercial approaches such as having to file 'Company Accounts', had helped governors to understand their role more clearly. This was because governors understood the terminology of 'business' more readily than that of education. In Wittgenstein's terms, these governors, who were used to engaging in the 'language game' of business, could now apply the same language to an educational setting. As Chairs of Governors, Catherine Taylor, Richard Johnson and Linda Grant all felt that the language of the market and business used in documents when they converted to academy status, had helped their governors to understand their roles better:

> *all of a sudden, the governors became very serious about their responsibilities… becoming an academy was a bit of a dawning of realisation for them ... I had three solicitors on my governing body…and a chief accountant on my governing body... So, I had a really high calibre governing body, who 'got' business. They didn't ever, some of them, 'get' education!* (Catherine Taylor).

Ruth Thomas used the language of 'business' when summing up the responsibilities of Academy Trust Boards, *'the trust board, through Companies Law is responsible*

for the success and failure of the trust. If the trust goes bankrupt, it is the trustees who are held legally accountable and etc etc...'.

Other interviewees were uneasy and expressed concern that this terminology did not fit in the world of education for a variety of reasons, some practical and some moral. I expected that those working within a MAT structure would be more positive about the application of market ideology, than those outside a MAT structure, but views did not clearly divide on those lines. The most passionate advocate of the model was indeed a MAT CEO (Keith Grey), despite his moral values outlined above. Other MAT CEOs and Senior Leaders were more circumspect (for example, Jane Green and Stephen Dawson).

The interviewee who appeared to be most comfortable using the explicit terminology of the market was Keith Grey, CEO of a large MAT. He used the analogy of 'shops' to illustrate how the structure of his MAT had evolved. He explained that when the MAT had first been established, it was like a group of five or six local corner shops, '*And the head teacher was the shopkeeper, knew where the soap was kept, knew where the cornflakes were. You couldn't put somebody else in there because the systems, protocols, and processes were all idiosyncratic'.* When the MAT expanded to ten or twelve schools, it was more like Spar (the national chain of local convenience stores). These schools were, *'part of a wider thing, but it's still quite localised and quite idiosyncratic'.* However, as the MAT got even bigger (35 schools at the time of the interview), *'you need to align yourself very much in terms of global systems, global processes, global protocols.'* For Keith Grey, such a standardised approach enabled schools in his MAT, '*to do things not just effectively, but to do*

them well'. This approach is discussed further in Chapter 7, since it raises questions about the freedom of individual schools.

Keith Grey had structured his MAT along business lines, with Regional Directors, who he described as '*mini-CEOs'* who each have a '*business support unit'* to '*free'* headteachers:

> *If my job as a headteacher, is to be a champion of my school in the community and the community in my school, and to raise standards, why are you distracting me with buildings? Why are you distracting me with IT infrastructure? I'm not an expert in those things. Why are you distracting me with HR and finance issues?* (Keith Grey).

Despite this being a 'business-like' model, it is at odds with the rationale behind the *Education Reform Act* and *The Academies Act*, which both stressed the importance of all decisions being taken at the front line, as advocated by Hayek. Indeed, I pointed out to Keith Grey that what he had described sounded '*pretty much like a local authority'*, to which he replied, '*could well be'*. This point is explored further in Chapter 7.

Some interviewees were unhappy about applying market terminology and the concepts behind it to the school system. They were particularly critical of the idea of 'business failure', arguing that the 'failure' inherent in market ideology, cannot be allowed in the school system because of its impact on children. Susan Briggs echoed Keith Grey's 'shops' analogy above, but used it to illustrate the difference between a supermarket and a school; the school is essential whereas the supermarket is optional:

*It's like opening up different supermarkets. If a supermarket decides to close, you know, 'We shut down. Go and have a look at the other supermarket down the road.' I suppose that, with the element of choice, is something that they have tried to embed in the school establishment. But the problem that you've got there is, that you have to have schools. You don't have to have supermarkets (*Susan Briggs*).*

Fiona Evans was also concerned about the impact of market failure:

for an institution like a school to be dependent for its success on how good it is at playing a market, I think it's too risky. I think the business is become— you can't have failure. In the market you have failure. And these are children, aren't they? We have seen catastrophic failure in the market, so I think it needs to be looked at differently (Fiona Evans).

Jane Green spoke about the tension she was under as a CEO. On the one hand, she needed to make '*the business work*' but on the other, she had a moral responsibility to look after small schools who were not financially viable. Linda Grant also referenced the tension when a rural school might '*wither and close*', because '*a market economy is all about the survival of the fittest, and that is okay provided that support is given to those who aren't the fittest, and it's not the children who pay the price for that really.*' James Williams was strongly of the opinion that the school system could not be left to market forces:

*So, you have senior ministers burying their heads in the sand and playing with kids' lives, because whilst the free market might sort it out in a few years' time or whatever, it's that kid's one chance—it's that whole cohort, that whole generation of children's, one chance in their life to make a difference. Once they have missed it, they really have missed it. So, I think quite depressing? (*James Williams*).*

For Fiona Evans, the culture of headteachers in the county, '*is a little bit conservative… they're not entrepreneurial. There isn't that kind of character'.* Susan Briggs also raised doubts about whether headteachers were equipped to adopt a business model:

> *As I said, we were lucky with our secondary heads because most of them had very good business heads on them … but a lot of them didn't in the country. And I think that is where it failed, and certainly with primaries, — they were worried about how they were going to manage the different processes that make up the business and different facets of the business. They weren't sure that they had the skills to do it, and I for one, wasn't sure they had the skills to do it. A lot of the heads have become headteachers through basically adapting, being a teacher, doing well, became deputy head, and adapting and moving into a headship. They weren't really ready for this new world which involved a lot of the business ideals. I think that is where it floundered a little bit* (Susan Briggs)*.*

On the other hand, Simon White warned about the danger of appointing people as CEOs for their business acumen, as opposed to educational expertise. He had recently been asked to work with a newly appointed CEO, in another part of the country, '*he's a brilliant salesman, but doesn't understand school improvement, doesn't understand education properly. That trust is already starting to creak at the seams.'*

Some interviewees expressed concern about some 'business' practices they perceived as having a detrimental impact on schools. Catherine Taylor referred to the actions of a national MAT in dismissing a headteacher, who had indicated she wanted to retire in a few months' time. *'… they just decided, again, without any kind of conversation, they just decided, "Oh, if she's decided she's going, she won't be interested in this place", and she was gone within weeks!'* Stephen Dawson expressed a similar concern that a business model could drive a ruthless approach

in academies. He cited a multi-national company which *'cut out the bottom 25% of their workforce every year, regardless of how well they've done'.* William Benson described MATS as *'ruthless'* and Linda Grant thought that in some sectors, heads were treated like '*football managers… in a cutthroat system where you don't get long-term sensible decisions… you just get what is best in those six months.'* She warned against the danger of having a '*spreadsheet*' approach to education.

Michael Phillips felt that MATs should do more to communicate more effectively with parents to explain the benefits of their business approach, dispel misconceptions and address:

> *some of these understandably difficult points of view about the opaqueness of, 'Who are these people? What do they do? Are they business-people trying to asset strip our school?' All the things you read about here. I think that would be one thing* (Michael Phillips).

However, Linda Grant also speculated on the need to look more positively on business practices and not lose sight of the fact that '*profit*' is not a dirty word, '*the best businesses make their profit and they fund this society*'.

5.4 The contemporary political setting

My research interviews were conducted in Autumn 2018, when national government was focused on preparation to leave the European Union (Brexit) in March 2019, following the referendum of 2016. During the period of my research, very few announcements were made by the Department for Education and no new major policy changes impacted on the structure of schools. This was in marked contrast to the time immediately after the *Academies Act* of 2010. Several interviewees

remarked on this lack of national political focus on education and attributed this to Brexit. Rebecca Jones was particularly critical of the Department for Education for not updating documentation to reflect that GCSEs were now being awarded using numerical grades rather than letters:

> *they're completely distracted by Brexit, whatever is going on there, nobody is really looking after Education. You go on the DfE website in 2018 and look for the floor standards for secondary schools, and the documentation is still talking about five or more A* -C. So, you know, it's not, we're not a priority* (Rebecca Jones).

Simon White explained that one of the reasons why some national work he had been undertaking on school improvement, had '*been pulled right back*' was because of Brexit:

> *Well, there is no will of any sort at the moment in Education because we are all worried about Brexit. So, all the resources are being sucked out of government into Brexit. Education has lost half its civil servants for Brexit. There is no will. Pragmatically they will fiddle around in the corners just to try to make sure nothing collapses ... The government are going to force less and less people to do anything just because they don't want anybody making a fuss while we worry about Brexit* (Simon White).

Susan Briggs concurred, '*I don't see the Conservatives at this point pushing academies like they used to…I am not sure what he is pushing… is it Hinds? I'm not sure what he is pushing. They seem to have come to a plateau'.* She concluded that the emphasis has moved to, '*Brexit and the NHS*'.

5.5   Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted what my interviewees consider to be 'unique characteristics' for the location of 'the drama'. In reaching my overarching

conclusions, I will need to bear in mind that this may limit how well my findings can be generalised on a wider national scale, and how replicable the research will be in other areas of the country, in terms of reaching similar conclusions. My data indicates a shared view amongst 'the actors' that the geographical characteristics of the county and its political history have led to the creation of a fragmented, highly diverse school system. This has resulted in a lack of close working and even distrust between primary and secondary sectors. The county's geographical location has been seen to contribute to a parochial culture amongst heads and the reluctance of outstanding heads to set up their own MATs. The low level of funding from central government has been described as pivotal to the county's high uptake of GM status by secondary schools and their subsequent conversion to stand-alone academies. This has in turn had an impact on the capacity and approach of the Local Authority. These factors all have a bearing on the discussion of consumer choice, competition and freedom in the next two chapters.

This chapter has also explored some examples of the way in which market terminology has entered the lexicon of educational debate. This is an important consideration when analysing answers to my research questions, and the way in which the 'script' of the drama is to be understood. It can also be argued that the historical point in time of this research is also significant, given the comments from several of my interviewees. The political challenge facing the government in implementing the Brexit referendum has been described in *The Times* newspaper as one of the biggest and most complex challenges in the country's history (Wright, 2018). At one level this could be regarded as a time of stability in education, but it

could also be argued that it is contributing to a sense of 'fear' and uncertainty of what will happen in the future. This theme will be explored further in a later chapter.

The review of primary sources in Chapter 2, set out the ideology that has shaped education policies since 1988. In this chapter, I have begun to explore policy development, 'the complete journey of policy from formulation to reception and implementation by a wide range of actors' (Trowler, 2003 p. x). This chapter has provided a more rounded portrayal and deeper insight into the members of my cast and their approaches to policy implementation. It is clear from the opinions expressed above, that the actors not only bring their professional experience to the drama, but also some very deeply held views that in some cases have led to some difficult moral dilemmas. This is an important reminder that the 'text' of educational policy is not delivered by unreflective 'robots' but by real people whose views and opinions add to the policy 'discourse'.

The data provides an important insight into ways in which the participants in my research have responded to government policy. On the face of it, the speedy response of a large number of Ayeshire secondary schools to convert to GM status in the 1990s, and subsequently convert as academies in the 2010s, might lead to the conclusion that the county was a shining example of widespread agreement with the government's 'market ideology'. However, the data outlined above, would suggest that decisions were taken for pragmatic, financial reasons rather than affiliation with the ideological rationale presented in government rhetoric and discussed in Chapter 2. The data presented in this chapter supports the view that policy does not happen in a vacuum but is subject to competing influences such as social, political and

economic factors (Forrester and Grant, 2016). The views of 'real' people taking

decisions at the front line, reflect 'the messy realities of influence, pressure, dogma,

expediency, conflict, compromise, intransigence, resistance, error, opposition and

pragmatism in the policy process' (Ball, 1990, p. 10). These words encapsulate the

'messy' context for this research. It is also clear from the data that, although 'the

actors' sometimes use language derived from 'the market', their moral values do not

always sit comfortably alongside Hayek's hard-line approach to business failure and

lack of concern for equality of opportunity. The 'actors' in the drama have not

accepted the core script at face value.This is the background against which to

explore the three central aspects of 'the market' (consumer choice, competition and

freedom) in the following two chapters.

Chapter 6: What the actors say: Consumer Choice and Competition

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter set the scene in terms of the location for the drama. It also served as an introduction to the actors' personalities. They are not just a set of people enacting a 'script', they bring their own deeply held views and motivations to the delivery of that script. In Chapter 2, I traced the rationale for choice as a means of empowering parents to act as consumers, and competition as a means of forcing providers to improve, so that their offer was attractive to consumers. In this chapter, through the voices of 'the cast', I will explore how they, and other members of the education community in Ayeshire, have responded to education policies encouraging consumer choice and competition. I will also analyse what they perceive the impact has been. As in the previous chapter, my own voice as 'an actor' is presented in the form of Vignettes. Throughout the chapter, I will assess how far the views of my 'actors' are in line with national research or research in other local authorities (LAs). I am particularly interested in whether some of the distinctive characteristics of the county identified in the last chapter make Ayeshire different in some respects.

6.2 Consumer Choice

For Hayek, freedom of choice is a key requirement for individual freedom. 'Our freedom of choice in a competitive society rests on the fact that if one person refuses to satisfy our wishes, we can turn to another. But if we face a monopolist we are at his mercy' (Hayek, 1986, p. 69). Prior to1988, although local authorities had some regard for parental choice, in effect they acted as monopolies, putting limits on the number of pupils a school could admit, spreading intakes evenly between popular

and less popular schools, and in some cases, ensuring a mixture of abilities (Hill et al, 2016). As set out in Chapter 2, education policies since 1988 have facilitated consumer choice through open enrolment, freedom for academies (including grammar schools) to expand and enabling parents to apply to open their own 'free' schools. In Hayekian terms, Ayeshire is an ideal 'market' for consumers with a diverse range of suppliers and 'over-supply' of school places. Four themes related to consumer choice, have emerged from my analysis of interview data. Firstly, the proposition that choice favours some consumers over others. This has been a consistent finding in research since the early 90s: Gerwitz et al,1995; West et al, 2004; Hill et al, 2016; Cullinane, 2020. Secondly, the view that parents may be confused by the choices open to them. Thirdly, the unexpected consequences of consumer choice, when that choice extends to parents removing a child from school to avoid exclusion. This practice was also identified as early as the study by Gerwitz et al (1995) and more recently by the Chief Inspector for Schools (Ofsted, 2020a). The section ends with a discussion about the difficulty of allowing market forces to shape provision in the context of schools, as opposed to commercial businesses. The rhetoric of successful schools expanding in response to parental demand and unpopular schools closing, is difficult to realise in practice.

6.2.1 Consumer Choice: some parents more advantaged than others

Tactical decisions taken by some parents to enhance their child's opportunity of attending, what they perceived to be, 'the best schools', were mentioned by several of those I interviewed. One such tactic was that of relocating into the catchment of a successful school. Peter Dixon said that constituents used to ask him, '*why are we in the catchment area of x and not y? Can we move a few yards and then?' It's all a bit*

petty, but it does actually matter if those parents are guaranteed to get their kids into a particular school.' Although John Baker acknowledged that this practice occurred, his aspiration was that across the country, every school would become a good school, '*which everybody is really pleased and proud about because they could go there if they happened to move to that city. So, the idea that parents have to move to get a good school is simply wrong*'. Fiona Evans shared this view, '*My ideal would be for every child to go to a good local school',* but she wondered how you could ever get to that, *'in a system that is already well embedded and that many people are already wedded to particular kinds of schools in particular areas'.*

Vignette Four: Middle class advantage

A demographic rise in pupil numbers caused particular pressure on pupil places available in one part of the county. I and my colleagues faced a particularly tricky annual task in dealing with aspirational parents, who found themselves no longer able to get their children into Top Towers, an outstanding comprehensive school in a wealthy suburb. They lobbied their MP and local politicians and engaged solicitors to argue their case. Some were incensed because they had relocated specifically to access the school, indeed estate agents attracted buyers by including details of proximity to the school. House prices were high. However, as the number of pupils in the area grew, the 'catchment' of the school reduced from 1.22 miles in 2017, to 0.86 miles in 2018. We had to scrutinise applications carefully and, in some instances, withdraw places from parents, who had temporarily rented property near the school to coincide with admissions applications, or used the address of a relative. This is in line with the Sutton Trust's findings that some parents were 'gaming the system' (Cullinane, 2020).

Parents can look beyond their own local area, and indeed beyond the Local Authority boundary if they are unhappy with what is on offer locally. However, unlike the

contiguous London boroughs in which Gerwitz et al (1995) conducted their research, Ayeshire has poor transport links to areas outside major conurbations and very large distances between some schools, particularly secondary schools. Therefore, in order to take advantage of a wider choice of schools, parents need to have the means to arrange and pay for their own transport. As a county, Ayeshire is a net importer of pupils, with parents from bordering local authorities applying for places at high performing Ayeshire schools. In some cases, these parents live closer than families actually residing in the county. Paul Fellows felt that his school benefited from this and could attract, *'the sort of parents who are most interested in education, perhaps having the more motivated children'.* Referring to her experience as a headteacher in another LA, Julie Smith described how it had been, *'parental choice to pay the bus fare to send the children out to the 'burbs',* to access a school they thought was better than the local one, which was her own. When her school had been threatened with closure the parents:

> *were vociferous that they should have that choice, and that it was a successful school and should stay open. The other school in the town, their parent community were also keen for my school to stay open, because it was a kind of social engineering on their part … estate agents in the town would market houses based on being in the catchment of the other school in the town … it was also in their interest that my school stayed open* (Julie Smith).

Simon White had a similar experience of more aspirational parents choosing to send their children to primary schools further away, rather than the one in the village (his school). Prospective parents had been told that Simon White's school was, *'where all the 'pikey kids go'… I was told that half a dozen times, and that x is where all the bright kids go.'*

Interviewees also felt the grammar school system favoured more advantaged, aspirational parents. Referring to Teresa May's initiative for grammars to take more disadvantaged children in return for additional capital investment, Peter Dixon expected an outcry from middle class parents:

> *And by the way, the grammar schools now as markets – they're beginning to exploit, get access to even more money if they can play this game of social engineering…* it's a bit *of a contrived way of doing it to actually sort of rig the system, and if I was a nice middle class parent who didn't get their kid in that school and found that they got the same marks as someone who did, but they come from the xx Estate, well that would be an interesting conversation, wouldn't it?* (Peter Dixon).

Peter Dixon was not happy with any system whereby:

> *All that happens is that the bright kids go to the better schools and get the chances, and the other kids go to the other schools and don't get the chances. It does become very – it gets reinforced. As I say, success breeds success and failure breeds failure.* (Peter Dixon).

He thought that the reason why some schools had converted as academies was, '*they've got something which is an attractive option for those parents who would otherwise say, Well I'm sending my kids to the grammar schools anyway*'.

Rebecca Jones thought that parents felt under pressure to have their children tutored for the grammar school tests:

> *we are seeing an increasing number of parents choosing the grammar schools because they get caught up in the whirlwind of their neighbour having tutoring, so they think they should have tutoring. We have just had two open mornings and a couple of parents have said to me, "Well we will do the grammar school test. We are getting him tutored." You don't need to have him tutored. You can get as good a quality of education here and outcomes as*

you could in the grammar school. You don't need to do that. But I think they feel there is a – if the neighbour is doing it, and it is the talk of the primary school gate – (Rebecca Jones).

Grammar schools were also seen as a contentious issue by Linda Grant, even though her own school was an over-subscribed, high performing school in a middle-class area. When asked whether there were benefits for parents in having a wide choice of schools, including grammar schools, Linda Grant accepted that it was, '*fair to point, as long as parents understand the metrics. They just see the headlines of As'.* She felt that prospective parents did not understand that the inclusive nature of her school resulted in the sixth form having a broader range of ability than the grammar schools.

6.2.2   Consumer Choice: Confusing for Parents

The ability of all parents to understand their choices as consumers was raised as an issue by several participants. William Benson thought that the choice for parents in Ayeshire was even more confusing than elsewhere in the country, '*the choice for parents now is baffling …we are one of five or six areas that have got grammar schools, which is even more baffling*'. Several (Michael Phillips, Stephen Dawson, Paul Fellows, Fiona Evans, John Baker), questioned whether all parents could understand the information schools provide. In particular, they wondered whether parents understood the difference between different types of schools, especially those in Multi-academy trusts (MATs). Michael Phillips suggested that MATs needed to improve their communication with parents, for example by '*a pretty simple report that they can distribute to the parents about what it is they're trying to do for the school their child attends …'.*

Stephen Dawson also felt that some parents were suspicious of MATs, '*They're a bit suspicious, particularly if they google you and find that your base is in London and you're in the South West*'. In Fiona Evan's opinion:

> *the general public, I don't think they've any idea what the difference is between a converter academy, a sponsored academy, whether that means it's a good school or a bad school. It's so difficult to explain and understand… we talk all the time to friends, professionals, capable people … they have no idea how the system works or what their choices are. People will say, 'it's an academy, does that mean it's good?' Might be, you know*… (Fiona Evans).

To illustrate the point that parents don't always understand how well a school is performing, John Baker graphically described a parents' meeting he attended where, as Director of Education, I was explaining to parents why the council wanted to close the school:

> *you were actually explaining the rationale…and there was a load of parents, and this woman…. she bellowed across…and she said, 'if this school was good enough for me, it was good enough for my kids' and I thought, 'God, you have just made the case for closing the school'* (John Baker).

The task of changing parental perceptions about a school, particularly following a poor inspection report, was mentioned by Richard Johnson, Julie Smith, Peter Dixon and Daniel West. Richard Johnson described the challenge faced by the primary school he chaired, after it had come out of Special Measures. The school was in a highly deprived area. Surplus places in neighbouring areas had led to:

> *middle class parents sending their children southwards and eastwards … so we were trying to get people in the area to come back … we chopped down a whole row of conifers at the same time. That didn't half help. People could see the school* (Richard Johnson).

The solution for Richard Johnson's school had been to convert as an academy thereby re-branding under a different name. The motivation was not about competing but, '*as much as to try to win back what was ours in the first place, or the better half of what was – because after special measures, there had been year groups of 60. They went down to 30, 35*'. Richard Johnson acknowledged the power of school reputations, referring to some friends whose granddaughter had been given a place at a failing secondary school, he said, *'they went through hell-and-high-water*' to make sure she had an alternative school place. Daniel West took a moral stance on consumer choice:

> *if there are spaces in schools doing better than here or anywhere else, then I shouldn't be allowed to be protectionist and say, 'No, they should be here even though we're doing a worse job. Because that doesn't make sense, but there has to be some level of co-ordination, and also, the idea of fair access to children that some will not entertain children* (Daniel West).

