



LONDON REVIEW OF EDUCATION

e-ISSN: 1474-8479

Journal homepage:

<https://www.uclpress.co.uk/pages/london-review-of-education>

---

## Resistance, professional agency and the reform of education in England

Stephen M. Rayner and Helen M. Gunter

### How to cite this article

Rayner, S.M. and Gunter, H.M. (2020) 'Resistance, professional agency and the reform of education in England'. *London Review of Education*, 18 (2): 265–280. <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.18.2.09>

Submission date: 6 June 2019

Acceptance date: 2 September 2019

Publication date: 21 July 2020

### Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymized during review.

### Copyright

© 2020 Rayner and Gunter. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

### Open access

*London Review of Education* is a peer-reviewed Open Access journal.

---

# Resistance, professional agency and the reform of education in England

Stephen M. Rayner\* and Helen M. Gunter – *University of Manchester, UK*

## Abstract

Much research into structural reform in education has reported on the success or failure of individual projects. Less attention has been paid to how the discourses associated with reform are normalized in teachers' and head teachers' thinking, and realized in their actions. In this article, we engage with resistance at the interface of legal policy positioning and position-taking by educational professionals. Drawing on empirical data from an ethnographic study of structural change in a school in England, we deploy the metaphor of 'the Borg' to develop new insights into the different stances that educational professionals can take to avoid assimilation into a hive mind.

**Keywords:** academies, cultural studies, education policy, resistance, school leadership, structural reform

## Introduction

Understanding that educational professionals are policy actors in the scope, design and enactment of policy is crucial in debates in the field of education policy. Researchers have focused on the tension between the structuring determination of state legality, using performance and contractual processes to secure conformity to reform requirements, and the agentic ideas, experiences and actions of professionals in both how reforms are interpreted and enacted, and how localized policymaking can take place independently of state interventions. We revive, re-enter and re-engage with the debate instigated 25 years ago (Ball, 1994; Hatcher and Troyna, 1994) by examining the interplay between the legal *positioning* of educational professionals through reform legalities and imperatives to deliver the required changes, and the *position-taking* by educational professionals through how their agency is exercised on a scale from enactment to resistance. We locate this analysis within the reforms to the supply of school places in England, or what we term the Academization Policy Complex (APC). We use the term APC to encompass a range of policy initiatives, introduced by successive UK governments in England since 1980. The common aim of those policies has been to restructure and re-culture the school system in England by transferring the ownership and governance of publicly funded schools to non-public bodies. Academy schools (hereafter, academies), governed through multi-academy trusts (MATs), are the most significant example. Where research has positioned educational professionals as reform deliverers, it has generated post hoc success stories authored by policy actors who have instigated and/or benefited from the APC (see, for example, Astle and Ryan, 2008; Macaulay, 2008; Pike, 2010). Our interest, however, is in the dynamic realities of how educational professionals display 'patterns of compliance and subversion' (MacBeath, 2008: 123) through how they not only do their 'day job'

but also engage with reforms that may present opportunities or threats to values and careers. Our contribution to the study of teacher professionals is to present data from the first year-long ethnographic study of academization in one school: the St Clement's project (Rayner, 2017). We read our data through a novel typology of the interplay between legalized position-making and localized position-taking regarding resistance, informed by deploying the metaphor of 'the Borg'. In doing so, we draw inspiration from previous examples of cultural studies illuminating thinking about educational change (Gunter, 1997; Gunter and Thomson, 2009, 2010) and of organizational studies reflecting on leadership discourses and practices (Kavanagh *et al.*, 2001; Bowring, 2004). The St Clement's project illuminates what it means for educational professionals, as policy actors, to be located at the interface of position-making and position-taking. By examining the options and policy processes afforded by the APC in a real-time context, we propose that resistance is not necessarily futile.

### **The St Clement's project: A case of resistance?**

St Clement's (pseudonym) is a mixed-comprehensive secondary school in England. Between April 2014 and September 2015, it was the site of an ethnographic study, which focused on the decision-making processes associated with the school governors' plans to change its legal status, so that it would no longer be maintained by its local authority, but would be an academy, which is an independent school funded by central government (Rayner, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Rayner *et al.*, 2018). The data generated during this project consisted of 37 in-depth interviews with key policy actors involved with the school, including governors, the head teacher and senior staff, teachers and support staff members, and the Diocesan Director of Education, as this is a Church of England school; scrutiny of 17 primary documents; and observation of four key meetings both within and external to the school. The data were analysed to support a longitudinal study of a process of structural change, beginning with a decision to develop a proposal for academy conversion and ending with a decision not to become an academy but to become voluntary-aided, thereby maintaining close links with both the local authority and the Church.

St Clement's is significant because data were collected in real time during the decision-making processes. Educational professionals were positioned by the APC to convert to an academy, but took a position based on individual and shared agency not to pursue academy status. This is the first case of local policy actors deciding not to become an academy to be reported through primary research. This is worthy of conveying and theorizing through re-engaging with and contributing to ongoing debates in education policy research regarding the interplay of legality with professional practices.

Reforms in England, particularly since the 1988 Education Reform Act, have created three main trends designed to secure the school as an autonomous provider of school places in a competitive market. In each case, they have been supported by legal requirements and guidance that can be interpreted as legalistic. Those trends are: (1) the introduction of corporate practices within schools that remain in local democratic control, known as local management of schools; (2) schools being allowed to opt out of local democratic control, known as grant-maintained status; (3) the introduction of state-independent schools outside local democratic control, first as city (technology) colleges, and later as academies, studio schools, free schools and university technical colleges (Courtney, 2015). We focus here on academy conversion, where from 2000 a school categorized as 'failing' could be closed and converted to an academy, and

from 2010 'successful' schools could decide to become academies (see Gunter and McGinity, 2014). It is in the context of these systemic changes that we are interested in reading our data.

