

---

Viewpoint

# A primary school head teacher's experience of pressure to join a multi-academy trust

Lee Faris<sup>1,\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Primary school head teacher, Cambridge, UK

\* Correspondence: [LeedFaris@gmail.com](mailto:LeedFaris@gmail.com)

Submission date: 9 May 2022; Acceptance date: 26 July 2022; Publication date: 16 November 2022

## How to cite

Faris, L. (2022) 'A primary school head teacher's experience of pressure to join a multi-academy trust'. *London Review of Education*, 20 (1), 44. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.20.1.44>.

## Peer review

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

## Copyright

2022, Lee Faris. 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 • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.20.1.44>.

## Open access

*London Review of Education* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

---

## Abstract

This commentary outlines the views of a current head teacher after receiving increased marketing and persuasive letters from multi-academy trust (MAT) chief executive officers (CEOs) in an attempt to expand their MATs. Following the Department for Education's academisation programme, which aims to convert all schools in England to MATs by 2030, this reflection highlights the implications of the programme and reflects, from an insider's perspective, on the author's concerns about this approach for the communities, which will lose local leaders with autonomy and see them replaced with CEOs who have multiple interests, other than those of the local schools.

**Keywords** CEOs; primary school leadership; head teachers; multi-academy trusts; Department for Education

## Introduction

This article is a position statement from an education professional which is informed by a pertinent set of professional observations and small-scale interviews with fellow head teachers focusing on maintained primary schools in England. For international comparison, maintained primary education in England is for pupils from 4 to 11 years old, is free to access and is staffed by teachers who must hold a degree. Section 35(3) of the Education Act, 2002 states that all schools must have 'a person appointed as head teacher'. I am a head teacher in a maintained primary school. I believe that head teachers in England work best when they have the autonomy, control and final decision-making needed to make quick and innovative decisions for their school community, based on the local need, due to their awareness of local culture. I assert that the Department for Education (DfE)'s academisation programme, which aims to convert all schools in England to academies linked to multi-academy trusts (MATs) by 2030, is detrimental due to the impact it has, and will have, on head teachers as local community leaders.

The past decade has seen a large expansion of the academisation programme, brought into schools by the Labour government in 2002, and designed to bring the advantages and freedoms of the independent school sector to schools in challenging areas, without fees for parents (Long, 2015). Alongside this change, and the push for mass academisation during the 2010s under Michael Gove, the UK Education Secretary between 2010 and 2014, England saw the growth of MATs, frequently spearheaded by those from the business world, bringing with them novel thoughts and models (Lynch et al., 2017). MATs run chains of schools and are largely free from the power of local authority control. They answer straight to the government through a solitary accounting officer for all schools in their chain (see the Academies Act, 2010). As of early 2022, there were 2,539 trusts operating in England, made up of nearly 10,000 schools (Plaister, 2022). The DfE (2022: 4) defines academy trusts as 'not-for-profit companies. They employ the staff and have trustees responsible for the performance of the academies in the trust. Sponsors work with the academy trust to improve the performance of their schools.'

In 2016, the DfE attempted to force all schools in England to join MATs (Elliot, 2016); however, due to political rebellion, this plan had to be abandoned (Pells, 2016). Six years on, the vast majority of primary schools in England remain maintained by their local authority, with only 37 per cent as academies. In 2022, the government's White Paper on education reaffirmed its commitment to the academies programme and set out its ambition for all schools to become academies and join MATs by 2030. It states that joining a MAT is beneficial as it will enable trusts to support teachers and school leaders (DfE, 2022). In 2021, the government conducted telephone interviews with more than 300 head teachers of non-academy or long-term stand-alone academy schools to examine their opinions on academisation and the factors that they view as detrimental to joining a MAT. The findings were as follows: two-thirds (67 per cent) of primary schools and three-fifths (59 per cent) of secondary schools said concern about losing autonomy was a key reason they had not become an academy (DfE, 2021: 9).