Despite parental choice being a cornerstone of the *Education Reform Act,* Peter Dixon articulated a cynical viewpoint that it is actually schools who choose the pupils, '*rather than parents choose schools. They may think they're choosing schools, but they are constrained. Schools are much cleverer at being able to manipulate the process. Even if it's just to the extent that 'we will change our catchment area'.* Fiona Evans was also aware of schools, *'that have changed their criteria to get a more favourable population to the detriment of other schools'.* This is where 'consumer choice' is intrinsically related to 'competition', discussed later in this chapter.

6.2.3 Consumer Choice: The Negative 'Flip-side'

In terms of the education 'market', the exercise of free choice means not only that a parent can choose the initial school, but also the option to transfer their child to a different school or indeed to home educate. It is in line with Hayek's ideology that if a consumer is not happy with what is being provided, he or she should be free to choose another provider. Several 'actors' spoke about parents being 'persuaded' to exercise their right to remove their child when the child was at risk of exclusion. This is picked up in greater detail in the discussion about 'competition' later in this chapter. However, it interesting that Linda Grant described the right of parents to remove their child in order to 'home educate', as '*the other side of parental choice*'. She was concerned about the level of education these children would receive. A view shared by Rebecca Jones who felt, '*entirely the wrong people are choosing to electively home educate. They're the people least well equipped to educate their children and take this decision'.* She had examples of what she called '*serial school-hoppers*'. When difficulties at a school arose, some parents reacted, '*if you're going to be like that, we'll take them out of school'… rather than resolve the issues.'* These children, '*come out of education for elective home education for a couple of weeks or six weeks, or six months, and then parents think, "Oh, they better go back to school"*.

6.2.4 Consumer Choice: Market Provision

In a pure 'market' system, as envisaged by Hayek, providers (schools) would supply the goods (places) which consumers wanted. Schools that did not satisfy what customers demanded would be closed (go out of business) and good schools would expand to meet demand. However, as discussed earlier, this does not work in practice because failing state schools are allowed to 'limp on'. David Carter (former

National Schools Commissioner) regretted that he had not dealt with failing schools quickly enough (Dickens, 2018)*.* Susan Briggs, Fiona Evans, Jane Green, Linda Grant and James Williams were all troubled by the notion of schools being allowed to fail and their impact on children, since it was usually the most vulnerable children who attended these schools. Fiona Evans argued:

> *for an institution like a school to be dependent for its success on how good it is at playing a market, I think it's too risky… you can't have failure. In the market you have failure. And these are children, aren't they? We have seen catastrophic failure in the market, so I think it needs to be looked at differently* (Fiona Evans).

Linda Grant thought that a system that was about: '*the survival of the fittest'* needed to ensure that*, 'children don't pay the price for that really'.* This sentiment was shared by James Williams who felt that the market system: *'played with kids' lives… taking away the one chance in their life to make a difference'.*

As a former county councillor, Susan Briggs was concerned about a model which treated schools as though they were supermarkets:

> *It's like opening up different supermarkets. If a supermarket decides to close, you know, 'We shut down. Go and have a look at the other supermarket down the road.' I suppose that, with the element of choice, is something that they have tried to embed in the school establishment. But the problem that you've got there is, that you have to have schools. You don't have to have supermarkets* (Susan Briggs).

The following example illustrates the difficulty I faced, in trying to manage consumer choice, by closing a failing school and persuading an outstanding school to expand.

Vignette Five: Ash School (Secondary)

Ash is located in an area of high deprivation with significant surplus school places. The number of pupils fell to around 300 because aspirational parents chose to send their children to Beech, an outstanding comprehensive four miles away. In 2012, before I could get a political decision to close it, the school's governors decided to voluntarily become an academy, sponsored by a national chain. This removed the school from LA control. Unfortunately, the Academy chain failed to bring improvement or increase the number of pupils on roll at Ash Academy. In 2014, the DfE issued an official warning of 'financial mismanagement' to this particular national chain at the same time as Ofsted identified 'serious concerns'. This resulted in ten academies, including Ash, being removed from the MAT. At this point, I met with the RSC to share my view that Ash should be closed, and the pupils be relocated to Beech.

Unfortunately, the RSC did not share my view. Ash was subsequently re-brokered and re-named in 2015. At the time of the last Ofsted Report (2018), there were still only 324 pupils on roll and for five out of the last seven years, the Academy has been judged as 'inadequate'. Despite a slight improvement in inspection outcome to 'Requires Improvement' in 2018, inspectors still noted 'insufficient progress by disadvantaged pupils in key stage 4' and 'low aspirations of pupils'. Meanwhile, during this time the neighbouring comprehensive, Beech, has consistently been 'outstanding' and oversubscribed.

In a 'market' system', Beech should have been expanded but the cost prohibited it. An alternative approach would have been for Beech to become a MAT, thereby 'taking over' other schools to establish its 'brand' on other sites. However, despite my best efforts, the head was unwilling to risk the success of his own school by taking formal responsibility for others. Although, he was keen to work informally with other schools and had indeed established a Teaching Alliance to provide support and co-ordinate good practice.

In a 'pure' market as opposed to the 'quasi-market' of education (Whitty, 2002), Ash would have closed, with pupils relocated to an expanded Beech School, where there is strong evidence that their outcomes would have been better. I am frustrated that 'political actors' at both a local and national level prevented 'market-forces' being put into practice.

6.3   Competition

Alongside 'consumer choice', 'competition' is another cornerstone of Hayek's ideology of the market. He believed that consumer choice would drive competition, forcing providers to improve their efficiency and effectiveness in order to succeed in the marketplace (Hayek, 1986). As already outlined in Chapter 2, this ideology influenced education policies including: pupil-led funding; open enrolment; parental choice; greater diversity in types of schools. League Tables and Ofsted inspections facilitated comparison between schools and served the function Hayek said was necessary to regulate competition. The government expected that schools would respond by, 'expanding their intakes, poor performing schools would improve themselves, or face bankruptcy' (Ball, 2008, p. 187). *The Academies Act* of 2010 encouraged even greater competition, freeing academies to increase their Planned Admission Number (PAN). Significantly for Ayeshire, this also applied to stand-alone grammar schools since grammars had been prohibited from expanding since 1998.

The review of literature and research findings in Chapter 3 pointed to some of the consequences of 'competition' as being, the breakdown of trust between schools and adverse impact on disadvantaged pupils. Rather than asking a direct question about 'competition', I asked my interviewees an open question about what they considered to be the impact of 'academisation'. Significantly, most participants referred to

'competition' in their response, although some pointed out that competition had been there long before academisation, '*the moment you introduce "bums on seat funding", which came in with LMS … it added that competitive element*' (Simon White). In contrast, William Benson paid tribute to the '*mutual support network of heads*' which he experienced in Ayeshire at the time of LMS, despite the fact that '*we were being encouraged to be competitive*'. There was a unanimous view amongst those I interviewed that competition was now intrinsic to the education system. Only one (John Baker) argued for the benefit of competition, although even he prefaced his comment with, '*competition is not the be all and end all*'. John Baker echoed Hayek's argument, asserting that competition was a mechanism for improvement because, '*if you have a monopoly, then you have got a probl*em'. This section will explore four areas of concern raised by those I interviewed: the erosion of trust between school leaders; reinforced hierarchies between schools; fear; negative impact on vulnerable pupils.

6.3.1 Competition: Erosion of Trust

Linda Grant, Catherine Taylor, Rebecca Jones, Fiona Evans, James Williams, Keith Grey, all referred to a degree of suspicion between school leaders. '*I think people are just incredibly wary about what's going on and what other people are doing*' (Catherine Taylor); '*there's a lack of professional trust*' (Rebecca Jones). As CEO of a MAT spanning several LAs, Keith Grey thought that Ayeshire had been '*the hardest stone to crack*', in gaining the trust of other schools. He attributed this to its, '*diverse culture – you know, grammars, academies, Local Authority*'.

Linda Grant suggested that this lack of trust was a relatively recent phenomenon:

> *you have to be careful about who you get on with really. Ten years ago, we were in a better place with the sort of role of the local authority and the partnerships - no doubt we were moaning about things then, but at least you understood your place in the system and who the players were and what was going on* (Linda Grant).

James Williams had also witnessed a recent hardening in attitudes. He illustrated this referring to the Schools Forum:

> *which has some very balanced characters who have been around a long, long time, and understand all the intricacies of it, are saying now that they will not play ball and it is each to their own. It is dog eat dog out there. That's what competition and the free market has done* (James Williams).

Paul Black, Catherine Taylor, Keith Grey, Paul Fellows, Rebecca Jones, thought that this lack of trust had been exacerbated by recent grammar school expansion. All seven grammars had each increased the number of pupils they admitted by one additional form of entry (30 pupils). Thereby putting an extra 210 places each year into a school system that already had a high number of surplus places in most parts of the county. This had resulted in some secondary heads refusing to be in the same room as grammar school headteachers. Rebecca Jones believed, '*grammar school expansion has really driven a wedge'*. Paul Fellows spoke about the impact as '*fault lines'* that weren't there before. Daniel West thought that the freedom to expand which grammar schools had gained through academisation, was '*freedom to actually do something which doesn't take account of the damage or the effect on neighbouring schools.'* William Benson thought the positive relationship that existed between headteachers in the 1990s, in spite of the government's drive to introduce competition, would have been severely threatened if grammars had been allowed to expand at that time, '*that would have been a real test of cohesion'*. Paul Black

described a meeting of the Association of Secondary Headteachers he had recently attended. He had been surprised by the lack of engagement in debate, '*it's been particularly since the grammar school expansion. It is sort of as if nobody can face having the – well no one really wants to row anymore. Nobody can face airing it again'*.

Catherine Taylor spoke of the present level of competition in the county as *'cutthroat'* and '*it's a bit of a jungle out there really'*. She went on to distinguish between some areas of the county where there was less competition because, '*of their school-place situation, but everywhere else there are surplus places, and so it is important that everybody gets their quota of youngst*ers'. Peter Dixon warned that there is an inherent danger in the notion of competition, *'because once you get into this competition malarkey, people try things, and you know it's not good for kids.'* Fiona Evans felt that heads*, 'have seen notable examples of people going off doing their own thing. Then your drive to keep things going in a shared sort of collective is sort of knocked away really'*. However, Simon White argued that competition was not any worse than in the past because he had, *'never found great collaboration in education in all of my years … we are still doing lots of school improvement work, but it is rarely with the schools immediately around us … nothing has changed'*. Keith Grey was*, 'not optimistic about the wider landscape because there is a lot of competition. There is a lot of friction between local authorities who feel threatened by academy trusts and academy trusts who don't trust local authorities.'* Although, he stressed that his own Trust was '*not threatening to other partners that we can work with*'. He wanted to '*work collaboratively with other MATs, with the local authority'*. Stephen Dawson was positive about the advantage for schools in his MAT of being able to work

together, rather than being in competition. However, he acknowledged that the two Ayeshire schools in his MAT were in different parts of the county:

not fighting for the same kids… it's a huge advantage … it isn't that we wouldn't take another local school on, and we may do so quite soon, but it does create an issue over competition. What we would then do is – we're together, and we have got to make sure that the kids that are going to that school and that school come to us instead (Stephen Dawson).

Since these interviews took place, two other Ayeshire academies have been re-brokered into Stephen Dawson's MAT. These schools are in close proximity to one of his existing schools, resulting in three being very close to each other. This could have the advantage of them being able to work together, but they are also likely to be in competition for pupils. This particular scenario would be an interesting focus for further research.

Paul Fellows pondered whether, '*some of the breakdown of relationships between schools is a result of academisation or simply that schools have perhaps used their publicity machines in ways which have upset others and would have done anyway really*'. Almost half of those I interviewed also referred to lack of trust being triggered by what they perceived as unfair marketing practices. This was identified as a finding in national research, *School Autonomy and Government Control: School Leaders' Views on a Changing Policy Landscape in England* (Higham and Earley, 2013). One school in Ayeshire had positioned advertising hoardings right next to a competitor school, '*I don't know what publicity machine they engaged, but it just sort of ran roughshod across our catchment'* (Paul Fellows). Rebecca Jones referred to schools, '*marketing aggressively … and subsidising buses.*' Peter Dixon referred to a comprehensive school that had posted a banner on a bus stop right in front of

another secondary. Daniel West mentioned a marketing leaflet one school had published that included performance tables to illustrate its own improvement, in contrast to other schools that were highlighted in the tables as being 'below average'. One student in a school listed as 'below average', had asked the head, '*Are you going to lose your job because you're well below average?*' Catherine Taylor also referred to, '*heads standing up quoting other schools' performance tables as part of their presentation'.* For her, this breakdown in collegiality had been driven by, '*numbers games and all the competition for places.*' In his role as current Chair of the Secondary Heads' Association*,* Daniel West said, '*the kind of rifts that I have overseen… spats, were more between schools and marketing, schools not getting on'.*

6.3.2 Competition: Reinforcing Hierarchies

Several heads commented on what they saw as the unfair advantage some schools had over others, particularly the recently opened University Technical College (UTC) and grammar schools. Since UTCs do not admit pupils until they are of Year 9 age, Rebecca Jones was frustrated by the requirement, '*to share all of our pupil information at 14 with the UTCs so they can direct mail our parents. But we can't direct mail their children'.* Linda Grant spoke of the moral dilemma of, on the one hand wanting students to know all the options open to them, but on the other, the impact on her school's budget (nearly £5,000 per-pupil), if several were 'lost' to the UTC. Paul Black, William Benson, Daniel West, Rebecca Jones, Paul Fellows, Linda Grant and Peter Dixon, all referred to what they considered to be the '*unfair'* financial advantage grammar schools had gained through academy freedoms to the financial detriment of other schools. At a time of falling pupil numbers across most of the

county, grammar schools would inevitably attract students at the expense of other schools. Peter Dixon gave the example of a head who had, '*lost 17 on appeal to the grammar schools … so she will go into deficit, and she is losing, obviously, her brightest, so she is not any longer able to say that it's a genuine comprehensive.*' This assessment was shared by Fiona Evans, '*Well as one school grows, another declines, so it's attracting more children, more of the population of children you might want is going to be detrimental to others. It's affected the comprehensive nature of schooling'.* Catherine Taylor reported a conversation between two heads. The grammar school head had explained, '*I don't want to do it, but if we end up having reduced funding, I will have to increase my PAN'.* The non-selective school head had replied, '*well that's all right for you. I will have to make staff redundant'.*

There was scepticism that competition leads to improvement for all schools. For Richard Johnson, the effect of competition is merely to change '*the pecking-order'* of schools. He thought that, although Adonis and others had expected:

> *the tide to rise…. because that school will improve and others will then improve but, you pop that one up and somebody else will come down … it seemed to me common sense that a structural solution alone wasn't going to work… you try to put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig. Any why is it a pig? It's a pig because it is having to take all the kids nobody else wants. It is at the bottom of the pecking order. It's not going to get away from that* (Richard Johnson).

Stephen Dawson was wrestling with the dilemma of being in an area of the county which had six secondary schools and only enough children to fill five. Whilst his priority was clearly to fill all the available places in his own school, he was concerned this would result in surplus places elsewhere:

when you've got a measure of success that is dependent on how well or how badly other people do, there is always going to be this 'unhealthiness' around making sure that your school is always better. And the only way you can get better is other people getting worse (Stephen Dawson).

Fiona Evans also spoke about the detriment to children from having a hierarchy of schools, '*the power and autonomy of some of the schools at the top of the tree have on schools at the bottom of the chain .... that's not academisation doing that, it's just policy freedoms'* (Fiona Evans).

Vignette Six: 'New Labour' Academies: Oak and Poplar

Richard Johnson's comment about the 'pecking order' of schools, prompted me to reflect on whether some of the structural reforms, I had championed in Ayeshire, had in fact made any difference to parents' perception of the hierarchical position of these schools.

This is particularly relevant when considering the two 'New Labour' academies, Oak and Poplar. These academies are located in the two areas of the county with the highest levels of deprivation. In each case, two weak or failing schools were combined to create one new Academy. All these schools had been at the bottom of 'the pecking order' in their respective locations.

Oak

The turbulent history of Oak Academy was touched upon in Vignette One. Despite sponsorship by a National Chain, new branding and 'state-of-the-art' buildings it has remained as the last choice for parents in the city. In 2020, there were 87 first preferences for Oak's 210 places. This is even lower than in 2015 when there were 119 first preferences for the same number of places. It remains to be seen whether its new (third) sponsor (Stephen Dawson's MAT) will change this. To date, it would be reasonable to conclude that structural change has not led to a change in the hierarchical position of the school, it remains at the bottom.

Poplar

Poplar, the county's first New Labour Academy, benefited from a generous capital programme resulting in an eye-catching design. Whilst it was being built, local children were quoted as saying, 'it can't be for us.' Andrew Adonis took a personal interest, inviting a group of us to London to discuss it. Adonis even followed this up with a personal telephone call of encouragement to me. Several high-profile partners, including an FE College and a University, pledged their support to work alongside the joint sponsors. However, despite what appeared to be a positive start, Poplar Academy has never been able to establish itself as the first preference of more aspirational local parents. In 2020, Poplar had 157 first preferences for the 180 places available.

As explained earlier, if there are surplus places in the school system, aspirational parents are able to get their children into schools some distance from where they live. However, in the last eight years, housing developments have led to a rise in the pupil population in this part of the county. This has restricted parental choice of schools further afield (as in Vignette Four). As a result, some parents were offered a place at Poplar Academy instead. So little had the perception of Poplar changed within the community, that the offer of these places led to a political storm and intense media interest as some parents went as far as to refuse the place, leaving their child without any school place.

Interestingly, given that more aspirational parents are now unable to access the school 'at the top of the tree' (Top Towers), they have become more willing to accept places at another school in the neighbourhood, Conifers, which used to be considered as only just above Poplar in the perceived hierarchy. Rather than refusing a place, parents have had enough faith in the reputation of the school and the leadership of the headteacher, to give it a go. Indeed, Conifers is bucking the 'pecking order' trend by starting to rise up the hierarchy, overtaking other schools which used to be regarded as more desirable. In 2020, Conifers received 224 first preferences for the 175 places available. This is despite Conifers having old buildings and remaining a Foundation School.

> *The conclusion I have reached from these reflections is that hierarchical positions are deeply entrenched. Smart new buildings and re-branding do not make a fundamental difference. Clearly, the rise of Conifers in the hierarchy of parental preference is not as a result of structural change. In my judgement, its improved position is down to exceptional leadership and school ethos.*

The impact of competition in reinforcing hierarchies of schools is also reflected in the findings from research comparing three LAs by Coldron et al (2014) *The restructuring of schooling in England: the response of well-positioned headteachers*. It was also identified in research looking across four localities by Greany and Higham (2018). National research by Higham and Earley (2013) found that competition between schools was intensified in areas with demographic decline and surplus places, as is the case in Ayeshire.

Another aspect of competition is a new hierarchy of school leaders. The emergence of powerful individuals is highlighted in findings by: Simkins and Woods, 2014; Coldron et al, 2014; Greany and Higham, 2018. Participants in my research also acknowledged that some heads were becoming more influential than others. Fiona Evans felt that for some schools, their decision to convert had been motivated by, '*the desire to be seen as amongst the 'very aspiring schools, the most successful schools*'. She described schools as having been 'flattered to convert' by the agents of academisation:

> *so, you were told that you were a good or outstanding school. Therefore, you could become an academy, and if you didn't, the question was 'why not?' You're outstanding, you should do this'…I don't think some of the decisions were made judiciously…you wanted to be in the in-crowd, you know the progressive schools in theory…they were then very persuasive in persuading others that we've gone therefore you should go* (Fiona Evans).

LA officers thought that establishing a MAT was a career opportunity for some long-established, ambitious heads, '*because what do you do after you have been a secondary head…. these are high powered people with huge capacity, so you look to create an empire to lead'* (Paul Black). Fiona Evans thought that some heads found it preferable to become a CEO to, '*grow outwards and develop a span of control'* as opposed to risking applying for the headship of a larger school and not being successful. Richard Johnson felt that some of the early CEOs had been '*vastly over-ambitious'* with too much depending on the CEOs themselves. Michael Phillips shared this view, referring to two CEOs, who had, at one time, been responsible for 75 and 30 schools respectively. Both had '*overpromised and chronically undelivered'.*

Several participants (Rebecca Jones, Julie Smith, Fiona Evans, Keith Grey, Jane Green) spoke disparagingly of competition between CEOs of Academy Chains. Rebecca Jones was '*incredibly irritated'* by CEOs chasing '*bumper stickers … you've got CEOs of a certain type and certain disposition who stand there saying, 'Oh, I've got twenty-five schools and I've got another three in the pipeline'.* Julie Smith described it as, '*chess playing … when to take on another school or when not to … there is a kind of branch warfare … what's the turn-over of the trust?'.* Keith Grey, referring to his national experience, felt that there were some areas where, '*MATs have become a 'fiefdom and it becomes a badge'.* Although, he wanted to stress that for him personally, '*volume doesn't matter. What matters is the quality … not seeing your strength, your beauty being in volume'.* Jane Green thought some MATs, '*only want the pick of the schools … and some of the secondary schools that are trying to*

set up multi-academy trusts; I think they are quite predatory, some of them. Not all, but some'.

6.3.3 Competition: Fear

In my conversations with participants in my research, I was struck by often they mentioned a sense of fear and uncertainty, which they suggested was widespread amongst school leaders. These emotions appeared to be triggered by the competitive pressure manifested through high stakes testing. For example, the consequence of a poor Ofsted inspection is forced academisation. There were also financial concerns, particularly if a school's number on roll declined as a result of expansion of a competitor school. These fears have also been identified in *A Generation of Radical Educational Change: Stories from the field* (Pring and Roberts, 2016). National research by Greany and Higham (2018) also identified a culture of fear amongst headteachers and *Emerging School Landscapes in England: how primary school leaders are responding to new school groupings* (Simkins et al, 2019), also refers to a sense of 'fear' expressed by the ten primary headteachers in their research sample.

There was a common thread around the fear of future compulsion. This not only applied to non-academy schools, who feared forced academisation if they had a poor Ofsted, but also to those in stand-alone academies who feared future legislation would force all schools and stand-alones to join Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). Even some academies that were already in a MAT, feared that small MATs would get swallowed up as 'market forces' prompted acquisitions and mergers. I was struck by the language used by several interviewees, for example their references to, '*battles*',

'*races*', '*being swallowed up*', '*hoovered up*', '*being picked on*', '*writing on the wall*' and '*being spooked*'. Daniel West referred to two community schools in the county who had recently been forced to join MATs following poor Ofsted inspections. Several years ago, when his own school had been placed in Special Measures; the law had not yet been changed to force it to become an academy. At that time, he had wanted to avoid having to join a MAT, '*That was, for me, one of the races we were running when we were in special measures to get out. We did. Then similarly, The Park, that was their race, too, and they managed to get out before they were forced.*'

Daniel West's, '*winning the race*' coincided with the government withdrawing its proposal that all schools had to become academies. '*The imperative is gone, but the risk is now on the Ofsted inspections. That has been ratcheted up and that's the political drive now to force everybody is on those inspections.*' He had decided that if his school went into Special Measures again in the future, he would be prepared to engage in a '*battle*' to try to prevent forced academisation:

> *I can be the person that will fight against that as an individual, separating myself out from the school if we end up in a battle situation … Because if the battle is lost and somebody comes in, they will get rid of me … so I could stay and fight that battle* (Daniel West).

