Chapter 14
Are MATS and Academies a Threat to Catholic Education?

Louise McGowan

Abstract Autoethnography as both method and methodology has enabled me to write a life; and my life in leadership since first joining the Academies programme in 2007 could be described as somewhat professionally tumultuous. As a Vice Principal, Acting Principal, Headteacher and now Headmistress, I have a story to tell about the 12+ years that I have been part of the Academies programme, sharing and theorising my experiences of working as a senior leader in a non-denominational sponsored city Academy, a stand-alone converter Academy and most recently a converter Catholic Academy within a Multi Academy Trust. It is a compelling story that documents a leadership journey out of which emerge key themes of power, ideology, strength, vocation, suffering and loss, and finally, detachment and healing. As a redemptive narrative, it is a personal story that I hope will offer the Catholic education community a perspective that leads to reflection and understanding of some of the practices that are bound within the Academies programme and its legislative powers; a perspective from lived experience that will encourage a deeper discernment of whether the Academies programme can be shaped to fit with the mission of Catholic education and whether this pathway will either secure and strengthen, or inhibit its future growth, strength and stability.

Keywords Autoethnography · Academisation · Mission integrity

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Introduction

I open this chapter with a few snapshots; momentary glimpses into my early life. As someone who has, via the process of undertaking an education doctorate, emerged as a self-confessed autoethnographer, I believe that to understand and really connect with the work of an autoethnographer is to first understand the person of the researcher. Autoethnography[1] allows a researcher to tell stories; and stories are a powerful tool of pedagogy. Stories have been told for centuries by human beings across multitudes of cultures and have provided a vehicle not only to teach, but to transmit knowledge and a wisdom that is borne out of lived experience (Muncey 2010). I have a story to tell. And this story needs to be told.

The Beginnings of My Story

I begin my story with snapshots of childhood. It is 1970s suburbia in south east London and a child is lost in a world of imaginative play; it is a scene played over and over, a prophetic scene. School has been re-enacted in the child's playroom within a household that depicts the very essence of 1970s middle-class life. My parents knew I would end up being a teacher. My default game was always 'schools'. My teddy bears and dolls must have been the most educated toys in London. I kept their names on a register; I listened to them read; I think I even rang their parents! I loved school and I loved my life. One day an opportunity arose at my primary school to sign up for piano lessons. I begged my parents to let me try. I was never a demanding child. My beloved Granny would always describe me as 'agreeable'. I think my first experience of properly falling in love was with the piano. And so began what was to become my very own lifelong trinity: faith, school and music. Music weaved itself into my life from the age of six and has remained a foundation upon which this now middle aged, not-far-from-50-year-old adult stands before you now.

It was music that led me into teaching and I started to teach piano from the age of 16. My own piano instructor believed I would become a better pianist if I had to teach others to master technique and repertoire. By the time I was studying music at University in London, I had 25 pupils a week visiting my parents' home for piano lessons. Journeying alongside my pupils in their progress gave me far more pleasure and joy than actually playing the piano myself.

I tell this story of early life to underpin how much teaching has become the definition of who I was and who I am now as a person, an educator and, more recently, an early-career researching practitioner. People asked me as a child what I wanted to do for a job when I grew up. I replied that I never wanted a job; I wanted to be a teacher. Those who think that teaching is a job have a lot to understand! For me, like many others, teaching is as close to vocation as one can get.

I started school teaching fresh from university and spent my training year on placements in some of the most challenging, poverty-stricken and deprived wards

of south London. And it was here that I found my vocation. I forgot my privileged life, my private education, my piano lessons, and I followed where our Lord led me. To this day he has led me to some of the most difficult and challenging secondary schools in areas with some of the highest deprivation indexes.