Researchers have identified that educational professionals are *positioned* to implement legal requirements and have been provided with controlled agency in how opportunities have been framed and interpreted. Hatcher and Troyna (1994: 162) identify a totalizing of state power, whereby educational professionals are licensed, employed and ultimately controlled by public institutions, with an emphasis on 'the ability of the state to control outcomes'. The state is not neutral, but is a site of elite class power, where governments:

were prepared to overturn the entire post-war settlement in order to construct a new hegemony, in conformity with what they saw as the *general and strategic* needs of capital, in terms of accumulation, contextual reproduction and legitimization. (ibid.: 160, original emphasis)

The legal apparatus and legalistic normative claims are located in the APC logics and are visible in policy texts (DfEE, 2000; DfES, 2004, 2005; DfE, 2010), where claims are made and interpretations controlled that academization will: (1) raise standards by promoting competition; (2) improve efficiency by adopting practices from business; (3) remove schools from the control of local authorities, which are regarded as bureaucratic and incompetent; (4) tackle inequalities in the name of social justice. Accounts by policy- delivery actors can show the challenges of change but do not question the changes (for example, Daniels, 2011; Leo *et al.*, 2010). The corporatization of educational services means that chief executives and branded products require compliance combined with building business dispositions (for example, Courtney and Gunter, 2015; Gunter and Mills, 2017; Courtney, 2017; Hughes, 2019). Events and discourses suggest that there is no alternative; new identities such as leadership are framed as liberating, but also rooted in a commitment to children, and alternative sites of professional agency in local authorities, trade unions, and research hubs have been marginalized (Gunter, 2018).

The implications of positioning are that oppositional resistance in the form of non-compliant forms of refusal is not an option, because an educational professional would face dismissal or even legal action, and the combination of normative enthusiasm (why would you say no?), combined with cultures of compliance, means that there are 'institutional constraints and larger social formations that bear down on forms of resistance waged by educators, teachers, students and others' (Giroux, 2003: 8). The only options are to not enter the profession, to seek promotion (see Butt and Gunter, 2007), to leave (see, for example, Gunter, 2005; Yarker, 2005), or to join/lead campaigns (see, for example, Hatcher and Jones, 2006; Hatcher, 2009, 2011). Our data from St Clement's show that no member of staff resigned or was dismissed because of public opposition to the possibility of conversion to academy status, or the outcome of adopting voluntary-aided status.

Some research into educational professionals as coerced policy deliverers focuses not on the totalizing nature of the state, but on *position-taking* by educational professionals. Ball (1994: 177) argues that the state-positioning argument characterizes teachers as 'cultural and political dupes', where 'everything is reduced to submission, the juggernaut of the state crushes the bodies and minds of everything in its path'. In a range of project reports and theorization, Ball (for example, 1987, 1990) and colleagues (for example, Ball *et al.*, 2012; Bowne *et al.*, 1992) present a 'differentiated conceptualization of policy' where 'policies differ in their form and forcefulness', arguing

that 'the forcefulness of policy is always subordinate to the interpretational responses of situated actors' (Ball, 1994: 180). Such position-taking is premised on recognition of professional values and knowledge, where judgement can be exercised in precarious but seemingly controllable contexts: 'where reality is being continually transformed and power enacted in the interests of developing new democratic identities, relations, institutional forms, and modes of struggle' (Giroux, 2003: 9).

The implications of position-taking are deeply rooted in education-policy research (for example, Hargreaves, 1982; Giroux, 2001), where we note that research (for example, Grace, 1995) and professional biographies (for example, Winkley, 2002) show that, while professionals may be allocated reform-delivery places within policy structures and logics, there is evidence of agency in taking up a range of discretionary positions in regard to immediate and longer-term change. What this suggests is that resistance is not just a one-off 'event', such as resigning from a job or delivering a petition to the government, but is concerned with 'turns of events' as an ongoing process where there is a range of happenings, information and arguments. Such an approach generates theorizing that interconnects local practices with 'bigger-picture' analyses of the state (Ozga, 1990: 360). We therefore locate St Clement's at the interface of state position-making as delivery and position-taking through exercising agency, where we propose four main position-taking stances: to *get with the times*, to *get on with it*, to *get away with it* or to *get out of it*.

Our first stance is to identify the opportunities to believe in, subscribe to and enthusiastically *get with the times*. In England, the educational initiatives introduced by successive Labour governments (1997–2010) have been claimed to have won over the teaching profession by improving teachers' pay and status (see, for example, Furlong, 2005, 2008) and by proactively assimilating selected professionals as role models and advisers, using a combination of investment and training to legitimize reforms for the wider profession (Gunter, 2012). Thomson (2008: 87) refers to this as 'corruption – the person has either been chosen to be, or has developed views and values congruent with, policy directions'. Since 2010, the policy direction of the UK Coalition (2010–15) and Conservative (2015 onwards) governments has been impervious to research evidence that challenges deeply rooted policy agendas (not only on academies: see, for example, Gorard, 2018 on grammar schools), and has focused less on the status of professionals than on driving structural change, specifically in order to move publicly funded schools from public to private control (Gunter, 2018). Research shows how some educational professionals have welcomed the move to entrepreneurialism and corporate models of governance, whether because they envisage improved opportunities for children and young people, or for reasons of personal advantage in terms of increased pay and status (see McGinity and Gunter, 2017; Hughes, 2019).

In that changing context, there may be a fatalistic tendency for professionals simply to *get on with it*, even if they do not agree with 'it' (see Gunter *et al.*, 2005). This second stance is based on an acceptance that this is how things are: local democratic governance and school organization are a thing of the past; the teaching profession has been structured – through performance management, audit, inspection and published accountability measures – in such ways that 'professionals become subjected to a process that denies their agency' (Ranson, 2003: 460). There is a sense of powerlessness, where teachers have been 'harnessed to state policy' (Hall and Gunter, 2009: 768) and where 'withholding enthusiasm' (Anyon, 1981: 11) is treated as a manifestation of resistance, and compliance may be misrecognized (see, for example, Furlong, 2008) as evidence that reforms are welcomed. In the political context since 2010, to resist policy may invoke harsh consequences, such as loss of status, job security and earnings.

Our third stance recognizes that the course chosen by educational professionals who remain in post may be to *get away with it*, denoting a form of non-compliance and 'simulating consent' (Thomson, 2008: 89), where actors use policy to achieve ends other than those that were envisaged by the architects of that policy. Policy actors in government complain publicly when they believe that their policy intentions are frustrated by what goes on in schools (for example, Barber, 2008), but there is increasing evidence that the capacity to create and sustain spaces for teachers to think and do otherwise are shrinking (Gunter, 2012). Opportunities to *get away with it* may be limited by the restructuring of education provision, where power and influence are being relocated to elite corporate roles. Nevertheless, in England, the government's arrogation of the oversight of all academies, which are now attended by around 70 per cent of secondary-age students and 30 per cent of primary-age pupils (Roberts and Danechi, 2019: 9), means that there are gaps in policy implementation, strategy and scrutiny for exploitation (see Courtney, 2017; Gunter *et al.*, 2017).

Our final stance is to *get out of it*: to leave by resigning, accepting redundancy or retiring. Teachers who decide to do so risk loss of identity, as well as earnings and security. Nevertheless, there is extensive evidence of the numbers of teachers who leave the profession, and of the recruitment challenges associated with their departure (for example, NAO, 2017; NFER, 2017). This may be as a result of the demands of a performativity culture (Ball, 2003) or part of a broader unease about the identity of teachers in an age when public services are configured around the market culture (Giroux, 2003).

The dynamics of recognizing and capturing such stances in position-taking requires ethnographic work over time, so that the realities of what it means to work as a professional in a school whose legal status is open to change or even closure can be charted and examined. The St Clement's project has generated examples of coercive optimism in *get with the times*, fatalism in *get on with it*, cautious subversion in *getting away with it* and the disposability of teachers in *getting out of it*. This has produced additional questions about the strategizing underpinning stances in regard to criticality and the risks of opposition within professional practices, and so we intend thinking about our data through the cultural trope of the Borg from *Star Trek*, where we consider the possibilities of resistance: is it futile, or are there possibilities for thinking and doing otherwise? It is to this that we now turn.

In considering the futility or otherwise of position-taking stances as forms of resistance, we deploy in our analysis the metaphor of the Borg, which features in several *Star Trek* movies, but most prominently in *Star Trek VIII: First Contact* (1996). The series of *Star Trek* movies, released since 1979, depicts the adventures of space-travelling heroes who fight, and usually win, intergalactic battles against the forces of evil. Enjoyment of the series as harmless entertainment has resulted in its worldwide popularity, and has made the franchise highly profitable. The movies have also been recognized for their use of science fiction as political metaphor (Saadia, 2016; Somin, 2016). In that same spirit, in this article we draw on an example from the *Star Trek* series to develop a perspective on the most significant systemic change to schools in England in the past 40 years: the APC.

The Borg are a species of cybernetic beings (cyborgs). None of them has an individual identity, with the exception of the Borg Queen: they are connected by a *hive mind*. Their aim is to attain perfection by forcibly *assimilating* the knowledge and technologies of other species. In popular usage, a *hive mind* is where individuals who may not know each other come to the same thought at the same time. It is also known as *collective consciousness* or *collective intelligence*.



We use the concepts of *the Borg*, *assimilation* and the *hive mind* to explore the narratives within the APC, interplayed with the understandings and practices of the education professionals who are its objects. Our main concern is to examine the potential major legal and cultural change for St Clement's through the experiences of those who live within and through local decision making. We therefore feature additional members of our 'sample' in the form of the central characters in *Star Trek VIII: First Contact*: the Borg Queen, and what we might regard as the senior leadership team of the starship *Enterprise*: Jean-Luc Picard, its Commander; Riker, the First Officer; and Data, the Operations Officer. Using this metaphor helps us to examine whether any form of criticality or opposition is pointless, because there is no alternative to the logic of the APC.

## Position-taking at St Clement's

Our data provide evidence of two stances being taken in relation to the possible academization of St Clement's: *get with the times* and *get on with it*. The stance of getting *with the times* is less about enthusiastic dispositions than about undergoing a realistic accommodation with the current context:

That is the way forward: that's where schools are now starting to become more academies and a more business-like environment. I know they're trying to gear up students to become like the future businesspeople that we need, and more kind of industry-based lessons and an environment for students' learning. I think the overall view is that it is going to happen. (Tamsin, Teacher)

You'd be a fool not to market the school. You can't always just presume that one marketing strategy will keep the general local population wanting to come and subscribe to the school. You still have to refresh your ideas, because you just don't know what the other schools, local academy chains, are doing and are offering. (Carol, Deputy Head Teacher)

Such a reading of the situation is deeply rooted in three decades of the APC:

I remember something similar when I first started teaching, where they opted out of local authority, though that was a choice rather than ... I think that was the Tories actually ... [It's] just for a constant need to interfere in education. Because for some reason you have to keep changing everything every time you come in. But also, this idea of having private money to come in to galvanize, change emphases, be more twenty-first century. (Lesley, Head of Subject)

The stance of *get on with it* is articulated in the interests of longer-term survival:

If somebody said to me 'would you prefer to work in an academy or a local-authority school?', I would still prefer to work in a local-authority school. However, I think 'when in Rome ...' and you're in a siege mentality, which I think is where education is at the moment, I think to protect yourself, you might have to go against some of your own political feelings and motivations. I don't think local authorities will ever recover from what's been created nationally: I do think that things have gone too far for that. (Martin, Head Teacher)

Here, Martin demonstrates that the positioning by the state has been so pervasive that it has reduced the options for taking a stance through local agency. The embedded

and pervasive impact of the inspection regime in categorizing schools to be 'failing' is core to this: just as the Borg Queen states that 'You are an imperfect being, created by an imperfect being; finding your weakness is only a matter of time', so Ofsted operates to expose those weaknesses. Its significance in that respect and its subservience to policy direction are recognized by staff at St Clement's:

The current government are keen for all schools to move towards academy status. Obviously, their Ofsted judgements determine on what basis they would move. (Barbara, Support Staff Member)

I think the government having more direct control over schools, because I know obviously the schools still get 'Ofsted-ed', so they have to answer to the government of the day. (Vijay, Teacher)

Most of the schools in (this area) now have gone to an academy, whether that's an enforced academy where they've failed an Ofsted and management come out and we enforce you, or schools that have chosen to go down an academy route because they've had good results and they've got enough funding to do that. (Thelma, Teacher)

This interplay of accommodation and acceptance means that, as policy actors, these professionals have taken up a position where they are aware of the risks involved in thinking and doing otherwise. They have accepted a version of 'resistance is futile', particularly since no one directly took a *get out of it* stance by resigning or being dismissed. However, there is something more nuanced taking place, where we need to give recognition to how the unfolding 'turn of events' over time can be best characterized as a *get away with it* stance.

## Dynamics of position-taking

The position-taking stances are in constant dialogue, and there are times in the ethnography where the legal status of the school is not on the immediate agenda, as educational professionals get on with the job of teaching children. However, following decision-making processes and events over a year and in a range of arenas, including the staff room, the head teacher's office, governors' meetings, local primary schools and diocesan meetings, the *get away with it* stance has come to dominate real-life, real-time practice. While position-making is based on state assimilation, we have identified that position-taking can actually resist, and that this is not necessarily futile.

The Borg operate through a process of *assimilation*:

The Borg: We are the Borg. Lower your shields and surrender your ships. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service us. Resistance is futile.

This is a key quotation, and not just for the final three words, which have influenced our analytical approach to position-taking. One of the main themes of *Star Trek VIII: First Contact* is the claim by the Borg that their cybernetics must be strengthened by organic elements. Academies are still schools, with real, living people working and learning in them:

Riker: The Borg are not entirely organic. But, like all cybernetic life forms, they cannot survive without their organic components.



It is essential, therefore, to develop a *hive mind*:

Data: The Borg are a collective consciousness. There are no individuals.

The collective consciousness necessary for positioning is evident in education policy at system level, where major research studies (for example, NAO, 2007; Curtis *et al.*, 2008; Gilbert *et al.*, 2013) are commissioned and constructed on the basis that there is no alternative to academization. Such reports recommend modifications to programme delivery and more sophisticated responses to the market in education, but do not problematize the ideological basis underpinning policy. At local (school and community) level, the *hive mind* can be theorized as an example of Foucauldian governmentality (see Rayner, 2018b), and is evidenced in the data from the St Clement's project. We found almost unanimous agreement among the staff and governors that a form of academization was the only favourable option for their school. This emerged from our interview data, and from the response to the formal consultation over the proposed change of the school's status. Of 39 responses, 36 staff answered Yes, three said *Maybe* and none said *No*. The staff were united on both the idea and the practicality of structural change:

I think most people have come to terms with the fact that over the last four years you're an anomaly if you're not an academy ... so, we hope we're going academy, there's an acceptance of going academy, it's just got to be the right organization. (Denise, Deputy Head teacher)

I'm not aware of anybody who's spoken out. There are one or two teachers that I do know perhaps better than some of the others: I think they'd be quite keen on the idea. I feel quite positive about it from the staff side. I've certainly heard nobody speak out against it, or against the idea. We've got nobody on the governing body that's against it either, which is nice, because if you can take everybody with you, then obviously half the battle's won, you know. (Clive, Chair of Governors)

The *hive mind* depends on an illusion of free choice:

Picard: It wasn't enough that you assimilate me: I had to give myself freely to the Borg.

Four years previously, in 2010, governors refused to give up St Clement's freely. At that time, student outcomes were below national averages and inspection results were unfavourable, so the Department for Education (DfE) proposed a forced conversion of St Clement's to academy status as part of a trust selected by the DfE. The governors delayed this external intervention until a new head teacher was appointed and examination results improved, and in doing so exercised some agency at local level.

Nevertheless, this strategy remained risky. Assimilation not only absorbs individuals; it also works at system level. Rather as, when their ship is destroyed, the Borg beam unnoticed on to the *Enterprise* and begin to take it over deck by deck, so academization can survive the failure of individual academies or trusts. It regenerates itself by assimilating (colonizing) other organizations. Mergers and acquisitions are to be expected in a system of marketized education provision. Such cases are predicted by Hatcher (2006) and documented in more recent press reports (for example, Hunter, 2015; George, 2017; Ward, 2017). In the case of St Clement's, the 'colonized' organization is the local Church of England (CofE) diocese:

I use the word freedoms hesitantly, because I don't believe that we're given freedoms, we're given additional responsibilities – but actually that

can be a useful tool to help to tailor provision at the local level according to local circumstances, in a way which local authorities haven't been able to do. So, that's where the academization agenda can be a plus. ... Since the government decided to withdraw funding from local authorities and seriously reduce their role, that's shaken the confidence of a lot of schools; as old alliances break down, they're looking to seek new ones. (Diocesan Director of Education)

Hence, assimilation can be challenging and painful, but the logic of the APC is locally articulated as generating opportunities.

There is dissonance between the collective spirit of welcoming academization and a lingering sense of dread, expressed as relief that, if St Clement's is inevitably to be academized, it will, at least, be with an acceptable partner. The emergence of such a partner is serendipitous. It depends on discussions held away from the school, rather than a considered choice. There is no sense of collective agency here:

The Church of England, I understand, have a memorandum of understanding with the DfE that, if we were to become an academy, they would want it to be a CofE academy. I suspect that kept the wolves from the door a little bit. (Martin, Head Teacher)

The sense of dread was evident as other interviewees spoke of the 'wolves at the door':

I'd be very concerned if an academy chain like [name] or [name] had come in, because I feel their priority's more financial and the bottom line, rather than protecting the values and the ethos of the school. (Carol, Deputy Head Teacher)

There was very great anxiety at the time, because I think there was a lot of scaremongering as to where we were going to go, who we were going to end up with, particularly in relationship to other high schools in the local area that academized at that period, where they were in my eyes swallowed by large conglomerates almost. (Alan, Senior Teacher)

There are some sponsors I would avoid like the plague, because I've seen how they run their schools. (Daniel, Teacher)

As a trust partner, the CofE Diocese was the least unfavourable option, even for those without religious faith. Those staff were confident in the morality and integrity of the partner organization, regarding it as the most acceptable of an uninviting and unavoidable range of options. The limiting of options was understood as a political imperative:

There has been a big ideological shift towards the privatization of schools ... it's about the shrinking of the state, rather than about changing outputs for children. (Tony, Teacher)

Academization will plough on, and obviously they've already said that they plan to open a significant number of free schools as well, on the basis that they can do what they want. So, I expect to see a lot more academization, now that the party in power has free reign to do so. (Daniel, Teacher)

Interviewees' understanding of 'academy freedoms' centred on the new employer's ability to change conditions of service and other ways of working, including the concern of Lucy, a head of subject, that, as a working parent, she might have to find another

job to accommodate her childcare arrangements, and that of Lesley, another head of subject, that:

I would have difficulty if we got into a situation where I had to say a prayer at the end of a lesson or anything like that, and that could be possible. Just because people say that won't happen, it could happen and there's scope for that to happen. (Lesley, Head of Subject)

This is an example of what Braun *et al.* (2011: 588) term 'situated contexts, ... historically and locationally linked to the school, such as a school's setting, its history and intake'. The 'situated context' of St Clement's was of a school that had a reputation built on good care and welfare, rather than good examination results. The school's history also influenced its staff, who had been shamed by the Ofsted inspection report as requiring improvement and threatened with forced academization. There is a strong sense in the data of having *got away with it*: the school has not been closed, it has not yet been forced to be an academy and, if there is to be this change, the Church of England partner is the least-worst option. Managing the ensuing anxieties and mitigating the fear of the unknown was one of the challenges faced by Martin, the Head Teacher of St Clement's, whose agency and influence we examine in the next section.

## Getting away with it ... for now

Central to the APC is the focus on corporate leaders, leading and leadership of the school as a business, where the head teacher as academy principal exercises corporatized agency to build and defend the brand, not least by eradicating any threats (Courtney and Gunter, 2015). Our empirical work leads us to raise questions about what it means to be the 'captain of an academy ship'.

Picard reflects on such an issue:

Picard: Let's just say Starfleet has every confidence in the Enterprise and her crew ... they're just not sure about her Captain. They believe that a man who was once captured and assimilated by the Borg should not be put in a situation where he would face them again. To do so would introduce an unstable element to a critical situation.

Riker: That's ridiculous. Your experience with the Borg makes you the perfect man to lead this fight.

Picard's relationship with Starfleet Command is akin to that of an academy principal working in a MAT. The individual academy principal must remain loyal to the head-office organization, while retaining some degree of autonomy at what might, in practical terms, be middle-management delivery and oversight level. There are opportunities for collaboration – Picard's senior team is joined by Worf, a starship commander rescued from the failing USS *Defiant* – but his decisions must always be either justified to, or at risk of censure from, the Starfleet MAT.

Martin's relationship with the formal educational establishment, like Picard's with Starfleet Command, was uneasy. Martin completed the National Professional Qualification for Headship and followed a conventional promotion route in schools in England. Soon after his appointment as head teacher at St Clement's, he established credibility with the DfE, Ofsted and the CofE Diocese by having 'turned around' a 'failing' school. Martin could speak, using the arcane language of performativity, 'accountability measures', 'value-added matrices' and 'Progress 8 buckets', just as

Picard can impress or baffle the lay audience by speaking of 'transforming the deflector dish into an interplexing beacon: a sub-space transmitter'. At the same time, Martin was held in high regard by the staff of the school, who trusted him to allay their sense of dread and to ensure that the school's assimilation into the APC would be relatively painless. Martin's direct appeal to the staff, by providing information and guidance in meetings and briefings, further secured their trust and loyalty. As a result, there was widespread support in 2014 for Martin's proposal that St Clement's should become an academy; and almost unanimous support in 2015 for his proposal that the school should not become an academy, but should become a voluntary-aided CofE school. As one member of staff stated:

Years ago, maybe it would not have been the right route for us to take, because the school wasn't in such a strong position as it is now. Obviously, any plans that we had for academy were very much that it would be school driven – it wouldn't be an enforced academy – and so I think that the whole voluntary-aided idea gives us that control, the decision making over admissions. That's such a crucial issue at the moment. (Barbara, Support Staff Member)

What ensured this confidence and support was not Martin's professional qualifications or leadership disposition, to which an adjective such as 'transformational', 'heroic' or 'distributed' could be applied; it was the recognition of his honesty as a human being and his empathy with colleagues, as he showed that there was another way to handle the demands of the APC.

In *Star Trek VIII: First Contact*, resistance proves not to be futile. As at St Clement's, the success of avoiding academy status cannot be ascribed to 'leadership'. Successful position-taking as *getting away with it* can be ascribed to three factors. The first is *collaborative action*. In *Star Trek VIII: First Contact*, this involves the co-operation of a diverse group of people to resist the Borg, including the Klingon Worf and twenty-first-century human Lily. In the case of St Clement's, school governors, head teacher and senior staff, teachers, support staff and local-authority and diocesan officers shared local intelligence and a sense of purpose. Their combined efforts exploited spaces in the APC that enabled a compromise that was acceptable to each of those actors and interests. The second enabling factor is *luck*. For a technologically advanced organization, the Borg are surprisingly inaccurate when it comes to aiming and firing their weapons. As a government department, the DfE may have the legitimate enforcement of the state apparatus on its side, but it appears to be unable to implement policy coherently and decisively, even when the then prime minister announced that every school should have the opportunity to become an academy 'and benefit from the freedoms this brings' (Cameron, 2015: n.p.). The third enabling factor is *superior technology*, which for Picard includes the deployment of technology dating from three centuries earlier, and at St Clement's meant avoiding formal conversion to academy status by becoming a voluntary-aided Church school, an option that had been available since the 1944 Education Act. Thus, although Martin might have echoed Picard's claim that 'reports of my assimilation have been greatly exaggerated', this was not a case where 'leadership' was decisive.

Where a research project makes claims that derive from a single, place-based study, it is customary in an article to acknowledge that fact, while pointing to its typicality and its potential to illuminate thinking about important issues. Here, we go further, by using it to question whether this evidence of *getting away with it* stands up, particularly since the St Clement's story cannot be any more than temporary and

limited. At the time of writing, almost four years after the end of the fieldwork phase, the school is still not an academy, because position-making through formal legal policy is not always coherent or consistent. Successive UK governments have made major policy interventions into the provision of school places in England, but they have done so through constitutional means of general elections, majority governments and policy mandates. This is different from nation states such as Chile, where there have been major political ruptures and where reform positioning has been dramatic and often brutal (Carrasco and Gunter, 2019).

Change to the education system in England can be understood through Courtney's (2015: 802) geological metaphor of *faults and folds* to explain how different school types have developed, each with a claim to distinction, but each layered on top of previous ones, remaining concealed until it is 'thrust upwards to the surface in a dynamic process of ideological reinterpretation' (see also West and Bailey, 2013). First grant-maintained schools, then City Colleges, then specialist, free and academy schools provided the means of moving schools from public to private ownership and governance, and there are now between 70 and 90 different types of schools (Courtney, 2015). Working within such 'tectonic shifts' has both limited and enabled the opportunities for local agency: our data show that, while educational professionals articulated an accommodation and acceptance of the APC discourses, their actual practices were more about strategies to get away with not changing to academy status. This is not settled. Positioning by the nation state remains a legal fact, and in returning to Hatcher and Troyna (1994), the point can be made that the micropolitical spaces allowing a *get away with it* stance continue to be squeezed or even closed (Gunter, 2014). The bigger-picture analysis requires St Clement's to be located in a globalized policy-positioning context, where decision making is not so much located at the local level of schools, local authorities, academy trusts and dioceses, but with wider business and political elites, populated by corporations, entrepreneurs and philanthropists (Gunter *et al.*, 2017). From those power bases, local decisions could be reversed, for example by the full-scale conversion of all schools into academies. However, the work of investigative journalists revealing corruption (for example, Beckett, 2007), together with localized campaigns against academy conversion, are gaining publicity and traction in policy debates (see, for example, Twinch, 2018). The phrase *getting away with it* is therefore particularly apt, since it gives recognition to the turn of events, and as such it implies something significant but always in play, rather than permanent and substantive.

## Summary

By analysing the realities of the APC within the working lives of education professionals in one school context, we have developed novel understandings of professional discourses and practices at the interface of legal position-making and professional position-taking. We have used the metaphor of the Borg to illustrate the need to problematize claims that schools and those who work in them must be acculturated and *assimilated* within a privatized system. Through our conceptualization of the different forms position-taking can take, we have illustrated how actors can adopt positions that enable them to renegotiate professional agency.

Our contribution to policy scholarship through the St Clement's project recognizes the validity of the debates regarding the dynamic interplay between state-legal positioning and professional-agentic position-taking. This has implications for ongoing primary research, where there is a need for more ethnographic projects that

provide access to the realities of change and the changing of minds, revealing how educational professionals understand what is happening and the extent to which the decisions they make individually and collectively are important.

## Notes on the contributors

**Stephen Rayner** lectures at the Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester. His main research interest is the interplay between education policy and teaching, leadership and governance practice in schools. Stephen was previously a teacher in schools in England. He completed a professional doctorate in 2017 and has published from his thesis *Academisation: A dynamic process of systemic change in England*.

**Helen Gunter** is Professor of Education Policy at the Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. Helen's research focuses on the politics of education policy and knowledge production in the field of school leadership. Recent publications include *The Politics of Public Education: Reform ideas and issues* (Policy Press, 2018) and *An Intellectual History of School Leadership Practice and Research* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

## References

- Anyon, J. (1981) 'Social class and school knowledge'. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 11 (1), 3–42.
- Astle, J. and Ryan, C. (eds) (2008) *Academies and the Future of State Education*. London: CentreForum.
- Ball, S.J. (1987) *The Micro-Politics of the School: Towards a theory of school organization*. London: Methuen.
- Ball, S.J. (1990) *Politics and Policy Making in Education: Explorations in Policy Sociology*. London: Routledge.
- Ball, S.J. (1994) 'Some reflections on policy theory: A brief response to Hatcher and Troyna'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 9 (2), 171–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093940090205>.
- Ball, S.J. (2003) 'The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18 (2), 215–28.
- Ball, S.J. (2017) *The Education Debate*. 3rd ed. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Ball, S.J., Maguire, M., Braun, A., Hoskins, K. and Perryman, J. (2012) *How Schools Do Policy: Policy enactments in secondary schools*. London: Routledge.
- Barber, M. (2008) *Instruction to Deliver: Fighting to transform Britain's public services*. London: Methuen.
- Beckett, F. (2007) *The Great City Academy Fraud*. London: Continuum.
- Bowe, R., Ball, S.J. and Gold, A. (1992) *Reforming Education and Changing Schools: Case studies in policy sociology*. London: Routledge.
- Bowring, M.A. (2004) 'Resistance is not futile: Liberating Captain Janeway from the masculine–feminine dualism of leadership'. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 11 (4), 381–405. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2004.00239.x>.
- Braun, A., Ball, S.J., Maguire, M. and Hoskins, K. (2011) 'Taking context seriously: Towards explaining policy enactments in the secondary school'. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32 (4), 585–96.
- Butt, G. and Gunter, H. (eds) (2007) *Modernizing Schools: People, learning and organizations*. London: Continuum.
- Cameron, D. (2015) '100 days: Article by David Cameron'. Online. <https://tinyurl.com/rs22jw8> (accessed 4 December 2019).
- Carrasco, A. and Gunter, H.M. (2019) 'The "private" in the privatisation of schools: The case of Chile'. *Educational Review*, 71 (1), 67–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2019.1522035>.
- Courtney, S.J. (2015) 'Mapping school types in England'. *Oxford Review of Education*, 41 (6), 799–818. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2015.1121141>.
- Courtney, S.J. (2017) 'Corporatising school leadership through hysteresis'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38 (7), 1054–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2016.1245131>.



- Courtney, S.J. and Gunter, H.M. (2015) 'Get off my bus! School leaders, vision work and the elimination of teachers'. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 18 (4), 395–417. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2014.992476>.
- Curtis, A., Exley, S., Sasia, A., Tough, S. and Whitty, G. (2008) *The Academies Programme: Progress, problems and possibilities*. London: Sutton Trust.
- Daniels, D. (2011) 'From reality to vision: The "birth" of the Petchey Academy in Hackney'. In Gunter, H.M. (ed.) *The State and Education Policy: The Academies Programme*. London: Continuum, 92–104.
- DfE (Department for Education) (2010) *The Importance of Teaching*. London: HMSO.
- DfEE (Department for Education and Employment) (2000) *City Academies: Schools to make a difference*. London: Department for Education and Employment.
- DfES (Department for Education and Skills) (2004) *A New Relationship with Schools: Improving performance through school self-evaluation*. Online. <https://tinyurl.com/y9bflge7> (accessed 19 December 2019).
- DfES (Department for Education and Skills) (2005) *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*. London: Department for Education and Skills.
- Furlong, J. (2005) 'New Labour and teacher education: The end of an era'. *Oxford Review of Education*, 31 (1), 119–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305498042000337228>.
- Furlong, J. (2008) 'Making teaching a 21st century profession: Tony Blair's big prize'. *Oxford Review of Education*, 34 (6), 727–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980802518979>.
- George, M. (2017) 'Exclusive: DfE wants Harris to take over Durand Academy'. *Times Educational Supplement*, 15 November. Online. <https://tinyurl.com/vuk2kjs> (accessed 4 December 2019).
- Gilbert, C., Husbands, C., Wigdortz, B. and Francis, B. (2013) *Unleashing Greatness: Getting the best from an academised system: The report of the Academies Commission*. London: Pearson/RSA.
- Giroux, H.A. (2001) *Theory and Resistance in Education: Towards a pedagogy for the opposition*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- Giroux, H.A. (2003) 'Public pedagogy and the politics of resistance: Notes on a critical theory of educational struggle'. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 35 (1), 5–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-5812.00002>.
- Gorard, S. (2018) *Education Policy: Evidence of equity and effectiveness*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Grace, G. (1995) *School Leadership: Beyond education management: An essay in policy scholarship*. London: Falmer Press.
- Gunter, H.M. (1997) *Rethinking Education: The consequences of Jurassic management*. London: Cassell.
- Gunter, H.M. (2005) 'Conceptualizing research in educational leadership'. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 33 (2), 165–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1741143205051051>.
- Gunter, H.M. (2012) 'The field of educational administration in England'. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 60 (4), 337–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2012.729664>.
- Gunter, H.M. (2014) *Educational Leadership and Hannah Arendt*. London: Routledge.
- Gunter, H.M. (2018) *The Politics of Public Education: Reform ideas and issues*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Gunter, H.M., Hall, D. and Apple, M.W. (eds) (2017) *Corporate Elites and the Reform of Public Education*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Gunter, H.M. and McGinity, R. (2014) 'The politics of the Academies Programme: Natality and pluralism in education policy-making'. *Research Papers in Education*, 29 (3), 300–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2014.885730>.
- Gunter, H.M. and Mills, C. (2017) *Consultants and Consultancy: The case of education*. Cham: Springer.
- Gunter, H.M., Rayner, S., Thomas, H., Fielding, A., Butt, G. and Lance, A. (2005) 'Teachers, time and work: Findings from the evaluation of the Transforming the School Workforce Pathfinder Project'. *School Leadership and Management*, 25 (5), 441–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13634230500340781>.
- Gunter, H.M. and Thomson, P. (2009) 'The makeover: A new logic in leadership development in England'. *Educational Review*, 61 (4), 469–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131910903404020>.
- Gunter, H.M. and Thomson, P. (2010) 'Life on Mars: Headteachers before the National College'. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 42 (3), 203–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2010.492963>.
- Hall, D. and Gunter, H.M. (2009) 'Tony Blair's big prize? A reply to Furlong'. *Oxford Review of Education*, 35 (6), 765–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980903399444>.
- Hargreaves, A. (1982) 'Resistance and relative autonomy theories: Problems of distortion and incoherence in recent Marxist analyses of education'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 3 (2), 107–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569820030201>.

- Hatcher, R. (2006) 'Privatization and sponsorship: The re-agenting of the school system in England'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 21 (5), 599–619. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930600866199>.
- Hatcher, R. (2009) 'Setting up academies, campaigning against them: An analysis of a contested policy process'. *Management in Education*, 23 (3), 108–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020609105803>.
- Hatcher, R. (2011) 'Local government against local democracy: A case study of a bid for Building Schools for the Future funding for an academy'. In Gunter, H.M. (ed.) *The State and Education Policy: The Academies Programme*. London: Continuum, 39–51.
- Hatcher, R. and Jones, K. (2006) 'Researching resistance: Campaigns against academies in England'. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 54 (3), 329–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2006.00350.x>.
- Hatcher, R. and Troyna, B. (1994) 'The "policy cycle": A Ball by Ball account'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 9 (2), 155–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093940090204>.
- Hughes, B.C. (2019) 'Investigating the CEO of a MAT: Examining practices and positions on "the street"'. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 48 (3), 478–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1741143219833688>.
- Hunter, M. (2015) 'Major shake-up at struggling Ipswich Academy with new sponsor and boss due in September after damning Ofsted report'. *Ipswich Star*, 11 March. Online. <https://tinyurl.com/qql2b8o> (accessed 3 December 2019).
- Kavanagh, D., Keohane, K. and Kuhling, C. (2001) 'Reading Star Trek: Imagining, theorizing, and reflecting on organizational discourse and practice'. In Smith, W., Higgins, M., Parker, M. and Lightfoot, G. (eds) *Science Fiction and Organization*. London: Routledge, 125–42.
- Leo, E., Galloway, D. and Hearne, P. (2010) *Academies and Educational Reform: Governance, leadership and strategy*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- MacBeath, J. (2008) 'Stories of compliance and subversion in a prescriptive policy environment'. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 36 (1), 123–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1741143207084064>.
- Macaulay, H. (2008) *Under the Microscope: Leading in a climate of close public scrutiny*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.
- McGinity, R. and Gunter, H.M. (2017) 'New practices and old hierarchies: Academy conversion in a successful secondary school in England'. In Thomson, P. *Educational Leadership and Pierre Bourdieu*. London: Routledge, 98–111.
- NAO (National Audit Office) (2007) *The Academies Programme*. London: The Stationery Office.
- NAO (National Audit Office) (2017) *Retaining and Developing the Teaching Workforce*. London: National Audit Office.
- NFER (National Foundation for Educational Research) (2017) *Teacher Retention and Turnover Research*. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research.
- Ozga, J. (1990) 'Policy research and policy theory: A comment on Fitz and Halpin'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 5 (4), 359–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093900050405>.
- Pike, M.A. (2010) 'Transaction and transformation at Trinity: Private sponsorship, core values and Christian ethos at England's most improved academy'. *Oxford Review of Education*, 36 (6), 749–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2010.510625>.
- Ranson, S. (2003) 'Public accountability in the age of neo-liberal governance'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18 (5), 459–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093032000124848>.
- Rayner, S.M. (2017) 'Admissions policies and risks to equity and educational inclusion in the context of school reform in England'. *Management in Education*, 31 (1), 27–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0892020616687699>.
- Rayner, S.M. (2018a) 'Leaders and leadership in a climate of uncertainty: A case study of structural change in England'. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 46 (5), 749–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217707522>.
- Rayner, S.M. (2018b) 'Re-thinking governmentality: Lessons from the academisation project in England'. In Courtney, S.J., McGinity, R. and Gunter, H.M. (eds) *Educational Leadership: Theorising professional practice in neoliberal times*. London: Routledge, 85–96.
- Rayner, S.M., Courtney, S.J. and Gunter, H.M. (2018) 'Theorising systemic change: Learning from the academisation project in England'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 33 (1), 143–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2017.1327084>.
- Roberts, N. and Danechi, S. (2019) *FAQs: Academies and free schools* (House of Commons Library Briefing Paper 07059). London: House of Commons Library.
- Saadia, M. (2016) 'The enduring lessons of "Star Trek"'. *New Yorker*, 8 September. Online. <https://tinyurl.com/qkao3w3> (accessed 3 December 2019).

- Somin, I. (2016) 'The politics of Star Trek'. *Washington Post*, 23 July. Online. <https://tinyurl.com/txkc93d> (accessed 3 December 2019).
- Thomson, P. (2008) 'Headteacher critique and resistance: A challenge for policy, and for leadership/management scholars'. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 40 (2), 85–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620802210848>.
- Twinch, E. (2018) 'Academies record £6.1bn deficit'. *Public Finance*, 8 November. Online. <https://tinyurl.com/yx2e968e> (accessed 3 December 2019).
- Ward, H. (2017) 'Revealed: Wakefield City Academies Trust schools to be split between eight sponsors'. *Times Educational Supplement*, 10 October. Online. <https://tinyurl.com/uqh8sbu> (accessed 3 December 2019).
- West, A. and Bailey, E. (2013) 'The development of the Academies Programme: "Privatising" school-based education in England 1986–2013'. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 61 (2), 137–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2013.789480>.
- Winkley, D. (2002) *Handsworth Revolution: The odyssey of a school*. London: Giles de la Mare.
- Yarker, P. (2005) 'On not being a teacher: The professional and personal costs of workforce remodelling'. *Forum*, 47 (2 and 3), 169–74.