Stephen Dawson graphically described his own 'battle'. In 2012, he had been appointed as head of a school that almost immediately went into Special Measures, followed by an Academy Order. He had been told that he would have to reapply for his job and be interviewed by someone from the Office of the Schools' Commissioner. He said they were, '*known colloquially as the 'Dark Riders'…these people were going to come in, and I really did imagine a scene from Lord of the*

Rings where somebody was going to suck my soul out of me and give this headship to somebody else'. Even though he was successful in being re-appointed as headteacher, he reflected that it was, '*a frightening experience'.*

James Williams was frustrated that some schools refused to take part in the 'managed move' process. This was a way of helping pupils avoid permanent exclusion by making a new start at a different school. James Williams thought the unwillingness of some schools to admit challenging students on 'managed moves' was down to the fear heads had for their own position because, '*the price of exclusion is a poor Ofsted and then the headteacher loses their job'.*

Julie Smith spoke about her experience as an Education Consultant, speaking to governing bodies of stand-alone academies, whose fear was of closure, rather than being forced to join a MAT:

> *they are just terrified that they're going to be closed down in three years' time because when the reserves are gone and they're no longer able to set – they're setting deficit budgets now anyway, and they know that that won't be manageable in three years' time* (Julie Smith).

Even amongst school leaders of very successful stand-alone academies, that were unlikely to face a threat from Ofsted, there was a recurrent theme of the need to 'protect themselves' from what might come in the future. For Linda Grant, Chair of a very successful school, '*even in our fairly privileged position in terms of you know, being quite successful, the dice seem stacked against us in the system*'. Many schools were planning strategically, considering joining a MAT or indeed, setting up their own MAT, although Linda Grant thought there was even danger in that:

these little random sort of MATs…they are going to be pushed together, sooner or later, and even if you think you have made the right decision on the little, if you are then forced into a bigger, then you could end up where you don't want to be really (Linda Grant).

Richard Johnson explained that the reason the primary school, where he was Chair of Governors, had decided to become an academy, was because, '*we saw enforcement coming along…you're better as volunteer'.* Julie Smith spoke about the '*fear*' amongst stand-alones concerning which MAT they might be forced to join, because they wanted to, '*have some control over where they go, rather than being directed to go*'. Referring to schools that had not yet converted to academy status, Fiona Evans observed that although the government's proposed forced academisation had been withdrawn, '*schools still believe that they might be forced to become academies one day or that they need to get on board with an academy trust before they're pushed into some kind of relationship that wouldn't suit them*'.

Some schools had thought about protecting themselves by establishing a MAT with other local schools. Linda Grant's school had met with partner primary schools and, although there had been interesting discussions, it had become clear, '*we were all having the conversation because we were worried about being "done to" … that was the fear. And would we better doing something to protect ourselves? That's not necessarily a best motive for doing something'.* Catherine Taylor also thought that the reason why some secondaries were beginning to set up their own MATs, was because they thought it was a way of protecting their own schools. Simon White was a lone voice amongst those I interviewed, questioning whether there was any need to fear imminent compulsion, '*I think the government are going to force less and less*

people to do anything just because they don't want anyone making a fuss while we worry about Brexit'.

6.3.4 Competition: negative impact on children

There was a general view that the break down in relationships between schools through competition and the isolation of stand-alone academies had impacted negatively on children:

> *I think it's the usual people that have taken the consequences … people who are less well-able to advocate for themselves, and you can certainly argue that one of the consequences of a highly competitive, baronial structure of education is the very high level of permanent exclusion we have… the number of people who find themselves, either wanting to, or being forced to take their children out of the education system* (Paul Black).

> *At a time when we really need schools to be co-operating, to be able to give fresh starts and to make a managed move, or negotiate a transfer system, actually plausible and work and be equitable, they are at the point when yeah, they're more isolated than ever* (Julie Smith).

Daniel West pointed out that the idea that some schools would not enter into '*fair access'* agreements '*pre-dates academisation. We're all just bloody minded and awkward about it'.* However, Fiona Evans, from her position as a LA officer, thought increased autonomy arising from academisation, *'has eroded the, 'we're all in it together', 'we'll do no harm to another schools,' all those principles have been diluted I think.'* A view shared by a fellow LA officer, James Williams, *'You've lost a coherent system and you've lost that moral obligation that schools and headteachers used to feel for the common good'.* In Peter Dixon's view:

As I say, success breeds success, and failure breeds failure… we can't have horrible kids from our little council estate because they are dragging us down – we are going to X Town to recruit a few because they haven't got a grammar school (Peter Dixon).

The interviews were conducted at a time when there was extensive coverage in the media about poor outcomes for vulnerable children. These included increased levels of exclusions and a rise in pupils being electively home educated. This concern was shared by all those I interviewed. Some attributed it to the fragmented nature of the school system, which had undermined a common sense of ownership of the children of a local area. Others felt that the competition school leaders felt under from league tables and the consequences of a poor Ofsted judgement, made them unwilling to admit challenging children. Some also argued that the narrowness of the curriculum de-motivated students.

As an MP, Peter Dixon had seen an increase in parents contacting him because their children had been excluded from school. He described the exclusion rate as, '*twice what it should be*'. James Williams referred to the, '*increasing number of children and young people being identified as 'at risk' and who are vulnerable*'. He pointed to an 80% rise in primary school exclusions in Ayeshire over the last six years. Linda Grant, Paul Fellows, Rebecca Jones and Fiona Evans also raised concern about the increase in the number of children who were being taken out of school to be electively home educated. This practice has already been mentioned in the previous section, where I described it as the 'flip-side' of consumer choice and quoted from Linda Grant who felt, '*entirely the wrong people are choosing to electively home educate. They're people who are least well equipped to educate their children and they take this decision*'. Michael Phillips referred to the national

picture on exclusions and home education, describing it as, '*difficult and distressing that in 2018, 2019, we have so many kids, who by definition, are the most vulnerable kids, we've got in the system, no longer in education*'. It is salutary that an increase in exclusions by voluntary withdrawal, termed 'constructive exclusion' was identified by Gerwitz et al (1995) in field work conducted between 1991 and 1994, soon after the 1988 Act introduced open enrolment.

Although Daniel West, Fiona Evans, Paul Black and James Williams were keen to point out that vulnerable children had always been disadvantaged, there was a common view that the recent fragmentation of the school system and increased pressure from Ofsted had exacerbated the situation. Referring to vulnerable children, Fiona Evans explained:

> *The data tells us actually they're not getting a good deal. They weren't getting a good deal before, but they certainly aren't getting a good deal now, and it's just easier now… take the secondary sector where the majority of schools are academies, it's just easier now - not because they are academies; that would be part of it. It's easier to say, "You can't take a child; you can't offer the curriculum, so the child won't be well catered for here. We will exclude without doing a managed move or any of those things." There's a bit of a crisis in the system around that* (Fiona Evans).

Whilst he believed academisation had contributed to the increase in disadvantage for vulnerable children, Paul Black thought, '*its origins were in the Education Reform Act, grant maintained, the introduction of a market aspect to education is the core of it*'.

Several of those I interviewed wanted to stress that some schools did take their responsibility for vulnerable children seriously. Catherine Taylor praised the success of a group of city secondary schools, who had established a partnership, '*to work collaboratively together to be responsible for the children*'. Heads and CEOs, including Jane Green, Stephen Dawson, Paul Fellows, Daniel West and Rebecca Jones were keen to stress that their own schools and Trusts worked hard to support challenging children and keep them on roll. However, the more commonly held view was that the collective sense of responsibility had broken down. Peter Dixon attributed the increase in exclusions to, '*the collapse of the system*'. James Williams held central government responsible for the poor outcomes for vulnerable pupils. He accused senior ministers of:

> *burying their heads in the sand and playing with kids' lives…it's that kid's one chance – it's that whole cohort, that whole generation of children's, one chance in their life to make a difference. Once they have missed it, they really have missed it* (James Williams).

Paul Black referred to a single county-wide panel the LA had set up, to implement the '*fair access protocol*'. This had been established in collaboration with headteachers, but the system had fallen apart straightaway because only one of the five panel members had turned up to the first meeting, '*there was a big mismatch between the words and the deeds*.' Julie Smith felt strongly that:

> *when we really need schools to be co-operating to be able to give fresh starts and to make a managed move or negotiate a transfer system actually plausible and work and be equitable, they're at a point when, yeah, they're more isolated than ever before* (Julie Smith).

Fiona Evans relayed a conversion she had overheard between headteachers, who were discussing what the "*trick*" was to refuse to take a child. Fiona Evans felt that it

was, '*as though now people feel more comfortable talking about being less inclusive, and … that's protected by the academisation, I think, and promoted by the exam system and the assessment system, by that kind of 'Gove-ian' don't tolerate any poor behaviour*'. Linda Grant referred to a pupil who had been permanently excluded from her school for a drug related issue, '*we know schools have places and yet they wouldn't take him. How can anybody do that*?' Jane Green commented, '*there are very few CEOs that I have met that have all the children in view'.* Breakdown in local partnerships was also identified in research by Coldron et al (2014). In *Because we can: Pluralism and structural reform in education*, Glatter pointed to fragmentation of the system leading to 'segregation' instead of 'a coherent, intelligible and equitable system' (Glatter, 2017, p. 122). However, Fiona Evans was hopeful that since there was greater awareness of what was happening to vulnerable children, something would be put in place:

> *we need some greater sanction on schools for excluding and stronger rhetoric from the DfE or from Ofsted around being inclusive. That is starting. I think the more aware we are of the problems with the system, the more things are coming to try to reset the balance, I suppose* (Fiona Evans).

Amanda Spielman, Chief Inspector of Schools, has indicated a commitment to ensuring that Ofsted holds schools to account for practices such as 'off-rolling' and permanent exclusions (Griffiths, 2019). It is too early to see whether this is having an impact.

Although a discussion about 'curriculum', is outside the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that James Williams, John Baker, Michael Phillips and Susan Briggs, all commented on the de-motivating impact of government reforms of curriculum and

assessment and the need for a more vocational curriculum. James Williams referred to the '*exam based*' approach brought in by the government, which in his opinion:

> *Doesn't work for a lot of vulnerable kids. We're not doing the sort of technical on the side. We're not getting the vocational courses in place anymore. You've got high stakes inspection regime, which is driving exclusions as a route to improvement, and that is a real issue* (James Williams).

6.4   Conclusion

This chapter has explored the views of those I interviewed, 'the actors', on two key elements of market ideology, 'consumer choice' and 'competition'. Even amongst the actors in roles that have embraced academisation, MAT CEOs, DfE officials and Conservative politicians, there were very few references to the benefits of 'consumer choice' and 'competition'. In contrast, there was frequent mention of what were perceived to be the negative outcomes, particularly in regard to disadvantaged children. There was a general view that, despite 'consumer choice' and 'competition' having featured in the rationale for education policies over the last thirty years, this negative impact had been felt more acutely in recent years. Some thought this correlated with the increase in academisation.

As previously mentioned, Ayeshire could be regarded as a 'buyers' market for parents, with a high number of surplus places in most areas and the availability of a wide range of schools. Moreover, unlike most other areas of the country, this choice extends to grammar schools. Those I interviewed were strongly of the opinion that the recent expansion by all seven grammar schools under new academy freedoms, had exacerbated competition and led to the total breakdown of relationships between some school leaders.

All those I interviewed thought that 'consumer choice' was weighted in favour of 'middle class' parents. They pointed out that these parents were able to take advantage of the system, whether it was by paying for transport to schools further away, or for grammar school tutors. Some accused parents of using more deceptive means, such as temporarily moving or renting to live near to more 'desirable' schools. There was a unanimous view that this middle-class advantage, was at the expense of more vulnerable pupils who ended up in schools no-one else wanted. For Hayek, this situation would be solved by the operation of the market, where successful businesses expand and failing businesses either close, or are subject to acquisitions and mergers. If the 'education market' operated in this way, successful schools would expand and failing schools would close, or be taken over by others. The difficulty of this operating in practice has been illustrated in Vignette Five (Ash Academy).

Evidence from my research raises the question of whether competition is more intense in Ayeshire than elsewhere, because of grammar school expansion. The 'market' factor, of which Hayek would have approved, namely the over-supply of places caused by a historical demographical decline, has intensified competition for pupils. Rather than driving up quality of provision in all schools, interviewees pointed to the impact of competition as the: breakdown of relationships between schools; loss of moral ownership of 'all' children; reinforced hierarchies between schools and even between school leaders, with the emergence of an 'elite'. It is significant that the most common response to my question about the impact of academisation featured comments about the breakdown of professional trust between school leaders. The words and phrases used to describe this are powerful. Competition was

described as '*cutthroat', 'a jungle', and 'dog eat dog'*. There is evidence that Ayeshire is experiencing a 'perfect storm' of competition, whipped up by surplus places, grammar school expansion, low funding and a long history of highly autonomous secondary schools. As referenced in this chapter, various elements of this storm are evidenced in research in other locations (Coldron et al, 2014; Simkins, 2015; Greany and Higham, 2018). National research by Higham and Earley (2013) found that competition between schools was intensified in areas, such as Ayeshire, which had demographic decline and surplus places. However, none of these research studies have been located in LAs with grammar schools. It would be interesting to compare Ayeshire with some of these LAs in order to assess whether competition has also been intensified in these locations.

My research data suggests that this competitive environment has fuelled a culture of 'fear' which is widespread amongst school leaders, irrespective of their school being successful or not, academy or non-academy, stand-alone or in a MAT. Some are afraid of forced academisation as a result of a poor Ofsted inspection. Others fear future legislation, that will either compel them to become academies, or force stand-alone academies to join a MAT. Those whose schools are in small MATs fear being taken over by larger MATs. The language used by some was dramatic, conjuring up images of battles and races. There was also a fear about survival itself when school funding depended on '*bums on seats'* (Paul Black). In Autumn 2018 when my interviews took place, schools across the country were voicing concern about lack of funding. The particularly low level of funding in Ayeshire exacerbated this situation locally. The need to attract per-pupil funding motivated some activities that were regarded as 'unfair' such as aggressive marketing campaigns.

There also appeared to be a source of 'fear' which was more nebulous. This was a fear of 'being done to', which drove, for example, the need to take pre-emptive action by joining a MAT. With the exception of Simon White, who asserted that the government was too preoccupied with Brexit to roll out new policies on schools, those I interviewed all spoke of changes which might be imposed on them by external forces. Stephen Dawson's amusing characterisation of representatives of the Office of the Schools' Commissioner as the '*Dark Riders'* who could '*suck my soul out of me*' was a powerful image., It struck me that there was resonance between this insidious sense of fear and Foucault's description of what he termed, 'disciplinary power' in *Power/Knowledge* (1977, cited in McHoul and Grace, 1993). 65). In this book, Foucault explored how power operates in society and concluded that in some circumstances, power was executed through what he described as 'surveillance'. Foucault used Bentham's image of a 'Panopticon', to illustrated what he meant. The Panopticon was a design for a prison which had a tall watchtower surrounded by a ring-shaped building divided into individual cells. Prisoners had been trained into docility by believing that they were under constantly under surveillance by guards in the watchtower, even when no guards were actually there. In a similar way, there was a sense that school leaders felt constantly under the gaze of inspection even though inspectors were not physically in their schools. Most school leaders also appeared to feel that the school structure itself was under surveillance and that the plans for wholescale forced academisation (Morgan 2016) had not been halted but were being introduced by stealth when any opportunity arose. The discussion of this idea of surveillance fuelling fear, will be continued in the next chapter in an exploration of 'freedom', the third element of Hayek's ideology.

How far does the existence of 'fear' threaten the very concept and operation of

'freedom'?

Chapter 7:   What the actors say: Freedom and Accountability; The Future

7.1   Introduction

In the previous two chapters I analysed the context for my research, 'the stage', introduced the actors and explored their views on two of the key themes of Hayek's market ideology: consumer choice and competition. This chapter will analyse the 'actors' views about 'freedom and autonomy'. 'Freedom' was at the heart of Hayek's ideology. He championed the right of individuals to take their own local decisions, freed from state bureaucracy. As discussed in Chapter 2, this rationale shaped education policies, including Local Management of Schools (LMS), Grant Maintained (GM) status and academies.

In this chapter, I will explore what my interviewees think about the principle of 'freedom' and how it operates in practice. This leads to an analysis of their views about the importance of accountability to mitigate against potential dangers inherent in granting freedom. The role of the Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) in holding academies to account is examined, leading to discussion of how far individual schools within Multi-academy trusts have ceded their 'freedom' to the Trust, particularly in Trusts that have adopted standardised approaches and pooled funding. Recent research literature has suggested that this is the case in some MATs: Pring and Roberts, 2016; Glatter, 2017; Greany and Higham, 2018; Simon et al, 2019; West and Wolfe, 2019. The chapter concludes with an analysis of participants' reflections on what the future might hold for the structure of the school system.

7.2 The principle of 'freedom' as applied to the education system

Despite the prominence of 'freedom' as a critical element in governments' rationale for significant changes to the education system since 1988, several of those I interviewed questioned whether school leaders should be 'free' to take their own decisions, given that education is publicly funded. Simon White, Daniel West, Julie Smith, Keith Grey and James Williams, all raised the issue of local democratic accountability for tax-payers' money. This role had previously been exercised by the Local Authority (LA) but it had gradually been eroded, particularly by widespread academisation. '*We serve our communities; we serve the government who pay us the money; we serve our broader education community. I'm not sure we should all be introducing our own theories – I don't know how much freedom we should have?*' (Simon White).

Daniel West thought it important that he was, '*held to account locally by people, who are in turn held to account locally by people, who are in turn held to account by the electors who are our parents'.* Julie Smith also questioned what had happened to, '*the democratic element of running schools'* and '*why nobody had stood up for that'.* Keith Grey, at least theoretically, supported LA oversight, rather than the existing position where his '*boss*' was the Secretary of State. Keith Grey said he was held to account, '*by one of his people, the RSC … but, if I had my way, I would still love to be held to account by local government officers who are held to account by elected, local officials*'. However, he acknowledged that this could not work in practice because his trust spanned several LA areas: '*the level of influence is not locally*

based, so democracy has gone out of the window'. James Williams echoed this

point, referring to the academy structure:

> *it's taken democracy out of education, actually, which is a really scary place to go. There is no accountability locally……you've got a national system which used to have localised control, and influence, whereas actually that has been dissipated, quite deliberately. The public don't understand that, and they still come to the Local Authority rather than central government when they've got issues with education* (James Williams).

Although an advocate of 'freedom', Michael Phillips felt that the separation from local

democracy had not been helpful and that, at the time when Nicky Morgan proposed

that all schools would become academies, she should have stressed the role of LAs

as:

> *the guardian and champion of children and making sure that people make good decisions, not just on behalf of the children they have got, and also everybody else's kids. Had Nicky come up with this as a strategy, I don't think it would have been as toxic, because it would have given people, who were against the idea that this was education being privatised, a much greater say in what was happening on the ground* (Michael Phillips).

He also felt that tighter democratic control would have '*clipped the wings'* of some

super-heads who had been '*fêted in the press'* but who had '*got carried away'* to the

extent they had to be finally removed from their posts.

On the other hand, Jane Green, Susan Briggs, Ruth Thomas and John Baker could

see benefits to schools of being freed from local politics, *'school futures shouldn't be*

down to somebody being re-elected next year' (Jane Green). Speaking as a former

county councillor, Susan Briggs acknowledged that it might be easier for a Trust

Board to make difficult decisions, such as closing schools, '*because they are not*

accountable to the people, are they?' Ruth Thomas expressed frustration at a lack of leadership by some LAs over aspects of education for which they were still responsible, such as sixth form planning across a city. Reflecting on his past experience as a local councillor in another part of the country, John Baker was highly sceptical about the effectiveness of local democratic oversight of education:

> *Famously, there is no example of a council getting beaten in an election because of the inadequate education it was providing … I was always struck by the fact that nobody seemed to know what they were really talking about with education, even the ones on the Education Authority* (John Baker).

For this reason, John Baker had supported the 2010 *Academies Act* when he was a member of the Coalition Government:

> *Adonis paved the way and there was evidence that that worked. Michael Gove was probably right to extend it. I think there is a question of pace. There is a question of – and it has never been resolved yet, what a Local Authority is supposed to be doing* (John Baker).

System fluidity in English school governance; Reflections on the implications for senior leaders of closed hierarchies (Riddell, 2019), is based on research, in a large Shire County and a compact urban LA, undertaken contemporaneously with my own field work. In this paper, Riddell identified a gap in research looking at democratic oversight, as opposed to implementation of policy. My own research provides some insight into this area, particularly in section 7.7.3, which examines the future 'the actors' would create if granted a 'magic wand'. There is a general view that this future should be based on a combined sense of ownership and responsibility for outcomes of all children in a local area, rather than on what is just in the best interest of an individual school or academy chain.

7.3   Freedom: Local Management of Schools and Grant Maintained Status

'Actors' who had been 'on the stage' in the early 1990s (Richard Johnson, Simon White, Paul Black, Catherine Taylor and William Benson) spoke eloquently of the freedom gained through LMS, which enabled schools to take their own financial decisions. This had been in stark contrast to when LAs controlled what happened in schools, including headteacher appointments and staffing allocations. Simon White recalled starting teaching at this time, '*it was in the days of the ultimate power of the Local Authority who decided pretty much everything … expenditure and staffing levels and SEN levels, and it was all managed by formula'*. Richard Johnson described LMS as, '*a complete liberation*' for him as a headteacher. He gave a specific example, contrasting the minutiae of local authority control with the freedom of LMS:

> *to get 0.1 extra teacher, I had to go the Chief Education Officer … And a year later I was in a position to hire my own handyman … who then refurbished all the classrooms on one site… that's the contrast. I mean it was just huge. My governors were just whoo! … LMS was great fun and undoubtedly improved things enormously* (Richard Johnson).

After LMS, in the school where Simon White worked at the time, '*the head got really excited about planning his own budget … he really enjoyed that freedom, and I felt it was beneficial for the children.'* Although Simon White knew of other heads at that time, '*who made arbitrary decisions that didn't benefit anybody… and nobody questioned it really, because we were entitled to make those decisions*.'