I rose up the ranks fairly quickly. I was a Head of Department at 24; an Assistant Headteacher at 29 and experienced my first taste of headship ten years later. It was whilst I was working as an Assistant Head in a large secondary modern school that people started to talk and write about a new kind of school emerging into the state sector. There weren't many of them at first but, where they were located, they seemed to be causing quite a stir! In the county where I was teaching, the first Academy was built just after the turn of the millennium in a tired, run-down, neglected and forgotten coastal town. It replaced a school that had been struggling for many years, that was always named in the bottom three schools in the country for results, where less than 5% of children finished with five GCSEs graded C or above. A billionaire sponsor had donated £2 m of his own fortune and that, in conjunction with the £38 m of government and Local Authority funding, paid for the county's first sponsored City Academy. The building was incredible. It did not look like a school. It looked more like a futuristic building that would grace the skyline of any modern capital city or metropolis. And it stood out, almost brazenly, announcing itself as the postmodern future of education and schooling, set against a landscape filled with grey blocks of social housing flats, dark green cabbage fields, broken shop windows, graphited concrete walls and a dark, swirling, murky sea. Berger (2003) observed that you can always tell what a society values in any given age by the kinds of buildings it creates. This and the new-build Academies that rose up in other parts of the county appeared to pay architectural homage to business and a perceived commodification of education (Youdell 2011; Strom 2010; Grace 2002; Chitty 1997).

My working life was not touched by the Academies programme until a few years later when I felt my work was done as an Assistant Headteacher and it was time to move on. An advert for a Vice Principal to work with a newly appointed Principal, to plan and set up a brand new school that was not yet built, had caught my eye. That it was an Academy didn't really figure with me that the time. I was drawn to the vision for this school, again located in another neglected and run-down coastal town, again replacing a school that had been brought to its knees by a mix of economic and social factors and the punishing expectations of the ever-increasing performance measures. The school was to be closed and the students transferred into the new Academy.

The Academy was located in the home town of the same billionaire sponsor. I later learned that he had struck a deal with the Local Authority that if he agreed to sponsor the first coastal Academy, the next Academy to be built *had* to be in his home town where he had committed to large scale philanthropic regeneration projects. Another £2 m of his own money and £40 m this time of government and Local Authority funding and the second award-winning, architect-designed Academy, built to resemble a ship's stern (a nod to its coastal and harbour heritage), was opened.

Like the first Academy, this one also had a 'Super-head', recruited by reputation alone from a top-performing school elsewhere in the country. His vision to give secondary modern children from deprived backgrounds and many living in poverty,

the same educational opportunities as children who attended the top public schools, appealed to me and my own sense of mission through teaching. For nine months I worked desk-to-desk next to the Principal in a tiny office in a backstreet of the coastal harbour town, planning and designing, creating an innovative curriculum offer that had not been done before in state education. Academies were billed as all about innovation in the early years of their formation. The children in this particular Academy would be taught to cook by a French-speaking chef; they would even have their music lessons delivered in French. They would be in school from 8.30 am until 5 pm and each day would end with two hours of Prep or Games and Activities. Money was no object and I was instructed to recruit the best teachers to staff this new curriculum whilst the Principal took care of the marketing and publicity, and chose the furniture. The coloured glass meeting table in the Boardroom that seated 18 cost just short of £20,000 alone.

But it was all for the children. At least that was the script. I was thankful to be part of what I saw as a once-in-a-lifetime transformational project. I delighted in the faces of the children, wide-eyed and gasping in amazement when they set their first footsteps into their new school. They were so smart and polished in their new uniforms. Their wool blazers that retailed at £60 a piece could have graced the cover of any top independent school prospectus.

But tragedy struck. Just seven months after the Academy opened, the Principal died. Numb with grief and shock, I took a call from the billionaire sponsor. I was instructed to take over. There was no one else who knew the school well enough and he would not risk destabilising 'the project' at this early stage by bringing in a new leader to take the helm. I was tasked with keeping *everything* and *everyone* going. For me, there was no other option. I was committed to the school and I loved the children dearly. I owed it to the staff to take care of them too, as best I could.

I spent a year as Acting Principal of a £42 m City Academy. By the time the headhunting firm had found a new Super-head, I had been a Headteacher for longer than I had ever been a Deputy. I realised that I had learned far more about politics and the business of education in that year than I had ever known existed. I stayed another year to support the new Principal but, more importantly, to help the children settle and get used to having a new figurehead. But I couldn't stay any longer. The air was changing. People were changing. It is astonishing how quickly people can change their behaviour to fit in with a new regime. The vision of the late Principal that had drawn me and many others into the Academy was slowly dismantled. It was no longer the air that I wished to breathe.