This commentary details my apprehensions regarding this plan and the detrimental culture being created in the school system due to the status given to 'super heads' (Telhaj et al., 2002: 10) and a small number of chief executive officers (CEOs) controlling schools. Currently, a MAT has, on average, 6.2 schools under it (Belger, 2021). This will grow as MATs expand, and the DfE (2022) has made it clear that they want a system with large MATs for many schools. In my view, supported by Bolden et al. (2018), the benefit of our current system is the flexibility that head teachers have to move their schools forward either academically or strategically based on the needs of their local area at any given time. Head teachers of stand-alone schools are uniquely placed, and they are given the authority and power to make staffing, budget and curriculum decisions (relatively quickly) based on the needs of their school, at the time, in order to move standards and quality of education forward. However, in this professional reflection, I suggest that not only is the expansion of MATs detrimental to head teachers due to the loss of autonomy they will face once they convert (Lynch et al., 2017; West and Wolfe, 2018), but this MAT expansion is also detrimental to the education system due to the loss of divergent thinking that the head teacher has, to make changes in schools and try new ideas (Brooks and Heffernan, 2021). Head teachers need to be able to think divergently and differently about problems they encounter each day, and this skill is one that needs to be developed and practised so that head teachers can quickly respond when things in their school go wrong (parental complaints, poor inspection outcome, safeguarding issues and so on).

## Empire building

It is my view that the expansion of MATs is leading to the creation of 'empires' of schools run by a single leader. I am currently completing the National Professional Qualification of Executive leadership (NPQEL), the course designed to train head teachers to become MAT CEOs and leaders. This has reinforced my view that the system is evolving to a point where a single professional has overall leadership of the numerous schools that may make up a MAT.

While working for a MAT previously, I attended many meetings and networking events where CEOs were asked to introduce themselves, also stating where they were from. This would always, without fail, lead to CEOs stating their names and the name of their MAT, followed by the number of schools they ran. At no point in the introduction were they asked to provide this information regarding school numbers; however, people always felt compelled to share it. This then led to a metaphorical game of Top Trumps, and the number of schools under the control of a single person would grow as CEOs introduced themselves. This phenomenon always worried me, as it never focused on the quality of these schools, the happiness of the staff within them or the outcomes of the pupils; it simply reduced the schools to a number on a CEO's spreadsheet. Given the increased focus on academisation, I now fear that we are returning to a system that values empire building. With the renewed energy devoted to academisation, I have already received four personalised letters from CEOs attempting to persuade me to direct my school (which is a large non-academy) to join their MAT, or with offers of meetings with the senior trust team. There are new incentives being promoted, such as trial joining a MAT before conversion or the addition of the small chance that a school could choose to leave a MAT to join another (DfE, 2022). These initiatives are designed to incentivise the conversion of schools to MATs. The letters schools are now receiving from CEOs attempting to get schools to join their MAT also display prominent information regarding the benefits gained from joining one MAT or another. As a head teacher, I feel pressure from all sides to join a MAT, due to these letters and DfE attempts to promote the benefits. This troubles me for several reasons. First, who is paying for this marketing and promotion of each MAT? Surely, this money and time spent could be used to support the learning of pupils, providing food to the most vulnerable or providing a few more hours of catch-up tuition so desperately needed since COVID-19 (Hofmann et al., 2021). Second, are these meetings a productive use of MAT senior leadership teams' time, when they are paid by us taxpayers to develop the educational outcomes of the pupils in their current care, not those at other schools?

## All-powerful CEOs

For my doctoral studies, I recently conducted 32 in-depth interviews with teachers at different stages of their careers to examine their motivation for school leadership. (In this article, I use the views of the retired head teachers among the interviewees.) During these interviews, several participants raised the issue of the academisation of schools and made unprompted comments about their opinion on MATs. These moments when they went off-topic – moments usually considered 'rambling' – proved valuable in providing insights into the participants' more profound reflections (Casey, 1995). Allowing for this freedom in the interviews enabled me to understand that the teachers saw the topic of academies as significant and worth discourse, although it was not the focus of the interviews (Dudley et al., 2015). Each interview was recorded on Microsoft Teams and transcribed verbatim, with the participant's consent. All information has been anonymised and encrypted. The new coding of the interviews examined the frequency of the mentioning of loss of autonomy by the retired head teachers; subsequently, I explored the common themes across the head teachers' responses that provided insight into their opinions on academy trusts. This has assisted in providing me with a better sense of how the head teachers feel about the topic of academies (Ismail, 2017; Saneiro et al., 2014).

One participant in particular caught my attention, and her words highlight the view from within the school system that CEOs are not as interested in the needs of their pupils as many think they should be: 'They are often perceived to have other interests, like earning themselves much money' (a retired head teacher).

This quotation highlights the fear within the system about CEOs, and the anecdotal belief that they have 'other interests' and that the pupils and staff in their care are not their primary focus. Contrarily, Kathryn Spicksley's (2020: 70) article from *Management in Education* highlighted the evolving

identification of MAT leaders and the extent to which they 'actively negotiate policy in their professional spaces'. The article also highlighted that CEOs of MATs desire to remain part of the community and shape schools to benefit the children they serve. This is a noble aim, and I do not doubt that this is the goal of most CEOs, even those who enjoy playing Top Trumps with school numbers. However, I question if this decision-making, and the ability to decide the policy of so many schools, provides diverse enough thoughts in the system to allow for innovations.

Head teachers talk to me about the benevolence of their CEO, and CEOs themselves attempt to highlight the freedom they give to the staff. However, it is not about the level of freedom that MATs choose to give their heads of schools; the fact that it is the CEOs' to give in the first place bothers me most. Primary school headship is an exciting business; one minute, you may be dealing with a broken boiler, the other, teaching phonics, followed by a parent meeting, all while dressed as Aladdin for World Book Day. The role is more than that, though; it is essential in the post to be a figure of the community, and someone the staff can trust and confide in about 'their divorce, their cancer' (Bloom, 2014). It is only through the empowerment that comes from autonomy and feeling in control (Oduro, 2004) that school leaders are able to weather the complex parts of the role (Forde et al., 2021).

## Localised decision-making

Primary school head teachers are extraordinary in that they are vital to moulding the way of life and ethos of their school. As I have suggested, primary schools are profoundly implanted into networks of the local community (the police, local shops, the doctors' surgery, the parents' associations), and because of this, primary schools are vital to adding to a thriving local area, and the job of the head teacher is instrumental in creating and keeping up with relationships with the local area.

As with any autocratic system, it is impossible for the leader to entirely be aware of the needs of those at the far arm of the system. I like to think of the current, most common, non-academy model of headship as being one Adam Smith would have been proud of, that is, the artisan head teachers moulding their schools (just like the pins in Adam Smith's pin factory example) into unique creations, with head teachers being able to give time, resources and attention to aspects of the school as they see fit (Smith, 1976: 22). This currently more common system of headship means that communities are served by head teachers who have the power and autonomy to make quick decisions for their schools, based on the need they see in front of them.

From my own research, the head teachers mentioned the reputation that MATs have for treating staff, especially head teachers, negatively. There was a notion among the head teachers that the world of academies is competitive, and that MATs cause that competition among the staff and heads. A retired head teacher said that they thought 'it was quite competitive and that was difficult'. When talking about this, they were visibly uncomfortable, the conversation felt stunted, and the tone of the conversation became negative. They appeared very awkward with the idea of a primary school being a place where staff compete against each other. This discomfort was also observed in another retired head teacher, who believed that the 'academy world has caused some hiring and firing'. Another head teacher raised the same concerns, and said that the expectation placed on head teachers in MATs to improve their pupils' grades is too great and creates a blame culture where head teachers are unable to make innovative decisions as they are too fearful for their own jobs.

One retired head teacher spoke passionately about how they believed academies do not value head teachers, and how they would never work for one; they said that academies think of head teachers as 'dispensable', and made the analogy between head teachers and sports managers who are sacked if they do not get the desired academic outcomes. During the interviews, Retired Head Teacher 5 was the most animated regarding the academy system, so much so that I asked if they had worked for an academy and had gone through a bad experience, and they said they had not. They said that 'academies themselves do not have a good reputation' for how they treat their heads, and that MATs 'buy them [head teachers] cheap and offload them fast'. This head teacher felt passionately that academy chains are not perceived to take accountability themselves, and instead blame head teachers for everything: 'their heads are expendable. Just blame everything on the heads, not on trustees blame it all on the heads.' This head teacher raised worries that the expansion of MATs moves decision-making away from local head teachers, and that they too (similar to myself) worried about the loss of local autonomy for communities, 'which I think is disgusting' (Retired Head Teacher 5).

The head teachers spoken to used words such as 'expendable' (Retired Head Teacher 5) and 'disposable' (Retired Head Teacher 4) when referring to their view of how MATs treat head teachers within their chain. Lynch et al. (2017) found that head teachers in academies had a low retention rate after conversion, which validates the view of the head teachers in my research (and my own view) that MATs do not value head teachers and dispose of them more frequently.

If MATs are the future of schools in England, and the DfE continues to push for its 2030 target for all schools to join MATs, then it will need to address MATs' reputation that they treat head teachers unfairly and disposably. Head teachers are passionate about their jobs and work close to burnout to best support the children in their care (Towers, 2020). However, if head teachers are to work in a system where they do not feel safe – due to an underlying narrative in the academy system that head teachers are expendable – heads will be forced to expend energy protecting themselves from the threat of the MAT and look to protect their own job, and not have energy or capacity to have novel ideas that will improve their schools for the local communities they serve (Alderfer, 1969; Maslow, 1943; Sinek, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

Suppose schools join MATs; no matter how shiny their flyer may be or how persuasive their pitch on top-slice funding percentages, head teachers and governors must remember that entering an empire of schools removes local decision-making from communities for good. The ultimate say now lies with the CEO, and the ability of the head teacher to have a maverick idea (Male and Palaiologou, 2015) now requires the sign-off of a CEO who has to take account of the needs of the many schools in their empire, not just one, meaning that the CEO needs to decide the direction and positioning of the trust as a whole (Spicksley, 2020).

Over the coming years, school leaders will be faced with the dilemma of joining a MAT, and schools will be considering which trust is best for them and which is the least bad option (Spicksley, 2020). However, I believe now is the time for us in the system to decide what we value, not for the sake of autonomy for individual heads or the pursuit of power for power's sake, but in the belief that communities deserve local leaders who have the agility and freedom to make decisions for the schools in the community that are beneficial to the education system as a whole.

I will continue to engage in the academy conversation and wait to be convinced that it is right for my pupils, staff and community. However, when CEOs attempt to meet with me to persuade me to join their empire, I will be sure to ask if taxpayers' money will be funding their time at the meeting and why they specifically want my school in their deck of Top Trumps cards.

## **Declarations and conflicts of interest**

### **Research ethics statement**

The author conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with BELA standards. The original study from which the quotations are derived has been approved by the ethical board of Anglia Ruskin University.

### **Consent for publication statement**

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

### **Conflicts of interest statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

## References

- Academies Act 2010. Accessed 12 September 2022. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/32/contents>.
- Alderfer, C.P. (1969) 'An empirical test of a new theory of human needs'. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 4 (2), 142–75. [CrossRef]
- Belger, T. (2021) "'Not a race" for all schools to join MATs, says Herrington'. *Schools Week*, 1 November. Accessed 4 May 2022. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/no-deadline-all-schools-convert-multi-academy-trusts/>.
- Bloom, A. (2014) 'It's lonely at the top'. *tes magazine*, 17 January. Accessed 4 May 2022. <https://www.tes.com/news/its-lonely-top-0>.
- Bolden, R., Gulati, A., Burns, G. and Gott, M. (2018) 'Place-based leadership: Lessons from the Bristol leadership challenge'. Paper presented at the 10th Developing Leadership Capacity Conference, Bristol, UK, 12–13 July.
- Brooks, J.S. and Heffernan, A. (2021) *The School Leadership Survival Guide: What to do when things go wrong, how to learn from mistakes, and why you should prepare for the worst*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Casey, C. (1995) *Work, Self and Society: After industrialism*. London: Routledge.
- DfE (Department for Education) (2021) *Schools' Views on the Perceived Benefits and Obstacles to Joining a Multi-Academy Trust: Research report*. Accessed 12 April 2022. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1033936/Academisation\\_research\\_report\\_FINAL\\_NOV\\_21.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1033936/Academisation_research_report_FINAL_NOV_21.pdf).
- DfE (Department for Education) (2022) *Opportunities for All: Strong schools with great teachers for your child*. Accessed 12 April 2022. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1063602/Opportunity\\_for\\_all\\_strong\\_schools\\_with\\_great\\_teachers\\_for\\_your\\_child\\_print\\_version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1063602/Opportunity_for_all_strong_schools_with_great_teachers_for_your_child_print_version.pdf).
- Dudley, L., Gamble, C., Allam, A., Bell, P., Buck, D., Goodare, H., Hanley, B., Preston, J., Walker, A., Williamson, P. and Young, B. (2015) 'A little more conversation please? Qualitative study of researchers' and patients' interview accounts of training for patient and public involvement in clinical trials'. *Trials*, 16 (1), 190. [CrossRef]
- Education Act (2002) c 32. Accessed 12 September 2022. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/part/3/chapter/1>.
- Elliot, F. (2016) 'Rebels force Morgan into U-turn on academies'. *The Times*, 25 April. Accessed 12 April 2022. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tory-revolt-forces-morgan-into-u-turn-on-academies-6nlc5t5ht>.
- Forde, C., Torrance, D., Mitchell, A., McMahon, M. and Harvie, J. (2021) 'Education governance and the role of the headteacher: The new policy problem in Scottish education'. *Management in Education*, 36 (1), 18–24. [CrossRef]
- Hofmann, R., Arenge, G., Dickens, S., Marfan, J., Ryan, M., Tiong, N.D., Radia, B. and Blaskova, L.J. (2021) 'The Covid-19 learning crisis as a challenge and an opportunity for schools: An evidence review and conceptual synthesis of research-based tools for sustainable change'. *CEPS Journal*, 11 (Special Issue), 39–66. [CrossRef]
- Ismail, N. (2017) 'Analysing qualitative data using facial expressions in an educational scenario'. *International Journal of Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods*, 5 (3), 37–50. Accessed 1 September 2022. <http://www.eajournals.org/journals/international-journal-of-quantitative-and-qualitative-research-methods-ijqqr/vol-5-issue-3-july-2017/analysing-qualitative-data-using-facial-expressions-educational-scenario/>.
- Long, R. (2015) *Academies Under the Labour Government*. London: House of Commons Library. Accessed 12 April 2022. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/academies-under-the-labour-government>.
- Lynch, S., Mills, B., Theobald, K. and Worth, J. (2017) *Keeping Your Head: NFER analysis of headteacher retention*. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research.
- Male, T. and Palaiologou, I. (2015) 'Pedagogical leadership in the 21st century: Evidence from the field'. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 43 (2), 214–31.
- Maslow, A.H. (1943) 'A theory of human motivation'. *Psychological Review*, 50 (4), 370–96. [CrossRef]

- Oduro, G.K. (2004) 'Distributed leadership in schools: What English headteachers say about the "pull" and "push" factors'. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Manchester, UK, 16–18 September 2004.
- Pells, R. (2016) 'Forced academy plan abandoned by Tories in major climbdown'. *The Independent*, 6 May. Accessed 12 April 2022. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/forced-academy-plan-abandoned-by-tories-in-major-climbdown-a7016991.html>.
- Plaister, N. (2022) 'The size of multi-academy trusts'. *FFT Education Datalab*, 18 May. Accessed 12 July 2022. <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2022/05/the-size-of-multi-academy-trusts/#:~:text=As%20of%20early%202022%2C%20there,were%20distributed%20between%20the%20regions>.
- Saneiro, M., Santos, O.C., Salmeron-Majadas, S. and Boticario, J.G. (2014) 'Towards emotion detection in educational scenarios from facial expressions and body movements through multimodal approaches'. *The Scientific World Journal*, 484873. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Sinek, S. (2014) *Leaders Eat Last: Why some teams pull together and others don't*. New York: Penguin.
- Smith, A. (1976) 'An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations'. In R.H. Campbell and A.S. Skinner (eds), *Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith* Vol. 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spicksley, K. (2020) "'A less unpalatable alternative": Executive leaders strategically redefining their work in primary MATs'. *Management in Education*, 36 (2), 64–71. [CrossRef]
- Telhaj, S., Machin, S.J. and Eyles, A. (2002) "'Super heads", school autonomy and leadership pay'. Social Science Research Network, 15 February. [CrossRef]
- Towers, E. (2020) 'Why do headteachers stay in disadvantaged primary schools in London?' *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 21 (2), 206–21. [CrossRef]
- West, A. and Wolfe, D. (2018) *Academies, the School System in England and a Vision for the Future*. Clare Market Papers No. 23. London: LSE Academic Publishing. Accessed 1 April 2022. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88240/1/Academies%20Vision%20Report%202%20JUNE.pdf>.