In addition to LMS 'freedoms', the *Education Reform Act* (ERA) also opened up opportunity of even greater freedoms through Grant Maintained (GM) status. William

Benson, Paul Black, Catherine Taylor and Simon White who had all worked in Ayeshire at that time, referred to the high proportion of secondary schools in the county that became GM, '*it was a steady flow until, eventually, there were 28 went out of 42*' (William Benson). As discussed earlier in Chapter 5, William Benson thought the driving force had been financial rather than a thirst for 'freedom', *'the reason they all went was money. It wasn't anything to do with the philosophy or educational advantage …. it was just money. We were just so desperate.'* On the other hand*,* whilst recognising additional funding was an important factor, Paul Black, who was a LA officer at that time, felt that, for some, freedom had been a motivator, particularly for schools concerned they might be closed or reorganised, '*they were actively eager to take advantage of the 'get away from the Local Authority'.* A greater proportion of secondary schools became GM than primary. Simon White thought that this was down to the fact that in secondary:

> there was a greater level of confidence. 'We need to do it on our own' and 'we've all got our own individual needs … I didn't see the advantages other than you got a six grand grant which most heads spent on office furniture as far as I can see … I also believe that primary schools needed – I still believe that – a strong mediating layer and that's what the LA provided (Simon White).

Those interviewees who had been in post at the time of GM were unanimous that the county's long history of autonomy, especially for secondary schools, had a powerful influence on the attitude of school leaders and the reduced role of the local authority. Catherine Taylor pointed out that, although the tranche of heads who could remember pre-GM days had now gone, *'schools had got used to being their own bosses and very much in charge of their own destiny.'*

7.4   Stand-Alone Academies: freedoms 'not real'

In line with findings by Woods and Simkins (2014) and Greany and Higham (2018), there was consensus amongst those I interviewed, that the academy freedoms promoted by Michael Gove, as an incentive for schools to convert as stand-alone academies, were not 'real'. This was felt particularly to be the case for former GM schools. Indeed, Simon White likened GM: *'to the early onset of academisation'.* Rebecca Jones summed up the position of schools which had previously been GM:

> *allegedly, the move to academy status was going to give us freedoms. Curriculum freedoms and far greater autonomy as headteachers. I think if we had been a community school, still funded and maintained by the Local Authority, it would have brought those freedoms. But in Ayeshire, and Ayeshire is quite unique in that so many secondary schools were grant-maintained or foundation schools, we already had those freedoms* (Rebecca Jones).

James Williams agreed, arguing that there had been: *'a misrepresentation of the truth … because schools already had that autonomy, and particularly in Ayeshire, actually more so than elsewhere*.' Paul Fellows felt, *'the alleged freedoms of academisation were not real, to be honest.'* For Linda Grant:

> *So, all of these freedoms didn't really seem to have a lot of substance … we already had a lot (of freedom) without realizing it. We had quite a lot of freedom because we were very, very semi-detached from the local authority* (Linda Grant).

This point was echoed by Fiona Evans, from her stance as a LA officer, *'I can't see that the local authority was particularly powerful in terms of exercising control over schools anyway*.' Even for Catherine Taylor, as the head of a community school at the time of converting as a stand-alone academy, the freedoms had no real

significance, despite some freedoms relating to payroll and HR, *'I couldn't say that it felt any different.'* Even national politicians in my sample expressed scepticism about the extent of the freedom offered. For Peter Dixon, autonomy was a '*buzzword*' that didn't really mean anything, and John Baker thought, '*the line about autonomy, plus financial advantage…. was overplayed by a lot of them*'. Paul Fellows, Linda Grant, Paul Black, Julie Smith and Simon White, all referred to restrictions placed on the 'alleged' freedoms: expectations about GCSE outcomes; the Ofsted inspection framework; practical difficulties of abandoning Teachers' Pay and Conditions. Paul Black felt that, nationally, academies had taken little advantage of the theoretical freedoms they had because they had not come up with:

> *fancy new curricula or completely changed pay structures and so on … freedoms are illusory while all schools are inspected on the same framework. I think it would have needed a much more open approach to inspection to make those realities – those freedoms real* (Paul Black).

Although theoretically schools converting as academies gained the freedom to increase their number on roll, in practice they were restricted by physical space on their site and lack of capital funding. The fact that all seven grammar schools had been in a position to do so was a contentious subject, as described in the last chapter.

Paul Black raised an interesting point about the protection freedom could offer:

> *I think that the so-called freedoms weren't about things you could do. They were more about protecting yourself. So, if you had the power to change your catchment area or increase your admission numbers or so on, either in an openly predatory way, or more likely to protect yourself from some predatory behaviours from your neighbours – I think that was a strong factor for schools in wanting those freedoms* (Paul Black).

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Michael Phillips concurred with this assessment of some schools' reaction to the offer of freedom. He was disappointed by this because he believed that the rationale behind the policy of 'freedom' was based on its potential to enable school leaders to innovate and achieve success. He recognised that conditions had to be right for this to be realised, '*The high level of freedom and autonomy is only valuable if you have got the kind of leadership team that can exploit….to make something sensational, transformational with it'.* Thus, for Michael Phillips*,* there was an important distinction to be made between freedom <u>from</u>, rather than freedom <u>to.</u> He referred to the centrality of 'stand-alone' academy status in Michael Gove's education policy, '*… the stand-alone bit for me was right in the heart of the autonomy space as Gove saw it'.* However*,* he argued that schools had interpreted this as being free <u>from</u> interference rather than freedom <u>to</u> innovate: *'People…saw this initiative of stand-alone as being <u>left</u> alone … they craved it, they wanted it*'. This had resulted in the isolation of stand-alone academies which is discussed below.

7.5   The dangers of 'freedom'

Several interviewees identified that were inherent dangers in school leaders having 'freedom' without the counterbalance of accountability. For stand-alone academies, the main danger of 'freedom' was likely to be isolation and declining standards. However, all academies and MATs were open to the dangers of misusing freedom by abusing systems, either intentionally or through ignorance, and of the misuse of public funds.

7.5.1 The danger of isolation

Concern about the isolation of stand-alone academies was a recurrent theme. Over half of my research sample referred to it (Keith Grey, Stephen Dawson, Michael Phillips, Fiona Evans, James Williams, Julie Smith, Ruth Thomas, Linda Grant, Catherine Taylor, William Benson, Janet Grant and Simon White). Michael Phillips pointed out, '*you've got those stand-alone schools now who are slipping, whether it's Ofsted grade or performance standards.*' Ruth Thomas went as far as to say, *'stand-alone academies should never have been allowed.'* They were described *as 'orphans'* by Keith Grey because*, 'when they were part of the Local Authority, they had the family of the Local Authority to support and challenge them and to interact with. If they were part of a Multi-academy trust, they would have a family.'* Simon White attributed the fall in standards in stand-alone academies to leaders, *'not talking to anybody … some of them haven't updated their SEN or their Keeping Children Safe. I think they are very vulnerable to Ofsted, and I think more and more schools will fall to Ofsted.'* This concern was echoed by Jane Green:

> *it's the lack of outward focus … so not having somebody come in to be challenging, somebody too friendly. It's not looking to other schools. It's like the world's moved on. They haven't. Then Ofsted comes in and says, 'You're five years behind the times* (Jane Green).

James Williams shared this view:

> *So, you've got a system in Ayeshire particularly, where you've got a lot of stand-alone academies … they are becoming isolated from the rest of the system; they have not got that robust challenge. Nobody has challenged them essentially. They are dependent on their board of trustees, who by and large don't have the expertise to provide that external challenge function … Of course, they have gone from being 'outstanding' schools to 'good' schools to 'requires improvement'* (James Williams).

Vignette Seven: Isolated 'stand-alone' academies

The dangers of isolation became apparent in Ayeshire at an early stage. A school on the western edge of the county, already geographically isolated, converted as an academy in September 2011, having been consistently judged as 'Good', most recently in October 2010. Two years after conversion, it was judged 'Inadequate' because of pupils' lack of progress. There had been no material changes, such as change in leadership, to account for this failure. This pattern was repeated in another part of the county, when a school with a consistent record as 'Outstanding', fell to 'Satisfactory' a year after conversion. Two years later it was still judged as 'Requires Improvement' not achieving 'Good' until April 2015. Despite a successful track record of effective intervention in failing schools, the LA was powerless to intervene, other than through informal offers of support. Across the country, failing schools were left to 'improve' themselves, with minimal input from the DfE until RSCs were appointed in 2014.

Several interviewees questioned whether school leaders had the right skills to be autonomous. Susan Briggs recalled Michael Gove's mantra that: '*everyone should run themselves*'. As a county councillor at the time, she felt that primary heads:

> *were worried about how they were going to manage the different processes that make up the business and different facets of business. They weren't sure they had the skills to do it, and I for one, wasn't sure they had the skills to do it … They weren't ready for this new world which involved a lot of business ideals. I think that is where it foundered a little bit* (Susan Briggs).

Echoing Paul Black's description of GM heads as '*barons and baronesses',* Keith Grey characterised some leaders of stand-alone academies as, '*kings or queens of their own fiefdom*'. He felt that although, '*in their hearts they might understand they should be doing something else',* nevertheless, they did not want others telling them what to do. Simon White recalled hearing a civil servant, who had worked with

Andrew Adonis say, '*we massively over-estimated schools' ability to be able to look after themselves.*' This view was endorsed by Richard Johnson, who argued that: '*there were schools that were allowed grant-maintained status that didn't have a clue how to run themselves*'. Equally for Richard Johnson, when schools wanted to convert as stand-alone academies, '*there was no due diligence over whether, actually, they were going to do a good job for themselves and their pupils, or anything for the greater good*'.

7.5.2 The Abuse of Freedom

Over half of those interviewed expressed concern about the potential for 'freedom' to lead to abuse of systems or the misuse of public funds:

> *Freedom is great isn't it? Until it's abused, and funds are going to individuals or organisations, excessive funds are going to individuals or organisations that would otherwise be spent on children's education, then something is wrong. And maybe that freedom should not exist?* (Paul Fellows).

Jane Green echoed this, '*they play fast and loose, some of them, with rules and regulations.*' Specific examples from her work around the country, were highlighted by Julie Smith:

> *… law, employment, and staffing and all of those things, but it would be the whole processes of competitive tendering (sigh), – there is a reason why you don't just go and buy all your school furniture from IKEA… It's slightly people trying to work it out in the new world about what do we have to follow and what don't we have to follow … there were reasons why things were done like that. Not just about bureaucracy!* (Julie Smith).

Many mentioned the failure of some national high-profile MATs. Rebecca Jones referred to a recent, '*dreadful Panorama programme',* featuring a MAT that had

received government grants to improve buildings, but no work had actually been carried out. She questioned how that had been allowed to happen. Reference was also made to media accounts of high salaries for CEOs of MATs. Paul Fellows thought there should be tighter oversight by the auditors commissioned by central government. Auditors should ensure salaries are set at an appropriate level by being empowered to ask, '*How is it that heads of a MAT are being paid £200,000 a year, which is excessive*?' Richard Johnson thought there were some academies, '*who behave very badly in quite a lot of different ways, chiefly financial, but in other ways as well'.* However, Ruth Thomas, was keen to point out that, despite media coverage about the failings of some Multi-academy trusts, '*It's worth saying, it's really worth saying there are also some pretty spectacular national successes.*'

7.6   Accountability

Interviewees all noted the need for accountability to sit alongside 'freedom'. Many were critical of government for not addressing this when they invited schools to convert as academies, thus 'freeing' them from LA oversight. There was some scepticism about the accountability systems that had belatedly been put in place, particularly the appointment of Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) under a National Schools Commissioner (NSC).

7.6.1 The need for accountability

The importance of accountability was stressed by John Baker, in words which closely echo Hayek, '*I think the important thing is to have schools which are autonomous but making sure we've got a proper accountability system'.* For him the cases of fraud are not, '*killers for the policy; what I do think is we need to have some*

approaches which are going to put it right'. James Williams agreed, '*I think actually the government has to create some very clear lines of accountability.*' Half of those I interviewed thought that academisation had reduced the level of accountability, without putting anything in its place. One reason for this was given by John Baker:

> *It was set up in a hurry without any real attention to governance and leadership. They (the government) were just panicking because they had a load of schools which were absolutely useless and they thought, 'We'd better get something done about this'. So, in a sense you've got an excuse insofar as we were acting to get the children who were at those schools a better education, so we had to act fast and so we didn't get around to doing – putting everything in place* (John Baker).

Catherine Taylor felt, '*The government. I think they have lost control of it. I don't think they know what to do in order to get it into a system where they can have a lot more control than they do at the moment*'. Perhaps surprisingly, given his national role, Michael Phillips referred back to, '*the days before academies, where schools… whether they liked the Local Authority, or not, there was a sense of somebody having a look at what you were doing and asking you some difficult questions if results slip*'. Susan Briggs also referred back to, '*years ago, the Local Authority held the school, the head teacher and everything to account*'. Linda Grant also wondered if there, '*is really the level of accountability that you think there is for the financial and other results that you have to deliver*'. Indeed, although he was confident that Deloitte, who examine academy annual accounts returns on behalf of the government, checked for compliance against the rules, Paul Fellows wondered if they really exercised proper judgement:

> *all an accountant is doing is checking against the rules that they've got, so the fact that somebody might be on a very high salary, they might say, 'Well,*

that's within the rules.' They're not going to say anything about that. Unless it's evident that something's not right, they won't see it (Paul Fellows).

He contrasted this with previous Local Authority audits, which were far more detailed.

7.6.2 Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs)

In December 2013, the government appointed seven Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs), under one National Schools Commissioner (NSC), to strengthen accountability for academies. At that time, John Baker was a member of the House of Commons Education Select Committee. He recalled arguing for more capacity to support RSCs, '*we need to tool these people up. You know if you are saying that Local Authorities aren't key providers and you're saying the Department for Education can't run each and every school … the answer must be, you've got something in between*'. Fiona Evans felt that the accountability roles of Ofsted and the RSC were not clear:

> *I don't want to sound negative, but it's become a lot about structure and not about the other things that make schools work and Local Authorities work… so people are busy feeding different structures…to feed this machine that is trying to get something coherent from a system which is now incoherent* (Fiona Evans).

Although he recognised that the RSC had some role in holding academies to account, James Williams questioned their effectiveness, '*they haven't got the expertise that the Local Authorities had over a number of years. They don't have the capacity to go in, to challenge schools to stop them dipping*'. Paul Black also questioned the RSC structure, '*I think it's incredibly expensive, bureaucratic, and*

ineffective way of governing the school estate'. Thereby suggesting that Michael Gove's ambition to reduce bureaucracy had not been realised in practice.

A few months before my interviews took place, in a speech to the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) Conference, in May 2018, Damian Hinds, Secretary of State for Education, clarified the roles of the office of the RSC and Ofsted. The transcript of this speech. in the journal *Schools Week* (Dickens, 2018a), makes it clear that Hinds was removing the authority of RSCs to intervene in schools or academies, which were outside Multi-academy trusts and had not been identified by Ofsted as schools of concern. Jane Green summed this up as, '*the RSC has had its hands slapped*' and has been told to '*get back in their box*' because they had been trying to monitor and intervene in schools. However, she questioned how the RSC could hold schools to account if they couldn't go into schools. James Williams also referred to:

> *the latest missive from ministers regarding the RSC brief is that all they can do, the only function that they are responsible for, is holding trusts to account. They are not to go into schools, but they can hold Multi-academy trusts to account, and that is it* (James Williams).

Damian Hind's decision was disappointing from Simon White's point of view. As a member of the RSC's Headteacher Board, he had been working on a 'School Improvement Capacity Framework' as part of a self-evaluation process for MATs. Simon White maintained that, '*if everybody adopted that and were held to account for it, that would make a difference*'. James Williams concluded that, following Hind's ruling, there was no future for the role of RSC:

> *RSCs … they're in decline and demise already … no-one is being held to account except by Ofsted, but Ofsted goes so infrequently that schools are*

drifting down, and you're not catching them before they're falling. That's the big worry for us (James Williams).

Riddell (2019) argued that the reduced role of the RSC presented an opportunity for LAs to re-emerge and take on a governance role for schools once again. To date, there is no real evidence of that happening in Ayeshire, although some of my research participants spoke of a possible role for the LA, alongside others, in a new accountability structure proposed by the RSC. Catherine Taylor and Fiona Evans explained that a new 'School Standards Board' was to be set up. This accountability mechanism was also referenced by Greany and Higham (2018) in *Hierarchy, Markets and Networks – Analysing the self-improving' school-led system.* Greany and Higham described the 'School Standards Board' as a possible new 'middle tier'. Catherine Taylor described her experience of sitting round a table to discuss this proposal, '*and we were saying, 'What are they for?' And 'No, you can't come into my school and tell me how to run my Maths department, thank you!' And I think that was another stab at trying to do something with accountability'.* Fiona Evans thought it was designed to be, '*an intermediary between the system and the Regional Schools Commissioner's Office and the DfE … and every authority is being encouraged to do that. So, you are having to put extra layers in in order to manage the system'.*

7.6.3   Accountability: The Trust Board in a Multi-academy trust

The historical lack of effective accountability specifically in, and of, Multi-academy trusts was raised by several interviewees. Although Richard Johnson had some sympathy for the early national chains, who had taken on, '*schools no-one else would have*', he thought lack of accountability came from the DfE. These national

chains had, '*overpromised and chronically under-delivered*' according to Michael Phillips and he suggested two fundamental things which had gone wrong:

> *One is the governance is just not strong enough; it's just not robust enough to hold people to account. You had examples of where the chief execs of trusts back in the day, completely under their own steam would go into DfE, meet with the minister, and agree X number of schools they would take over. And the board just said 'Yes, that's fine' rather than the board having a really intelligent conversation about, 'Can we really do this? Have we got the capacity to do that?' The second point was, neither of these trusts …. had a concept of what a school improvement plan at scale was about* (Michael Phillips).

He went on to explain that in one failing trust, the CEO had openly invited schools to join his trust because, '*we will leave you alone*' … *they took a view that these are units, which happen to be called schools, and as long as you put a good school manager in, it will be fine*'. Two of the largest Multi-academy trusts, effectively: '*ran a group of stand-alone academies, who saw no benefit from being in a MAT*'. Michael Phillips had a clear view that, '*if as a result of becoming an academy and a MAT, your results don't get better than the school that you inherited, then actually you need to give the school back*'. Catherine Taylor shared her personal experience as Local Governing Body Chair of a school in a national chain:

> *To begin with they were very hands off. When I first became the chair of governors, we just didn't see them. They didn't contact the school … Didn't get anything for about a year, and then all of a sudden it was like the cavalry coming over the hill* (Catherine Taylor).

This academy was eventually re-brokered into a different MAT.

Ruth Thomas and Stephen Dawson stressed that responsibility for holding schools in a MAT to account rested with the Multi-academy trust Board and not the RSC. Ruth

Thomas was clear, '*if the trust goes bankrupt, it is the trustees who are held legally accountable*'. Thus, for her it is really important to strengthen Trust Boards and to understand the balance between members and trustees, '*If trustees are not doing their job, members can remove them'.* She argued:

> the RSC is not accountable for trusts. The people who are accountable for trusts are the Trust Board. And often people assume that the RSC holds the board to account. We don't. The board had a funding agreement with the Secretary of State, and we are making sure that is working effectively…if there is an indication of failure, either financially, educationally or safeguarding, any other, that's when we start to look at the funding agreement (Ruth Thomas).

As the Regional Director of a MAT, Stephen Dawson shared this understanding. He thought there was some evidence that trusts were strengthening their processes in expectation of being held to account by Ofsted:

> what I know about Multi-academy trusts is that the further we go down this route, the greater the accountability's sitting with the Multi-academy trust financially, in terms of education improvement, in terms of every part of that. And that is why we will get further scrutiny around MAT's self-evaluation, around the way Ofsted are sure that they want to hold Multi-academy trusts to account (Stephen Dawson).

Richard Johnson said that when they were setting up their MAT, it had been made very clear, '*the members are responsible for the appointment of trustees and if things go wrong, it is the members who are accoun*table'. However, he was cynical about the role of members:

> have any members been sacked anywhere in the country?! And if not, why not? The members notion is utterly flawed, "Oh the members are only going to meet a couple of times a year", so I'm going to be held accountable for something that goes on that I only learn about from their annual report and

one other meeting in the year, but if it goes belly-up it's my fault. You're joking* (Richard Johnson).

The usefulness of members was also questioned by Linda Grant, who described the members as, '*the inner circle*', which in the case of the stand-alone academy she chaired, she felt added, '*expense, cost and a false sense of assurance about accountability*', because they only met two or three times a year.

Richard Johnson also reported that the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) had introduced further accountability measures in the form of, '*a list of what a Multi-academy trust must do and have*'. He speculated that this list had been compiled because some Trusts had abused their freedom, '*We got a list of the ESFA 'musts', and you almost wanted to have a column alongside – so who has done this then?*'

7.6.4 Accountability: Local Governance in MATs

One of the most interesting themes that emerged from my interviews was the discussion about the level of freedom and autonomy school leaders of individual schools actually had within a MAT. This was a particularly pertinent question in MATs that had adopted a 'standardised' approach. This issue was drawn to my attention by Linda Grant in the very first interview I conducted. She reflected on her experience of a MAT in a neighbouring authority, that had caused her to question how an individual school could have its own ethos if it was in a MAT. '*Really, is that deliverable if you're going to start standardising*?' This was to be a recurrent theme in my subsequent interviews. It has also arisen in other recent research (Salokangas and Chapman, 2014; Woods and Simkins, 2014; Greany and Higham, 2018; Riddell, 2019; West and Wolfe, 2019).

Michael Phillips was open about the loss of freedom for individual schools in MATs, *'And the reality is that there is no way to sugar coat that. If you were a stand-alone head, and now you're a head in the* MAT, *you have given up a high proportion of your autonomy'*. As CEO of a MAT, Jane Green also recognised this dilemma for schools:

> And I think when the governors realise that, effectively, they're replacing one overarching body, the Local Authority, with another… That puts governors off. I think what puts heads off is having a boss over them … your maverick heads, your big hitters became heads because they wanted to be in charge of their own destiny, their own children (Jane Green).

Speaking of plans to establish a MAT that had subsequently been aborted, Paul Black attributed the reason for this as being, *'you would be asking a lot of people to take a half step down from being … wasn't autonomy the idea?'.* James Williams echoed this, *'if you were a headteacher, would you want to go from being the master of your own destiny to having a CEO telling you what to do?'.*

Several interviewees questioned the role of the Local Governing Body (LGB) in a MAT. Susan Briggs was clear that, as an LGB Chair, *'the freedom and autonomy lies with the Trust Board … as a chair of governors, no we haven't, we really haven't got it'*. She speculated what would happen if she decided, *'I'm not going to bother too much, what would they do? Apart from saying "goodbye?", what accountability is there*?' James Williams was sceptical about the role of the LGB, *'Let's face it, for an academy, a governing body is just window dressing … they're totally powerless'*. For Rebecca Jones the role of the LGB was more like, *'an advisory group'*, because *'it has no legal status whatsoever'*. From his national perspective, Michael Phillips also

agreed that the LGB did not have any real powers, but they did provide local knowledge:

> *we cannot run a complex system like a Multi-academy trust without some local oversight, but local oversight doesn't have any powers, if you like, or responsibility to fulfil that role. It's pretty toothless. I think that is what we've seen sometimes. So, the Scheme of Delegation is everything here* (Michael Phillips).