I took a leap of faith and moved to my first substantive headship far away on the other side of the county. This was not a sponsored City Academy but a middle ground, average all girls High School that, like many other 'Good' secondary schools, after the coalition government took office in 2010, had taken up the Secretary of State's offer and the £50,000 grant, to convert to Academy status (Department for Education 2010). No one would really know it was an Academy though. It still operated by the title of 'School', it still had a governing body; I was the new Headteacher, not a Principal. But it had severed its ties with the Local Authority and was now standing alone as a registered company.

In retrospect, I do not believe that the Governors and the out-going retiring Headteacher had realised what they were signing up to and signing over when the *Funding Agreement* to become a *Converter Academy* was made a year before I joined the school. In signing *up* to the Academies programme they were in fact signing the school *over* to the Academies legislation governed by the DfE (Newsam 2013), and what was soon after delegated to a group of appointed, not elected, officials known as *Regional Schools Commissioners.*

When I was appointed to the post of Headteacher, the school had not been touched by the politics of the Academies programme. But that was all about to change. It was 2012 and the coalition had been in power for nearly two years. There were many changes in what was termed as a 'policy frenzy' in education over a short space of time as the Education Secretary (Michael Gove) set about instructing major reform of curriculum and accountability measures for state schools (Education Act 2011). A particular curriculum known as the *English Baccalaureate* (Ebacc) had been identified, but not all schools had embraced the compulsory pathway in GCSE where all students would take a humanities subject and a language on top of their core of English, mathematics and science. But when the methodology for calculating the performance measure of each school was radically changed from judging the percentage of students who achieved 5 GCSES at grade A* to C to a new measure of calculating progress made over a prescribed set of subjects, this came to be viewed, certainly by many Headteachers, as enforced Ebacc by the back door.

In order to score highly or above average, a school had to put *all* its students through the same curriculum pathway. To not do this was to render a school as performing poorly even when, at face value, it may not have been. In the three sets of subjects that formed the overall measure, if one set was empty of any of the prescribed Ebacc subjects the overall progress measure for the school decreased and fell below the zero average. To be viewed as below average is to be at risk.

Pfeffer (1994) in his critique of power, suggested that where there is a vacuum there is a space for power to be exercised. The schools that had not made the Ebacc curriculum compulsory but had given students free choice over their curriculum options, were suddenly portrayed as failing to provide the required standard of education. Where a school is portrayed as failing, then that creates the vacuum, the space where power can be wielded to legitimately move in and enforce change (Thompson 2008).

The Impact on My School

My school was an Arts College. The arts were privileged and whilst the Ebacc pathway was offered, not many of our students chose it. Children chose to come to the school purely because it was an arts college and it offered them curriculum choices that they might not be awarded elsewhere. There were no restrictions on what they chose to study alongside their core programme. Musicians could study music, performance and music technology; theatre students could study drama, music and

dance; visual artists could study fine art, textiles and photography. In the second year of my headship, Ofsted visited and judged the school to be good with outstanding features. It was a fair judgement. But less than two years later the school, or standalone Academy as it was, appeared on the radar of the Regional Schools Commissioner who believed that it was failing to provide the expected standard of education.

I did not really know what a *Regional Schools Commissioner* was until I was faced with one. I was so busy running my Arts College and taking delight in the achievements of the girls who accomplished the most outstanding results in their chosen option pathways. Not many followed an Ebacc pathway and the overall progress score of the school was negatively affected because points were then missing from many of the students' results. When I started to receive communications from the Commissioner's office I soon realised that this was a new layer, or was it a new lever in the system (Harris et al. 2006)?

My school was located in an area in which the Unitary Local Authority was deemed to be failing; therefore it was assumed that all the schools in the authority were failing. The Academies were, however, prospering, especially those secondary schools that had taken the opportunity to set up as a lead Academy in a *Multi-Academy Trust*. One by one, over three years, many of the primary schools were judged to be 'requiring improvement' or 'inadequate' and then a mandate was issued to force them to join the *Multi-Academy Trust* decreed by the Commissioner. The large scale failure of the Local Authority created the space to legitimise the full scale academisation of an entire region.