Michael Phillips went on to argue that there should be a mechanism for the LGB to be able to, '*play up to the main board*' as opposed to the '*conversation being driven by the board*'. The strategy for school improvement could be set at board level, '*but it can only really be driven at local level'.* For Ruth Thomas there was uncertainty about the role of LGBs, '*I do think we are a little bit uncertain about their proper role nationally, if I'm honest, and the most common debate in governance terms is what's the role of the local governing body*?' Jane Green referred to a meeting, which I had also attended, where the Deputy RSC had told chairs of LGBs, '*You're not a decision-maker. You're only a decision-maker insofar as the Trust Board allows you to be*'. Jane Green felt that one governor at that meeting had shown, '*a complete lack of understanding*' when he had said, '*good governors should be rewarded with more autonomy*'. This illustrated Jane Green's opinion that some governors of schools in her MAT had not paid attention to the Trust's Scheme of Delegation (the document which set out the respective responsibilities of the Trust Board and the LGB). Governors had not appreciated that, by joining the Trust, '*they're replacing one over-arching body, the Local Authority with another. And they start to realise that the other actually had more to do with them… hold them to account more regularly*'. Ruth Thomas, Keith Grey and Michael Phillips all thought there was a role for LGBs, but it was as a quality assurance mechanism doing '*stakeholder work*'.

Several leaders of stand-alone academies had explored setting up their own Multi-academy trusts but had abandoned the idea when they realised this meant losing their individual school autonomy. Daniel West knew of a secondary school that had stepped back from setting up a MAT with primary schools, when the head realised, '*everybody has an equal vote on the board and primary school budgets are the ones that have been hit. They could see money drifting away*.' Equally, interviewees reported that their schools were reluctant to join a MAT because of loss of autonomy, '*quite a few of the larger, more established, or more secure primary schools in the area are still very, very concerned about retaining their identity and autonomy*' (Paul Fellows). Richard Johnson questioned, '*why would you want to join a MAT as a good or outstanding school when all the places round the table look to be already filled*?'. He illustrated this with an example of a primary school, '*that courted us and walked down the aisle with us, and when they realised their bursar might not keep her position forevermore as a single school bursar, they dropped their flowers and walked out.*' For Richard Johnson, there was a danger in this because MATs needed to attract '*good*' schools with the expertise to support other schools in the Trust, particularly any failing schools the Trust took on, '*it's meant that Multi-academy trusts have been handicapped by not being able to bring on board the firepower they need to bring about wider system improvements.*'

Although acknowledging that individual schools lost their autonomy when joining a MAT, all the CEOs I interviewed were keen to stress that this was outweighed by the benefits. Michael Phillips described these as, '*trade-offs*':

> *So, I have given up my autonomy in handling the school, but in return, I play a much wider role in the system … Who is going to develop, incubate, and*

innovate the next bit of thinking? So, they're trying to build more of a compelling argument to good and outstanding schools to join them to be the lead incubators. I think that is quite enticing for a head thinking about it (Michael Phillips).

In Rebecca Jones' experience, primary governors in her MAT welcomed no longer being responsible for some aspects, because they said, '*we can now do the piece of work we became governors to do. We can concentrate on community and teaching and learning'.* Jane Green also thought that there were gains*:*

> *for our outstanding heads … it has given them a view that they can be responsible for more than just their school and that common good, and that you don't have to charge £250 to send a teacher out, because you will get something in return* (Jane Green).

Keith Grey thought leaders of individual schools in his MAT benefitted because, '*giving people the power and enabling them to do that which they're good at, will have the most impact on their kids and their communities.'*

7.7   Standardisation in MATs

A significant finding from my research was the emergence of a new national initiative that had the potential to further erode, and possibly eradicate, the autonomy of individual schools in a MAT. This was a drive for MATs not only to standardise all aspects of educational delivery across their individual schools but also to pool the 'General Annual Grant' (GAG) allocated to each school. Centralising funding in this way, removed responsibility for their own budget at individual school level.

7.7.1 The spectrum of standardisation

Michael Phillips described what he called 'the spectrum' of standardisation in different MATs:

> *At one end of the spectrum, it's as if we had just been saying, 'Schools do what you like. It's okay. We will leave you alone.' Where at the other end, 90% of your operating model is going to be determined for you* (Michael Phillips).

Stephen Dawson also described a spectrum. At one end of the scale, he knew of schools in a top performing national Multi-academy trust doing things, *'virtually in line with each other … they timetable lessons at the same time between the schools … if you want to sneeze, you've got to do it in a XX branded tissue'.* At the other end of the continuum, there were completely autonomous schools, '*and everything in between'.* Research by Salokangas and Chapman (2014) in three secondary schools in two national Academy Chains and by Ryan-Atkin (2018) in four mainly primary phase MATs, also identified a spectrum of standardisation (see Appendix 2). The full range of the continuum was represented by CEOs in my sample. At one end, strict standardisation with pooled budgets (Keith Grey and Simon White), in the middle, a graduated approach (Stephen Dawson), and at the other end, light touch (Jane Green and Rebecca Jones).

Keith Grey explained that as the number of schools in his MAT had increased, central budgeting had become necessary, '*when you get bigger, you need to align yourself very much in terms of global systems, global processes, global protocols and governance is included in there.'* In his MAT this extended as far as pooling all school budgets and deciding how much money each school should have:

> *So, we give you all the money you need for staffing, both teachers and support staff … we give you all the money you need for your school*

improvement plan … we give you all the money you need for books, stationery, materials and resources. The rest we keep (Keith Grey).

He believed that this approach meant that school leaders were not distracted by financial matters, *'if you take away all the reasons why they (headteachers) don't have to focus on education, they probably have to focus on education'.*

For Simon White there was a moral argument for standardisation. By standardising *'a basic offer and basic entitlement'*, he ensured his MAT was there *'for all our children'*. His trust also pooled budgets, *'So, all the money comes in and we agree a budget for each school … we teach the same maths and English curriculum. We have the same assessment package. We have the same performance management.'* Simon White recognised that this would deter good or outstanding schools from wanting to join.

Stephen Dawson's MAT was in the middle of the spectrum with many standardised aspects, such as the maths curriculum. High performing schools could choose not to follow it, but there were disincentives to do that, *'if you're not part of the curriculum, well, you've got a workload issue because it would need to better than what we've got, and you'll be doing it on your own.'* He could envisage a model whereby there could be full delegation through earned autonomy. However, he was equally clear that there was a need for a standardised approach in failing schools because, *'there isn't any capacity in the school.'*

In Jane Green's MAT, they had standardised some aspects that had been judged to have a positive impact on children, for example, Philosophy for Children and Action

Research, as well as '*back-office stuff*'. However, she felt that a move to GAG pooling would be unpopular with schools in her Trust. She likened it to, '*turkeys voting for Christmas*'. She also felt that a fully standardised approach would not work in her MAT because of the range of schools within it:

> *the same curriculum in every one of those (schools) for me would be a disaster. If you think about our, particularly our vulnerable children who need a different style of curriculum and content, from our children who get loads of experiences, have lots of material stuff (*Jane Green*).*

Rebecca Jones had found that headteachers in her newly formed MAT, had wanted to move to a standardised approach with standardised tests and teacher assessments.

7.7.2 The drive for standardisation

Jane Green and Stephen Dawson both expressed their perception that there was a regional and national drive for all MATs to adopt standardised approaches and pool school budgets:

> *the political hype has changed and it's not autonomy and freedom; it's alignment and standardisation … I don't know where it comes from – an implicit assumption from somewhere that the more standardised things are, the better things are … so whatever reason, I think there is a view that standardisation is king* (Jane Green).

> *They are networking extensively at the moment within the director levels of Multi-academy trusts to get us to start thinking about standardisation and alignment, if that isn't already being talked about. So, there is a definite preferred model for a Multi-academy trust* (Stephen Dawson).

Jane Green described receiving a draft MAT self-evaluation document from the RSC which, '*was based on a number of assumptions*', including that the curriculum was the same across all schools in the MAT. She also felt that MATs might be forced into pooling budgets because it would be difficult for them to access funding otherwise. A national drive to encourage standardisation was also identified by Greany and Higham (2018) and also by West and Wolfe (2019) from their analysis of documentary evidence such as funding agreements.

However, despite what was perceived as a national drive for standardisation, the two DfE officials I interviewed were not arguing strongly for rigid standardisation. Ruth Thomas thought, '*The best trusts have got a model of standardisation across their core… but they do allow local academies to be able to build on their strengths and then contribute to the core*.' She was not in favour of corporate approaches, '*the sort of simplistic, oh, we can do it, John Lewis type schools.*' Although she made an exception for failing schools. Pointing to someone who walked past during our interview she observed:

> *I mean xx just walked past us now. That's a trust which has got five special measures primary schools. She has got a very, very heavily standardised approach, because frankly that is what is needed… the best trusts have got a model of standardisation across some of their core… I think it is much more dynamic where you see it being done well to build on the differences of different schools… if you have some really outstanding practice in one of those schools, then go back and revisit how do we do this across the trust?* (Ruth Thomas).

She spoke of another Trust that had an '*engine out, engine in'* approach to the failing schools they took over.

In his national role, Michael Phillips was happy to take ownership for the impetus for standardisation in MATs although he stressed, '*it's got to be led with intelligence and it's got to be subtle.*' There were two reasons why he had been persuaded of the benefits of this approach. Firstly, it helped staff working in schools across the MAT to feel part of one organisation by sharing, '*resource elements and moderation and assessment',* and this also had the benefit of reducing workload. Secondly, his observation of a large, long-established national MAT, had persuaded him that standardisation could increase equality and improve standards:

> *So, when I hear a trust talking about standardisation as a lever to get more control, I'm not that convinced … but I think you can standardise processes to give kids a fairer opportunity … Why is the practice from this school so strong, producing these great outcomes for kids, not becoming our trust-wide practice?* (Michael Phillips).

The majority of those I interviewed expressed reservations about the possible imposition of standardised approaches for MATs and its impact on professional freedom and satisfaction. Stephen Dawson warned:

> *we would lose a massive amount about working in a school where you've got quite a lot of trust and quite a lot of power to make a difference… if everything is kind of in line, across, I don't know, fifteen different Multi-academy trusts, all of the real talent is just going to do a different job* (Stephen Dawson).

Vignette Eight: *Pooled Budgets*

I recently attended a meeting of LGB Chairs in a MAT (in my role as the LGB Chair of a Free School in this MAT). 'Pooled budgets' was on the agenda. The CEO explained that this discussion had been triggered by the Funding Agency's refusal to pay for urgent asbestos removal in one of the Trust's schools. The refusal was on the grounds that the MAT had sufficient funding to cover the cost, if the surplus balances of all Trust schools were added together. For most Chairs round the table, this was the first time they had

heard about 'pooled' budgets. The idea that their individual school budget 'belonged' to the MAT was an anathema. Many schools had joined the MAT voluntarily, rather than by compulsion as failing schools. They had seen the MAT as more akin to a 'club' providing mutual support, rather than a formal structure that could remove individual freedom and the money they had accrued for future projects. Most had not read the Scheme of Delegation. There was a particularly horrified response from the schools that had amassed considerable reserves that were earmarked for future capital projects. Following the meeting, the Trust Board carried out a formal review before deciding to postpone a decision on pooled funding to a later date.

7.7.3   Standardised MATs as 'quasi' local authorities

Unexpectedly, almost half of those I interviewed expressed a view that Multi-Academy Trusts had become like local authorities. In my very first interview, Linda Grant was musing on MATs, '*you can't help feeling that the bigger ones are starting to replicate the sort of local authority thing, but with a geography which doesn't necessarily make sense.*' A view shared strongly by Catherine Taylor, '*I think with Multi-academy trusts, they're just creating mini-Local Authorities. I mean, it's just – I think the whole thing is just bonkers! Just completely bonkers!*' Richard Johnson, who, like myself, had previously been a Local Authority Director of Education, had been involved in discussions about joining a large academy chain. He said that after looking at the MAT structure, he had commented:

> *I've just left one of these. Why would I want to do that?' … it was extraordinary because that comes back to those who thought that the only thing wrong with Local Authorities was that the people running them weren't good enough and they could do a better job* (Richard Johnson).

He wryly pointed out that the CEOs were both better paid and had more powers than either he or I had experienced as Directors of Education:

> *The CEOs of multi-academy trusts have now got twice the salary that we ever had … and powers beyond anything we had, you know. I mean, all those warning letters we were supposed to write … they can march in and say, 'I dismiss you'. So yes, Crazy!'* (Richard Johnson).

He relayed his conversation with an Ofsted inspector, who was inspecting one of the schools in his MAT. The inspector had said, '*You're just trying to create another Local Authority, aren't you*?'. To which Richard Johnson had replied, '*No, I'm trying to do something that is more effective than a Local Authority.*' He went on to say that some of his friends used to joke, '*You're trying to create a Local Authority that's small enough that it will actually work*!'.

Rebecca Jones also admitted that the '*cynic*' in her, '*says we're re-inventing Local Authorities'* and that as Multi-academy trusts merged to form larger Trusts, '*the infrastructure that needs to be put in place is going to be very similar to that of the Local Authority'*. Keith Grey was very clear that a direct comparison could be made between his own MAT and a Local Authority, indeed he described himself as being, '*just like a Director of Education*'. After he had described his structure, pooling of budgets, and centralised procurement, I asked, '*have you just described a Local Authority pre-LMS?'.* Keith Grey's response was*, 'Could well be'.* Unprompted*,* Simon White also made the same point, '*we run our trust here probably a bit more like a Local Authority before LMS.'* Jane Green was struggling with the dilemma:

> *sometimes they want MATs to be like Local Authorities, and sometimes the government don't … a MAT is almost a Local Authority without those final statutory functions that remain with the Local Authority… especially the trusts that have 50 odd schools. It is a Local Authority* (Jane Green).

7.8   The Future

As discussed in Chapter 4, my original research design had not included a consideration of what school structures might look like in the future. However, unprompted by me, my interviewees shared their frustration with the current system and speculations about what might happen in the future. There was a unanimous view that the current school structure was fragmented, unsustainable and indeed undesirable for the future. None of the 'actors' felt that there was a blueprint for a future coherent structure that had already been worked out. This view was shared by those working at senior national and regional levels, as well as those in local government and school leaders. In light of this, I introduced a question that offered interviewees the choice of 'magic wand' (what they would like to happen in an ideal future) or 'crystal ball' (what they thought was actually likely to happen). When offered a 'magic wand' the imagined futures ranged from a complete reversal to pre-academisation, to academisation with local collaboration.

7.8.1   The Future: there is no plan

Linda Grant, Julie Smith, Jane Green, Richard Johnson and Simon White were explicit in their belief that government did not have a worked-out plan for a future school structure: '*I don't think anyone had a plan … it's not really an end game … it just is a bit random for me*' (Linda Grant); '*It doesn't ever feel like a finished article. It's like everyone is always looking over their shoulder about what next*' (Julie Smith); '*No-one has really taken the long-term view. We've kind of lurched from Parliament to Parli*ament' (Jane Green); '*Gove likes to throw everything up in the air and doesn't really care where it comes down to rest*' (Stephen Dawson); '*We all have this human view that somebody somewhere must know the answers, and there must be an*

answer. I don't know that this is true' (Simon White). Interestingly, Hayek's ideology would support a level of uncertainty. He argued against the rigidity of those who wanted a meticulously worked-out plan. For Hayek (1986), 'the market' would decide and shape future reality.

Michael Phillips referred back to the government's proposal in 2016, for all schools to become academies by 2022:

> *this isn't the end game. I mean, the end game under Nicky Morgan was going to be 21,000 academies. Which, as toxic as that debate was, was the last time I think we heard anybody talk about the shape of the system. We're now in a position where it is actually more complex than ever… I think that there is a need for a better conversation about the role of the Education System, rather than just being a silo called, 'Education'* (Michael Phillips).

Catherine Taylor thought the government, '*have lost control of it. I don't think they really know what to do in order to get it into a system where they can have a lot more control than they do at the moment.'* Rebecca Jones shared this view*, 'The Tories will muddle along as they are …they have kind of run out of ideas.'* Susan Briggs characterised the government as having reached, '*a plateau*' on education policy, '*I don't see the Conservatives at this point pushing Academies like they used to*.' Paul Black thought:

> *we're probably into an extended period where there is a mixed economy of schools … at some point, you will have a Secretary of State or whoever, looks at the education system and says, "this isn't good enough. It's not working for children"* (Paul Black).

7.8.2 The Future: 'the crystal ball'

There was a range of predictions about what a future structure might look like, when viewed through, 'a crystal ball'. The vast majority thought all schools would eventually become academies, although there was divided opinion about whether stand-alone academies would be allowed to continue as they were. '*The critical mass of secondaries is already there. It will be 80% by the end of this academic year. Primaries are up around 36 or 37. I think when you get to 40, you're probably at tipping point there*' (Michael Phillips). '*I am sure that all secondaries will be academies of one kind or another*' (Paul Fellows). '*Both parties are committed to the academies idea. Whether they will expand, I mean what else can they move into*?' (William Benson). Daniel West reluctantly concluded that the only way to unify the system would be, '*to change it all, to make it into what I wouldn't want it to be'.* A minority of interviewees (Catherine Taylor, Richard Johnson and John Baker) predicted a future where stand-alone academies would still exist:

> *I'm not sure how they're going to pull away from what we've got completely. I mean there was a fundamental flaw in the thinking when they allowed us all to go off and do our own thing… I think there will always be really, really good schools and what is the lever for getting them back in the system* (Catherine Taylor).

On the other hand, some expected all schools to be part of MATs. Jane Green felt that until very recently, '*there was a very clear drive for all schools, over whatever period of time, to become part of a MAT'.* Stephen Dawson described a future in which stand-alone academies would disappear and, '*get hoovered up into larger Multi-academy trusts.*' Paul Fellows, Stephen Dawson and Richard Johnson all expected the merger of small MATs into larger, as envisaged by Ball (2013). Stephen Dawson predicted the creation of, '*Super-Multi-academy trusts… what I*

think we will be left with long term is 15 or 20 multi-academy trusts across the country'. He expected these would be highly standardised with little autonomy for individual schools and, '*have inordinately highly-paid CEOs, probably male, sat at the top of them, and essentially a Local Authority working cross region sitting below them. I think that's a really horrible, horrible position if we get to that*'.

7.8.3   The Future: 'the magic wand'

The widest range of views emerged when interviewees were offered a metaphorical 'magic wand' to describe what they would like to see as the future shape of the school system. Some argued for a return to how things used to be, albeit with some improvements. For Peter Dixon this would be a model of comprehensive schools, with an enhanced inspection system carried out by experts such as HMI, to hold schools to account. Julie Smith also wanted to, '*turn back the clock*', but improve local authorities to take out, '*weaker practices*'. Paul Black's, '*nirvana scenario*', was a re-emergence of '*local democracy … local control of schools*'. James Williams was pragmatic:

> *Whilst I would welcome removal of academisation and schools returning to Local Authorities en masse, the funding is not there to provide the infrastructure needed to deliver that … I would go back to a Local Authority function because you have to have that co-ordination function at a local level and putting democracy back into education is the reality. That's what I would want* (James Williams).

Interestingly, even for those who would not want to, 'turn back the clock', their 'magic wand' scenario, included the need for the type of co-ordination described by James Williams. Simon White would like to see, '*families of schools or groups of schools ….co-ordinated and managed by regional government'.* In Daniel West's vision, if

everyone is going to have to be an academy, '*I would rather it was that everybody was a stand-alone, directly accountable to the region in the same way that they used to be directly accountable to the county*'. Similarly, Paul Fellows described a model where:

> *rather than having independent academies, or a selection of academies and maintained schools, each trying to do their own thing, perhaps if there could be co-ordinated in a way that might have been in the past under the auspices of Local Authority, maybe you'd end up with better provision, and maybe it would be to everybody's benefit* (Paul Fellows).

Although a firm advocate for academisation, Michael Phillips also argued for a vision of:

> *a much more collaborative culture… so your goal is that no school is left behind; no school is left isolated by geography or philosophy and that actually, you are part of something … If we were ever in a position where a politician said, "Right, we're going to academise the system", the only way it would work would be to look at a better model of local democratic control* (Michael Phillips).

He saw a role for the Local Authority as, '*guardian and champion of children and making sure that people make good decisions not just on behalf of the kids they've got but everybody else's kids.*'

Ruth Thomas hoped we would, '*come back to a helpful role of stewardship around schools, which are run by schools.*' Keith Grey's, '*utopian world'*, would also be, '*very much about collegiality, it would be very much around recognising that diversity within a system can be really, really healthy*'. He could not understand why leaders wouldn't want to work together in this way, '*because actually our kudos comes from having a really good educational system, not my part in the educational system … if*

collectively we can lift it up, then actually it feels a better place to be'. John Baker echoed the same point referring to the, '*professional desire to not just think about your own school, but to think about the schools around you*'.

James Williams, Daniel West, Michael Phillips and Richard Johnson mentioned the idea of a statutory 'Board': akin to a '*Area Health Board*' (Daniel West); '*Local Improvement Board*' (Michael Phillips); USA style '*Education Board'* (Richard Johnson). For James Williams, some form of 'Education Board' would:

> *give control back to local areas in some shape or form … with a statutory duty to deliver the improvement function in an area and to drive that improvement, whoever the stakeholders are, because it's – you need to have that local accountability* (James Williams).

A system of facilitated local collaboration was a recommendation made by Pring and Roberts (2016) in the conclusion to their compilation of '*Stories from the field'*. As a result of their three-year national research study, Greany and Higham (2018) also recommended that there should be a new Middle Tier which had a democratic mandate. Simkins et al (2019) also identified the need for a new Middle Tier based on partnership rather than hierarchy. Whereas Riddell (2019) and West and Wolfe (2019) argue for restoration of links with local authorities.

7.9   Conclusion

In this chapter members of the 'cast' have set out their personal views about 'freedom' and its impact on the school system. In so doing, they have exposed the journey which 'freedom' has travelled, from the1988 *Education Reform Act* up to the

present day. Some argued that this journey was actually a circular 'round-trip' back to a situation akin to pre-1988.

For Hayek, freedom was central to the dynamism of 'the market'. There should be individual freedom, 'in everything which depends on the circumstances of time and place, because only the individuals concerned in each instance can fully know these circumstances and adapt their actions to them' (Hayek, 1986, p. 69). Members of 'the cast', who had been 'on stage' when the journey began in 1988, unanimously acknowledged the advantages of being able to manage their own school budgets through LMS. They echoed Hayek's rationale about the benefit of decisions being made at the front line. Whilst there was a unanimous view that adoption of Grant Maintained (GM) status had been driven by funding, rather than ideology, they acknowledged that GM freedoms had created a strong and enduring culture of autonomy amongst school leaders. This was particularly the case in the secondary sector. In the light of this, the additional freedoms brought by Michael Gove in 2010, were generally seen as insignificant for former GM schools. Indeed, some interviewees described these freedoms as 'unreal' because of the difficulty of implementation, for example, making radical changes to teachers' pay and conditions or National Curriculum.

However, the 2010 *Academies Act* did free converted academies from oversight by the LA. New Labour had re-introduced some LA oversight of 'GM' schools in 1998, changing their status to 'Foundation Schools'. Thus, the 2010 Act was a significant step on the journey to greater freedom for academies. However, rather than being welcomed by 'the cast', this was seen as a retrograde step. They were critical of

government for granting freedom, unaccompanied by the counterbalance of accountability measures. The unintended consequences of this had been the isolation and subsequent decline in standards of stand-alone academies and incidences of fraudulent activity. Hence unrestricted 'freedom' was not seen as being desirable.

It was at this point that the 'actors' started to describe a 'return' journey to more restricted freedom. I would assert that it was at this point that pressure on school leaders started to increase further, feeding into the sense of 'fear' which emerged as a research finding in the previous chapter. The first step was the appointment of Regional School Commissioners who picked up some of the accountability functions LAs previously exercised over Foundation Schools. Faced with this responsibility, RSCs had begun to depart from the core government script of 'freedom for schools' by starting to develop systems to enable them to hold academies to account (for example, the self-evaluation process described by Simon White and Jane Green). Referring back to the Foucault's image of the Panoptican (Foucault 1977), described in Chapter 1, it is as though, for school leaders, the watchtower is now inhabited by representatives from the office of the Regional Commissioner as well as Ofsted inspectors. This sense of being increasingly under surveillance is behind the 'fear' which emerged in the data analysed in the previous chapter. Even though Damian Hinds had recognised the sense of fear in the system and stepped in to reduce the role of the RSC, this did not appear to have allayed school leaders' fears about possible intervention or compulsion.

At the same time, national accountability mechanisms were introduced to curb some of the unexpected consequences of the freedom given to MATs. For example, the drive by central government to restrict the salaries of CEOs. The widespread failure of the large national MATs that had historically taken a 'hands-off' approach to their schools (as described by Michael Phillips and Caroline Taylor), marked another point at which the return journey to greater control commenced. Governance of and across MATs was strengthened with the stipulation that there must be a single accountable CEO and transparent Schemes of Delegation. Government pressure also came to bear on persuading, or forcing, stand-alone academies to join a MAT. This put to an end any notion of a MAT just being a mutually supportive group. Members of the cast, who spoke from the viewpoint of non-academy schools or stand-alone academies, were clear about their reluctance to join MATs because they did not want to cede their 'freedom' to a Trust Board.

However, in order to have a tighter grip on standards, there was an incentive for Trust Boards to reduce the freedom of individual schools in the MAT, by standardising aspects such as the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. This marks a very significant milestone on the return journey of 'freedom' because individual schools had previously had the freedom to decide which syllabus to teach, to create their own resources or projects and to devise their own internal assessments. However, the 'cast' members who were CEOs and DfE officials were clear that the benefits of the loss of freedom were outweighed by the advantages. It was more efficient to provide MAT-wide teaching resources and training as well as ensuring equal access to best practice for all pupils in the Trust. A totally

standardised approach also strengthens the Trust Board's ability to compare schools and hold them to account.

The most radical step on the return journey is undoubtedly the recent move to introduce pooled budgets. Indeed, it even led many of 'the actors' to conclude that MATs were becoming '*quasi-local authorities'* and that the journey had almost gone full circle. However, it was not quite an exact return to the original starting point because, along the way, a role for local democracy had been lost. There was a general view amongst members of the cast that this had been to the detriment of children and young people, particularly the most vulnerable. Many spoke about the loss of a sense of collective ownership and responsibility for all local children and young people having been lost in the fragmented academy system. This was also reflected in the previous chapter's analysis of views about 'competition'. All the 'magic wand' scenarios sought to restore a sense of local responsibility, although most thought it unrealistic to think that the journey would end in closing the circle completely with the return of Local Authority oversight. The creation of a new 'Middle Tier' was thought to be the most likely scenario for the future.

Chapter 8:   The Denouement

8.1   Introduction

The analysis of primary sources in Chapter 2 demonstrated that the key components of market ideology: consumer choice, competition and freedom, are central to the rationale underpinning key education policies that have shaped the current school system. I have argued that this centrality and consistency, justifies their characterisation as a 'regime of truth', the discourse which society 'accepts and makes function as truth' (Foucault, 1980, cited in McHoul and Grace, p. 131). In my analogy of a 'drama', this 'truth' has formed the plotline of the 'script' given to my cast of 'actors' to deliver. However, as I explained in Chapter 1, the drama is not a straight-forward story, a simple description of policy enactment through the delivery of a set script. A full understanding can only be achieved by critical thought and exploring the motivations, beliefs and actions of the 'actors' involved.

This concluding chapter presents answers to each of the four research questions, posed at the outset of my research, and referenced in Chapters 1 and 4:

1. How has the rationale of the 'free market' been expressed in key educational policies since 1988?

2. How have members of the education community responded to this rationale and why?

3. What have been some of the impacts of the 'market model' on the school system?

4. How do educational professionals envisage the structure of education evolving in the future?

In answer to Question 1, Section 8.2 rehearses the rationale, presented by successive governments, for embedding consumer choice, competition and freedom in the school system. This consistent rationale emerged through the de-construction of key education policies in Chapter 2. Foucault's characterisation of those in power producing the 'truths we live by' which he terms 'the regime of truth' (Foucault 1980), provides a theoretical perspective through which to explore this rationale. The following sections address Questions 2, 3 and 4, drawing on the exploration of literature and recent research in Chapter 3 and analysis of my own research data set out in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. Foucault's thinking about truth, power and surveillance adds a theoretical perspective to enrich understanding and interpretation. Section 8.3 examines the response made by my 'actors' and others, to the rationale underpinning market ideology. These responses range from pragmatism and enthusiasm to fear. Section 8.4 considers the impacts of the market model of consumer choice, competition and freedom on the school system in Ayeshire and beyond. The most significant findings are in relation to 'freedom'. Speculation about the future evolution of the school system is analysed in Section 8.5. As is the nature of qualitative research, there are no definitive, 'black and white' answers to the questions posed, and it must be borne in mind that my findings are based on research in one specific location, at one point in time, by a selected group of 'actors'. However, at the same time, I assert that this approach is also a strength, addressing a gap in research. Through this research model I have been able to analyse the drama which has unfolded in Ayeshire over the last thirty years, through the voices

of those involved. In so doing, I have gained insight into the current shape of the school system.

Having considered each research question in turn, section 8.6 will draw together my main findings and signal what I consider my research contributes to the existing field of knowledge. Finally, I am completing this thesis during the extraordinary circumstances of a global coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, it seems appropriate to close with an 'Epilogue' (section 8.7) reflecting on the way the school system has responded to the pandemic and possible implications for the future.

8.2 Research Question 1: How has the rationale of the 'free market' been expressed in key educational policies since 1988?

There is an inherent assumption behind this research question, namely that the rationale of the 'market' has influenced education policies. The review of primary sources in Chapter 2 provides justification for this assumption. The direct dialogue between Hayek, Margaret Thatcher and her government ministers is well documented. By her own admission, Hayek had a profound influence on Thatcher's ideas (Thatcher, 1984). As early as 1973, it had been accepted that Hayek's ideology could be applied to public services, including Education (MTFA, 1973). The radical changes enshrined in the *Education Reform Act* (ERA) laid the ground on which the future evolution of the influence of market ideology on the school system was based.

My first Research Question has largely been answered in Chapter 2. In that chapter, rather than following the more usual sequential, historical, approach of examining

individual policies in turn, I deconstructed policies by teasing out what Ball terms, 'policy technologies', which 'constitute a 'one-size-fits-all model' for transformation (Ball, 2013, p. 49). Thus, I analysed the policy technologies of consumer choice, competition and freedom in order to understand the rationale for them becoming the 'one-size' model. This approach exposed the consistent influence of market ideology on successive governments since 1988.

In the conclusion of Chapter 2, I asserted that the repetition of these themes has created, what Foucault termed, a 'regime of truth', where market ideology and the centrality of consumer choice, competition and freedom to school improvement, have become an accepted reality or 'truth'. For Foucault this 'regime of truth' is society's 'general politics of truth, that is, the types of discourses it accepts and makes function as true … the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth' (Foucault, 1980, cited in McHoul and Grace, 1993). It is taken as read that consumer choice is desirable: 'real choice for parents, and schools which respond to that choice by improving themselves' (Baker, 1993, p. 212); 'power and choice being in the hands of the people ensures that market mechanisms and incentives are allowed to do their job' (Major, 1992, p. v); 'parent choice can be a powerful driver of improved standards' (DES, 2005, p.3). Free Schools provide, 'parents with choice they have been denied by local bureaucratic monopolies' (Gove, 2011). The rationale is that: empowering parents leads to a competitive market where providers (schools) need to attract 'custom'; 'competition drives improvement' as schools strive to move up the League Table to attract parents and increase their income. Equally, 'freedom' for headteachers, leads to more effective decision making and school improvement. For Kenneth Baker, Grant Maintained (GM) schools would, 'run

themselves … so standards will rise' (Baker, 1987). The 'can do' attitude of academies, willing 'to innovate and use their freedoms imaginatively' was heralded by Tony Blair (DfES, 2005, p.3). David Cameron reflected that 'allowing heads to steer their own ship worked wonders' (Cameron, 2019, p. 220).

These phrases, and other elements of market ideology have become part of the general language used by those involved in education. The ease with which my own research participants used the terminology of 'the market' exemplifies its influence (see Chapter 5). As discussed in Chapter 3, *The Guardian's* political columnist, Monbiot (2016) asserted that neoliberalism is so inherent in society, it is seldom recognised as an ideology. My analysis leads to the conclusion that the political rationale expressed in education policies is purely concerned with the practicalities of embedding these market conditions in the system. There is an absence of a fundamental discussion of whether these conditions are actually desirable and will indeed achieve the anticipated outcomes.

There are signs of a recent government shift in emphasis, particularly in relation to 'freedom'. The scale of the accountability measures, introduced in recent years to strengthen governance and regulation, implies a reassessment of the assertion that school leaders can be relied on to take the best decisions. As discussed in Chapter 2, it is notable that the most recent White Paper (DfE, 2016) had less emphasis on freedom for individual schools than previous policies. The White Paper speaks of 'supported autonomy' with 'responsibility and accountability in one place, as close to the front line as possible', this is significant because 'freedom to innovate' applies to the MAT, rather than individual schools being autonomous. It also marks a move

from 'freedom' to 'compulsion' by proposing that all schools should become academies by 2022. This radical change in rhetoric proved to be politically unacceptable, resulting in the White Paper being withdrawn. Although the government stepped back from its radical plan, there are still signs of the rhetoric of the 2016 White Paper at work, in the move to standardise processes in MATs, as set out in Chapter 7. This change to the script on 'freedom' could be being driven by those responsible for implementing policy on the ground, rather than a government re-write of the core script.

8.2.1 <u>Conclusion</u> to Research Question 1: How has the rationale of the 'free market' been expressed in key educational policies since 1988?

The rationale of the 'free market' has been expressed both implicitly and explicitly in education policies since 1988. Consumer choice, competition and freedom have been identified as the means to improve the quality of the school system. This became 'a regime of truth'. Its central tenets were not questioned but continued to be accepted by successive governments. However, the discussion about 'freedom' in the previous paragraph underlines the point that 'actors' in this ongoing drama are not always delivering a script by rote but are adding their own interpretation and improvisations. Hence the importance of my second research question below.

8.3 Research Question 2: How have members of the education community responded to this rationale and why?

Those who define policy as 'a specification' to be enacted (Trowler, 2003), would not anticipate a difference between rhetoric and reality. 'Actors' would deliver 'the script' they were given, without adding their own interpretation and improvisations. Had I

accepted this definition of 'policy' I could have compiled a historical, factual commentary on changes made to the school system. This might have led me to conclude that Ayeshire is a shining example of widespread enthusiasm for 'market ideology', citing factual evidence of a high rate of conversion as GM schools in the 1990s and as stand-alone academies in the 2010s. However, my research questions the validity of this conclusion and points instead to the accuracy of the assertion that the policy process is influenced by many factors. I found evidence from my interviews that some 'actors' were influenced by their political or philosophical stance, others by pragmatism and the happenstance of time and place. Some have been motivated by a mission to innovate and share expertise with others, whereas others have been driven by fear for survival. I have characterised the responses of my 'actors' below as: pragmatism, caution, enthusiasm and fear. It is important to remember that there was a widely shared view amongst research participants, that Ayeshire is '*unique'* and '*an outlier'.* This prompts the question of how far these responses would be shared by those working elsewhere, and to what extent my findings are specific to Ayeshire. In order to address this, where relevant, I have cited studies of other local authority areas.

8.3.1   Question 2. Response to the market model: Pragmatism

An argument can be made that pragmatic decisions, made by school leaders in Ayeshire in the 1990s, have influenced the future direction of the school system in the county ever since. William Benson, who chaired the Heads' Association at that time, explicitly stated that the decision by the majority of secondary schools to convert to GM, was not, '*anything to do with philosophy or educational advantage … it was just about money'.* School leaders made a pragmatic choice to accept the

government's offer of GM status because their schools were located in a part of the country with one of the lowest levels of school funding. GM status was an opportunity to gain significant additional funding. This pragmatic response was pivotal to the emergence of an autonomous culture in Ayeshire, particularly amongst secondary headteachers. This prepared the ground for school leaders to adopt the same pragmatic response to academy conversion in 2010. As Paul Fellows asserted, '*The reason why we converted was very simple…there was a financial incentive to convert'*. There was a universal view amongst members of my 'cast' that they had not been influenced by the 'freedoms' on offer. Indeed, they considered these to be '*unreal*' for former GM schools. This view of academy 'freedoms' was also identified in research by Woods and Simkins (2014) and Greany and Higham (2018). Research by Simkins (2015) and Smith and Abbott (2014) also made the link between areas that already had a culture of autonomous schools, being quick to embrace academisation. Hence, my findings have some resonance with research conducted in other local authorities. However, these studies are of a particular point in time, rather than an exploration of the past events and decisions which led to these schools becoming 'autonomous' in the first place. There is no reference to the financial advantage of academisation as a motivating factor. Further research, in some of the historically lowest funded authorities in the country, would shed light on how far responses to government policy have been driven by the opportunity to gain extra funding. There is strong evidence from my research to conclude that, at least in Ayeshire, the promise of additional funding has had greater influence on school leaders than the offer of greater 'freedom'. School leaders have taken the market ideology inspired 'script' but used it for their own pragmatic ends.

8.3.2 Question 2. Response to the market model: Caution

Ayeshire is unusual in having very few examples of 'home-grown' MATs, despite its large number of high performing schools. In Chapter 5, I attributed this to school leaders adopting a cautious response to this policy initiative. Despite the rhetoric of MATs opening up opportunity for further freedom and innovation, many participants argued that the county's long history of autonomy actually inhibited heads and governors from wanting to take responsibility for other schools. Some 'actors' had 'bought into' the original script about freedom and were unwilling to divert from it when successive governments changed the emphasis. This is exemplified in Chapter 7 by the stand-alone academy, that had abandoned the idea of a MAT with primaries, when governors realised that they would have no greater say, despite having more pupils than all the other schools added together. Heads, accustomed to autonomy, did not want to be answerable to a Trust. Although, as many pointed out, the reluctance to take formal responsibility for others did not mean successful heads were not willing to support others through the National Leaders in Education (NLE) programme and as Teaching Schools. The moral dilemma facing some successful heads was eloquently expressed by those who struggled with what they felt were competing duties. On the one hand there was a moral duty to support struggling schools, but on the other, a duty to do the best for their own schools. Caution had been further fuelled by the acknowledged failure of the first National Academy Chains to enter the county, of which Oak and Ash Academies are examples (Vignettes One and Six in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively). The fate of these schools was seen as a salutary example of the challenge of turning some schools around.

It is possible that the cautious response of school leaders in Ayeshire would not be replicated to the same extent elsewhere. From their national and regional perspectives, Michael Phillips (MP) and Ruth Thomas (RT) both confirmed that in Ayeshire several factors may have combined, which are present to a lesser extent elsewhere. Competition for pupils during a demographic decline (exacerbated, some would argue, by the existence of grammar schools) and increased levels of accountability, all add to the mix. It is possible that, since low funding was the initial driver by which school leaders gained autonomy, rather than a desire for Hayek's vision of 'freedom to innovate', leaders are more cautious of taking on challenge. It is certainly clear from my research data that many school leaders in Ayeshire have adopted a cautious response to the rationale of greater freedom.

8.3.3   Question 2. Response to the market model: Enthusiasm

However, despite the caution of some, other 'actors' have embraced the opportunity to set up, or lead MATs. The enthusiasm of the CEOs and DfE officials I interviewed, was rooted in personal vision and motivation to make a positive difference through schools working together to generate and share good practice for the benefit of all children. Keith Grey and Stephen Dawson both used the analogy of a '*family*' to describe the relationship between schools in their individual MATs. Thus, the rationale for their MATs is based on partnership and co-operation. This is at odds with the market ideology of competition, the antithesis of 'collaboration'. Thus, suggesting that the 'enthusiastic' school leaders I have interviewed, have been more motivated by the freedom to share good practice and innovate, than by other aspects of market ideology. However, examples of large national chains, suggests that

leaders elsewhere may have adopted a more competitive, entrepreneurial response to growing their MATs (Whittaker, 2016).

8.3.4   Question 2. Response to the market model: fear

The strength and prevalence of 'fear' in the response from my participants, took me by surprise. It prompted me to reflect whether I had been simply unaware of it when I was in my professional role, or whether it has become more acute in the three years since I retired. Despite government rhetoric about the importance of 'freedom and autonomy', research data in Chapter 6, reveals widespread fear of future compulsion expressed vividly using language of conflict: *'battles', 'races', 'picked on', 'spooked'*, *'hoovered up'.* Non-academy schools feared forced academisation, stand-alone academies feared compulsion to join a MAT and those in small MATs feared 'market forces' prompting acquisitions and mergers by larger MATs. Some were concerned about their school budget, fearing intervention if they went into deficit.

Chapter 6 outlines some of the reactions to these fears. These challenge the 'regime of truth', that 'competition' is a driving force for school improvement. Rather than being motivating factors, the components of the competitive market appear to have inspired defensive actions. Some schools have been reluctant to take pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with particularly challenging behaviour. Fear of a poor Ofsted outcome or failure to meet performance targets has fuelled a rise in exclusions across the county and an increase in the number of pupils being electively home educated.

Throughout these interviews there was a sense of school leaders constantly looking over their shoulders. The performance regime that schools operate under has been

described as 'a regime of numbers – a resource through which surveillance can be exercised' (Ozga, 2008, p. 268). This insidious sense of surveillance is reminiscent of Foucault's image of the Panoptican. The Panoptican is a design for a prison, which had a tall tower in the centre surrounded by a ring-shaped building with individual cells, meant that inmates were kept in line because they could never be certain whether they were being watched or not. Foucault described this surveillance system as inciting a state of docility, without the need for a physical display of force (Foucault, 1977, cited in McHoul and Grace, p. 65). For Foucault, this is akin to the way government exercises 'disciplinary power'. 'It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being always able to be seen, that maintains the disciplined subject in his subjections' (Foucault, 1979, p. 187). Ball termed this 'performativity', which he defined as 'a regime of accountability that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of control, attrition and change' (Ball, 2013, p. 57). In education, judgements are continually been made about school data, such as test and examination results. Hence school leaders feel constantly under scrutiny. For Ball this type of accountability is a 'key mechanism of neo-liberal governments that uses comparisons and judgements, and self-management, in place of interventions and direction' (Ball, 2012a, p. 137). For James Williams, it was obvious why heads were fearful of taking responsibility for others in a '*high-cost inspection regime where you lost your job in a second if a school goes down…there is just absolutely no incentive…*'

'Fear' was acknowledged in a speech to the National Association of Headteachers' Conference (NAHT) by Damian Hinds, Secretary of State for Education in 2018, when he spoke of the 'spectre' of the accountability system looming over schools which engendered, 'Fear of inspection…Fear of a single set of bad results. Fear of

being forcibly turned into an academy – all of this can create stress and anxiety, and that can percolate through the staff' (Dickens, 2018a). Thus, there is evidence that the sense of 'fear' expressed by many of my 'actors' is shared by others in different areas of the country.

8.3.5 <u>Conclusion</u> to Research Question 2: How have members of the education community responded to this rationale and why?

My research identified four main ways in which members of the education community in Ayeshire have responded to the rationale of market ideology: pragmatically, cautiously, positively and with fear. The pragmatic responses centred around funding. This is a clear example of how 'policy reality' differs from 'policy rhetoric' (Potterton, 2020). Leaders were not acting 'ideologically' even though they embraced GM status and academy conversion. They accepted the additional funding without necessarily 'buying in' to the rationale. I had expected to find a positive response from Academy CEOs and DfE officials. However, even they were selective about which parts of the ideology they had embraced. They were critical of 'competition' recognising the value of schools working together and more enthusiastic about the freedom to innovate. The responses of 'caution' and 'fear' are connected, with some leaders adopting a cautious approach to taking on further responsibility, because of fear of failure. I had expected to find caution, since I had experienced it first-hand in my previous role. However, I had not expected to find the prevalence and intensity of 'fear' from the majority of the 'actors', irrespective of whether they had embraced academisation or not, and the impact this would have on the answer to the following Research Question.

8.4 Research Question 3: What have been some of the impacts of the 'market model' on the school system?

In Chapter 6, I described Ayeshire as an 'ideal market' for consumer choice with its diverse range of suppliers and over-supply of school places in most parts of the county. I expected Academy CEOs, DfE officers and Conservative politician to champion consumer choice and competition. However, there were few references to their benefits and awareness of some negative outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children. It is possible that these negative outcomes have been exacerbated by the particular circumstances in Ayeshire outlined in Chapter 5. National research by Higham and Earley (2013) evidences intensified competition in areas with demographic decline and surplus places. In Ayeshire, these factors are combined with low funding, and the presence of seven grammar schools. Taken together, these factors may have created 'a perfect storm' of intense competition, possibly resulting in educational policies having a different impact to elsewhere in the country. This hypothesis would need to be tested by conducting similar research in a county that shares these characteristics.

Rather than driving up quality of provision in all schools, my research data points to a belief amongst my 'actors' that inequality and breakdown of trust and partnerships are the product of consumer choice and competition. Data has also revealed some interesting insights into the relationship between 'freedom' and 'accountability'. Unexpected consequences of 'freedom' have led to an increase in the accountability systems which have given rise to the 'fearful' response detailed above.