Soon my Arts College was the only Academy standing alone—and standing out. It didn't fit with the vision of the Commissioner who had decreed all schools must become Academies in this region and all Academies must belong to a *Multi-Academy Trust*. One by one the MAT Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) came calling. They either wanted to take me to lunch or to give me a sales pitch of what they could offer the school if we joined their MAT. One CEO brought his entire team of Directors with him to each take turns in pitching. I had never felt so popular!

Despite the many offers from MATs, none of them seemed to understand my school. In discussion and periods of deep reflection over time with my Governing Body, we discerned that we were fine continuing to stand alone; our budget was balanced with a little left over each year, we were fully staffed and stable, our outcomes in English and Maths and our arts curriculum were good and exceptional; our school was a popular choice for girls and their parents in the area. We could not accept any of the reasons the CEOs gave us to hand over our school to a larger corporation. So we politely declined their offers and carried on alone. What happened next is perhaps the most critical part of this story. I pause to re-visit the title of this chapter: *Are* Academies and MATs a threat to Catholic education?

Soon after we had turned down the multiple offers from the CEOs it seemed that the niceties suddenly ceased. The business lunches, the persuasive sales pitches and the spin all stopped. But they were replaced with an approach that began to feel more coercive, darker and in many ways rather sinister. I was notified by the Commissioner that he wished to learn more about my school and therefore would be sending in a team of officials to spend a day in the school on a given date. The

object was to see how we were doing and whether we needed any support. The team arrived on the agreed date; one of the members was an Ofsted inspector and the others were civil servants from the Commissioner's office. They spent the day observing lessons, meeting with middle leaders, interviewing children and the SLT. I had been required to send them performance data, the *Self Evaluation Form* (SEF) and the *School Improvement Plan* (SIP) a week ahead of the visit. It didn't feel like a visit to find out about the school; it felt more like a shadow Ofsted inspection (George 2018; Dunford 2016)!

At the end of the day I met with the visitors and they fed back to me their findings. They liked much of what they saw—good quality teaching, good behaviour, happy children. They also conceded that the arts results and outcomes were among the best in the county. But the problem was the curriculum. Not all children studied humanities and a language for GCSE therefore we were failing to provide a good quality education. The solution they offered: we should join a MAT.

It didn't stop there. The first visit was only the beginning. I had to draw up an action plan to send to the team; I was asked to re-draft my SIP and send to them for feedback and approval. This then triggered another visit; the second one very much framed within an Ofsted style. Letters, phone calls, emails; the pressure was increasing.

So caught up and consumed by what felt like a fight to retain the standalone status for my school was I, that I didn't even notice at first how unwell I was becoming. I was so busy dealing with what was happening *around* me that I didn't notice what was happening *to* me. A blanket of political power was being slowly pulled over my school, enveloping it, suffocating it, rendering it helpless, demanding submission. At the same time, a blanket of aggressive, debilitating, critical life-threatening and life-limiting illness took over my fragile humanness, smothered my strength and left me completely broken. At the time I did not connect the two; but now in recovery, I can.

I see now that there is a *living connection* between the Head and the school he or she leads. In deeply committing to the school, I felt its takeover as a personal takeover; the takeover of the professional self at the same time as the personal self. But the attacks did not cease. Whilst I was critically ill in hospital, weak, fed alternately first by a glucose then by a morphine drip, emaciated, more than half my body weight gone, so weak that I could not even stand up, the Deputy Head who had taken the helm in my absence, received a call from one of the officials. They had heard that I was ill and wanted to know what was wrong with me; how long would I be away? It was my absence now that created the space where power could be applied—the space where a rhetoric of failure could be further enforced. As a Headteacher I was experiencing in congruence two different forms of what I can only describe as violence: my physical self was being attacked by an illness that carried me to the space between this life and the next whilst my professional self was being forced into a space where I could no longer be the authentic leader that I had signed up to be. I was being asked to pledge allegiance to what I experienced as a sinister practice that had infiltrated the profession that I loved. But I simply could not comply with what I did not believe in.

I returned, months later, to resume my place at the helm of my Arts College. But I returned as a very different person. I could see with far more clarity and detachment now. I had received my calling when our Lord gave me new life and I knew that my work there was done. I left the school that I had loved, lived and breathed for five years. Within six months the school had been taken over by a MAT. I still keep a distant eye on the school and how it is faring. I note with interest that since it was taken over, its results have gone down, its popularity has decreased, its Ofsted grade was reduced from 'Good with outstanding features' to 'requires improvement'. And the Headteacher has suddenly 'disappeared' (Lepowska 2015; Waters 2013).

Academies and Catholic Education

I tell this story not to speak out or against the Academies programme. I believed wholeheartedly in it when it was first conceived as its transformational mission to address engrained underachievement in some of the poorest parts of the country had appealed to me. But I do not believe in what it has become anymore. I have deep concerns and fears that the practices that I experienced will at some point both find their way into, and impact upon, Catholic education.

I came into Catholic education in some ways to find refuge from what was a terrible, frightening and debilitating experience in the non-denominational Academies sector. But I am concerned. If the Academies programme and its commonplace associated practices are embraced by the Catholic sector, my question is one of preservation and protection of the mission; and raises a question of mission integrity (Grace 2002).

I contend that the Academies programme was conceived out of an ideology. A government that formulates policy and sets about reform based on ideology is not a wise government (Apple 1996). Our Catholic Christian faith is *not* an ideology. I submit that our faith will be at risk if it aligns itself with the ideology of education which is now implicit in Academisation. It is still, as yet, under-researched (Chapman and Salokangas 2012). Our faith may well find that it is incompatible with an ideology that appears to privilege finance, data, executive structures and managerialism over and above its people.

I question why, if there is no longer a call for compulsory academisation coming from central government, is there an increasing pressure on Catholic schools to academise and then be organised into Catholic Academy Trusts? What benefit; what gain; what deepening of Catholic practice and strengthening of Catholic education can be gained from entering into a lifelong legal agreement with a government that is then enabled to dictate policy and practice that will directly impact upon our mission (Newsam 2013)?

We are living in uncertain times, and we are surrounded by a deepening sense of what could be described as existential doubt (Ellis and Bochner 2016; Merrill and West 2009). My call to the Catholic education community is simply to wait; listen,

watch, read the research and the body of literature that *will* start to grow. Separate the truth from the spin (Gewirtz et al. 2004). Ask for God's guidance. And be patient.

Wise decisions can only emerge from discernment (Nouwen 2013). Before we go stumbling forth into a place from which we might never be able to return, let us consider other ways, the possible alternative ways of securing our future. Let us guard against an unconscious participation in legitimising practices such as the stripping away of professional and human dignity of our school leaders and teachers, of placing the value of assets above the value we place on the mission, before we stop seeing the child and in their place see just data (Sharratt and Fullan 2012).

Conclusion

Are MATs and Academies a threat to Catholic education? I maintain that as educators in England, we are currently divided on this issue. But as the Gospel warns us: 'if a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot last' (Mark 3: 26). Now is not the time to divide and fragment. Now is the time to apply our deeply Catholic practice of discerning wisdom from prayer, from scripture and perhaps from the auto- and ethnographic stories of those who have lived and worked in the Academies programme; from those who have certainly suffered but, above all, survived.

Notes

1. Autoethnography has roots in anthropology and ethnography. As a methodology it places the self (auto) in the writer's specific field (ethno) and enables the writer to tell the story (graphy) of their experience within that field. It was first championed as a qualitative research methodology in the 1980s as a reaction to the so-called 'crisis of representation' in the field of social science research that questioned how positivist approaches to research could present truths of lived reality; autoethnography accounts for the role of personal experience in research and offers an approach for studying cultural experience. It privileges personal voice and lived experiences and developed in the work of prominent researchers specialising in the field such as Laurel Richardson, Arthur Bochner, Deborah Reed-Danahay and Carolyn Ellis. Although a contentious and questioned methodology within the field of academia, it has grown in prominence and popularity in both the USA, Canada and, in more recent decades, in the UK.

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