8.4.1 Question 3. Impact of the Market-model: Inequality

Chapter 6 reflects a general view that, the impact of policies strengthening 'consumer choice' and 'competition', has been to widen the gap in Ayeshire between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from more affluent families. Those I interviewed felt strongly that this gap had arisen because middle class parents are able take advantage of the 'buyers' market in Ayeshire. These parents can buy a house in the right location, pay for travel, and engage tutors for the grammar school test. 'Middle class advantage' correlates with research by Gerwitz et al, 1995; West et al, 2004; Hill et al, 2016 and Cullinane, 2020. The 'actors' thought the impact of more affluent parents being able to grasp opportunities, was that disadvantaged children ended up in schools no-one else wanted. In terms of 'market ideology', this particular problem should not arise. In Hayek's model, failing businesses either close, or are subject to acquisitions and mergers with successful businesses. If the 'education market' operated in this way, successful schools would expand and failing schools would close, or be taken over by others. 'Ash Academy', described in Vignette Six (Chapter 6) is an example of a school which, arguably, should have been closed. Despite what could be regarded as a 'business take-over' by a sponsor, it still continues to fail to attract pupils and yet is not subject to closure. However, as several of my interviewees explained, and I know from personal experience, closing schools is a more contentious issue than a shop ceasing to trade. For this reason, failing schools such as Ash Academy 'limp on'.

Several participants said that the impact of recent education policies, particularly academisation, was the loss of a shared sense of moral obligation for outcomes for vulnerable children. This had contributed to greater inequality. Some attributed this to the fragmented nature of the school system that had undermined a common sense of ownership for children in a local area. Others thought the sense of 'fear',

described in the previous section, had forced school leaders to act defensively. In order to maintain their position in the League Tables and avoid the consequences of a poor Ofsted judgement, some school leaders were quick to remove challenging pupils through permanent exclusion or by 'persuading' parents to home educate. Although the heads I interviewed were keen to stress that they worked hard to support challenging children and keep them on roll, the commonly held view was that the collective sense of responsibility had broken down. 'Actors' described this as a '*crisis*' and '*the collapse of the sy*stem'. The national high level of exclusions and home education indicate that my research findings in this regard, are not unique to Ayeshire (Dickens, 2018b; Griffiths, 2019).

It can be argued that it is not surprising that the impact of 'market ideology' is inequality, since for Hayek, equality was not actually an outcome he sought. On the contrary, he saw benefits from having inequality. For neoliberals, inequality incentivises the rich to take risks for financial reward and lack of wealth provides the poor with disincentives to remain poor. 'Efforts to create a more equal society are both counter-productive and morally corrosive. The market ensures that everyone gets what they deserve' (Monbiot, 2016). A view shared by the academic James Tooley, who asserted that, the education system should not seek equality but, 'adequate opportunities for all … As long as there is a satisfactory minimum, those at the top are justified in having more than they need' (Tooley,1998, p. 277).

This particular aspect of market ideology was the one which attracted the most criticism from my cast of 'actors'. Several participants specifically mentioned their struggle with 'market' language concerning '*survival of the fittest'* and argued that there was no place for '*market failure'* in the context of schools. There was also

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resistance to pupils being treated as commodities. This approach, which regards

children as a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves, is at odds with the

aspiration of New Labour's '*Every Child Matters'* (H.M. Treasury,1983) to be

'ambitious for all children, whoever they are and wherever they live' and to 'ensure

support for all their needs'. Many participants in my research shared this holistic

vision, speaking of a '*moral imperative'* and '*moral purpose'* to make a difference to

children's lives. Many would subscribe to Davies' assessment that 'the impersonal

and anonymous mechanism of the market or market-like behaviour … has led to

epidemics of depression, anxiety, obesity and addictive behaviour … an indictment

on societies that have made calculated self-interest and competitiveness tacitly

constitutional principles' (Davies, 2014, pp. 2-3). Initiatives such as Sure Start, Every

Child Matters, Parent Advisers, introduced by the Blair government, attempted to

blend social justice with market ideology to form 'The Third Way' described in

Chapter 2. Similarly, the Coalition government introduced Pupil Premium to boost

the progress of children from disadvantaged families. These measures of 'state

intervention' are at odds with pure market ideology and are designed to mitigate the

hard line of Hayek's approach to inequality. This is pertinent to the situation the

government currently faces in dealing with the Coronavirus Pandemic, explored in

the Epilogue to this thesis (section 8.7).

8.4.2 Question 3. Impact of the Market-model: Breakdown in trust and partnerships

Whilst many of those I interviewed, were keen to point out that some local

partnerships had never worked well, most thought that the impact of recent

education changes, particularly academisation, had been a further erosion of

partnerships between schools. From her regional perspective, Ruth Thomas thought

this was particularly acute in Ayeshire. She was frustrated by some heads who saw their role as purely being about their individual school, rather than the education of all children. This frustration was shared by Keith Grey who had found it hard to gain the trust of local schools when his MAT had taken on Ayeshire schools. Interviewees spoke about some secondary heads no longer being able to be in the same room as each other. The language they used to describe the competitive environment was stark: '*cutthroat', 'a jungle', 'dog eat dog'.*

However, this finding is entirely consistent with Hayek's ideology of autonomy and competition. As Olssen pointed out, 'while autonomy is the basis of the freedom, it is also the basis of the competitive order … if the autonomy of each is emphasised, one also, by definition as it were, underplays the responsibilities and duties which we owe to each other, individually and collectively' (Olssen, 2005, p. 378). Whilst they did not reference the same stark language and extreme views as some of my 'actors', lack of partnership-working was also identified as a finding by Simkins (2014) and Smith and Abbott (2014). Both of these studies found that, in LAs where schools had traditionally been more autonomous, the discourse was of independent schools working for individual advantage and power. Whereas in LAs where schools were less autonomous, discourse was of collaboration. Research by Simkins et al (2019) and Simon et al (2019) asserted that primary heads were keener than secondaries to work in local partnerships and shared a moral purpose wider than their school. It is also the case that partnerships are stronger in Ayeshire at primary level, perhaps reflecting the lower incidence of the take up of GM and Academy status by primaries in contrast to secondaries.

It was striking that when I offered my research participants a 'magic wand' to shape their ideal school system of the future, the majority wanted a system where schools worked together. They used words such as: '*collaborative culture*', '*a co-ordinated way*', '*stewardship*' and '*collegiality*'. Desire for this type of local collaboration was also identified in research by: Pring and Roberts, 2016; Greany and Higham (2018); Simkins (2019). It can be argued that there are signs of a change in government rhetoric, from an emphasis on competition to one of partnership, particularly between schools in MATs. The government's abortive attempt to legislate for all schools to become academies by 2022 (DfE, 2016) envisaged a system where all academies were grouped into MATs. However, whilst schools at some distance from each other in a MAT are able to share a common curriculum and professional development, it is difficult for national MATs to establish partnerships to take on 'local ownership' of children. Even in the case of a locally based MAT, such as Jane Green's, it is impracticable to arrange 'managed moves' for pupils at risk of exclusion between primary schools, because they are spread across a large geographical area. The same is true for two Ayeshire secondary schools, who, although they are in the same MAT, are 43 miles apart, serving entirely different communities of children. Since the time my research interviews took place, two more Ayeshire academies have been re-brokered into Stephen Dawson's MAT. Three of the four Ayeshire schools now in his MAT, are in close proximity to each other, serving the same inner-city community of high deprivation. It would therefore be feasible for these schools to have a co-ordinated approach to admissions and managed moves. It would be a promising further area of research to assess how far joint ownership of vulnerable children can be realised in this situation and its potential impact.

8.4.3 Question 3. Impact of the Market-model: Isolation

Over half my research participants expressed concern that the impact of academisation had been a fall in standards in many stand-alone academies, because they had become isolated. Vignette Seven in the previous chapter, illustrated the adverse impact of isolation on two Ayeshire schools. DfE officials thought stand-alones should '*never have been allowed'*, and had been created for '*political, rather than educational reasons*'. Michael Phillips made a significant observation that, rather than being 'freedom' to be '*left alone',* academy 'freedom' should be about freedom to innovate, '*to do something sensational, transformational with it'*. This is in line with Hayek's conception of 'freedom'. Although there was an element of freedom 'from' in that Hayek argued for freedom 'from' bureaucracy, the real purpose of freedom was to empower individuals to be able to adapt their actions to their individual circumstances. Some schools in National Academy Chains had also suffered from isolation. Michael Phillips characterised some early Chains as operating as '*separate units'* and quoted one CEO, who had invited schools to join his MAT because he promised 'to leave them alone'. Thus, in Ayeshire isolation has been a feature, not only of stand-alone academies but also of the first schools that joined national Academy Chains. The insistence in the 2016 White Paper that all new academies would have to be in MATs, and the increasing encouragement of standardisation, are signs that failure as a result of isolation is sufficiently common to have influenced a change in policy direction.

8.4.4 Question 3. Impact of the Market-model: Increase in accountability systems

Rather than accepting the 'core script's' rhetoric of the importance of giving freedom to those at the front line, a majority of my 'actors' argued that it is possible to have

'*too much freedom*'. Several, including national and local politicians, DfE and LA officers, Heads and Governors, argued for the importance of accountability alongside freedom. They thought that the impact of academisation had been the removal of existing accountability systems without anything being put in their place. John Baker attributed this to the hurried introduction of the Coalition's academisation programme. Others saw it as the consequence of the rhetoric that school leaders could be trusted to take their own decisions. The 'freedom' envisaged by Hayek was the freedom for humans to act in their own self- interest (Treanor, 2005, p.10). Hence Hayek's lack of interest in equality. Several members of my 'cast' questioned the morality of applying this ideology to an education system that was publicly funded. They believed there should be local democratic accountability for how schools spent tax-payers money. Interviewees referred to high profile cases of CEOs and MAT Boards acting out of self-interest and abusing their freedoms. As each of these came to light, the government was forced to issue regulations and monitoring systems.

The realisation by successive governments that granting 'freedom' does not always have the desired impact, has led to the ratcheting up of accountability systems. This was acknowledged by Damian Hinds when he intervened to curb the power of the RSC (Dickens, 2018a). Riddell (2019) asserted that the impact of this diminution of the RSC's role, would be an enhanced role for local authorities. However, I have found little evidence to support this assertion and the weakened state of LAs as a result of funding cuts, makes it improbable without significant increased investment.

The proliferation of accountability systems in schools has been discussed extensively by academics, such as: Olssen et al, 2004; Lingard and Ozga, 2007; Ball

and Olmedo, 2013. Ironically, an increase in accountability measures has been identified as a feature of neoliberal systems in general. Despite the neoliberal drive for a non-interventionist approach of government through a 'small state' and reduced bureaucracy, there is a pattern of governments introducing, 'bureaucratic systems of audit and measurement associated with administering compliance systems' (Davies, 2014, p. 192). Thus, an unexpected impact of 'freedom' for school leaders has been an increase in accountability measures. These have given rise to the sense of 'fear' amongst school leaders leading to defensive actions which have impacted on outcomes for disadvantaged children.

8.4.5 Question 3. Impact of the Market-model: The erosion of freedom

Despite the rhetoric about academies 'freeing' school leaders, I assert that there is mounting evidence of the erosion, or even arguably, eradication of autonomy for leaders of individual schools within a MAT. This assertion is supported by research in other LAs, for example, Riddell (2019). This paper had yet to be published when I carried out my own field work, but I have been struck by its correlation with my own findings. Many of those I interviewed, argued that schools in MATs had ceded their freedom and autonomy to the Trust Board. West and Wolfe (2019) even question whether academies in MATs are actually 'schools' in the eyes of the law, or whether it is the MAT itself which can be defined as a 'school' operating on a split site. Glatter (2017) also argued that in MATs, individual schools were effectively, sites for the delivery of education rather than 'self-standing' schools. Jane Green thought that some governors in her MAT had not read the Scheme of Delegation carefully enough to realise that they would cede some of their autonomy when they joined. Indeed, as outlined in Chapter 7, the role of local governing bodies (LGB) was an interesting topic of debate amongst my 'actors'. Those involved in governance, such

as Susan Briggs, had begun to recognise that their role was more akin to an advisory board. All the CEOs were clear that accountability rested with the Trust Board, although LGBs had a part to play by providing local knowledge.

The White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE, 2016) marks a subtle shift in the rhetoric about freedom. It signals a departure from Hayek's ideology about the importance of leaders being free to take their own decisions at the front line. Under this proposal, not only would all schools have to become academies by 2022, but they would have to join a MAT. There was no clearly articulated reason for this shift, but as discussed in Chapter 2, it is significant that *Educational Excellence Everywhere* was first announced in a budget speech by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Michael Phillips believed that George Osborne (the Chancellor) had put pressure on Nicky Morgan (Secretary of State for Education) because Osborne, '*had recognised the cost of running a maintained sector and an academy sector in the same education space. If they could have moved everybody over to an academy funding agreement, it would have saved resource.*' This would support the notion that the shift in rhetoric was motivated by pragmatism rather than ideology. Opponents were quick to point out the conflict with previous rhetoric. Schools were now being promised 'freedom', but only if they signed up to an academy chain, 'forcing freedom on schools is bizarre' (McInerney, 2016). Widespread opposition led to the government stepping back from drawing up legislation, but Nicky Morgan made it clear that there would still be an 'expectation' that all schools would become academies.

All of the CEOs and Trust Board members I interviewed, had experienced schools and stand-alone academies being reluctant to join their MATs because these schools wanted to retain their identity and autonomy. Several were keen to stress that the benefits gained by being in a MAT would outweigh this loss of freedom. For example, Michael Phillips spoke about '*trade-offs'* in that heads might give up autonomy for their own school, but they would gain from being in a position to play a wider role, to be '*lead incubators of the next bit of thinking'*.

8.4.6 Question 3: Impact of the Market-model: Standardisation

A significant and unexpected finding from my research, was the emergence of a new initiative with the potential to further erode, and arguably eradicate the autonomy of individual schools within a MAT. This is the drive to standardise, not only the 'back-office' functions, but also all aspects of educational delivery across individual schools. Additionally, some MATs were going as far as pooling the general annual grant (GAG) allocated to each school, thereby removing responsibility for their budget at individual school level. As explained in Chapter 4, I only became aware of the practice of 'standardisation' once I started my data collection. For me, this demonstrated the power of 'responsive interviewing' (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). If I had restricted my interviews to a pre-set list of questions, I would not have uncovered this significant research finding.

Some of the 'actors' spoke about the practical benefits of having a standardised approach. Thus, it seemed that this had been a pragmatic insertion into 'the script' by 'actors' in the role as CEOs and Trust Board members. This addition to the script enabled them to run their organisations efficiently, ensure equity for all pupils and

facilitate their responsibility to hold all schools in the MAT to account. Standardised approaches meant that resources, training and curriculum development could be shared across schools, thereby reducing costs and workload. Furthermore, for Keith Grey, pooling budgets ensured that heads could concentrate on '*education*' rather than buildings and other related issues, which could distract from a school's core function. I was struck at the time by the disconnect between this argument and the rationale articulated for LMS, for better decisions being taken by individual heads at the front line. Equity was also identified as a driver for standardisation. Michael Phillips and Simon White argued that, if a school in a Trust was very successful, their practice should be adopted Trust-wide so that all pupils could benefit.

It was apparent from my interviews that not all the 'actors' playing roles as MAT CEOs and Trust Board members wanted to make this change to the core script. Whilst they had incorporated some lines about standardisation, they were not consistent in their views. There was a spectrum, with Stephen Dawson's MAT taking a graduated approach depending on the strength of individual schools, Jane Green and Rebecca Jones having a light-touch, with only some aspects, such as assessment processes being standardised. This spectrum was also identified by research in two national Academy chains by Salokangas and Chapman (2014), who found schools in one more autonomous than the other. Research in four MATs, by Ryan-Atkin (2018) identified a notion of 'earned autonomy' for stronger schools. It appears that 'actors' in other local authorities have also made changes to the core script about 'freedom'.

It is interesting to speculate where this shift in the rhetoric about freedom has come from. Is this an example of the 'actors' departing from the core script to add their own interpretation and improvisation? If so, this would be an example of Foucault's exercise of power 'from below', where 'individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application' (McHoul and Grace, p. 89). Thus, for Foucault, 'power is productive as well as repressive, power arises from bottom up' (Olssen et al, 2005, p. 24). Foucault overturned the idea that power is only exercised in a descending direction and believed it was possible to analyse the ascending nature of power. In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault described power as being exercised 'through a net-like organisation … not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power' (Foucault 1980, cited in McHoul and Grace, p. 89). Thus, one possible interpretation of the script change is as part of the 'dialectic process' in which 'policies can be formed and reformed by challenge from below as well as imposition from above' (Bell and Stephenson, 2006, p. 20). Thus, 'standardisation' could be a pragmatic 'bottom-up' exercise of power by CEOs and Trust Boards to meet the challenge of being efficient and accountable for all schools in their Trust. This assertion is supported by David Carter's comment that Trusts had become more aware of what 'the chief accounting officer' being 'accountable for the performance of all schools' actually meant (Dickens, 2018b). Granting 'freedom' to individual schools within a MAT puts the CEO and Trust Board in a difficult position when it comes to holding these schools to account. To safeguard their own positions, it is easier to impose a standardised approach against which each school can be judged. There is also a strong motivation for RSCs to drive standardisation since it strengthens their own accountability processes. It forces MATs to avoid the pitfalls of

the failed MATs that Michael Phillips described as having run, '*a group of stand-alone academies, who saw no benefit of being in a MAT*'.

However, is there an alternative source for this change in script? Is it actually an exercise of power 'from above' without being enshrined in an official change of policy through legislation? Is the school system being 'nudged', rather than legislated, towards what is still the government's preferred position of a more financially efficient system, where every school is an academy in a MAT with pooled budgets? If so, the change in rhetoric is being introduced, not by legislation, but by more subtle means. Standardised practice in MATs is not 'official' government policy, although it is interesting to note the exact wording of the abortive White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere'* (my underlining):

> We believe in <u>supported autonomy: aligning funding, control, responsibility and accountability in one place,</u> as close to the front line as possible, and ensuring that institutions collaborate and access the support they need to set them up for success…<u>autonomy will be both earned and lost</u>, with our most successful leaders exerting their influence, and weaker ones doing the opposite (DfE, 2016, p. 4).

This suggests a change in rhetoric, moving away from a mantra of 'freedom and autonomy' for all headteachers, to an approach in which the MAT itself is perceived as 'the front line' and the locus of freedom and accountability. Rather than emphasis on 'competition' there is stress on collaboration between schools in a MAT. Despite the White Paper being withdrawn before legal changes were introduced, two CEOs (Jane Green and Stephen Dawson) both expressed a belief that there was a regional and national drive for all MATs, not only to adopt standardised approaches but also to pool budgets. Jane Green thought '*the political hype has changed and it's not*

autonomy and freedom; its alignment and standardisation … I don't know where it comes from – an implicit assumption from somewhere that the more standardised things are, the better things are…'. Stephen Dawson was of the same opinion. The '*implicit assumption'* identified by Jane Green appears to have its roots in the 2016 White Paper. This has not happened through the exercise of the 'top down' power of legislation, but it is possible that the aborted White Paper of 2016 has acted as 'a nudge', a form of 'soft power' through influence (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009). An example of this is a letter from Lord Agnew (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the School System) to Trust Boards, describing pooled funding as 'one of the greatest freedoms a MAT has' (Parliament. House of Lords, 2018). Moreover, in the Trust I am personally associated with, it has become clear that when assessing requests for money to deal with urgent property issues, the funding agency for academies (Education and Skills Funding Agency, ESFA) takes account of <u>all</u> the reserves held by the Trust, regardless of whether this money is held centrally or by individual schools. Thus, there is an expectation that MATs will pool budgets. In my experience, there have been other examples of the government employing 'soft' power before legislation has been passed, such as the attempt to coerce failing schools to join a MAT. Legal challenge by some schools led to this eventually becoming enshrined in law.

Irrespective of who is responsible for the script revision that is driving standardisation and pooled budgets, there is a case to be made that this change in rhetoric is pragmatic, rather than ideological, and indeed, that it is at odds with a market ideology emphasis on freedom and autonomy. Half of the 'actors' I interviewed, including some school leaders, MAT CEOs and politicians, expressed a view that

some MATs had become like local authorities with bureaucratic infrastructures, centralised procedures and pooled budgets. Whilst some MATs had not gone as far as pooled budgets, all had curtailed the freedom and autonomy of individual schools to some extent. As set out in Chapter 7, after Keith Grey had described the structure of his MAT, I felt impelled to ask him if he had just described a 'local authority pre-LMS' and his reply was, '*could well be*'. Adonis had himself warned against the possibility of academy chains becoming 'resented local authorities in a new guise' (Adonis, 2012, p. 207). Hence an argument can be made that, at least in some MATs, the freedom and autonomy granted to schools through LMS in 1988, has in effect been removed with the advent of pooled budgets. The analysis of documents and literature review undertaken by West and Wolfe (2019) also led them to conclude that schools in MATs had less freedom and flexibility than they had enjoyed as maintained schools. Notably, this was without West and Wolfe taking pooled budgets into account. Adonis had predicted that there might come a time when a school might resent paying the top slice to the Academy Chain and he argued that successful schools should have the right to leave a chain and 'either become a free-standing academy subject to its own governance or to join another' (Adonis 2012, p. 207). There is no indication of this direction of travel by central government. My own research indicates that individual schools in academies have ceded their autonomy. Moreover, the 'journey' travelled by 'freedom', as set out in the conclusion to Chapter 7, points almost to a 'return journey' to the position pre-LMS, when local authorities managed budgets on behalf of schools. The only difference is that LAs have been replaced by Trust Boards and therefore outside local democracy. Ironically, the impact of the 'market-model' appears to have been a

return, almost to where it started in 1988, a position where MATs have a 'quasi' monopoly over decision making as opposed to a local authority.

8.4.7 <u>Conclusion</u> to Research Question 3. What have been some of the impacts of the 'market model' on the school system

Chapter 2 set out the rationale for constructing the school system in line with a 'market model' and the impact this was expected to have:

- Pressure from parents would force providers (schools) to compete for 'market-share'.

- 'Competition' would drive improvement as schools strived to move up the League Table in order to attract parents and increase their income.

- Improvement would be achieved by freeing headteachers to take effective decisions at the front line, unhindered by bureaucracy and control.

From my research data, 'actors' who could recall changes introduced by the *Education Reform Act*, remembered them warmly, relishing the freedom they had been given through initiatives such as Local Management of Schools (LMS). However, this is in contrast to how the majority of my 'actors' regarded the impact of academisation and increased accountability measures. They characterised the impact as:

- Greater inequality, particularly for disadvantaged pupils as a result of increased competition. This had, in turn, led to the breakdown of trust and sense of partnership between schools. Interestingly, neither of these impacts are at odds with what might be expected of a market model which expects providers to compete for custom, seeking opportunities to expand even if this puts other providers out of business. However, what might be seen as

acceptable or even desirable in a commercial market, was regarded by my 'actors' as detrimental to achieving the best outcomes for all children.

- The impact which 'freedom' has had on the school system is complex. On the one hand, some leaders enthusiastically embraced 'freedom <u>to</u>', creating innovative approaches to the curriculum and other aspects of school delivery, whereas others sought 'freedom <u>from</u>' oversight and became isolated. These schools have stagnated and declined as a result. The fall in standards by some schools, and the abuse of freedom by others through 'gaming the system' or in some cases, fraudulent actions, has led to a proliferation of accountability systems.

The unexpected finding in relation to Research Question 3, is the extent to which individual schools in a MAT have lost their individual freedom over many aspects of their delivery, such as curriculum design and assessment processes. In some cases, they have even lost control of their individual school budgets. Thus, the impact of the market model appears to be an erosion of freedom and MATs becoming quasi-LAs.

8.5   Research Question 4: How do educational professionals envisage the structure of education evolving in the future?

As discussed in Chapter 4, I was so struck by the recurring theme of anxiety and speculation about the future early in my data collection, I decided to add a fourth question. I found a unanimous view that the current school structure was fragmented, unsustainable and indeed, undesirable for the future. Whatever their role or seniority, all the 'actors' thought that the government did not have a blueprint for the future structure of schools. To some extent, this would be in line with market

ideology. Hayek was critical of the rigidity of those who wanted a meticulously worked-out plan instead of leaving the market to decide the future. Indeed, for Hayek, the appeal of market competition was its unpredictability (Davies, 2014, p. 29). I would argue that it is of significance that my interviews took place in Autumn 2018 when national government was almost entirely pre-occupied with Brexit. The lack of a national focus on education appeared to have fuelled the uncertainty and for some, the anxiety and 'fear' of the unknown, discussed earlier.

8.5.1 Question 4. 'A crystal ball' view of the future structure

When asked to consider what they thought would happen in the future (through a metaphorical 'crystal ball') there was a general consensus amongst 'actors' that all schools would become academies at some point in the future, because, as Michael Phillips pointed out, a '*critical mass'* had already been reached. There was divided opinion about whether stand-alone academies would be allowed to continue and whether small MATs would be merged into larger MATs. Stephen Dawson predicted that there would eventually only be fifteen to twenty MATs across the country, which would be highly standardised with little autonomy for individual schools. Even though a staunch supporter of MATs, Stephen Dawson thought that this would be a *'horrible'* position to be in. None of those I interviewed raised the prospect of the privatisation of the education system, possibly with a for-profit element, although there has been speculation about this (for example, Olssen et al, 2004; Ball, 2013; Woods and Simkins, 2014; Hill et al 2016).

8.5.2 Question 4. A 'magic wand' vision of the future structure

When offered a 'magic wand' to shape their idealised vision for the future, there was a wider disparity of views. Some 'actors' wanted '*to turn back the clock'*, albeit with some improvements to LA practices, whilst others saw this as impossible, given the cuts in funding for LAs. However, the majority of 'actors' yearned for closer partnership working between schools in local areas, whether this was facilitated by local authorities or by other bodies. They thought this would benefit local children and drive improvement. The desire for a system to facilitate local collaboration appears not to be unique to Ayeshire. It was also identified in research by: Pring and Roberts, 2016; Greany and Higham, 2018; Simkins et al, 2019. The benefit schools in a MAT gain from working together was articulated clearly by the 'actors' involved with MATs. However, unless a MAT is confined to a local area, MATs cannot provide the solution to local partnerships.

8.5.3 <u>Conclusion</u> to Research Question 4. How do educational professionals envisage the structure of education evolving in the future?

In the discussion about ethics in Chapter 4 (section 4.7.5) I referred to my sense that for some of the participants, the interview was a cathartic opportunity to reflect on their concerns and frustrations. These frustrations centred particularly on a perceived lack of '*moral purpose'* at a national level. After 'actors' had described an anticipated future of total academisation (possibly with schools grouped in very large MATs), there was frequently a tangible change of mood in the interview. Some interviewees actually commented on this: '*I feel as though my mood has gone down'*; '*not a very happy note to end on'*; '*it's just all rather depressing frankly'*. It was for this reason I stretched my question to offer participants a metaphorical 'magic wand' to describe what they would like to see in the future. This did not necessarily lift the mood for those who wanted a return to the past which they knew could not happen, but for

many it was an opportunity for them to express their deep desire for partnership and local ownership of children. Recent events during the pandemic have reinforced the importance of this. This will be discussed further in the Epilogue (Section 8.7).

8.6   Final thoughts

My research has sought to explore how the ideology of the market has been applied to the structure of the school system in one particular Shire County. My professional career has been played out against the backcloth of this policy development. I argue that the three policy technologies explored in this thesis: consumer choice, competition and freedom, have become the 'regime of truth' within which I, and other colleagues have operated, although not always wholeheartedly. This research has given me an opportunity for personal reflection, but more importantly it has enabled me to engage in deep conversation with some of those I have shared this journey with. Together, we have been 'actors' in the 'drama' played on this particular 'stage'. In 'market' terms, the 'actors' involved in my research are drawn mainly from 'providers' and 'commissioners' but there is an ensemble of other 'actors': teachers, teaching assistants, parents, children and others, whose voices could be included in further research. Given the frequent references to the unique nature of Ayeshire, it could be argued that the interpretation and implementation of policies might well have been different, had the drama been played out on the 'stage' of another local authority. However, as referenced throughout, many of my findings resonate with research in other local authorities which suggests that 'actors' on 'stages' elsewhere have responded in similar ways to those in Ayeshire.

It is interesting to reflect on the timing of my research. 'Standardisation' and the pooling of school budgets were just beginning to emerge as practices at the time of my data collection in 2018. My research contributes an early analysis of these important developments. Moreover, the completion of my thesis in the middle of a coronavirus pandemic, presents a very early opportunity to reflect on what can be learnt from recent events about the operation of 'market ideology' at a time of crisis (see section 8.7).

A key element of the contribution my own research makes to existing knowledge in this field has arisen from the methodology I have adopted. Firstly, my deconstruction of education policies into their component parts, through the lens of consumer choice, competition and freedom, has given insight into how these 'policy technologies' were intended to shape the education system. This provided a clear basis on which to examine the impact of 'market ideology' on the structure of the school system. Secondly, I have based this analysis on the testimony of 'actors' who are, or have been, 'on the stage' of one particular local authority (Ayeshire), some throughout the entire thirty-year period under study. I have also brought my own testimony as an 'actor' on the same 'stage' for twenty of those years. This is in contrast to most recent studies, which have focused on single aspects of the school structure in two or more research sites, in a restricted 'snap-shot' of time (see Appendix 2). My exploration of the evolution of the school system through the voices of those involved (including my own), has revealed the motivations, pressures and beliefs that have influenced the way education policy has been interpreted. I have thereby been able to demonstrate the way decisions taken by school leaders at one point in time (for example to convert as GM schools) can influence decisions taken

by others at a later date. My research has revealed that as 'actors' we have not been constrained by the core 'script' of government policies. Our personal interpretations, motivations, values and beliefs have shaped our actions. There is little evidence that these actions have been driven by 'ideology'. My findings demonstrate an absolute commitment to achieving the best outcomes for children and frustration at a school system which does not support this. An ideology designed for the world of commerce and economics has proved to be flawed when applied to the school system. The notion of inequality that is tolerated, and indeed encouraged, by market ideology is at odds with what 'actors' see as being the purpose of a state education system: to achieve the best outcomes for all children. I found a unanimous view that 'consumer choice' has benefitted 'middle class' parents, often to the detriment of disadvantaged families whose children are forced to attend less successful schools, or even 'failing' schools, which according to 'market principles' should close, but remain open for political reasons. 'Competition' has driven some school leaders to take fear-induced defensive actions, leading to an increase in exclusions and 'off-rolling'. Competition has also broken partnership and trust between schools and weakened, or in some cases, destroyed the sense of shared ownership of children in a local area. 'Freedom' has not always brought innovation and sound decision making. It has encouraged isolation and 'gaming' the system, resulting in increasing layers of accountability and ultimately the erosion of freedom itself.

One of my key findings is that the accepted 'truth' behind the notion of 'freedom', that is that individual headteachers are best placed to take decisions at a local level, free from bureaucracy, is currently undergoing radical reassessment. I identified a clear impetus for standardisation and pooled funding in MATs, although it is impossible to

determine definitively whether this reassessment of 'freedom' is being driven by central government or by 'actors' on the ground. Whatever the source, there is an inescapable irony that the market-model, from which the Multi-academy trust system emerged, is ultimately leading to the erosion of the central element of market ideology; 'freedom'. History appears to have almost gone full circle. Pre-1988, Local Education Authorities exercised control over schools, including financial control. In 2020, the direction of travel appears to be towards Trust Boards exercising control, including financial control, over individual schools in a Multi-academy trust. However, the circle is not quite complete; MATs can only be 'quasi LAs' because they lack a democratic mandate.

My research has led me to conclude that the plotline of the 'drama' I have been studying, was flawed from its inception. Market ideology was never going to be able to shape a school system capable of achieving the best outcomes for <u>all</u> children: the fundamental purpose of the state school system. The 'actors' have done their best to interpret and modify the 'script' but the deep roots of market ideology, with its acceptance of inequality, veneration of self-interest and above all, its devotion to 'competition', have made their task impossible.

If this was indeed a 'drama' played out on a 'stage' the writers could start again from a blank sheet. In 'real-life' re-writing the plot would need as radical a shift in policy as that embodied in the *Education Reform Act of 1988.* Since, realistically, this is unlikely to happen in the near future, how would I answer the question I posed to the other actors? What would I do if I had my own personal 'magic wand'? My own priority would be to eradicate 'competition'. My research data indicates that it is this

particular facet of market ideology that has had the most detrimental impact. The lack of trust, breakdown in partnerships, reluctance to take on vulnerable children, decisions driven by fear, all eloquently described by my 'actors', have been driven by competition. 'Competition' is so deeply rooted in the education system that its removal, in the absence of a 'magic wand', will be difficult to achieve. However, it would at least be possible to have a change of focus, from judging the performance of individual schools, to considering the outcomes of all children in a local area. This would liberate schools to work together in a spirit of partnership and trust. The current haphazard structure of the school system has been shaped purely by market forces. This has contributed to the sense of fear and uncertainty about the future described in the research data. Over time it may be possible to rationalise the structure to create more locally based MATs, but this will require the government to create a new vision, based on the needs of children rather than the random operation of the market. In the absence of local MAT structures, a new focus on schools working together requires a new model of local leadership to fill the void left by the erosion of the role of the local authority. The stark reality of the need for local leadership is illustrated below.

8.7   The Epilogue

The concluding stage of my research has taken place at a very significant point in history, namely the global coronavirus pandemic. This is an opportunity to reflect on how well 'market ideology' has been able to withstand the challenge of a crisis on this scale and, in particular, how well the school system is withstanding the pressures. The pandemic tests the principles on which market ideology is based and

challenges a school structure shaped by market forces. In this section I will consider what has been learnt so far and assess what the long-term impact could be.

Political commentators have speculated about the long-term political impact of the unprecedented decisions taken by central government. Writing in *The Times*, the political columnist, Rachel Sylvester commented that, 'traditional assumptions are being upended, ideologies challenged … A Tory party, which has always been in favour of a smaller state, is embarking on the greatest peacetime expansion of government the country has ever known …' (Sylvester, 2020). Hayek believed that 'the market' should be left to deal with events without intervention. However, this approach has proved to be untenable in the face of a crisis on the scale of a pandemic. It has required the state to act as a safety net, even going as far as paying people's wages. In a 'Comment' piece for *The Sunday Times*, the journalist Rod Liddle asserts:

> The free market has no answer to Covid, other than let the vulnerable die. It has no answer to endemic poverty either… the notion of society, the communitarian ethos and good that a government can do are what are important in a time of crisis' (Liddle, 2020).

This is particularly the case for vulnerable children. The impact of the pandemic on all children has been profound, with the majority unable to attend school for four months and continuing disruption for many, even when schools reopened in September. There is widespread concern about the impact of this on children's social and mental well-being, as well as learning (Ofsted, 2020b). This impact has been felt even more acutely by children from disadvantaged families who have not had the physical and mental resource to support home learning. In an attempt to mitigate some harm, the government instructed schools to remain open during the

first 'lock down' for children who were deemed 'vulnerable', alongside the children of key workers. Lobbying by the footballer Marcus Rashford, forced the government into providing free school meals during the summer holidays, despite criticism from some politicians who wanted to adhere to free-market principles. The Conservative M.P, Ben Bradley, tweeted

A school structure that depends on leadership from MATs, many spread across the country, or on Regional School Commissioners whose jurisdiction crosses multiple local authority boundaries, is not designed to support schools in a specific locality or respond to a crisis. The pandemic has required local leadership to manage provision for vulnerable children, support schools with safety measures, equip them with personal protective equipment, facilitate the re-opening of schools to all pupils in September 2020 and provide ongoing information and support as the pandemic continues. Despite many years of government rhetoric about the need to free schools from the bureaucracy of local government, at a time of crisis, central government has called upon local authorities provide this local leadership. Recent conversations with two LA officers from my interview sample, have highlighted the way in which the LA has been the first point of contact for the DfE through daily video conferencing. The expectation is that the LA will liaise with all schools, irrespective of their status, and collate data to pass on to the DfE. Communication between the LA and schools has been channelled through the Headteacher Associations rather than the MAT structure.

It remains to be seen whether the pandemic causes central government to reassess whether the current school system can meet the unprecedented challenges left in its wake. The achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children is set to widen. Greater support will be needed for rising numbers of vulnerable children living in poverty. Financial pressure may well bring renewed pressure from the Treasury to legislate for all schools to become academies in MATs. It is possible to argue that MATs, particularly large MATs, may be better placed to create innovative on-line learning systems and catch-up programmes to benefit all their pupils. The move to 'self-improving' schools and drastic reduction in LA capacity has left individual non-academy schools or stand-alone academies to create or purchase their own programmes. However, haphazard MATs scattered over wide geographical locations cannot provide local ownership of children. The *Every Child Matters* model (H.M. Treasury, 1983) of a co-ordinated approach linking all local services for children together, is more likely to be effective. The London Challenge referred to earlier, also demonstrated the effectiveness of local authorities and schools working together. Now, more than ever, an effective mechanism needs to be put in place to facilitate the local collaboration which most of the 'actors' I interviewed yearned for.

There is a conundrum to be solved. The school system needs to ensure the best possible outcomes for all children, including the most vulnerable. The application of the 'market-model' to the state school system is fundamentally flawed. Competition and freedom have not brought the outcomes heralded in Chapter 2. When Brexit and the Pandemic are finally over, perhaps there will be a new vision for a school system which supports all pupils to achieve the best possible outcomes.

Undoubtedly, the drama is 'to be continued …'

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Appendix One: Actors' Roles

	HT Prim	HT Sec	HMI/ Ofsted	RSC office	LA Officer	Local Politics	National Politics	National Role	Governor	Non Academy	Convertor Academy	MAT CEO/ Director	Small MAT	Large MAT
Daniel West		x								x				
Paul Fellows		x								x	x			
William Benson		x						x		x				
Stephen Dawson		x										x		x
Rebecca Jones		x								x	x	x	x	
Simon White	x			x				x		x	x	x	x	
Jane Green	x		x					x	x	x		x		x
Keith Grey	x			x	x			x	x	x	x	x		x
Linda Grant								x	x	x	x			
Catherine Taylor		x								x	x	x		x
Richard Johnson		x			x			x	x	x	x		x	
Fiona Evans			x		x									
James Williams					x									

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Name															
Paul Black				x			x								
Julie Smith	x	x					x		x						
Susan Briggs					x				x	x	x				x
Peter Dixon					x	x	x	x	x						
John Baker					x	x	x	x	x						
Michael Phillips	x		x				x		x	x	x				x
Ruth Thomas			x	x			x								

Appendix Two: Overview of recent empirical research

Researcher(s)	Date of research fieldwork	Location	Methodology	Purpose	Main Finding
M Salokangas C Chapman	2011/2012	3 Secondaries in 2 National Academy Chains (of 15 -20 academies each)	Comparative case study: semi structured interviews with 37 members of staff and documentary evidence	To examine governance arrangements in two chains of English Academy Schools	Level of autonomy for individual academies varies significantly both between as well as within chains
R Higham Peter Earley	2012	National Initial random sample of 3,692 primary and secondaries.	Survey of school leaders leading to 8 case studies: semi structured interviews in person and by telephone. 3 focus groups	How school leaders view contemporary policy change and how they plan to respond to it.	Key implication that increasing operational power for schools, changing external support and differentiated autonomy have the potential to intensify local hierarchies between schools
J Coldron M Crawford S Jones T Simkins	2011/2012	3 LAs: Large metropolitan Large rural Smaller, town centred	Interviews with 15 headteachers of 'well positioned' schools	How and why heads responded to the changing policy environment	Many heads felt impelled to make various associations with other schools. Some individuals were becoming more powerful in their competitive arena
P Smith I Abbott	2011/12	2 LAs in Midlands and their secondary schools	Semi structured interviews with 10 HTs, 10 CoGs, 2 TU reps, 4 LA officers/councillors	To consider contrasting responses of the 2 case-study LAs to the national policy agenda	In LA1: dominant discourse of competition but LA2 it was collaboration. These predispose LAs to act in different ways

T Simkins	2011-2013	3 LAs: Lg. metropolitan Lg. rural town	26 semi structured interviews with senior post holders in LAs and schools Analysis of data on changing status of schools	To consider the ways in which government policy in England is causing local school landscapes to be reconfigured	Central question of how key actors and organisations exercise power and influence. Balance between individualistic and competitive approaches and those based on concepts of public value
T Simkins J Coldron M Crawford B Maxwell	May 2015 – July 2016	3 LAs: Lg. metropolitan Lg. rural town	Semi structured interviews with 10 primary HTs and analysis of relevant documentation	To understand the phenomenon of primary reluctance to accept academisation	Primaries HTs are keen for local partnerships and have professional concern for all children in the area. There is the potential for a new Middle Tier based on partnership rather than hierarchy.
T Greany R Higham	2014 -2017	4 localities	47 school case studies, survey of c700 school leaders Statistical analysis of 10 years of Ofsted data	To ask whether the English education system is self - improving, and analyse those elements that facilitate and impede this intention	Hierarchical governance (Ofsted and wider accountability framework) is more influential than market or network co-ordination in England Middle Tier must play mediating role, but must have democratic mandate
C Simon C James A Simon	October 2016 – May 2018	National 11 MATs	Analysis of national patterns of sponsoring MATs Interviews with 11 MAT CEOs	To analyse the growth of MATs, their emergent structure and attendant issues of sponsorship of underperforming schools	MAT structure becoming new unit of analysis in the school system as opposed to individual school Development of a state school system tightly managed by RSCs, dependent on CEOs to make a difference to underperformance
H. Ryan-Atkin	2018	4 MATs, mainly primary phase	Interviews with CEOs, school leaders, staff, governors, trustees, members, parents	In new alliances, how do MATs and their schools negotiate accountability, governance and agency	Amount of agency depends on whether a school is good or failing. Possible to have 'earned autonomy' Some think it is worth losing some autonomy

				What are the implications for school leaders for autonomy and identity?	
R Riddell	2017	2 contrasting LAs – large rural Shire Compact urban	Semi structured interviews with senior local politicians (Lab, Con, Lib Dem), senior LA officers, HTs, CEOs of MATs, RSC, Promoter of free schools, former senior civil servant	To explore arrangements for local democratic oversight	Re-emergence of LAs in the local governance arrangement for schools and diminished role for RSC. Traditional autonomy of the HT or senior leaders in state schools may be becoming rarer.

Appendix Three: Interview Letter

Dear

As you are aware, I am currently undertaking a PhD at the University of Gloucestershire. My research is looking at how and why the model of "the market" with its emphasis on competition, choice and freedom, has been applied to the school system, particularly through academisation, and whether the outcomes have been as expected.

I am interviewing a range of education professionals who have played different roles in the unfolding implementation of academisation in xx. These include headteachers and principals, governors, Multi-academy trust CEOs and Board Members, DfE officials, Ofsted inspectors, local authority officers and local and national politicians.

I am particularly pleased that you are willing to take part in my research. Your viewpoint, not only as a former Academy Chair of Governors, but also as someone with wider involvement in education locally and nationally, will be very valuable to my research.

I hope that the following information will be helpful to you:

- The interview will last for about an hour. I have attached the questions which I propose to ask - these are designed more as prompts to a conversation than a set of precise questions. If there are any questions you feel unable or unwilling to answer that will be fine.
- I would like to record the interview as well as taking a few written notes, as long as you are happy with this. I will check with you before we start the interview.
- If the interview is recorded, I will send you a transcript for you to agree or amend.
- Interview data will be treated confidentially and stored securely.
- All references to your interview data will be anonymised by generalising your role, changing any identifying features and using pseudonyms.
- You have the right to withdraw from the research at any time up until the point when I complete my thesis, which I anticipate being in October 2020.
- If you are interested, I will share the completed thesis with you. It will also be publicly available through the University Library.

Before the interview there will be an opportunity for you to raise any points about the information above and confirm whether you are happy for me to record the interview. I will need to have a record of your informed consent so I will prepare a sheet for you to sign when we meet.

Thank you once again for agreeing to take part in my research. I look forward to meeting you at 9.45 a.m. on Monday, 30 July at my house.

Yours sincerely

Appendix Four: Interview Questions/Prompts

1. Please can I start by asking you to reflect back to the time when Michael Gove became Secretary of State and extended "academisation" to include successful schools being able to convert to stand-alone academies. What were your personal views about academisation at that time?

2. Why did your school decide to convert, what did you hope to achieve?

3. What difference do you think that academy status has made for your school – particularly in terms of freedom/autonomy?

4. I am interested in why you think that, unlike in many other parts of the country, very few of your colleague secondary heads have chosen to set up their own MATs?

5. What do you think has motivated the few secondaries who have set up their own MATs?

6. Thinking of the local area and more widely at the county as a whole – what impact do you think academisation has had?

7. What do you think might happen to the structure of schools in the future?

Appendix Five: Consent Form

I understand that this research is being undertaken as part of a PhD at the University of Gloucestershire and that the data collected will contribute to a Doctoral Thesis.

I confirm that I have read the letter which outlines the purpose of the research and the way in which the interview will be conducted. I have also had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions.

- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, up until the time that the thesis is completed, which is anticipated to be in October 2020.

- I have been informed that the interview will be recorded and I have given my consent for this recording to be made.

- I understand that I will be sent a transcript of the interview which I can amend if I wish.

- I understand that all information I provide will be treated as confidential and will be anonymised.

- I agree to the use of anonymised direct quotes from my interview in publications arising from this study

I confirm that I agree to take part in this research.

Name of Participant:

Signature: Date:

Researcher:

Signature: Date: