University of Stirling

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Is this Academy a place where teacher agency can flourish?

A case study of the extent to which the autonomy gained by one school through its 'Academy Status' enabled teachers to achieve professional agency.

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Like many doctoral students, those dear to me have lost me in recent times. My sister Kathryn never lost faith in me and provided me with the inspiration to keep going. My friend Maria Edmond played a key role and showed great patience as she offered support and challenge.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my late parents, Bette and John McGowan. I cannot be sure they would have fully understood all of my research, but I know they would have been proud.

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with teacher agency and how this is achieved within the autonomous schooling model of England's academies programme. The enquiry draws upon the empirical work conducted in a single case study sponsored academy ('Bucklands Academy'[1]) in 2012. The research was conducted in order to investigate whether the autonomy and freedoms afforded to one such school extended to the teachers working in it and how this affected their professional roles as classroom educators.

The thesis begins by sharing my research interest, which relates to whether greater levels of school autonomy enhance the pedagogical approaches taken by teachers. This interest then develops towards the notion of teacher agency and asks the fundamental research question: *Is this academy a place where teacher agency can flourish?*

The study sets out the policy context for academies in England, including an analysis of the historical development of state secondary schooling since 1944. It is shown that the continued 'need' to develop a new approach to schooling, eventually in the form of academies, started with claims of unfairness, discrimination and waste of talent brought about by the tripartite system of schooling established by the 1944 Education Act. It then analyses later concerns about the alleged failure of the comprehensive system to achieve its aim of raising standards for all children. The political contexts of state schooling are considered, and particular attention is given to the neo-liberal ideology developed after 1979 of 'rolling back the state', introducing choice and competition between schools and increasing the role of the private sector in the delivery of public services.

However, the scope of the investigation is not restricted to the national policy context; the research interest lies in establishing what the key reforms have meant for teachers in the classroom and how this has affected the agency they achieve. A number of themes

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[1] This is a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of the school (see 5.12).

emerged in the review of key literature, including school autonomy, teacher professionalism, the policy to practice paradox and discourses around the academies programme.

This thesis sets out a clear theoretical position, which draws upon the critical realist social theory developed by Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer. This approach offers a centrist alternative to what Pring (2000b) describes as the *false dualism* of the two epistemological positions of educational research. Critical realism posits that the world is real and that its structures exist beyond our understanding, but that our knowledge of this stratified world is socially constructed. Within the structure-agency debate, the *ecological view* of agency developed by Priestley *et al.* (2015) is adopted, which sees it as being context-dependent and something that individuals achieve in concrete settings.

The empirical work within this study consisted of semi-structured interviews, observations and documentary analysis. The main findings from the research are that the case-study school had significant autonomy to develop its own policies and approaches to raising standards. However, this autonomy did not extend to any significant extent below the level of the academy sponsors and the principal. The school had developed a highly performative culture where teachers' work was centrally directed and through which they were held highly accountable for the attainment of their students. It was found that the way in which autonomy was distributed throughout the school affected the agency of key stakeholders. The sponsors achieved high levels of agency, the principal achieved restricted agency and teachers achieved limited agency.

It was found that teachers took one of two approaches to a new curricular reform being introduced by the academy sponsors. They either adopted it or used their limited agency to modify it so that it aligned more closely with their own educational philosophies. There was no indication that any teachers rejected the school's reform, and it is suggested that this may have been the result of them subordinating this key policy to their ultimate concern of working in a school recognised by school inspectors to be highly effective. This thesis concludes that, contrary to the policy rhetoric, teachers working in one sponsored academy may have had less autonomy than those teaching in

local authority maintained schools. This in turn affected the agency they achieved, which appears to undermine the original vision and aims of the academies programme.

The thesis concludes by offering possible areas for further research which emerged during this study.

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Background to the Thesis

> The academies programme has been good for teachers—they are paid more than teachers in other schools, even although they are on average younger. If you look at academies, a disproportionate number of student teachers want to work in those highly successful schools. Teachers want to work in academies, and why not? Because academies are schools where teachers are in charge, where headteachers have the freedom to design their own curriculum free from my interference or anyone else's interference, and where different methods of teaching and learning can be pioneered. The resistance to the academies programme is increasingly from people who want to swim close to the edge of the pool rather than striking out into the centre of it. All I can say is, if you come on in, the water's lovely in the academy programme. Once you've had a chance to work and operate in an academy, you'll never want to go back.
>
> (Gove, 2012b)

This quotation from the former Secretary of State for Education was in response to a question put to him by a student teacher at the *London Festival of Education* on 17 November 2012, which I attended as part of my research. The declaration that 'teachers are in charge' and 'headteachers have the freedom to design their own curriculum free from my interference' lies at the heart of this thesis. The aim was to find out whether this was the reality in one sponsored academy in England.

1.1   Introduction

In this chapter I explain my research interest and motivations in undertaking studies leading to the Degree of Doctor of Education (EdD). The evolving and iterative nature of my thesis is explained, illustrating the journey from an initial interest in possible school structures to support *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) in Scotland to the final focus on teacher agency in a sponsored academy in England.

This study relates to my professional background as a headteacher over the past 18 years in a number of different educational contexts. The ways in which these experiences have informed my research is explained in 1.4, together with my motivation to develop deeper expertise at doctoral level as a senior professional working in the field of education.

An important concept with regard to this research relates to autonomous schools[2], discussed briefly in this chapter and then followed up in more depth in 3.3.2. Although the theoretical concepts of agency and teacher agency are discussed in Chapter 4, my stance on agency is explained in this introductory chapter to make clear the epistemological beliefs on which this thesis is based.

I am interested in academies and the role of teachers within them. In particular, my research focuses on analysing the extent to which academies value autonomous, agentic teachers. The research is based on a single, standalone case study of an academy in England which was opened between 2005 and 2010 following the closure of its 'predecessor' school. In order to protect the anonymity of the academy, its staff and students, no reference is made to either its name or that of the predecessor school. No specific details regarding teachers, students or subjects are included in the write-up of the fieldwork and citations from inspection reports and other documentation are anonymised. Although some specific contextual information gained during the fieldwork provided rich data (e.g. the motivations of the sponsors which may help explain aspects of the academy's educational approach) the inclusion of this has been avoided to protect the anonymity of the respondents.

Finally, the overall structure of the thesis is outlined before concluding with the research questions, which have evolved over the period of study. Having read this introductory chapter, the reader should understand my area of research and my motivations for developing further knowledge in this field of study.

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[2] I am using the term 'autonomous schools' to describe those which have autonomy from the local authority and are self-governing.

1.2 Approach to Scholarship

This research has evolved during my period of study for the Degree of Doctor of Education (EdD) at the School of Education, University of Stirling. The EdD allows postgraduate students to develop research on chosen topics in ways that are deeply connected to important professional interests, practices, policies and impacts. To be an expert practitioner is now a contemporary expectation of professionals in public services, including education. Society does not confer professional status unquestioningly; it has to be earned through a clear demonstration of effectiveness and impact in the relevant field of work (Dent and Whitehead, 2002). There is a professional imperative for educators to be informed about their field at a higher level. The EdD allows them to do this by critically evaluating existing literature and empirical research, creating new knowledge about their line of professional work and advancing understanding by making a significant, original and rigorous contribution to the field of education. This was my intention in conducting this research.

What I believe has been a strength of the work leading towards this thesis has been the interaction between my research and my professional practice as part of an iterative process. One has informed the other in a dialectical approach. I have developed my theory from practice through 'engaged scholarship' (Boyer, 1990). Theoretical explanations together with abstract and conjectural concepts have become clear and relevant as a result of my professional experiences. In turn, my research has informed and changed my professional practice resulting in the development of a much deeper understanding of education and the role of teachers as professionals.

As a result of this doctoral research, combined with my involvement in academic seminars and conferences, and in interacting with the teams of which I am part, I am participating in the fourth phase of engaged scholarship—by teaching. Through this thesis I hope to develop a greater understanding of the continued development of the academies policy and what this means for teachers. Using the knowledge gained, I hope to influence the development of practice in my field at school level with colleagues and governors, locally with other school leaders and at national level by contributing to the debate around schooling and the role of teachers, both in England and Scotland.

1.3   Justification for this Study

There are two ways in which this thesis is relevant to my own professional context as the headteacher of a large state secondary school (converter academy) in England. The first relates to how I lead and develop colleagues to enhance their roles as teachers in what are uncertain and turbulent times in state education in England. Teaching faces the challenge of having a generation of educators who make up what has been termed a 'directed profession' (Bottery and Wright, 2000), with the consequence that 'teachers have come to be seen more as technicians implementing preset policy … [rather] than as professionals creatively mediating flexible policy frameworks' (Priestley, 2011, p. 226). At the same time, government ministers harbour great suspicion towards student teachers engaging with academic theory, and instead favour a utilitarian approach to 'on the job' teacher training through schemes such as *School Direct*[3] and *TeachFirst*[4]. Indeed, they champion the place of unqualified teachers in schools (*The Guardian*, 2014b). This techno-rationalist approach to teaching (Bottery and Wright, 2000) is not new, and Simon (1981) identified a historical unwillingness on the part of the English education system to engage with pedagogical research and theory to any serious degree. This, he argues, is partly as a result of the social dominance of the country's most prestigious educational institutions which have, until recently, 'contemptuously rejected the idea that a professional training is in any sense relevant to the job of a public school master' (p. 125). Other commentators have further developed this line of argument (Alexander, 2004, 2010; Apple, 2004). A discourse of 'effectiveness', 'best practice' and above all 'what works' has created a hegemonic situation where the promotion of practices which are auditable and compliant with current policy takes precedence (Biesta, 2004). When underpinned by notions informed by *New Public Management* (Hood, 1995) and emergent tendencies towards performativity and survivalism (Ball, 2013), 'the space for inventiveness, experimentation and, indeed, autonomous decision-making by teachers becomes increasingly closed down' (Berry, 2012, p. 400). It is worth noting that in Finland,

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[3] A School-led option offering practical, hands-on training and education based in schools judged 'good' or better by Ofsted.

[4] A government backed registered charity which encourages graduates with a 2.1-degree or above from Russell Group universities to participate in a two-year training programme which involves practical teaching and the completion of a PGCE together with wider leadership skills training in schools situated in low-income communities.

consistently one of the world's top performing school systems in PISA[5], teachers are highly qualified and seen as 'trusted professionals' (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 129) enjoying high levels of professional freedom.

The second way in which my research is relevant concerns the future of state schooling in England with the move towards a 'fully academised' system of 'independently publicly funded schools' (DfE, 2010; Cameron, 2015). This involves removing accountability for schools at local level and transferring it directly to the Department for Education, forming part of an increasingly centralised system of schooling controlled by government ministers. Some schools are governed by business entrepreneurs—or 'sponsors'—thus allowing private individuals with no public mandate or accountability to influence education policy. The irony of this is that at a time when teacher accountability has never been stronger, those who sponsor and are handed 'ownership' of England's state schools are protected from such surveillance (Wilkins, 2014). This fragmentation and lack of local democracy in a publicly funded education system poses significant threats to the independence and professional freedoms of teachers. It also has the potential to threaten the entitlement of young people to an education for the general good by focusing on a narrow instrumentalism aimed at the world of work rather than providing them with the 'powerful knowledge required to critically engage with the world' (Priestley, 2011, p. 223) which in turn grants them 'access to society's conversations' (Wheelahan, 2010, p. 1). The concern is that education is seen mainly in entrepreneurial terms as contributing to the country's economic prosperity and competiveness. From a Critical Marxist perspective, this can also be viewed as a mechanism which helps keep 'the working classes obedient and subservient' (Hill, 2014, p. 188).

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[5] The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a triennial international survey which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of a sample of 15-year-old students from different countries.

1.4   My Professional Context

I have been a teacher and leader in a range of different schools since 1985 and headteacher of five schools since 1997—three in Scotland, one British international school in Asia and, since January 2013, in my current post in a converter academy in the South East of England. This has granted me the privilege of direct experience of three different systems, all claiming to provide what they consider to be the best of British education. In Scotland there has been a belief in the 'consensus' around curriculum guidelines (Boyd, 1994). This was traditionally based on the notion that there was no need for a national curriculum, or indeed regulations around most aspects of policy, owing to the 'strong commitment to consensus and partnership which has been the hallmark of public policy developments in Scotland over the years' (Pignatelli, 1994, p. 92). My school in Asia delivered the curriculum through the International GCSE[6] and the International Baccalaureate Learner Profile. In England, I lead within the context of the English National Curriculum, over which there is some flexibility for academies. These experiences have nurtured a desire in me to understand why various parts of the UK education system are so different and what can be learned from each of them.

My experience is that the curricular frameworks of the three contexts in which I have worked reflect the differing political and educational ideologies which accompany them. In Scotland, the notion of the *Democratic Intellect*, taken from the title of George Davie's 1961 book, can be summed up in:

> the form of a story or 'myth', shaped by history but not always supported by historical evidence, to the effect that Scottish society is relatively egalitarian and meritocratic, that ability and achievement, not rank, should determine success in the world, that public (rather than private) institutions should be the means of trying to bring about the good society, and that, even where merit does justify differential rewards, there are certain basic respects—arising from the common humanity of all men and women—in which all human beings deserve equal consideration and treatment.
>
> (Humes and Bryce, 2008, p. 99)

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[6] GCSE is the *General Certificate of Secondary Education*—academic subject qualifications awarded by examining bodies in England at age 16. iGCSE is the international alternative/equivalent, based on GCE 'O' Levels.

Internationally, the selective and for-profit model of private schooling offers advantage and privilege for those who are able and willing to pay. The neo-liberal ideology evident in England, based on the quasi-market model of schooling, has an emphasis on high-stakes testing and accountability. This is seen as being political because 'Governments want control over a compliant teaching profession and see that standards regimes provide the regulatory framework to achieve this end' (Sachs, 2003, p. 6). My move out of Scotland was to pursue my desire to lead with greater autonomy—to be in charge of my own school, which I did not consider was completely achievable within the state sector in Scotland because of the dominance of local authorities. However, since moving to England my enthusiasm for the 'independence' of state schools has been tempered as a result of the highly precarious, performative culture where it often seems that test scores matter more than educating young people. I now appreciate more fully the collegial style and commitment to the common good of the Scottish education system.

1.5 Avoiding Isolation through 'System Leadership'

A consequence of academisation for some schools is that they can face the danger of working in isolation. In recent years, efforts have been made in England to tackle the individualistic approach to schooling and move towards a policy of *system leadership*. This requires school leaders to take responsibility beyond their own schools and demonstrate a moral commitment to the education of all children and young people. This is partly about working collegially with other schools to share good practice, but is also aimed at working in a connected way with other public services and agencies to provide better support for families and communities. Recently, academy chains have been seen by government as a way to mitigate the risks associated with 'standalone' academies and to facilitate the school-to-school support integral to the notion of a 'self-improving system' (DfE, 2010; *TES*, 2015). The Conservative government elected in May 2015 is introducing legislation to broaden the category of local authority schools eligible for mandatory academy sponsorship and their inclusion in academy chains through the identification of 'coasting' schools (those that have failed to improve significantly over three years) (Hutchings *et al.*, 2015). Although much of the current research on academies is about academy chains and school federations (Hill *et al.*,

2012; Chapman, 2013; Hutchings *et al.*, 2015), this is not the focus of this particular research, and although it is acknowledged as an area of possible further study, this thesis only incorporates the case study of a standalone sponsored academy.

The notion of system leadership has been developing in England since the mid-2000s in response to what had become an increasingly diverse and fragmented school system (Yarker, 2015). Attempts at defining system leadership state that 'system leaders are those that care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own' (Hopkins, 2007, p. 47). They go substantially beyond collaboration and are a 'powerful force for change and improvement' (Higham *et al.*, 2009, p. 2). Scotland has a well established tradition of this, including through what was the *New Community Schools* initiative introduced as a flagship policy of the new Scottish Parliament in 1999 (McCulloch *et al.*, 2004). Headteachers in Scotland are seen as senior officers of the local authority rather than as chief executives of standalone institutions. Until 2009, I was a member of a Scottish local authority Secondary School Improvement Partnership, which was an executive committee of secondary headteachers and senior local authority officers charged with strategically planning broad policy developments across all schools. Thus, I have found this aspect of my role in England more comfortable than some of my current headteacher colleagues, for whom issues of collegiality and collective responsibility can mark unchartered territory. This may be attributed to a culture of competition and lack of trust between schools as a result of the legacy of the Parents' Charter and open enrolment, thus encouraging parents to select those schools perceived to be performing well, and in the process promoting the educational 'market'. This view is supported in a review of over 200 studies on introducing markets in education, which pointed out that collaboration can be a fragile process in a competitive climate:

> Research from different contexts suggests that co-operation is a vulnerable strategy and requires continuous mutual agreement. Competitive behaviour can be decided on by an individual school and has a tendency to spread with time.

> (OECD, 2010, p. 48)

1.6   Research Interest

Against this backdrop of professional experience and interest, and after a period of reflection, I became interested in what the claims around 'freedom' in academies actually mean for teachers and what the Scottish system might learn from the academies model of schooling as a way of promoting teacher agency as part of CfE.

Being a headteacher who is committed to 'teacher activism' (Sachs, 2003), and having led schools in Scotland where teachers were given a reasonable degree of professional autonomy, my early experience in England was telling me something different. Compliance and accountability pervade the school system in England (Ball, 2003), particularly in sponsored academies which are under public scrutiny to raise standards very quickly. Two connected areas of interest emerged for my research (these are not my research questions but simply the themes which directed my research interest for this thesis):

- Why are academies seen by some as the answer to the challenges faced by England's state school system and why is the academies programme expanding so rapidly?

- What is the role for teachers within the academy system and how do they achieve professional agency?

This led to the overarching research question 'Is this academy a place where teacher agency can flourish?', which was agreed with my supervisors.

Honig (2006) argues that educational leaders need to become more 'savvy consumers of research' and that they should 'mine the research for ideas, evidence and other guides to inform their deliberations and decisions about how lessons from implementation research may apply to their own policies, people and places' (p. 23). This is what I have strived to achieve in writing this thesis and I hope to be able to draw insights from this research that will help develop my own professional learning and contribute to the debates around policy in education.

1.7   Autonomous Schools

My interest in evaluating the English school system and the claims that schools there are amongst the most autonomous in the world (NCSL, 2009; Greany, 2014; *The Economist,* 2014) was the starting point for my research. This led to a case study of a sponsored academy, exploring the extent to which becoming an academy either fosters or inhibits the professional agency of its teachers.

Towards the end of my time as a headteacher in Scotland I was leading the development of CfE at school level, a key tenet of which is that responsibility for curriculum design lies with individual schools rather than central government or local authorities:

> It is the responsibility of schools and their partners to bring the experiences and outcomes together and apply these entitlements to produce programmes for learning.
>
> (Scottish Government, 2008, p. 5)

There is an explicit message here that teachers should be given professional freedom to plan high quality learning experiences within a framework of accountability as 'Curriculum for Excellence allows for both professional autonomy and responsibility when planning and delivering the curriculum' (ibid., p. 11). Hence, the early focus of enquiry for my research was to consider whether a more autonomous school system— particularly the academy model in England—might help support the development of CfE.

Policy debate around the importance of increasing school autonomy in Scotland followed a report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) *Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland,* which recommended:

> local authorities [should] negotiate agreements with schools under which greater management autonomy in staffing and curriculum is established in return for progress on an agreed platform of improvement in learning opportunities and outcomes.
>
> (OECD, 2007, p. 19)

The OECD's view was that despite the many strengths of the Scottish education system, ensuring high levels of achievement with young people was being hampered by a lack of autonomy at school level. The report warned that:

> the potential of local administrations to ensure high quality outcomes for all children may not be fully realized where schools lack a significant degree of management autonomy, for example, in staffing matters.

(ibid., pp. 35–36)

Central to the OECD report on Scotland was that high levels of school autonomy linked with tight accountability can help drive improvement, particularly in the areas of staffing and curriculum.

1.8   Beyond 'Bog Standard'

A clear example of a policy initiative to create autonomous schools is England's *academies programme*. The political rhetoric behind academies is that something *different* happens in those schools compared with 'bog-standard' comprehensives, as former Prime Minister Tony Blair's spokesperson, Alastair Campbell, famously described them in 2001. The corollary to this is that the teaching will be better and that children and young people will achieve more successful outcomes. An important part of the argument supporting academies is that they are 'free' to be innovative and creative with the curriculum. Chapman and Salokangas (2012) suggest that academies are part of an international trend in the development of independent state funded schools—part of a wider neo-liberal political shift in philosophy from *government* to *governance*. Features of the governance transition include:

> creating alternatives to public provision, developing competitive environments through the usage of user fees or vouchers, decentralising management in order to increase operative autonomy and flexibility as well as focusing on results, efficiency, effectiveness and quality.

(Chapman and Salokangas, 2012, pp. 473–474)

Much is made of the independence and autonomy enjoyed by these schools and it is argued that this, together with independent and professional governance, lies at the heart of their success (Adonis, 2012). My initial research led me to develop a line of enquiry that wished to investigate whether, if claims about the success of academies were true, *teachers* working in them were doing things differently from those in maintained schools.

My central research interest, using the theoretical framework of critical realism, lies in establishing whether or not teachers working in one case-study academy were able to use the freedoms associated with academy status to enhance their professional agency in order to improve pupils' learning. Was there an expectation from the academy sponsors and leaders that teachers would be agentic? Were they looking for people who would be keen to do things differently? The research also considers whether there is space for teachers' agency to develop and grow within what is a highly performative and accountable environment.

1.9   What is Agency?

A theoretical explanation of agency, together with the developing concepts of *teacher agency*, is discussed in Chapter 4. However, references are made to 'agency' throughout this thesis, and so it is important for the reader to have an early understanding of what is meant by the term. It is also important for me to share at this stage my ontological view of agency as an *emergent phenomenon*, rather than from a sociological perspective, which tends to see it as a variable in the structure/agency debate. Hence, a brief description of agency is given here to provide access to early references to the concept prior to a fuller discussion in 4.3.

The term 'actor(s)' is used frequently and this denotes individuals (in this research almost always teachers) who are at the heart of any social interaction—the people who are involved in activities and action—who make things happen (or not). In referring to people as being 'agentic', I mean individuals who are exercising agency.

1.9.1   Theoretical Perspectives on Agency

The concept of agency includes the idea that people are active, exercising at least some degree of control over their lives; they do not merely react or repeat given practices (Biesta and Tedder, 2007; Priestley *et al.*, 2015). In education, agency often refers to teachers' purposeful decisions and actions; hence, the concept of agency includes notions of power and the exerting of influence (Ortner, 2001; Hökkä and Vähäsantanen, 2014). Such influence can be directed at one's work, career and identity, as well as institutional and societal circumstances. It is argued that it is meaningful to talk about agency as existing *only* when the individual has the power to act—to affect matters, make decisions and choices, or bring about some kind of change in a prevailing situation (Eteläpelto *et al.*, 2013). In distinguishing between agency and action, Priestley *et al.* (2015) clarify that actors can have agency without exercising it. They may, for whatever reason, choose not to exercise their agency—but it still exists, which still accords with having the 'power' to do so.

Hökkä and Vähäsantanen (2014) posit that agency means that teachers are able to negotiate the conditions and content of their work, and to influence the community and organisational issues, including educational reforms. Teachers' agency is strong if they are able to be active subjects in influencing the practices that are meaningful to them in their work and, conversely, their agency is weak when they lack such opportunities. They also understand professional agency as a *relational phenomenon*, one that is intertwined within sociocultural conditions. These include organisational conditions and practices, as well as situational demands, constraints, and opportunities. This accords with Archer's model of structure, culture and agency (Archer, 1988–cited in Priestley, 2011).

My interest in agency within this research relates to the extent to which teachers are able to influence their approach to the curriculum and pedagogy. I seek to establish whether they draw upon their own *personal* philosophical resources and professional expertise to exercise judgement and make decisions which affect their daily professional practice and hence the learning experiences of their pupils. I view teachers with agency having a significant degree of control over *how* they teach. To a lesser

extent, as a consequence of nationally prescribed examination specifications, I also see teacher agency as enabling teachers (individually and collectively) to have some control over *what* they teach through influencing curriculum content. This is more relevant, although not exclusive, to the lower (Key Stage 3) years of secondary schooling.

1.9.2   My View of Agency

It is important at this point to clarify how I am viewing agency within this research. Agency is a much-contested term as is evident in the long-standing structure/agency debate in sociology (McFadden, 1995; Willmott, 1999; Biesta *et al.*, 2015; Priestley *et al.*, 2015). This dichotomy focuses on the relationship between individualism and holism. The core question is whether individuals or social structure should be given primacy in explaining social ontology. Ball (1998) argues that the debate is simplistic and that the interplay between structure and agency is contextually dependent. In certain situations structure can limit who speaks and acts and is treated as a constraint and not an enabler for change. In other circumstances, however, human agency opens up the possibility of the transformation of structures—individuals, or individuals acting collectively, are able to reshape these structures.

Priestley and colleagues claim that the 'slipperiness of the notion of "agency" can be seen in the common tendency to conflate agency and action' (Priestly *et al.*, 2015, p. 19). As McFadden (1995) has observed, 'questions about structure and agency, particularly in education, are obviously not going away' (p. 295). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) suggest this is because:

> in the struggle to demonstrate the interpenetration of agency and structure, many theorists have failed to distinguish agency as an analytical category in its own right.
>
> (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 963)

A commonly expressed sociological view of agency sees it as an individualistic human capacity residing within the person—a personal attribute that individuals can claim to 'have' or 'possess' (whether or not it is exercised). However, my stance is based on the concept of an *ecological view* of agency (Biesta and Tedder, 2007), which sees agency as an *emergent phenomenon*. With its roots in the philosophy of action, agency is seen

as something that is *achieved* by people through the interplay of personal capacities and the environment in which individuals act. As Priestley and colleagues explain:

> This makes it important not just to look at individuals and what they can do, but also at the cultures, structures and relationships that shape the particular 'ecologies' within which teachers work. It is the *interaction* between capacities and conditions that counts in making sense of teacher agency.
>
> (Priestley *et al.,* 2015, p. 3)

The relationship between culture, structure and human activity made critical realism the appropriate research philosophy for this study. I draw on the work of Archer (1988, 1995, 2000), Bhaskar (2008), Priestley (2011) and others to understand the interplay between these three spheres, and this is discussed in depth in Chapter 4.

1.10   Overview of Thesis

Following this introductory chapter, which explains my research interest, Chapter 2 looks at the development of state secondary schooling in England from 1944 to the present day. This is important as it illustrates how the academies programme evolved—to address the alleged failures of various school structures which preceded it. I analyse the tripartite system of schooling resulting from the 1944 Education Act; the comprehensive schools movement from the 1960s; the significance of James Callaghan's 1976 Ruskin College Speech; and the neo-conservative and neo-liberal approaches to schooling and rolling back of the welfare state from 1979 to the present day. An overview of the introduction of academies, with their roots in grant-maintained schools and City Technology Colleges, is followed by more recent policy developments and the broader process of 'academisation'.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature around key themes, starting with the development of autonomous schools. An area considered which arose from within the fieldwork is how policies are enacted in schools and why some reforms are more successful than others. A review of the literature on academies considers the role of sponsors and private interests in state funded schools, the claims made about academies, as well as the debates over the effectiveness of the academies programme. Issues of governance and

new forms of *polycentric policymaking* (Ball, 2009) are discussed, as well as what this new world of schooling means for teachers.

Chapter 4 discusses the theoretical concepts of agency and teacher agency, followed by an introduction to my ontological and epistemological stance of critical realism. These are used to develop an understanding of the interplay between structure, culture and human activity as the basis for the emergence of agency, leading to the framework for understanding teacher agency developed by Priestley *et al.* (2015).

Chapter 5 concerns the development of the research strategy and focuses on the conception and framing of the research as a form of case study and the evolution of methods to explore teachers' agency. In devising a strategy to answer the main research question, a case-study plan was developed which underpinned the design of the research (Robson, 2011, p. 141)—see the research sample in Appendix 1. I discuss my data collection methods as well as referring to the ethical considerations which had to be taken into account. Of relevance to this research was the issue of 'researching up' (Walford, 1994), and I outline how this affected my enquiry.

The final chapter constitutes a discussion of the main findings and evaluates the contribution of this research to new knowledge. It draws together themes running throughout the research in order to make sense of what may be happening in the case-study academy. In particular, I discuss how teachers found ways to exercise their professional agency despite structural constraints. The research suggests that although the academy as an organisation enjoys significant autonomy, this did not extend to the work of individual teachers. It found that the strong performativity and accountability agendas led to a culture of directive, top-down control of teachers' work requiring their compliance and adherence to particular approaches dictated by sponsors and the principal. There was a distinctive, whole-school approach to pedagogy in the case-study academy which was non-negotiable and included teachers *delivering* a centrally prescribed knowledge-based curriculum in Key Stage 3. In situations where teachers did exercise agency, it tended to be in nuancing and adapting prescribed approaches to tailor learning to suit the needs of their pupils and their own preferred styles of teaching.

1.11   Research Questions

The research questions, developed over the period of the project, eventually focused around the themes of academisation and teacher agency. The principal research question is:

- Is this academy a place where teacher agency can flourish?

With two follow-up questions being:

- In what ways was agency achieved by key stakeholders in Bucklands Academy?

- How has 'academy status' improved educational standards at Bucklands Academy?

1.12   Conclusion to Chapter 1

The main finding from this research, which is discussed in 7.2, is that contrary to the official policy discourse on academies suggesting that teachers are trusted to make important decisions without 'bureaucrats' telling them what do (Cameron, 2015), this was not the case in Bucklands Academy. It was found that the agency of key stakeholders was related to the level of autonomy and professional trust they were granted. I established that the sponsors of the academy *acted* autonomously and achieved significant agency. The principal had restricted autonomy, and although agentic in certain areas of decision-making, his agency was constrained in important aspects where one might have expected him to be more influential in deciding school policy. Overall, I argue that teachers in Bucklands Academy achieved less agency than one would expect in a school where the philosophy is that 'teachers are in charge' (Gove, 2012b). I infer that this is the result of the dominance of the sponsors' vision, the culture of performativity and high levels of accountability in the school. Overall, therefore, I conclude that this academy is not a place where teacher agency can flourish.

I am unaware of any previous research which considers teacher agency specifically within the context of academies, hence I believe that this thesis makes an original contribution to new knowledge in a number of ways. Firstly, it highlights a contradiction between policy and practice regarding the place of the professional teacher working in what could be considered to be a typical sponsored academy. This has significant implications for how researchers and professionals working in the field of education make sense of the academies programme and evaluate one of the key tenets of its rationale. If teacher agency is not allowed to flourish in such a school, what is the purpose of academies? The answer may lie not in the 'professional freedoms' of teachers, but perhaps more in political and structural concepts, such as the diminution of state funded schooling provided as part of the welfare state. It may also be that as the academies programme has evolved, instead of a school's independence being a *key factor* in raising standards, it has actually become an end in itself—with *being* independent considered more important than the opportunities that independence brings. Finally, some policy initiatives emerging within the academies programme (e.g. the adoption of the *Core Knowledge Sequence*[7]) potentially challenge the democratic nature of schooling. Questions are raised about what knowledge is taught and who decides this. Increasingly, this appears to be individuals from the private sector rather than professional teachers who are accountable to the communities they serve.

Having outlined my research interest, professional context and main themes within the thesis, the next chapter considers the policy context of my study. It begins by taking a historical perspective of the expansion of secondary schooling in England from 1944 with the tripartite system of selective schooling, followed by the comprehensive movement of the 1960s and 1970s, with the later introduction of neo-liberal approaches to schooling after 1979. The introduction of the academies programme in 2000 is seen as a key response to the alleged failure of the comprehensive school system. It has also contributed to the rolling back of the welfare state and the introduction of new private partnerships in the delivery of state funded education as part of New Labour's *Third Way* and the Conservative Party's *Big Society* policy agendas.

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[7] The CKS is based on the work of E. D. Hirsch Jr. and his concept of *cultural literacy* (Hirsch, 1987). It is predicated on the belief that children's ability to learn is greatly enhanced when they can draw upon a wide body of knowledge, allowing them to make connections between new and previous learning.

Chapter 2

Policy Context of Academies

> This has nothing to do with the 'localism agenda' that Michael Gove boasts about. In reality, it involves a massive transfer of power from our democratically elected local bodies to civil servants at the Centre.
>
> (Chitty, 2011, p. 336)

2.1   Introduction

To fully understand the policy context of academies it is necessary to look at the development of post-war secondary education in England from the 1944 Education Act, with its tripartite system of schooling, and then to consider the subsequent development of the comprehensive school movement from 1965. The election of the Conservative government in 1979 led to explicit neo-liberal approaches to public services, including education—particularly after the 1988 Education Reform Act, which extended the concept of markets and competition to all state schools. This began a policy trajectory that has been continued and developed by all UK governments since (West and Bailey, 2013). This led to the launch of the academies programme by New Labour in 2000 and the subsequent expansion of academies and free schools by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government elected in 2010.

Successive governments have felt the need to 'fix' secondary schooling in England over the last 70 years. The selective grammar school/secondary-modern system was seen as divisive, unfair and wasteful of talent. Those on the right saw the comprehensive system as a failure, even before it was fully established. The City Technology Colleges initiative only ever became a marginal corner of the system aimed at creating choice and diversity of schooling. The 'need' to do something about secondary schools (Adonis, 2012) endured, and through time academies were seen as the answer.

In this chapter I outline the background to the academies programme, including why successive governments since the mid-1980s have seen 'independent state-funded schools' (Chapman and Salokangas, 2012) as the blueprint for publicly funded schooling in England. While examining the arguments over academies, I will outline

policy developments in state secondary schooling from 1944 to the present day, analysing the journey from selection to 'comprehensivisation', and then to the introduction of diversity, choice and quasi-markets in schooling. A central theme of the chapter is that of 'rolling back' the welfare state in the provision of a public education service as championed by those on the New Right. Subsequent policy revisions inherent in New Labour's *Third Way* and David Cameron's *Big Society* are also considered. Fundamental features of the marketisation of schooling are developments in performativity and accountability, both for schools and individual teachers. These themes are referred to throughout the thesis, and it is suggested that they militate against the achievement of teacher agency.

2.2   Academies Programme

'City Academies' were first announced by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, in a speech to the Social Market Foundation on 15 March 2000 on the theme of tackling school failure (*The Guardian*, 2000). They are independent state schools publicly funded by central government and outside the control of local authorities. They have greater autonomy than conventional state schools, particularly on matters such as the curriculum, the format of the school day/year and the ability to set their own pay and conditions for staff (Adonis, 2008, 2012; Ryan, 2008; Basset *et al.*, 2012; Gove, 2012a; DfE, 2013b).

When they were launched, the aim of these schools was to improve educational outcomes for some of the most disadvantaged pupils in England. The Secretary of State's introduction to the *Prospectus for Sponsors and Other Partners* laid out the vision:

> We need a dramatic increase in the number of successful schools in our cities. Far too many schools are under performing in terms of the outcomes for their pupils … No single approach will solve all problems, but radical innovation in the creation of new schools is one option. City Academies will provide for this.
>
> (DfEE, 2000, p. 4)

Schools which were in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage and judged by Ofsted[8] to be failing, with falling rolls and poor examination results, and which were being spurned by local parents, were to be replaced by city academies. A 'failing' school would be closed and then immediately re-opened as an academy, with a new headteacher, new independent governance and substantial additional resources. Pupils from the 'predecessor school' wishing to join the new academy had to be guaranteed a place. Some commentators have argued that the generous additional funding for academies is the main reason for any discernible improvement in performance (Gorard, 2005; Beckett, 2007; *The Guardian*, 2007).

Whilst academies with subject specialisms were allowed to select up to 10 per cent of their intake on the basis of pupils' aptitude for this aspect of the curriculum, funding agreements required that they operate as all-ability schools and that:

> the admissions criteria must be clear, objective and fair, and must comply with equal opportunities legislation; they must take up to agreed pupil numbers; must admit pupils of different abilities, including special needs pupils.
>
> (DfEE, 2000, p. 10)

However, claims have been made that many academies have changed their pupil profiles by reducing the numbers from disadvantaged backgrounds and attracting more middle-class families (Beckett, 2007; Wrigley, 2011). This is discussed in 3.10.

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[8] The Office for Standards in Education: England's non-ministerial governmental body responsible for inspecting and regulating schools and other education services.

2.3   Expansion of the Academies Programme

Following the 2002 Education Act 'city' was dropped from the name, allowing for academies outside urban settings. The Academies Act 2010 then led to a significant expansion of the programme, moving beyond 'failing' schools to allow any school judged 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted to convert to academy status of its own free will in order to take advantage of direct government funding and increased levels of autonomy. The Act also broadened the academies programme through the introduction of free schools (see 2.13). Academies receive the equivalent level of funding per pupil as maintained schools in the same area, but they also receive funding for services previously provided by the local authority (DfE, 2013a). Thus, schools converting to academy status have an immediate budget increase, which it is argued is the prime motivator for many headteachers and governing bodies deciding to make the change (Downes, 2011). These changes signalled a clear shift in emphasis, from something must be done about *city* schools, to something must be done about *all* schools. Additionally, it suggests that even those doing well can do even better outside local authority control.

There is now a policy of compelling underperforming and coasting schools to become sponsored academies as part of academy chains (Hutchings *et al.*, 2015; *The Guardian*, 2015). At the time of writing, the Education and Adoption Bill[9] is on its way through its final reading in Parliament and if passed will *require* the Secretary of State for Education to change any maintained school rated as 'inadequate' by Ofsted into an academy. McInerney (2015) suggests that the 'government is literally passing a law to take away its own powers of judgment' as 'failing' schools will automatically become academies.

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[9] See http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2015-16/educationandadoption.html.

As can be seen in Figure 1, these policy developments have led to a substantial increase in the number of academies. By the time the New Labour government left office in July 2010 there were 203 [secondary] academies. In January 2015 there were 2,075 secondary academies and free schools, representing 61.4 per cent of publicly funded mainstream state secondary schools in England (DfE, 2015). In January 2015, 62.5 per cent of state secondary pupils were enrolled in academies or free schools (ibid.). The graphs demonstrate that academies are no longer a 'niche' branch of state schooling in England.
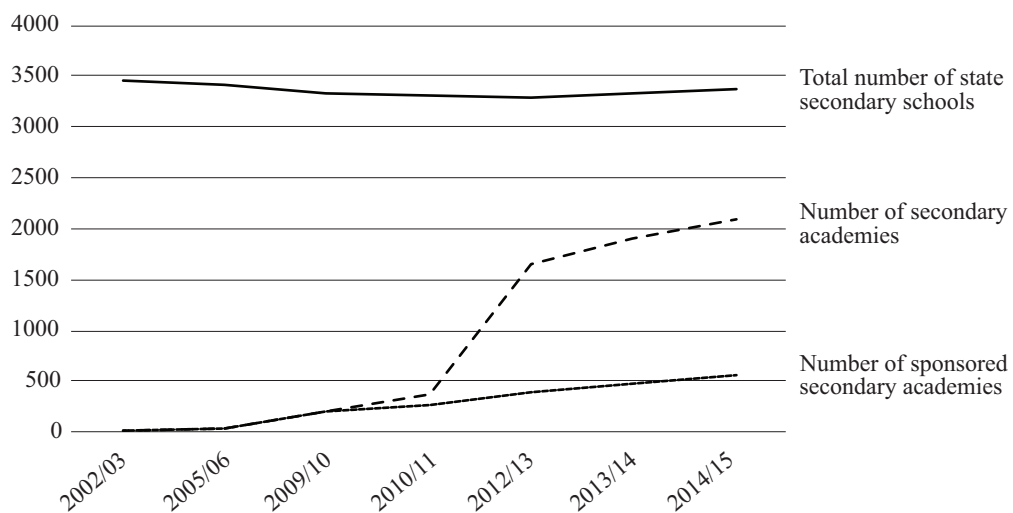
Figure 1: The Expansion of Secondary Academies in England 2002–2015 (DfE, 2015)

With the diversification of the programme, what has emerged is a typology of academies. Husbands (2012) rightly makes the point that 'It's not clear that the single term "academy" captures much about this complexity'. Whilst I refer at times to different types of academies, the focus of my research is on secondary schools, and so I concentrate my analysis on 11–18 academies[10] (including those that are 'all-through' combined primary and secondary).

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[10] This does not include special schools or alternative provision such as pupil referral units.

2.4   Independence

The unwavering vision for academies with consecutive governments has been the importance of being 'independent' schools. For Prime Minister David Cameron, the top priority in his government's education policy is to ensure that every headteacher is free from the influence of 'bureaucrats':

> I want teachers not bureaucrats deciding how best to educate our children. We have already seen how academy freedoms have been fundamental in turning around failing schools.
>
> (Cameron, 2015)

This belief is based on the assumption that academy freedoms foster innovation and raise educational standards.

Glatter (2009) suggests that the importance of 'self-government' in the official discourse around academies relates to the pivotal role that elite private schools play in English culture and society. This consequently brings pressure to bear on politicians to deliver some of their supposed features to the users of the state system. Legislative reforms in England regarding publicly funded education have been about 'the imagining, promotion and realisation of the "independent" school as the preferred model' (Gunter and McGinity, 2014, p. 300).

This admiration of the independent school as a preferred model for state education has its origins in a neo-liberal and neo-conservative alliance (Gunter, 2011b). The neo-liberal approach to schooling can be thought to include the 'businessification' of education (Hill, 2014). Neo-conservative thinking holds that governments must intervene to ensure morality and social order. It defends traditional forms of hierarchy and national culture, and is 'critical of egalitarianism and collectivism which … have encouraged an anti-enterprise and permissive culture' (Furlong *et al*., 2000, p. 9). In schools, neo-conservatism can be seen through the adoption of traditional approaches aimed at maintaining order and the status quo, such as strong discipline, House systems, formal uniform, speech days, prefects and a traditional academic curriculum which promotes 'British values'. Hill (2014) argues that neo-liberalism is always accompanied by neo-conservatism because the 'capital class, and the governments they control, have

to make sure that [the] freedom of the market is controlled' (p. 185). Lawton (1992) makes a similar point, suggesting that neo-conservative thinking has a 'pessimistic view' of society derived from Hobbe's view of human interaction as 'nasty, brutish and short' unless tightly controlled by social rules. Conservative Party thinking is, thus, based on the notions of 'custom', 'tradition' and 'order'. So that:

> whereas the neo-liberals tend to talk about choice, competition and the market in education, the neo-conservatives are more likely to advocate traditional values, traditional subjects, and less educational theory in the training of teachers, but greater immersion in the traditional values of good schools.
>
> (Lawton, 1992, p. 7)

This could be viewed as policy foresight into what would become the difference between the academies programme under New Labour and the later Conservative-led governments. New Labour's vision was arguably more about improving failing schools in deprived communities. It could be argued that Conservative policy is more about competition within the market but also about putting a traditional stamp on schools, what Gamble (1994) refers to as 'the free economy and the strong state'. For Margaret Thatcher 'rolling back the state' meant 'a reduction in the scope of government but not a diminution of its strength' (Lawton, 1992, p. 8).

2.5   Genesis of Academies

Academies effectively grew out of the City Technology Colleges (CTCs), which were launched by the Conservative government in 1986. The plan at that time was to establish CTCs as 'state independent schools' in urban areas, sponsored by business and with an emphasis on technology and science, and to sit outside the control of local authorities. These schools were to be run by independent trusts, with capital funding coming from the private sector and the state providing recurrent funding. In practice, however, few business sponsors came forward and the government covered virtually all of the funding and the number of CTCs remained small (Whitty *et al.*, 1998).

As well as formally establishing CTCs, the 1988 Education Reform Act also gave existing schools the opportunity to 'opt out' of local authority control and run themselves as grant-maintained schools with direct funding from central government. Approximately one-fifth of England's secondary schools opted out, but subsequently returned to the mainstream system as 'Foundation Schools' under New Labour in 1997. For the schools that remained with the local authority, *Local Management of Schools* (LMS) meant that they had greater control over their budgets and day-to-day management. Open enrolment meant that popular schools could attract more pupils, so that schools could no longer rely on a catchment area intake and had to attract sufficient numbers to remain viable.

In 1992 more schools were encouraged to become grant-maintained and it was also at this time that specialist schools were introduced, first in technology and languages, and later in a range of other subjects. These schools were given additional funding to support their specialism and were allowed to select up to 10 per cent of their pupils on the basis of aptitude for the specialism. All of these developments reduced the funding and control of local authorities in the management of schools.

New Labour's academies were essentially a continuation of the Thatcher government's commitment to independence, diversity and specialisation in the state sector. West and Bailey (2013) suggest that academies really brought together CTCs and the specialist schools programme, so exhibiting continuity with past Conservative policy and that change was 'via a process of layering and policy revision' (p. 153). Only 15 CTCs were created by the Thatcher and Major Conservative governments, the last being in 1993, and all but three of these have now converted to academy status.

2.6   Political Nature of the Academies Programme

Although the Conservative Party would claim the academies programme to be part of its *Big Society* agenda (Higham, 2014), it was initially a clear sign of New Labour's *Third Way* between the state-control ideology of 'Old' Labour and the neo-liberal ideology of the Conservative Party. Ball (2009) suggests that academies are just one part of an 'experimental and evolutionary' set of 'policy moves' which are about re-inventing and reforming public services from hierarchical bureaucratic and administrative structures so that they are delivered through alliances between the public, private and voluntary sectors. Described as the new world of 'plural controlled schooling' (Woods, 2010, p. 145), education is seen as the concern of a range of new players and a mix between the public and private sectors—a new world that lies somewhere between state control and market forces.

A succession of government ministers has hailed the successful impact of academies on pupil outcomes, often with no evidence to support these claims (Gunter, 2011a; Fisher, 2012). Only 17 academies had been opened by 2004 when the New Labour government published its *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (DfES, 2004). The strategy made a commitment to have 200 academies 'open or in the pipeline' by 2010, irrespective of the fact that no assessment would have been made of either their academic achievements or cost-effectiveness. Thus, before any meaningful GCSE results had been recorded, the decision had been made that academies were the future of schooling in England.

The academies programme has proved to be one of the most contested policy areas within public sector reform in England (Gunter, 2011a; Chapman and Salokangas, 2012; Ball, 2013; Chitty, 2013a). To understand why academies were considered crucial in addressing the 'failure' of so many state schools, it is necessary to analyse the policy context of state funded schooling in the post-war period leading up to 1997. It was sustained criticism from the New Right of the 'failure' of the comprehensive system which led to the dismantling of the post-war settlement of a national education service provided as part of the welfare state. I now turn to the expansion of secondary schooling from 1944 and the introduction of comprehensive schools after 1965.

2.7   A National System, Locally Administered

The 1944 Education Act established the principle of free universal education in England up to the age of 15, reflecting the sense of urgency that the post-war Labour government attached to education as a key driver of social and economic change. Education was delivered locally through democratically elected authorities and was a service that belonged to 'the public' (Pring, 2013). Local education authorities were responsible for ensuring that there were enough school places, enough teachers, a fair distribution of resources and a fair admissions system. Local responsibility was responsive to local opinion, and this inevitably resulted in different systems in different parts of the country (ibid.). The values inherent within the post-war settlement had the support of both Conservative and Labour politicians, most of whom shared a common experience and broadly similar set of aspirations and who were determined to banish the hardships of the pre-war years. Thus, there was cross-party acceptance of a three-fold commitment to full employment, the welfare state and the co-existence of large public and private sectors in the economy (Marquand, 1988–cited in Chitty, 2013a).

The system of policy making that was established as an integral part of the 1945 post-war settlement has often been described as a 'national system, locally administered' (Aldrich, 2013, p. 68). Being a source of much pride at the time, this system involved the continuing operation of a 'benign partnership between central government, local government and individual schools and colleges' (Chitty, 2011, p. 335). The clear emphasis on the importance of 'localism' and 'partnership' was seen as a post-war British response to the dangers inherent in the centralising tendencies which had been obvious in other parts of Europe (Barber, 1996; Chitty, 2011, 2013a; Pring, 2013):

> The tripartite partnership that existed between central government, local government, and the individual schools and colleges seemed to contemporaries to involve a network of checks and balances that ensured the effective diffusion of power within the education system and thereby prevented the imposition of what might be seen as undesirable policies.

(Chitty, 2013a, p. 26)

In stressing the importance of local representation and accountability beyond the purely administrative, Henry Morris, Chief Education Officer for Cambridgeshire from 1922, argued perceptively:

> We tend to forget that local government is also a cornerstone of freedom, as every dictator realises when, on getting into power, he abolishes it—think of Napoleon in France, Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany.
>
> (Morris, 1943–cited in Chitty, 2011, p. 336)

It is significant that 68 years after the end of the Second World War, serious concerns were being expressed about the 'free market' system of academies and the centralisation of education policy in England (Ranson, 2012; Chitty, 2013b; Newsam, 2013). There is also disquiet amongst some about the control of schools being handed to private 'sponsors' who are free to set the vision, aims and ethos in line with their own personal and educational philosophies with no accountability (Beckett, 2007; Benn, 2011; Millar, 2014).

2.8   Different Schools for Different Children

The 1944 Education Act made secondary education compulsory until the age of 15. However, children were separated at the age of 11 by 'age, ability and aptitude' into grammar, technical or secondary modern schools on the basis of the '11-plus' examination taken at the end of primary school. In 1960, two-thirds of 11–15 year-olds, mainly working-class children, were placed in secondary moderns with inferior resources and less-well qualified staff. It is argued that these were 'chronically inadequate schools and were never valued in their own right' (Adonis, 2012, p. 14). Very few pupils in secondary modern schools remained in school after the age of 15 to take examinations—only one in eight secondary modern schools recorded O level passes in 1960 (Ball, 2013).

Selection at age 11 was based on the spurious notion that there were three specifically different types of mind—the academic, the technical and the practical—and that children could be separated on the basis of their measured ability and aptitudes (Simon, 1991). Categorising children in this way was seen as being unfair, socially divisive and modelled on class division (ibid.). It cast a 'pernicious shadow over the

education of less privileged groups throughout the twentieth century'
(Tomlinson, 2005, p. 16). The post-war Labour government compounded the apparent
social inequalities by arguing against the introduction of comprehensive schools at the
same time as reducing the number of grammar school places. Frustration about the
influence of the English class structure was clear:

> even under a Labour government elected with massive majority, the mediation of class
> relations was still seen as a major function of the education system.
>
> (Simon, 1991, p. 115)

Tomlinson's explanation for why successive Labour governments have shown little
interest in challenging the influence of independent and grammar schools is that
'the ideology of meritocracy … has always had a strong appeal for Labour leaders, and
their attitudes towards private schooling have always been ambivalent' (2005, p. 17).
Simon takes a more critical view:

> By 1947-48, then, the government (and the ministry) had shown its hand quite clearly on
> two issues following the Act. First, a determination to impose a tripartite solution on the
> nation's secondary schools, and second, an equal (but less visible) determination to ensure
> that the new dispensation did not radically open up new opportunities for the hitherto
> disadvantaged—that is, to the working class as a whole.
>
> (Simon, 1991, p. 115)

Concerns over the lack of equality of opportunity grew throughout the 1950s and 60s.
The Crowther Report (Ministry of Education, 1959) drew attention to the 'waste of
talent' amongst working-class school leavers. It noted the need for a more educated,
adaptable and skilled workforce, which was not being produced by the
grammar/secondary-modern system. It found that pupils from semi-skilled or skilled
family backgrounds were 'much under-represented in the composition of selective
schools', but 'over-represented' in the secondary moderns. Most of the 'sons of
professional people' went to grammar schools, but only a minority of manual workers'
children did so. As Boliver and Swift (2011) point out: 'any assistance to low-origin
children provided by grammar schools is cancelled out by the hindrance of secondary
moderns' (p. 89). Research indicates that even today, despite the claims made about
social mobility, grammar schools in the twenty-first century continue to discriminate
against children from poorer backgrounds:

> there is no evidence whatsoever that Grammar Schools provide a 'ladder of opportunity' for poor and disadvantaged pupils. The clear picture that emerges is of a system of schooling that discriminates against pupils of this type and is also highly exclusive in its social composition.

<div align="right">(Jesson, 2008, p. 25)</div>

The technical schools promised as part of the 1944 settlement could not contribute to the tripartite vision as they never became more than a peripheral part of the post-war school system (Tomlinson, 2005).

It is interesting to note the enduring concerns over 'wasted talent' and lack of social mobility in the English education system. There is a clear similarity between the concerns expressed in the 1950s and 60s and those made more recently about the lack of social mobility of children and young people from the UK's most socially deprived communities (Reay, 2012; *The Telegraph*, 2012; *The Guardian*, 2013b; Nuffield Foundation, 2015). Academies, including those sponsored by universities and independent schools, are seen as being key to addressing this inequity in 2015. However, it was to be through the comprehensive school movement of the 1960s and 70s that efforts were made to level the playing field of educational opportunity, and it is to this policy that I now turn.

2.9 The Comprehensive Ideal

The Conservative government of the early 1960s recognised that educating more young people to higher levels was an economic necessity and this coincided with the views of some Labour politicians that educating all children together was a desirable aim. The lack of grammar school places was unacceptable to the growing new middle-classes and aspirant working-class parents, for whom secondary modern schools were regarded as second best. A broad consensus was thus established during this period that comprehensive schools should be established and higher education provision expanded (Simon, 1991). As a result, many of England's grammar and secondary modern schools were replaced with all-ability community comprehensive schools over a 15-year period following their introduction by the Labour government from 1965. This was later accompanied by the raising of the school leaving age to 16 in the school year 1972/73.

By 1979, well over 90 per cent of England's secondary school population was being educated in comprehensive schools (Barber, 1996).

Differing views on comprehensive education meant that struggles quickly emerged—and remain—over matters of status, unequal access (to schools, courses and examinations) and parity of prestige with the remaining grammar schools. Furthermore, the negative critique of comprehensive schooling by the political right—what Johnson (1991–cited in Ball, 2013, p. 79) terms the 'forming of the New Right educational tendency'—emerged almost immediately in the early 1970s. Comprehensive schools had barely had time to become established before grammars had become synonymous with 'good' schools and comprehensives with 'bad' schools (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 21).

The myth of lower academic standards in comprehensive schools was presented in fearsome and often-inaccurate ways in a series of 'Black Papers' published by right-wing academics and policy groups between 1969 and 1977. The Black Papers, together with a variety of neo-liberal and New Right policy groups, gained considerable influence with Conservative education policy thinking during the 1970s and 1980s. This signalled a new kind of 'think-tank' influence and approach to policy-making in education that played its part in moving the articulation of policy ideas away from local government and the civil service, as well as providing the basis for a 're-narration of the public sector in terms of neo-liberalism (and neo-conservatism)' (Ball, 2013, p. 80).

Comprehensive schooling began initially as a programme to roll back selective education, but has always been subject to 'standards' arguments from its critics. The period of expansion in secondary education between 1944 and 1976 was one that was beleaguered with entrenched ideological conflict, historic social divisions and class struggles which have defined English education from the outset (Stevenson, 2011). The introduction of comprehensive schools coincided with the advocacy of 'progressive education' and child-centred teaching methods, which became another focus for attacks by those on the right, despite the fact that the evidence suggests that most teachers were not particularly innovative in their teaching methods (Tomlinson, 2005). Reynolds *et al.* (1987) describe the period 1965–1987 as 'two decades of controversy' and argued at that time that 'it is the insecurity of the comprehensive enterprise which is now most

striking' (cited in Ball, 2013, p. 81). Moreover, the idea of a 'common' school with a common curricular experience for all pupils increasingly came under threat from policies designed to increase 'choice and diversity' *within* the comprehensive system. Many comprehensive schools were organised by ability streams rather than mixed-ability groupings and 'the grammar-school curriculum continued to hold its central and dominant position in the secondary-school curriculum, despite comprehensive re-organization' (Hargreaves, 1982, p. 51). The challenge was later compounded by the launch of CTCs and the introduction of specialist schools. All of this muddied the waters and made comprehensive reform difficult, if not impossible. In summing up an evaluation of comprehensive schooling, Adonis claims that a large proportion of the comprehensive schools were little better than the secondary moderns they replaced:

> In reality, comprehensives were essentially a continuation of their predecessor secondary modern schools rather than the creation of new schools. They were 'secondary modern comprehensives', as I came to call them, and this is why they so largely failed.
>
> (Adonis, 2012, p. 12)

It was against this backdrop that successive governments felt compelled to 'do something' about the alleged 'inadequacy' of comprehensive schooling. I would argue that the comprehensive struggles of the 1970s lie at the heart of the subsequent moves towards the vision of a fully academised system that we have today. Although the fracturing of the comprehensive ideal was cemented by the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s, a moment of 'organic crisis' (Gramsci, 1971) came in October 1976 when Prime Minister James Callaghan opened up the debate about the purpose of education and who should be able to influence educational policy. I now turn to Callaghan's Ruskin College Speech and its legacy for education policy in England.

2.10 Ruskin and Beyond

Perhaps the most significant challenge to the comprehensive system came in October 1976 when Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan decided that it was time to have a public debate on education. In a speech at Ruskin College Oxford, he attacked what he called the 'educational establishment' who he claimed were failing to prepare young people for the world of work and schools had not yet realised the higher standards of education needed in a complex world (Barber, 1996; Riley, 1998; Tomlinson, 2005). Callaghan challenged the monopoly of teachers and educationalists over progressive teaching methods and the aims of education. In particular, a phrase that was to be seized upon by the media and became a key aspect of the speech's legacy was his argument that 'the secret garden of the curriculum' needed to be opened up, signalling the end of what was called 'the Golden Age of teacher control (or non-control) of the curriculum' (Lawton, 1980, p. 22). In calling for a 'Great Debate', Callaghan argued that education should have two goals: to equip children for 'a lively, constructive place in society' and to prepare them 'to do a job of work'.

The longer-term impact of James Callaghan's speech was that it laid the groundwork for the accountability movement that was to come:

> Under a succession of governments, a discredited and ineffective pattern of peer accountability was replaced by a combination of markets and bureaucratic patterns of accountability. The strategy of change that emerged was one of greatly increased central determination of policy.
>
> (Hoyle and Wallace, 2007, p. 9)

Ball (2013) agrees that the speech broke new ground for what was to come and that its effect was to 'disrupt the existing settlement within education policy and begin to make what was to follow possible' (p. 83). There was a discursive 'shift in the balance of power in policy making … and the real losers on this were local authorities and teachers' (ibid.). Whilst debates have developed as to whether the reforms introduced since the 1980s have improved education, it can be argued that Callaghan did indeed open up the 'secret garden' of the curriculum. At the very least, 'teachers are [now] more attuned to the expectations of parents and the National Curriculum has provided a national framework that ensures consistency' (Hoyle and Wallace, 2007, p. 10).

Having had the status quo disrupted by Callaghan, it was to be the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major (1979–1997), followed by those of New Labour (1997–2010), which would break the mould of state schooling in England through the introduction of neo-liberal policies. It is to an analysis of these policies that I now turn in order to understand the developments linked to the expansion of the academies programme.

2.11   The Neo-Liberal Marketisation of Education

The characteristics of the system of schooling in England today, which encourage diversity, choice and competition together with an increased role for the private sector, have their origins in the neo-liberal policies of former Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. She was critical of Keynesian economics and social policy for creating a 'nanny state' in which people were seen as being dependent on welfare. Her plan was to reduce taxation, 'roll back the state' and allow people to have greater control over their lives. Nowhere was the impact of the fundamental change to the delivery of core public services brought about by Thatcherism felt more acutely than in education which, since the 1944 Education Act, had been seen as the very cornerstone of the welfare state (Chitty, 2013a).

Neo-liberalism is an economic logic underpinned by a commitment to the idea that the best way to ensure prosperity and equal opportunity is to restructure all economic and social arrangements to operate as if there were a free market. Ball (2013, p. 49) refers to the 'policy technologies' of choice, devolution, competition, leadership, management, entrepreneurship, privatisation, governance, and within all of these and between them, there are a set of subject positions—a language, relationships, practices—a social imaginary which we call 'neo-liberalism'. This provides a new way of thinking about public services such as education, rendering it as a 'commodity' rather than a public good (Thrupp and Willmott, 2003). Ball (1997a) suggests that all of this is embedded within and contributes to changes in the technology of state control, what he calls 'steering at a distance' and what Hoggett (1994) calls 'remote control'.

The result of the neo-liberal agenda on education has been to convert the state education system into markets to improve its quality by encouraging competition between schools. This has been achieved through diversity, delegated budgets (determined largely on pupil numbers) and increasing the power of parents—at least in theory—in relation to their choice of schools. Central to the diversity of schooling and the involvement of the private sector has been the academies programme.

2.12   New Labour's *Third Way* and Academies

The *Third Way* was seen as a clear commitment from Tony Blair to modernise the Labour Party (Gewirtz, 2002; Whitty, 2002; Ball, 2013; Chitty, 2013a). It was to present the Party's policies as being distinct from those of its neo-liberal Conservative predecessors, whilst also making clear that there would be a break from the state-dominated social democracy of the Old Left and previous Labour administrations. Blair's philosophy was that programmes should no longer be driven by ideological preferences, but by a 'healthy pragmatism'. It was about what actually works rather than the constraint of political ideology.

Academies are a clear example of the Third Way approach to the delivery of public services, with private sponsors, local authorities, charities and religious groups all working in partnership to establish schools competing in a free market. Despite New Labour's concern for social justice, criticism is made of the Party's term in office for its failure to address inequalities in schooling and its detrimental effect on liberal education[11]. The argument is made that towards the end of New Labour's time in office, the Third Way approach had run its course and the policy tide was turning towards a much-needed alternative. The neo-liberal 'authoritarian, didactic assumptions that inform effective schooling and hyper-accountability' appeared to have reached a cul-de-sac in both conceptual and developmental terms (Barker, 2010, p. 140).

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[11] The ideal of a liberal education is one that is 'civilised, broad and humane, based on learning that is disinterested and cultivated for its own sake. It is generally contrasted with vocational education that is instrumental and designed as a preparation for a job or a career'. (McCulloch and Crook (2008) (Eds.) *The Routledge International Encyclopedia of Education*, p. 358)

2.13 Cameron's *Big Society* and Academies

The 'new' policy agenda of 'Cameronism', which accompanied the election of the coalition government in 2010, is described as a distinctive new form of governmentality and a process of depoliticisation. The responsibility for decision-making is seen to be 'at one remove' from government, thereby allowing politicians to 'distance themselves from accountability while enhancing their electoral prospects' (Kerr *et al.*, 2011, p. 200).

David Cameron set out his vision for the *Big Society* while still Leader of the Opposition at a speech at the Conservative Party Conference on 15 March 2010:

> It includes a whole set of unifying approaches—breaking state monopolies, allowing charities, social enterprises and companies to provide public services, devolving power down to neighbourhoods, making government more accountable. And it's the thread that runs consistently through our whole policy programme—our plans to reform public services, mend our broken society, and re-build trust in politics.
>
> (Cameron, 2010)

A clear example of the Big Society operating in education came with the introduction of free schools, which are academies set up from scratch wherever there is demand. The government has argued that the proposers will typically include 'teachers, charities, parent groups, faith organisations and others' in what is described as an opening up of state resources which will empower civic society (DfE, 2010). Free schools are a purposeful attempt to liberalise the 'supply side' of education. Since the 1980s a range of reforms have attempted to stimulate the demand side of the quasi-market to make schools more responsive to parental choice and the competition this creates. However, the introduction of free schools marks the first time in post-war England when *anybody* can set up a state funded local school.

2.14 Conclusion to Chapter 2

In order to appreciate the 'need' for academies, this chapter has analysed the development of state funded secondary schooling in England from 1944 to the present day. This has been necessary to understand the issues surrounding the attempts to

ensure the fair and equitable expansion of secondary education. The themes which emerged in the review of policy were:

- the expansion of provision

- equality of opportunity and access to good schools for *all* children

- the role of schools in supporting the country's economic and industrial competitiveness

- claims of low educational standards in secondary modern and comprehensive schools

- the development of a quasi-market in education offering parents choice and diversity of schooling

- the commitment since 1979 to reduce the size of the welfare state and involve the private and voluntary sectors in providing public education.

It is only by understanding these issues that we can begin to make sense of why academies have been seen as the preferred model of schooling by successive governments. New Labour grandees might claim that academies are a shining example of their Third Way philosophy, regenerating urban education in some of the country's most deprived communities—a pragmatic solution 'which works'. The Conservative Party views academies and free schools as being at the heart of its Big Society agenda and has used the programme to create a system of 'opted out' schools based on neo-conservative values, appealing to middle-class, aspirational parents.

Teachers are at the centre of debates about standards in schools, and what is of particular relevance to my main research question is a consideration of how teachers have been viewed by policy makers and the wider public in the different models of secondary schooling since 1944. How teachers perceive their role is an important factor influencing the professional agency they achieve. A system which respects the role of teachers and offers them professional autonomy may provide greater opportunities for their agency to emerge than one in which their work is centrally directed and where they are highly accountable. The different systems of schooling discussed in this chapter reflect variations in the freedoms granted to teachers, with academies arguably

providing them with less autonomy than any previous structures. This restricted autonomy has implications for whether or not teacher agency can flourish.

My analysis of academies shows that they represent continuity and development of neo-liberal policy in the provision of state education with successive governments since 1979. They form part of the commitment to choice and diversity of schooling within a quasi-market, believed to drive up standards. They also contribute to the erosion of the post-war welfare state settlement as it has given way to private sponsorship and ownership of publicly funded schools.

The rhetoric of 'freedom', 'autonomy' and 'innovation' attached to the discourses around academies suggests that there is an important role for the teachers working in them. It could be inferred from this that the professional agency of teachers in academies is an important aspect of teaching in a 'pioneering' way (Gove, 2012b).

My analysis of education policy in England over the last 40 years suggests that competition, performativity and accountability have become increasingly prevalent and are now culminating in the academies programme. The academies programme enables sponsors to effectively 'own' their schools, setting out their distinctive ethos and educational approach. In the words of Lingard and Sellar (2012) '[it] is difficult to be optimistic about how this complex policy mix—perhaps most consistently characterised by the depoliticising impulse to displace state responsibility for education—will play out' (p. 52). Given these trends, it is difficult to envisage a situation other than where the demands on teachers to comply with a centralised policy agenda can only increase, thus further restricting their professional agency.

I now develop my thesis by moving from the policy context and turn in Chapter 3 to review key literature on autonomous schools, the academies programme, teacher professionalism, school reform, policy enactment and school governance in academies. I will then outline my research philosophy in Chapter 4, which includes a theoretical analysis of the concept of teacher agency.

Chapter 3

Literature Review

Power over children's education is being handed over to a rag-tag bunch of second-hand car dealers, carpet salesmen and tax-avoiding city traders.

(Wrigley, 2009, p. 48)

He's changed my whole management approach for the better. I've become more performance orientated, clearer about our objectives and more solution focused. It's been exciting and very liberating.

(Principal of Bristol Academy–quoted in *TES*, 2005)

3.1 Introduction

A number of themes emerged during the development of this thesis as a result of the reading of academic literature, reviewing policy, and also during my fieldwork. The themes covered specifically in the literature review are:

- school and teacher autonomy
- teacher professionalism
- the process of policy making and enactment
- how schools adopt and adapt reforms
- the academies programme.

Teacher agency and my theoretical framework of critical realism are discussed in Chapter 4.

3.2 Scope of the Literature Review

A body of literature on academies is now beginning to emerge, but in comparison to other themes within the study it is limited. Gleeson suggests this may be because:

With few exceptions research access to academies, compared with mainstream schools, has been something of a no-go area, reflecting the political sensitivity associated with the 'goldfish bowl' effect of early academy development.

(Gleeson, 2011, p. 199)

The literature which does exist focuses mainly on the contested nature of the academies programme and debates over its success. In linking the literature to my research questions, my main focus relates to teachers' agency and how this is affected by the governance structure of academies.

A review of policy enactment is included, which was a theme that emerged as a result of my fieldwork. During my data collection I discovered that the case-study academy was implementing a new curriculum policy, and this proved to be a key issue with teachers and leaders. It also exposed the role of teacher mediation in school reforms, which relates directly to my interest in teacher agency.

While I have not conflated school autonomy and teacher autonomy, the main focus of my work in this area has been on *what school autonomy means for teachers*. I had to guard against the possibility of digressing into a theoretical study of the concept of 'autonomy'. My research interest relates to autonomous schools and why (and indeed whether) this model of schooling supposedly offers teachers the opportunity to be 'in charge' of their work (Gove, 2012b).

3.3   School Autonomy

3.3.1   The Concept of Autonomy

The etymology of autonomy can be traced back to the capacity for self-governance (Owens and Cribb, 2013). In the dominant liberal interpretation, self-governance is normally understood as the ability to take decisions about one's life as an individual—independently from others and free from outside interference and external constraint. Pitt suggests that autonomy is a 'vexed, complex and contradictory concept':

> As a common trait of the modern, educated human being, autonomy refers to independence from external influence and freedom of the will. In professional contexts, autonomy is, on the one hand, extended and specified through claims to specialized knowledge and skills and, on the other hand, opposed as expression of the will of the individual against public or institutional interests.

(Pitt, 2010, p. 2)

Reich (2002) does not consider autonomy to be a natural quality of humans, but something that is learnt and dependent in part on an individual's intrinsic capabilities, thus liable to 'progress and regress' (cited in Parker, 2015). Garland (1997) argues that context affects the 'ebb and flow of autonomy' and that it is a relative concept connected to one's capacity and power to act in certain situations.

Philosophers, such as Emmanuelle Kant (1785), have typically located personal autonomy in an agent's capacity to engage in a process of deliberation and decision-making about the course of his life—to be one's own person. This characterisation of autonomy as freedom of will provides a *deliberative account* of personal autonomy (Frankfurt, 1989). It is about an agent's ability to critically reflect upon his desires and act according to those which are most in line with his true and authentic volitions. Owens and Cribb describe this as a *proceduralist* account of autonomy:

> [W]hat is important for autonomy is not the content of the desires an agent has, but that the reasoning behind these desires conforms with the appropriate psychological procedures necessary for autonomy.
>
> (Owens and Cribb, 2013, p. 264)

These procedures typically involve a process of reflection and reflective endorsement of the options chosen. Proceduralist accounts, therefore, suggest that autonomy can be achieved by ensuring that the deliberative procedures of people are uninhibited. An example of this might be in the National Health Service where a patient is free to give his or her consent to health treatment. Owens and Cribb make the point that theorising autonomy in such a narrow and abstract way is problematic. Human beings are always situated within complex material and social structures, which have a bearing on the psychological processes that determine their capacity for autonomy. For example, patient decision-making is influenced by social factors such as fear of stigma, cultural beliefs and interpersonal relationships—which may lead us to question the extent to which we can judge a patient's decision to be autonomous.

I find the notion of *relational* autonomy posited by Owens and Cribb (2013) helpful, which involves concerns for 'real world' issues in the practice of autonomous deliberation. This concept of autonomy is useful in educational research, where agents' actions inevitably must take account of social structures and contextual factors, e.g.

school accountability measures. This extended view of autonomy has much in common with the ecological view of agency I take within this study, where autonomy (and hence agency) might, as a result of contextual factors, be possible in one situation but not in others.

It is with this view of autonomy that I now consider autonomous schools and autonomous teachers.

3.3.2   Autonomous Schools

School autonomy is a contested issue (Fisher, 2012; Glatter, 2012b; Pearson/RSA, 2013) and questions have been raised as to whether 'it is the elixir that policy appears to imply' (Glatter, 2009, p. 105). According to Husbands (2015), the question of how much autonomy a school should have is one of the most difficult questions in education policy. He argues that schools' autonomy is granted not to allow them to do as they like, but rather to do as *expected*. This was evident in the 2015 Conservative Party Manifesto commitment to make the English Baccalaureate all but compulsory, and also in a more recent suggestion from government to ban mobile telephones in all schools (*The Telegraph*, 2015a). These policy suggestions do not leave much scope for schools to use their autonomy to make decisions for themselves.

For some schools, being part of a multi-academy trust can also put restrictions on their autonomy, where there can be a requirement to follow the directives from 'head office'. According to the chief executive of England's largest multi-academy trust—*Academies Enterprise Trust* (AET)—there is less autonomy for schools in academy trusts than there is for schools overseen by local authorities (*Schools Week*, 2015).

The UK Government, like those of other jurisdictions, pays heed to the findings of research on the impact of school autonomy conducted by the OECD. However, the OECD's findings are not clear-cut. Commentary on the 2012 PISA results made clear that: '[R]elationships between school autonomy and performance are … complex, and the relationships vary according to the extent of the accountability arrangements that systems have' (OECD, 2013, p. 4). Elsewhere, the OECD develops a more sophisticated argument, showing the link between autonomy and accountability:

In countries where schools account for their results by posting achievement data publicly, schools that enjoy greater autonomy in resource allocation tend to show better student performance than those with less autonomy. In countries where there are no such accountability arrangements, schools with greater autonomy in resource allocation tend to perform worse.

(OECD, 2011, p. 1)

In other words, school autonomy is a complex issue and depends on the policy context. Giving schools autonomy without accountability can be problematic—it can lower, as well as raise standards. In England, the significant autonomy enjoyed by all schools is accompanied by high levels of public accountability.

The OECD (2013) points to the futility of using autonomy purely for managerial purposes: 'greater responsibility in managing resources appears to be unrelated to a school system's overall performance' (p. 52). Some observers of autonomous schools (Fisher, 2012; Gilbert, 2012a) suggest that managing financial resources has been the most significant feature of LMS in England and there has been very little attention given as to how autonomy can better support improvements in learning. This is an important finding linked to my third research question, which considers how academy status improves the standard of education provided by a school.

Husbands (2015) makes the point that 'the debate about levels of school autonomy and oversight won't go away' and nor should it, as autonomous schools are 'spending public money'. He suggests that the key question raised by the OECD findings is not for politicians and regulators to consider whether school autonomy is a good thing or not, but instead to consider 'what *sorts* of decisions need to be made at *different layers* of the school system, and how these interact' (ibid.). This suggests that there is a role for agency at the different (stratified) layers within a school—sponsors, leaders and teachers.

3.4 Teacher Autonomy

Until 1976, the prevailing image of teacher professionalism in England and Wales revolved around the ideal of teachers individually and collectively possessing a high degree of autonomy and control in the curriculum domain. According to Lawton (1979), the 'golden age' of teacher control of the curriculum was from 1944 to 1960, a period which was denoted by its optimism and consensus in education (Kogan, 1978). The ideal of teacher autonomy was repeatedly endorsed among teacher groups and by a range of educational agencies as a central aspiration. McCulloch (2001) makes the point that it was widely assumed that the autonomy of teachers included the freedom to decide not only *how* to teach but also *what* to teach, and that they had a primary responsibility for curriculum development and innovation. He contends:

> this prerogative was not subject to the fickle demands of parents and the community, still less to the interest of the state or political parties. Rather, it was to be carefully preserved as the province of teachers' experience, judgement and expertise.
>
> (McCulloch, 2001, p. 104)

McCulloch (2000) argues, however, that 'the ideal of teacher autonomy was frequently belied by reality' (p. 27). He suggests elsewhere that a wide range of competing pressures that became increasingly evident during the 1950s and 1960s undermined teacher autonomy. One such pressure was the growing influence of examinations at all levels of the education system during that period. These tended to establish a uniformity of expectations and standards, reflected in the requirements of universities, colleges and employers, which constrained teacher-led innovation and 'belied the idea of each school being responsible for its own curriculum' (McCulloch, 2001, p. 105).

In the years that followed James Callaghan's Ruskin College Speech, a major struggle developed over teacher professionalism (McCulloch, 2001). As was discussed in Section 2.10, the then Prime Minister's intervention served to encourage a concerted challenge to inherited ideals and understandings of teacher professionalism that were based on the so-called 'secret garden' of the school curriculum. Moreover, with the role of the teacher in the curriculum domain being viewed as a key source of their professionalism in England and Wales, the incursions of the state and the introduction of the National Curriculum have been widely viewed as marking a 'major and

unprecedented threat to this "professionalism"' (McCulloch, 2000, p. 27). It is pointed out:

> In these circumstances, teachers' supposed rights in the curriculum field appeared little more than an illusion that effectively hindered reform.
>
> (McCulloch, 2001, p. 105)

3.5   Teacher Professionalism

3.5.1   *The Changing Nature of Teachers' Work*

In recent years governments and the media in many countries, including the UK, have undermined the standing of teachers with claims of poor examination results and disappointing international comparisons in measures such as PISA (BBC, 2013). The general public are constantly invited to participate in the general concern over supposed 'falling standards' and 'nations at risk', to become angry about 'failing teachers' and 'failing schools' and to admire the determination of governments to improve the 'quality' of education (Helsby, 1999). The Secretary of State for Education in the coalition government, Michael Gove, was seen to be determined to improve the *quality* of education, primarily through his criticism of state schools, the educational establishment and progressive education methods. He described his critics as:

> The new Enemies of Promise [who] are a set of politically motivated individuals who have been actively trying to prevent millions of our poorest children getting the education they need.
>
> (*The Telegraph*, 2013)

It is argued (Wilby, 2009; Ravitch, 2013a) that these attacks on teachers are not accidental, but are part of an intentional commitment to the privatisation of education through the promotion of choice and competition. In considering the role of charter schools in the USA, Ravitch (2013b) contends: 'They have become the leading edge of a long-cherished ideological crusade by the far right to turn education into a consumer choice rather than a civic obligation'. She argues that parents as citizens understand their responsibility to the common good. As consumers, however, they only look after

themselves. Parents as 'consumers' appears to be the antithesis of Dewey's view 100 years ago:

> What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.
>
> <div align="right">(Dewey, 1915, p. 3)</div>

Accordingly, teachers' work is changing across the westernised world as new responsibilities, demands and conditions of service are imposed as education is 'reformed' and 'restructured' to meet the demands of the twenty-first century. Attempts are being made by governments to move schooling towards competency-based, test-driven teaching, payment by results, and forms of indirect rule from the centre (Lawn, 1995, 1996; Helsby, 1999).

3.5.2   The De-Professionalisation of Teachers

A number of observers note that the changes which have taken place in teachers' work over the past four decades have resulted in a 'de-professionalisation' and 'de-skilling' of their roles (Apple, 1986; Ball, 2003; Galton and MacBeath, 2008). The most significant challenge to the autonomy and level of trust in teachers has been as a result of what Hanlon (1998) calls a 'commercialised professionalism', which in the public services took the form of *New Public Management* (NPM) (Hood, 1995). Often portrayed as applying industrial management approaches to public services, NPM puts an emphasis on such things as explicit performance standards, greater emphasis on output controls, the breakup of large entities into smaller units, market-type mechanisms, the introduction of competition and a stress on a professionalised commercial-style management. Bottery (1996) argues that in education, NPM led to 'the classic antagonism between bureaucracy and the professional' (p. 180).

Ball (2001) has described this central drive for quality and improvement as being embedded within three technologies—*the market*, *managerialism*, and *performativity*—and placed this in distinct contrast to the post-war public welfarist state. Apple (1986) describes this as being 'part of a dynamic of intellectual de-skilling in which mental workers are cut off from their own fields and again must rely even more heavily on

ideas and processes provided by "experts"' (pp. 42–43). Lawn and Ozga (1987, p. 52) call this the *proletarianisation* of professional roles, where formerly *skilled* occupations are analysed, systematised, and routinised, such that the autonomous and non-standard application of expertise comes to be seen as neither necessary nor, indeed, desirable.

Despite the education reform agenda's rhetoric of autonomy and professional freedom for teachers, constraining limits have been placed on their professionalism (Smaller, 2015). At the same time, teachers are given more onerous and diverse responsibilities and are subject to greater managerial control by school leaders. This has had the effect of restricting the conditions under which teachers work, putting into place a system that rewards those who successfully *comply* with government directives and who reach government targets and punishes those who do not (Day, 2002). Lawn (1996) has referred to this as the creation of the 'post-modern teacher', which is reflected in a transition from a body of 'state professionals' to a more 'differentiated, flexible workforce' (pp. 112–114). Although school contexts continue to mediate the short-term effects of the intensification of work which is a consequence of such reforms, the persisting effect is to erode teachers' autonomy and challenge their individual and collective professional and personal identities (Apple, 1986).

3.5.3   Teacher Professionality

In conceptualising different forms of teacher professionalism, Hoyle (1972) compares the notion of the *restricted professional* with that of the *extended professional*. He suggests that greater professional control requires more *extended* forms of professionality. These are people who, as well as having high levels of classroom competence, also have an awareness of the wider dimensions of their role, for example by keeping professionally informed, engaging with theory, and in finding solutions to professional problems through collaboration with colleagues. He frames this within what he describes as 'a trend towards collegial authority' (p. 43), whereby professional equals govern their affairs by democratic procedures rather than through the top-down, positional authority of the headteacher. He suggests that 'bringing teachers into a closer relationship with their colleagues increases the collective "power" [agency] of the staff, but at the cost of some degree of autonomy' (ibid.). However, this interdependence and

collegial practice opens up one's teaching to scrutiny from colleagues, and so the teacher loses his/her isolation but in the process also a degree of autonomy. Elsewhere, Hoyle makes the point:

> The teacher loses his classroom autonomy and hence control over his immediate teaching activities, but gains *at least the opportunity* of controlling the broader teaching context. … Collaborative teaching and collaborative decision-making both involve a loss in teachers' autonomy but increased potentiality for teacher control.
>
> (Hoyle, 1975, p. 317)

In describing *restricted professionality*, Hoyle stresses that the term 'restricted' is not used pejoratively, but that it refers to a teacher who has 'high levels of classroom competence' as well as:

> A good knowledge of children, a sensitivity to their development and who derives the work satisfaction from his relationship with pupils.
>
> (ibid.)

However, teachers' autonomy is significant in filtering and adapting what actually takes place in the classroom. The gap between policy-makers' aims for any new development and how it is realised in the classroom is, according to Hoyle, a result of the restricted professionality which is facilitated by teacher autonomy:

> That the strategies of innovation have stopped at the doors of the school is not surprising given the jealously-guarded freedom of the British school, but because schools have not yet developed their own innovative potential it often happens that new ideas are implemented but do not 'take' with the result that 'tissue rejection occurs'.
>
> (Hoyle, 1972, p. 43)

The term 'tissue rejection' is a powerful metaphor in describing what happens to many reforms in education, i.e. teachers picking and choosing which reforms they adopt and which they reject. This is a theme which is revisited later when reviewing the literature from McLaughlin (1976), Tyack (1990) and Cuban (1998).

3.5.4   Teachers' Influence

The state's increased influence has brought about 'a struggle among different stakeholders over the definition of teacher professionalism and professionality for the twenty first century' (Whitty *et al.*, 1998, p. 65). In many national settings, the influence of the state has increased, hence the scope for professional influence on policy and practice has diminished (Gewirtz *et al.*, 2009). The amount of control and discretion open to teachers is being reduced and this is seen as being part of the effort to undermine the dominant discourse of liberal humanism and replace it with one of technical rationality (Jones and Moore, 1993). The impact of this, according to Adams and Tulasiewicz (1995), is that teachers are being turned into technicians rather than reflective practitioners. According to Hanlon (1998), the clash between the two traditions is leading to a split within the professional ranks which, according to Whitty, revolves around the issue of trust:

> Those who are prepared to manage on behalf of their employers may gain enhanced status and rewards, but those pursuing a welfarist agenda are no longer trusted and have to be controlled more directly.
>
> (Whitty, 2001, p. 164)

This is central to my research in that if teachers' influence is being diminished as a result of macro social structures, then this clearly has implications for the agency they can achieve.

3.5.5   The Compliant Profession

It is argued that teaching has become a compliant profession (Gleeson and Gunter, 2001; Trafford, 2010; Menter and Hulme, 2013; Priestley *et al.*, 2013). Teachers have been conditioned to implement centrally prescribed policies rather than using their professional judgement to design what they consider to be appropriate learning experiences for their students. Suggesting 'being told what to do by government' became a 'habit', and that there now appears to be reluctance on the part of teachers to use their new-found academy freedoms willingly, Trafford argues:

> Prescription and regulation saved us doing a number of awkward jobs, then, but they made us dependent. This is Stockholm syndrome, where hostages develop an emotional bond with their captors. The dependency culture in schools is insidious: it grows without realising it, and becomes hard to break out of. That is where we are now. We have been demanding freedoms, insisting that big government back off, but when the tide turns and leaves that empty ground in front of us, we feel lost.
>
> (Trafford, 2010)

However, Richards (2011) argues that while there has been a degree of conformity, there has also been a 'good deal of underground, creative, educational subversion in the children's best interests' and that there are 'plenty of takers leading "the great escape" from excessive conformity' (p. 330).

The literature on the de-professionalisation of and re-professionalisation of teachers' work suggest a relegation of teachers to a 'technocratic role' (Ball, 2006). Walsh (2006) asserts that increased distrust of teachers has led to the subordination of their professional knowledge and judgement in preference for 'measurement of performance' (p. 112), meaning their critical voices have increasingly been silenced at policy level. Priestley argues that absence of curriculum theory in the professional training of teachers has undermined their professional capacity to engage with the policy debate:

> Curriculum studies has to some extent fallen into abeyance in the UK since the 1980s … In part, this may be attributed to the tendency for curriculum policy to become more prescriptive since that time. Initiatives such as England's National Curriculum undermined teacher autonomy through prescription of content, and increasingly methods.
>
> (Priestley, 2011, p. 226)

Elsewhere, Priestley expresses concern about the increasing use of technocratic language to describe the teachers' role in current official discourse around CfE:

> I am struck by their continual use of what I consider to be unhelpful language. My view is that this language is both antithetical to the spirit of CfE and detrimental to its development. I refer here to what I term the *language of delivery* … I believe that this language is extremely problematic. It constructs education as a product to be delivered, rather than a process with clear goals. Education thus becomes something that is done to people.
>
> (Priestley, 2015)

Having outlined the move from professional trust and autonomy to the compliant profession, I now turn to the literature examining just how teachers operate within these various labels and how they engage with the policy process and make sense of the school reform process. I begin with an analysis of the policy process itself before proceeding to investigate how teachers either adopt and change policy.

3.6   The Policy Process

This section of my literature review explores how policy is made and enacted. It considers what teachers do with policy once it arrives in school and how they use their agency to change and adapt it to ensure it fits with their own values and preferences. My research suggests that the agency of many teachers emerges not to act with intentionality, but rather in response to external policy demands. Sometimes this will be in an effort to make sense of the policy directives; at other times it will be to subvert them.

3.6.1   The Nature of Policy-Making

During the fieldwork conducted in my case-study academy, I discovered that the sponsors were implementing a knowledge-based curriculum in Key Stage 3. A top-down approach was being taken, with the sponsors deciding both the breadth of the curriculum and also the content, which was advised on by external consultants. Analysis of this is covered in my write-up of the case study in Chapter 6. To help make sense of this, I now analyse key literature on the policy process and the enactment of policy. I will be drawing on the work of Bowe *et al.* (1992), which highlights the distinction between different 'contexts' within the policy process.

Rational, processual understandings of the policy process (Jenkins, 1997; Fowler, 2009) separate the generation and the implementation of policy. This has tended to reinforce the 'managerial perspective' on the policy process, in the sense that the two are seen as distinctive and separate 'moments': generation followed by implementation (Alford and Friedland, 1988). This distortion produces accounts of the policy process as linear in form; whether top-down, bottom-up or allowing for a 'relative autonomy' of the bottom from the top. Thus, state control theories (Dale, 1989) portray policy generation as

remote and detached from implementation. Policy then 'gets done' to people by a chain of implementers whose roles are clearly defined by legislation.

A more helpful policy model is that posited by Bowe *et al.* (1992), one which is cyclical and dialectical, and which interacts with the wider socio-political environment. It is an ongoing, iterative process in which policy formulation and policy implementation are continuous and inter-connected. It is also one in which the balance of power can change between those who initiate and form policy and those who implement it.

In their model, Bowe *et al.* (pp. 19–23) divide up the education policy process into three different but interrelated contexts, describing it as a continuous process of inter-connected generation and implementation, through which policy 'loops' during its formation. They are:

The context of influence—in which public policy debate occurs and where policy is initiated and formed. This is where 'policy discourses are constructed' (p. 19) and where concepts, ideologies, social purposes and power influence the values and intentions of policy. Key actors in this context are parliamentary committees, ministers, national bodies, think tanks, and pressure groups that can gain influence and voice through members of parliament. Bowe *et al.* concur with Cuban (1990) that this context is based upon political ideology and the 'capture' of influence in political thinking.

The context of text production—where specific policy text emerges, where influence and political reason are written into documents of varying kinds, primarily policy texts but also other documents addressed to different parties such as the media, practitioners and officials. The aim of these policy documents is to 'control the meaning of policy through its representation' (p. 21).

The context of practice—where the consequences of policy are experienced and practiced. Policy is implemented—or not—by practitioners depending on how it is received and interpreted. Practitioners will interpret policy within the contexts of their own, differing 'histories, experiences, values, purposes and interests' (p. 22).

These contexts form a 'continuous policy cycle' (ibid., p. 19) in which they are loosely coupled (Ball, 2006) rather than being associated in a linear form. Within and between each of these contexts there are a number of arenas, both public and private, in which interpretations and influences are contested and where there is 'struggle and compromise' (ibid.). An important point to note about this model is that policy-making continues once a policy text has been launched (Bowe *et al.*, 1992, p. 14). It is claimed that practitioners are as much policy-makers in this model as those who control the discourse and text production in the early stages of a policy's formation (ibid.).

3.7   Policy to Practice

Despite the increasing prevalence of centrally prescribed policy-making, much has been written about what happens to this top-down policy by the time it reaches the classroom (Hoyle, 1972; McLaughlin, 1976, 1990; Frey, 1979; Cuban, 1990, 1998; Bowe *et al.*, 1992; Frost, 2000; MacBeath, 2008; Ball *et al.*, 2011; Priestley, 2011). Cuban (2009) calls this the *policy-to-practice paradox* (p. 64) and Ball *et al.* (2011) refer to it as *the paradox of enactment* (p. 625). These researchers describe the ways teachers find to navigate, negotiate and incorporate central policy into nuanced approaches that fit in with their own educational philosophies and values.

The agency of teachers, individually and collectively, is used to mediate structure in the form of central prescription (Bowe *et al.*, 1992). As a policy text is decontextualised from its original location and then recontextualised into a new assemblage:

> those who participate in a program at the school level will interpret it in their own terms, in relation to their own understandings, desires, values and purposes, and in relation to the means available to them and the ways of working they prefer. In short, all aspects of a program, moreover, a program is formed and reformed throughout its life through a process of contestation.
>
> (Rizvi and Kemmis, 1987, p. 21)

Thus, the traditional notion of *fidelity* to the original innovation (Cuban, 1998) as an evaluative measure of its success becomes suspect. Practitioners bring moral and service values inherent to teaching that differ from the technical and scientific values that policy elites possess. Practitioners accumulate expert knowledge about students and how to teach subject matter and skills that few policymakers may consider. In what is a

clear link to teacher agency, Cuban argues that what becomes especially important to teachers is how they can put their 'personal signature' on the mandated reform and make it work for their students and themselves and describes this as *adaptiveness*:

> To reformers … alterations in their design and variations in practice become evidence of decay and failure; to teachers, the very same modifications are viewed as healthy signs of inventiveness, active problem solving, and a precondition for determining effectiveness—as they would define it. To one, the end-product is everything; to the other getting to the end-product is as important as the outcome. This practitioner-derived standard of adaptiveness (the flip side of the fidelity standard) becomes an essential prior condition for other criteria [around which to judge a reform's success] to be applied.

> (Cuban, 1998, p. 459)

Priestley (2011) argues that policy enactment is more complex than this and that 'adaptiveness' is only part of the picture in evaluating whether changes are 'genuine changes in social practices or simply strategic responses to yet another new policy, designed to tick the boxes and satisfy the demands of accountability mechanisms without involving too much disruption to existing ways of acting' (p. 232). He suggests that one response to externally initiated innovation is to adopt superficially while continuing with more established practices.

In justifying policy enactment through a 'pedagogical frame', Spillane *et al*. (1996) argue that teachers' professional learning is not only shaped by their encounters with the curriculum (i.e. policy documents) but also by the prior knowledge, beliefs and dispositions they bring to these encounters. These include their experiences with policy, as well as their beliefs about schooling, learning and teaching, and these will in turn influence how they interpret education policy. Talking about ideas, exploring multiple perspectives on an idea and developing new understandings of an idea—all of these are critical in this view of learning. Thus, discourse is key to this collaborative approach to policy enactment:

> [W]e argue that practitioners' understandings of reformers' proposals are shaped by a variety of factors above and beyond the policy texts they read—including the context in which local educators learn, the ideas and knowledge they bring to their encounters with policy texts, and the discourse communities in which practitioners are immersed. We suggest that practitioners' responses to policy might be best thought of as learning from policy texts rather than passively absorbing and implementing some uniform, fixed vision of policy.

> (Spillane *et al.*, 1996, p. 432)

McLaughlin's (1976) notion of 'mutual adaptation' captures this dynamic, portraying policy and practice relations as more of a *mutually adaptive process*, where policy is transformed to meet the needs of local educators and local practice is transformed to fit in with the goals of policy. McLaughlin argues that innovations cannot be specified or packaged in advance and require that implementation be a mutually adaptive process between the user and the institutional setting—that specific project goals and methods be made concrete over time by the participants themselves. Frey (1979) emphasises that if reforms are to survive, the best people to make this happen are classroom teachers:

> She/he has to synthesize the feedback, eliminate the trivial, and modify the program to help it survive. Without someone performing this role, experienced classroom teachers will modify the program on their own, or toss it out when no one is looking. The next result will be to obliterate the program. Some teachers will eliminate it, others will alter it, and by the end of the trial period, administrators will be unable to determine whether the program helped or hindered students.
>
> (Frey, 1979, pp. 208–209)

The literature reviewed to this point relates to teachers, their role and how they approach their work. A central line of enquiry in this research is whether academy schools support or constrain teachers' agency as they perform their professional duties. I shall now review the literature on the academies programme before turning to consider the impact of school autonomy and how schools make use of their 'freedoms'.

3.8   The Academies Programme

In examining the literature on academies, Chapman (2013) represents a commonly expressed view that the policy on academies is highly contested, with the only area of consensus being that it is highly politicised:

> For those with views on the left of the political spectrum, academies are seen as part of a wider neo-liberal project underpinned by an antidemocratic agenda designed to promote privatization of the education service with little evidence to support improved outcomes … For those on the right, academies are seen as an attempt to increase choice and diversity within the education service by promoting innovation, injecting new freedoms, energy, and ideas into the system.
>
> (Chapman, 2013, p. 336)

There are accounts which are 'pro-academy', some of which—as pointed out by Gunter (2011b)—are written by 'insider apologists for the dominance of the elite and powerful private interests' (e.g. Astle and Ryan, 2008). There are also oppositional accounts which have focused on the ways in which pro-academy interests have used public money to gain advantages (e.g. Beckett, 2007). *The Anti-Academies Alliance*[12] operates as a national activist campaign against what it considers to be the 'undemocratic way' in which schools are closed to become academies. A theme running throughout the literature is that of the 'democratic deficit' within the academies programme (West and Currie, 2008; Chitty, 2011).

It was impossible to find documented accounts in the literature of the experiences of teachers working in academies, and this is possibly as a result of the contractual obligations which prevent such narratives. What is also missing from the literature is any rigorous evaluation of whether or not the academies programme has had an identifiable and distinctive impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

The most prominent literature on academies is from Gunter (2011a), which is a collection of papers from individuals directly involved in the academies programme. The overall view from Gunter's book is that the programme is 'highly problematic'.

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[12] A socialist campaign group composed of unions, parents, pupils, teachers, councillors and MPs with the aim of opposing the setting up of academies and free schools.

The claim is made that academies have not been genuinely successful in that they have not improved on their predecessor schools.

Elsewhere, Gunter argues that the academies programme is a policy without a robust and convincing evidence base, and is political rather than educational:

> It is a policy that is framed on the basis of giving children in disadvantaged areas more of an investment, but in reality it is about promoting markets and generating a labour force.
>
> (Gunter, 2011b)

In a balanced critique, Gleeson writes:

> On the one hand, it is possible to view the academy initiative as a highly progressive attempt to improve educational attainment in some of the weakest schools in the country. On the other, the history of academies could be construed as one in which powerful sponsors, with their own agendas and design, were handed public assets (and allegedly offered and given honours) that allowed them to define intakes, own schools and decide results. If parents are forced to choose between rival value systems in their choice of schools, rather than being able to trust their local school to equip their child to be a discerning citizen in a pluralistic society, academies will continue to lack credibility.
>
> (Gleeson, 2011, p. 210)

The arguments in support of academies centre around autonomy, the impact of sponsors and raising standards—the concept that they are a 'flagship intervention' in the disorder of failing communities:

> The academies programme was based upon a political imperative to make changes to the country's most troubled schools, and to make the necessary changes quickly. This political imperative was based on a moral, social and economic imperative: to reduce the social divisiveness of schools.
>
> (Leo *et al.*, 2010, p. 29)

Referring to the importance of independence, former Schools Commissioner at the Department for Education and one-time Chief Executive of the Haberdashers' and Aske's Federation, Dr Elizabeth Sidwell, stated her belief: 'Of all the things we've tried in education, the academies have had more success than anything else. It's this independence, so you can tailor the needs to the children you have' (*TES*, 2011). Dr Sidwell's successor as Schools Commissioner, Frank Green, speaking in 2010 as Principal of The Leigh Technology Academy in Kent, gave a similar endorsement:

> Becoming an academy has been a phenomenally transformative process. It is not an absolute necessity in the route to success, but it does breed independence of spirit and mind for headteachers. It lends you a resolve and determination to achieve things without relying on other people.
>
> (*TES*, 2010b)

Moynihan sees the involvement of the private sector in state education in positive terms and supports the involvement of sponsors:

> Private sector sponsors are sometimes criticised because they are not educationalists. This misses the point. The predecessor schools may have been run by educationalists, and yet they were unsuccessful. Sponsors do not need to be educational experts because they appoint a principal to run the schools, but they should bring high expectations and a track record of success. And they can help in creating a 'can-do' brand that supports success.
>
> (Moynihan, 2008–cited in Gunter, 2011a, pp. 1–2)

A theme running through the literature on academies is that sponsors are regarded as 'the lynchpin of the governance of each Academy' (Adonis, 2008, p. iv). The way in which schools are governed is a key issue relating to their autonomy and also that granted to the teachers working in them. I will now examine the literature on academy governance.

3.9 Governance

3.9.1 The Role of Sponsors

Other than those 'converting' of their own free will, academies are required to have a sponsor—typically business entrepreneurs, companies, not-for-profit organisations, faith-based organisations, universities or other successful (usually independent) schools. The independence of academies means that sponsors have powerful control over the management and governance of individual schools, entitling them to appoint the majority of governors and appoint the headteacher:

> Sponsors will be given considerable freedom over management structures and processes, and other features such as the length of the school day, terms and year. Academies will be expected to offer all pupils significant out of school hours learning activities and to encourage the participation of partners in mentoring, curriculum delivery, and work experience.
>
> (DfEE, 2000)

> Sponsors are held accountable for improving the performance of their schools. They do this by challenging traditional thinking on how schools are run and what they should be like for students. They seek to make a complete break with cultures of low aspiration and achievement. The sponsor's vision and leadership are vital to each project.
>
> (DfE, 2013b)

Tony Blair's education adviser, Andrew Adonis, who was the principal architect of the academies programme considers the role of sponsors and governance to be the most important factor in the success of academies:

> Academies are independent state schools but it is often stated, wrongly, that the magic ingredient of their success is independence alone. Rather, it is strong independent governance and leadership. To be effective, the governors—and the headteachers and management teams they appoint and sustain—need to be unambiguously in control of their schools without managerial interference from local and national bureaucracies.
>
> (Adonis, 2012, p. 123)

> [Sponsors] are fundamental to the success of academies. Where they succeed, they generate an educational 'multiplier effect': governance, leadership, innovation, independence, continuity and capital investment, all mutually reinforcing within a single project to create a new institution.
>
> (ibid., p. 137)

This suggests that Adonis sees it as being important that sponsors can achieve agency in order to make a difference. What is of particular interest in my research is that in recognising the need for sponsors to have agency, what effect does this have on the agency of teachers? The findings from Bucklands Academy on this issue are discussed in Chapter 6.

3.9.2   The Business of Education

According to Ball (2009), the common assumption in the arguments for privatisation in the form of sponsors is that they will import the business-style efficiencies and entrepreneurialism required to make public services more responsive to local needs. Hatcher (2006) sees this as a 're-agenting' process in which new interests, values and priorities aligned with the government's agenda are brought into state education.

There has been an evolution in the role of commercial actors in state sponsored independent schools. When City Technology Colleges were introduced in 1989, in addition to their financial contributions, sponsors were seen as providing valuable links to the world of business and as a means of connecting schools with certain kinds of knowledge that traditionally lay outside the school curriculum. This is exemplified in the 1992 White Paper in which it is claimed, 'sponsors can play a very positive role in helping schools to specialise in their preferred areas' (DfE, 1992, p. 44). Thus, during this period the involvement of commercial actors was promoted as introducing students to additional knowledge in the areas of science and technology.

Papanastasiou (2013) found that in the academies programme, commercial actors are not only present in the governance of education, but they are playing an active role in the 'reconceptualising discourses' of education that include questions over the very meaning of 'public' education. Sponsors are much more *embedded* in their schools as opposed to being separate entities or providers of additional knowledge. The Labour government's *Children's Plan* gave a clear endorsement of the role of sponsors: 'Sponsors challenge traditional thinking on how schools are run and what they should be like for students. This helps to raise standards and foster innovation and best practice, which can then benefit other schools' (DCSF, 2007, p. 95). Thus, the academies policy served to frame commercial actors not simply in providing knowledge to students, but also governing the way schools are actually run (Papanastasiou, 2013).

Sponsors are now effecting change in the education practices of schools, influencing their ethos and character, including their specialisms. 'Business and Enterprise' was the most common specialism promoted by the early academy sponsors, leading to the

values and practices of business being reflected in the knowledge and skills taught to students (Woods *et al.*, 2007). Concern has been expressed about the freedoms afforded to some sponsors who develop a preferred philosophical approach for 'their' schools (Beckett, 2007; Gillard, 2007). This can sometimes be at odds with a commitment to diverse and inclusive schooling as well as arguably being educationally unsound. For example, two academies sponsored by Sir Peter Vardy's *Emmanuel Schools Foundation* have attracted criticism because of their strong evangelical Christian ethos, the teaching of creationism, high exclusion rates and open homophobia (Walford, 2014). This poses the question of whether school autonomy is always a good thing.

3.9.3   Multi-Academy Trusts

Sponsorship arrangements have evolved since 2002. As well as individual private sponsors, some are now collaborative—in which the 'sponsor' is a group of co-sponsors. For example, a university and a local further education college may work in partnership with a local authority to sponsor an academy. This renewed involvement of local authorities is something that is seen by some as a betrayal of the programme and a threat to the role of academies in 'increasing diversity of supply' of schooling (Sturdy and Freedman, 2007, p. 17). Some arrangements sponsor more than one academy, often referred to as a 'chain' (Hill *et al.*, 2012). Some schools judged as 'outstanding' by Ofsted form academy chains as part of multi-academy trusts and 'take on failing schools' under one single governance arrangement to provide school-to-school support (Chapman, 2013). This is part of the government's 'self-improving, school-led system' in which responsibility for school improvement is passed down to school level, with school-to-school collaboration seen as the primary vehicle of change (Greany, 2014). This view is also embodied in the policy of establishing *Teaching Schools* (Husbands, 2014). It is important to note that academy chains vary considerably in their 'ownership', size, geographical reach, and in their approach to governance. For example, some schools in chains are required to adhere closely with centralist policies and approaches, while others grant individual schools autonomy from central controls and policies (Chapman and Salakangas, 2012; Papanastasiou, 2013).

3.9.4   Policy Networks

Beyond their individual schools, commercial actors have become increasingly embedded in the 'policy communities' which contribute to shaping the future of education reforms. These policy communities often consist of personal relationships and bring 'different members of the "power elite" into a very specific relation to state education and education policy' (Ball, 2007, p. 122). This has arguably resulted in a 'heterarchy of governance'[13] networks:

> All in all it replaces hierarchy with *heterarchy*. That is, it replaces bureaucracy and administrative structures and relationships with a system of organization replete with overlap, multiplicity, mixed ascendancy and/or divergent-but-coexistent patterns of relation.
>
> (Ball, 2009, p. 100)

Around the globe, entrenched problems of public policy are increasingly being addressed through a mix of 'networks, partnerships and many other forms of collaboration across sectoral and organizational boundaries' (Williams, 2002, p. 103). This involves 'mutuality and interdependence as opposed to hierarchy and independence' (Peterson, 2003, p. 1). However, as some commentators point out, this interdependence is 'asymmetric' (Rhodes, 1997), with the influence of some being greater than others. These new arrangements expand the 'territory of influence' (Mackenzie and Martinez, 2005) over policy as they 'enlarge the range of actors involved in shaping and delivering policy' (Newman, 2001, p. 125). This interdependent approach represents a shift from the hierarchy of the state towards a new form of 'polycentric' governance based upon network relations (Jessop, 1998). These processes are sometimes referred to as the shift from *government* to *governance* (Rhodes, 1996), a mode which involves a shift in the role of the state from 'directing bureaucracies' to 'managing networks' (Smith, 1999). As Marinetto (2003) points out, the state 'although not impotent, is now dependent upon a vast array of state and non-state policy actors' (p. 599). Junemann and Ball (2013) highlight the impact of this:

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[13] A model of governance that displaces the apparent incompatibility between market-based and state-centred forms of co-ordination, and replaces them with more flexible structures (heterarchies), where decision-making is shared at different instances by old and new actors (Jessop 1998).

> Gradually but steadily, new modes of entry for alternative providers (business, voluntary organisations, social enterprises), the deregulation of educational labour (and the disapplication of national pay and conditions agreements), and the invention of new types of schools (trusts, academies, free schools, studio schools and UTCs) have created a new framework for educational governance made possible by a new set of 'technologies of government'.
>
> (Junemann and Ball, 2013, p. 426).

Alongside the introduction of new actors and organisations, the shift to polycentrism also involves the displacement of some others, like trade unions and professional associations, and in some cases teachers in schools (ibid., p. 425).

What this illustrates is that the nature of educational governance is changing. It is worth noting here a face-to-face meeting I had at the Department for Education with Lord Nash, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools, on 11 September 2013 as part of my research. He spoke at length about the government's wish to see governing bodies changed to include people with backgrounds from outside education to 'challenge norms and mediocrity' and to see things done differently. Lord Nash spoke of the importance of small governing bodies, modelled on corporate boards in the USA—he considered seven members to be the right number. Moreover, he saw no need for parents or teachers to be on governing bodies; rather they should comprise 'highly focused and successful people' who have 'skills to bring to the table'. The Minister accepted that legislating for smaller governing bodies would be difficult, and so the government would introduce change 'by stealth' in the form of performance and accountability measures. The meeting confirmed much of the literature referred to above around the removal of local decision-making, centralisation of powers and the move towards heterarchial forms of governance.

3.10   The 'Academy Effect'?

Chapman (2013) points to various studies which demonstrate that there is inconsistent evidence to claim that academies are more successful in raising attainment than maintained schools. He cites the 2012 National Audit Office Report which found that Ofsted had judged almost half of academies as 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement'. Chitty (2013b) considers that if the academies programme is about raising standards, the evidence for this is 'mixed and inconclusive'. He links to research by Stewart

(2012) which shows that many previously poorly performing maintained schools in disadvantaged areas have done just as well as those which have become academies. The five-year national evaluation for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2008) found there was variability in both character and performance across the sample of academies studied, leading to the view that no uniform 'academy effect' could be observed. However, this has not hindered their expansion and the government's commitment to a 'fully academised' system (Cameron, 2015).

Wrigley (2011) has argued that in many academies any apparent improvement over the performance of their predecessor schools may have been as a result of a substantial switch to 'equivalent' vocational qualifications instead of academic GCSEs. It was shown that the curriculum in these academies was becoming limited and that the 'equivalent' qualifications tended not to include many of the traditional academic subjects such as sciences, humanities or modern foreign languages. This is supported by more recent analysis of the percentage of pupils who achieved the EBacc in 2010:

> This new measure [of the Ebacc] showed that Academies, far from being the most successful, were the least successful schools in the country. It is even more startling how little notice the media have taken of this fact.

> (Fisher, 2012, p. 240)

In grammar schools, 67 per cent of pupils achieved the EBacc; in comprehensive schools a national average of 13 per cent was achieved; while in academies it was 7 per cent (DfE, 2011–cited in Fisher, 2012). This suggests that pupils in some academies may not be following a broad and balanced curriculum. In relation to teacher agency, this could be interpreted in one of two ways: it could be that teachers were using their agency to tailor the curriculum to suit the needs of their students. Alternatively, it could be argued that teachers in academies may have less agency in the delivery of a broad and balanced curriculum.

The final finding in Wrigley's (2011) research relates to what he describes as the 'changing pupil population' in the early academies. In a 2007 sample of 'improved' academies he found that the proportion of children entitled to free school meals had decreased in comparison to their predecessor schools. He also found that the ability of

pupils on entry to Year 7 was higher and closer to the national average than in the predecessor schools. In summary, Wrigley is challenging the claims of improvements in these schools by observing: (i) easier vocational qualifications were being used to boost examination results; (ii) these schools were reducing the proportions of lower ability and disadvantaged pupils, and attracting higher ability children from more affluent backgrounds. In essence, the academies were very socially different from the schools they replaced.

There are also claims that exclusion rates in the early academies were higher than the national average and an increase on their predecessor schools (*The Guardian*, 2004; Chitty, 2008; Gillard, 2008). This not only changed the student profile of the academies which were excluding, but also that of other neighbouring schools which had to absorb the excluded students. This justifies the call made by Glatter (2009) that in evaluating the success of academies, they must be researched on the basis of their impact on the system *as a whole* and not just in isolation.

These issues point towards the assertion that:

> There is important evidence that the curriculum has been dumbed down in order to enable Key Stage results to improve, and there is evidence that Academies are now teaching different children to those in the predecessor schools, with claims that the composition of Academies have been manipulated in order to exclude children and parents who don't, or won't, or can't play the game.
>
> (Gunter, 2011b)

3.11   The Impact of School Autonomy

Glatter (2012a) talks of the 'paradox of autonomy', by which he means that despite the growing emphasis on autonomy, most practitioners consider themselves significantly constrained by government requirements 'to an extent that is undoubtedly far greater than their forebears thirty or forty years ago would have done' (p. 412).

Gilbert (2012b) is sanguine about the importance of autonomy, cautioning policymakers against focusing entirely on school independence and autonomy as key elements of system reform. She argues instead that we need 'a better balance between independence, inter-dependence and even dependence'. A successful example of the

kind of systemic approach needed to 'lift all the boats' (Glatter, 2012a) was the programme of intensive support to schools through the *London Challenge*. Gilbert (2012b) argues that the success of the London Challenge was a result of it being an *interdependent* system, the impact of which has been to increase the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and a narrowing of some attainment gaps. GCSE results are better in London than any other English region and Ofsted inspection reports for London schools are consistently better than the rest of the country. As a result of this collegial approach it is claimed that 'Today, London is one of the few capitals in the world where educational results are better than the national average' (Facer, 2013).

Hopkins (2013, p. 29) asserts that the idea that schools flourish when they are 'released to be free' is a 'myth'. He describes it as 'an attractive and populist image'. He cites international evidence by Barber and colleagues which locates the issue of school autonomy in relation to successful school leadership:

> differences in what leaders do are not directly related to the level of autonomy they are given. Internationally, there is no relationship between the degree of autonomy enjoyed by a school principal and their relative focus on administrative or instructional leadership.
>
> (Barber *et al.*, 2010, p. 8)

However, Cruddas (2014) notes Husbands' concerns about centralisation, and argues that government should have a 'subsidiary function, performing only those tasks that cannot be performed at school level' (p. 19). This enables 'decision-making closest to the learner' allowing 'school leaders to focus on [important] building blocks without being distracted by the vagaries of initiatives or political whim' (ibid.).

In launching Ofsted's Annual Report in 2014, England's Chief Inspector of Schools warned that despite the reforms to schooling that had taken place, secondary school progress had stalled and that the debate over structures had become 'sterile' (Ofsted, 2014). Although endorsing the view that 'schools and the profession ultimately benefit from having more freedom and more autonomy', Sir Michael Wilshaw stressed that the essential ingredients of success are no secret: 'strong leadership, a positive learning culture, good teaching, robust accountability and a determination to improve the lot of every child, regardless of background or ability'.

3.11.1 'Free at last, free at last … we are free at last'?

In assessing the 'myth' of autonomy (Fisher, 2012) in academies it is important to consider the legal governance arrangements of *all* maintained schools in England. A key point is that it is governing bodies and not local authorities which have the legal responsibility for the strategic functions of *maintained* schools. When consideration is taken of the fact that budgets have been devolved to all schools under LMS since 1988, I would argue that schools in England, regardless of status, are amongst the most autonomous in the world (NCSL, 2009; Greany, 2014; *The Economist,* 2014).

Mansfield (2012) believes that the 'need to be set free' from local authorities is a 'fallacy', as state schools in England have enjoyed autonomy and freedom without academy status for over twenty years. She argues that there was no immediate rush of schools applying to 'convert' to academy status following the 2010 Academies Act. It was a solution to a problem that did not exist and was in reality about centralisation and privatisation:

> [Michael Gove's] offer of freedom from the control of the local authority did not attract many schools since local authorities have not been 'controlling' schools since the introduction of Local Management of Schools. This gave schools their own budgets which they could spend as they wished. … This has been the case for more than twenty years. So there was no 'control' and in most local authorities there is support and guidance.
>
> (Mansfield, 2012, p. 319)

This view was supported by the Chief Executive of the National Governors' Association who did not 'recognise the vast majority of local authorities as dictatorial bodies that withhold freedoms … [our members] feel supported by the local authority, not restricted by it' (*TES*, 2010b).

3.11.2 A Return to the Past

Despite the freedoms which have long existed, evidence suggests that little use has been made of these to enhance teaching and learning, mainly because of the heavy hand of high stakes accountability (Fitz *et al.*, 1997). The *technologies of performativity* (Ball, 2007) have curbed schools' creativity around curriculum and pedagogy, meaning

that they are reluctant to take risks which may endanger their standing in national performance measures and league tables.

Contrary to developing innovative approaches to learning, competition appears to have brought about a gradual return to traditional neo-conservative notions of schooling in an attempt to appeal to middle-class, aspirant parents. Larsson (*TES*, 2010a) claims that when independent (free) schools were created in Sweden, the government's vision was that competition between schools would create a 'pedagogical renewal'. However, she explains: 'the schools have not created any new pedagogical ideas—when schools compete they tend to be more quiet with their ideas than before'.

According to Stevenson (2011), the situation in England is similar. Rather than autonomy fostering diversity and innovation, Conservative-led policy has changed the purpose of the academy system and this has resulted in a 'return to the past'. The academies programme has moved much closer to a system of allowing the highest-attaining schools in the leafy suburbs to opt out of local authority control in a manner not unlike grant-maintained status (Chitty, 2013b). This has allowed a return to traditionalism in many schools (Stevenson, 2011), resulting in a hierarchy of schools and social segregation between them (Gorard *et al.,* 2013). Within a competitive market, some schools are pursuing 'academic elitism' based on the notions of the traditional grammar school system to set themselves apart. Stevenson argues that parents want a broad and balanced education for their children when choosing a school and are not seeking a return to some bygone age. However:

> in a multi-tiered system, where state-funded Academies seek to brand themselves as crypto-Independent schools, then traditional notions of academic excellence and elitism will be privileged. State-funded schools will increasingly seek to mimic the private Independent schools they wish to emulate, and the likely consequence is that the curriculum provision in many state-funded schools will take on the appearance of the traditional curricula of the Independent sector.

> The more a school seeks, and is able, to compete in this market the more likely it is to favour this curricular approach. In this context, the aim is to *reproduce* not innovate.

> (Stevenson, 2011, p. 187–*my emphasis*)

Research suggests that school choice has increased the power of middle-class parents who know how to 'work the system' (Reay, 2008). Consequently, it has failed significantly to narrow the attainment gap between the most advantaged and disadvantaged pupils (Whitty, 2008). Stevenson (2011) contends that 'In the Brave New World of Coalition Academies it becomes increasingly likely that the curriculum provided by *Leafy-Suburb Academy* will look very different to that provided by *Inner-City Academy*' (p. 187).

Twenty years after the 1988 Education Reform Act, one of the strongest international advocates of the 'self-managing school' concluded that the claims by its proponents for what school autonomy would achieve had been 'extravagant' (Caldwell, 2008). In his view, research had not uncovered a clear evident link between autonomy and educational outcomes, and researchers should be cautious about making such claims when 'schools use their autonomy to be selective in controlling student admissions' (p. 248).

In arguing against the rhetoric of self-management and the perils of accountability that come with it, Cranston makes the call instead for 'principled and moral leadership' in which responsible leaders understand their values and position themselves proactively:

> educators, especially school leaders, know—or should know—that schooling is about much more than that … [they] should be the ones driving that process, and that the constraints of accountability on school leaders need to be replaced by a new liberating professionalism for school leaders framed around notions of professional responsibility.
>
> (Cranston, 2013, p. 130)

For Fullan (2002), this centres upon students and their learning, and he challenges the narrowness of high-stakes testing and accountability. He argues that schools should engage with a much broader view of the purposes of education where social and moral learning are prioritised. Moreover he calls for a 'big picture' view of school improvement where schools work together rather than compete with each other. The role of teachers in this vision of schooling is crucial and this is considered in Chapter 4.

3.12   Conclusion to Chapter 3

This chapter has discussed key issues linked to my research questions. Autonomy is central to this thesis for two reasons: firstly, a key concept of academy schools is that they have autonomy—they are free from the control of local authorities; secondly, if teachers are to achieve agency they require a degree of autonomy. Hence the discussion in this literature review provides the backdrop for the analysis of the fieldwork in helping to understand how autonomy impacted on stakeholder agency at Bucklands Academy.

The literature reviewed on academies highlighted the contested nature of the programme—both politically and educationally. This is important because some forms of agency require stakeholder buy-in; people need to feel that they have investment in the school. Some teachers working in academies have reservations about this model of state schooling, and this has the potential to affect their agency. One of the key issues to emerge in the literature is the lack of accountability to local communities, leading to a potential loss of local democracy. The literature on academies also suggests there is no 'academy effect', which is important for my research in helping me understand how such rapid improvements have been achieved in such a short time at Bucklands Academy. Two questions arise: are the improvements a result of teachers' agency and how has 'academy status' helped improve Bucklands Academy?

The themes of teacher professionalism and policy enactment emerged from my fieldwork. Teachers were being directed to implement a major curriculum policy which many did not agree with. This raised questions for me about the professional role of the teachers and how they react in the classroom to externally imposed policy directives. Chapter 6 discusses how teachers were viewed by sponsors at Bucklands Academy and how the teachers approached the implementation of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum.

To bridge the gap between what others have been writing and what emerged during my empirical work at Bucklands Academy, I now turn to explain my research philosophy in Chapter 4. This is followed by a discussion in Chapter 5 of the research methods adopted for my fieldwork before sharing my main findings in Chapter 6.

Chapter 4

Research Philosophy

The commonwealth of learning is not at this time without master-builders, whose mighty designs, in advancing the sciences, will leave lasting monuments to the admiration of posterity: but every one must not hope to be a Boyle or a Sydenham; and in an age that produces such masters as the great Huygenius and the incomparable Mr. Newton, with some others of that strain, it is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge.

(Locke, 1690, p. 13)

4.1 Philosophical Approach

Conducting research in the social sciences invariably involves making certain philosophical assumptions, both about the nature of the object of research and about the nature of the world in which it is situated. These assumptions shape the methodology and interpretation of the results (Owens, 2011). O'Mahoney and Vincent affirm this philosophical stance and assert that researchers' assumptions are important because:

ontological commitments, which relate to what we believe exists, often affect our epistemological concerns, which relate to our beliefs about how whatever exists can be studied and known.

(O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014, p. 1)

Pring (2000a) states that the variety of philosophical differences which can be adopted result from interrelated concepts concerned with reality and objectivity; with truth, facts and verification; and with theory and knowledge. He argues that these can be applied with sufficient variation to create very different ideas about the nature and the conduct of the research, and in some cases 'the underlying philosophical positions are simply mistaken' (p. 87). A principal dispute relates to the contrast between the quantitative and qualitative traditions and Pring believes that by focusing solely on this, many educational researchers have failed to 'do a proper philosophical job'. The way in which we understand and explain the social world, including educational practice, is more subtle than that:

> Part of the problem is the failure to attend to the rich and subtle ways in which we have come to describe social practice, embedded in the language of ordinary usage. Common sense beliefs need to be questioned, but the language of common sense embodies a complex way of understanding the world, which at one level is not to be dispensed with and at another level is the best we have.
>
> (Pring, 2000a, p. 87)

Elsewhere, Pring (2000b) describes the dispute between the values of the two broad epistemological positions as the *false dualism* of educational research. A contrast is drawn between the objective world ('out there' independently of our thinking about it) and the subjective worlds (in our heads, as it were, and individually constructed). In other words, 'between the public discourse and private meanings; between reality unconstructed by anyone and the "multiple realities" constructed by each individual' (ibid., p. 248). This is described as a 'paradigm war' which is 'stubbornly impervious to the messy realities of practice' (Clegg, 2005, p. 416).

My research attempts to make sense of how teachers' agency emerges within the governance structure and culture of a sponsored academy. A sociocultural theoretical lens (Ahearn, 2001) incorporating teacher agency is used to understand the interplay between structure, culture and individual efforts as it shapes teachers' agency. The concept of teacher agency is useful in analysing whether top-down school policies lead to successful change in professional practice in the classroom. This is of particular interest when researching the academies programme, where freedom to innovate and do things differently is part of its *raison d'être*, but where centralised systems of accountability play a significant role in the professional practice adopted by teachers in these schools.

In this chapter I address issues in a particular sequence. I begin by outlining key concepts around structure and agency, before proceeding to discuss teacher agency in particular. I then share my theoretical framework of critical realism, which helped me explain my research findings. The chapter concludes by considering Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) *chordal triad of agency* and how this was used as the basis for the model of understanding teacher agency developed by Priestley *et al.* (2015), which I use to make sense of the empirical research conducted in Bucklands Academy.

4.2   Social Structure

Structure consists of the rules and resources that may constrain or enable action, where these constraints have 'differential malleability' (Archer, 1982, p. 462). Some structural properties have more constraining power or are more difficult to change than others. There are differing views on structure: Elder-Vass (2010) argues that structures are emergent entities which arise out of the interplay of other entities; Archer (2000) maintains that structure represents the relationship between pre-established social positions—that there is no such thing as decontextualized action. She contends that every action that happens takes place in a context. Critical realists (see 4.7) believe that action and change are always contextually dependent; there is no vacuum in which social action and social change can take place.

The term 'social structure' is used in many ways and, 'there continues to be a certain blurriness in the way we speak of social structure' (Porpora, 2007, p. 195). Priestley (2011) illustrates the concept of structure by referring to mechanisms and their properties, which exist independently of our knowledge of them. For instance, social objects such as social structures, customs and traditions, 'are real in that they persist over time and space, existing independently of an anterior to the knower, and exerting causal influences on social events and the actions of people' (p. 228). Fleetwood (2008) warns that it is all too easy to conflate properties that should be associated with agency (e.g. habits) with those which should be associated with structure (e.g. conventions and norms).

By emphasising the first word of the pair, '*social* structure' can be used to refer to anything that is the result of human action, as opposed to some naturally occurring phenomenon. It can also be used to refer to society as a whole, or in a general sense to mean anything that is external to an organisation or an individual.

4.3   Key Concepts of Agency

4.3.1   Downwards and Upwards Conflation

The structure-agency debate tends to get locked in a battle over whether it is structure or agency which influences the actions of individuals. Archer (2000) refers to these two views as *downwards conflation* and *upwards conflation*, respectively. By downwards conflation she means the over-socialising theorising where people are understood to be no more than 'society's being', as being purely discursively formed. The argument here is that society has contributed 'everything' to our making and consequently individual human beings have limited agency. This is founded upon tenets like 'a person is not a natural object, but is a cultured artefact' (ibid., p. 256). Conversely, upwards conflation is a view of 'modernity's man'—a form of methodological individualism and a view of an actor for whom society has contributed 'nothing'—a 'pre-formed and atomised being who, along with others like him, generates the entirety of the social structure from his built-in disposition to be a rational actor' (ibid.). This denies emergent powers at the societal and cultural levels.

4.3.2   Sociological View of Agency

According to Biesta *et al.* (2015), within the structure-agency debate a sociological view of agency is normally taken, where 'agency' is essentially used to refer to the social action achieved by a person's individual capacity. Agency is seen as residing within the individual and is either *limited* or *enabled* by structure, but it is something that sits within the person. Viewed this way, agency is seen as a *human capacity*, something that a person has—implying that some people are more agentic than others. This notion of agency can have a tendency to conflate agency and human action, where agency is seen as a variable to explain and understand social action (Priestley *et al.*, 2015). The problem with the sociological view of agency is that it does not take sufficient account of the contextual situation that actors find themselves in.

4.3.3 Habitus and Structuration

Some theorists have offered new perspectives on the relationship between structure and agency. Bourdieu (1977) posits his notion of *habitus*, which is the sub-conscious absorption of influence from our environment. He sees human agency as habitual, repetitive and taken for granted, which can influence our brains, beliefs and dispositions. Structurationists like Giddens (1984) do not see structure as being independent from social actors and consider that there is an ongoing interplay between structure and agency resulting from their symbiotic relationship. It is argued that it is the repetition of the acts of individual agents that reproduces social structure, but that these structures may be changed when people ignore them or reproduce them differently. He is critical of Structural Marxism for its conception of structure as wholly independent of agency, arguing that structure is never beyond agential grasp:

> The constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality. … Structure is not 'external' to individuals: as memory traces, and as instantiated in social practices. … Structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling.
>
> (Giddens, 1984, p. 25)

However, Giddens' view that agency and structure cannot be analysed separately is questioned. His critics (e.g. Archer, 1995) identify the problem of being unable to theorise the relative weightings of structure and agency, thus making them indistinguishable. Archer describes this as an unfortunate 'central conflation' of structure and agency:

> Outcomes, which can be broadly reproductory or largely transformatory, depend upon the intertwining of structure, culture, and agency, but not by rendering them inseparable, as in the 'central conflation' of Giddens, Bourdieu, and Beck, which makes for an amalgam precluding the examination of their interplay. Nor is this co-determinism, implying a dualistic—literally a dual-factor—approach; it is never anything but *analytical* dualism.
>
> (Archer, 2010a, p. 274)

In summary, the problem with central conflation is that it does not allow for the separate analysis of structure and agency, which is essential if their distinctive contributions to emergent action are to be considered. The differential impact of structure and agency lie at the heart of answering this question. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) capture the problems with what they describe as the 'selective and dominant conflationist theories':

> While routine, purpose, and judgment all constitute important dimensions of agency, none by itself captures its full complexity. Moreover, when one or another is conflated with agency itself, we lose a sense of the dynamic interplay among these dimensions and of how this interplay varies within different structural contexts of action.

> (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 963)

4.3.4 The Ecological View of Agency

The conception of agency adopted for this research is that posited by Priestley *et al.* (2015) who see it as an *emergent phenomenon*. The *ecological* view of agency suggests that it should not be seen as an individual capacity—it is not some 'kind of "power" that individuals possess and can utilise in any situation they encounter' (Biesta and Tedder, 2007, p. 136). Rather, it is seen as something that can be *achieved*—something that emerges, which is realised by people in particular situations as a result of engagement with particular temporal-relational contexts-for-action. The ecological view of agency highlights that actors always act *by means* of an environment rather than simply *in* an environment, making it possible to understand why an individual can achieve agency in one situation but not in another:

> To think of agency as achievement rather than as a 'power' also helps to acknowledge that the achievement of agency depends on the availability of economic, cultural and social resources within a particular ecology. In this sense we can say that the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural 'factors' as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations.

> (ibid.)

Priestley *et al.* (2015) highlight the importance of both 'individual capacity and contextual dimensions in shaping agency, and moreover the achievement of agency as a temporal process' (pp. 19–20). It is temporal in that agency is influenced by past experience, is orientated towards the future but is located in the present. With agency being caught between the past and the future, there is an inevitable instability about it, making it difficult to define (Biesta and Tedder, 2007).

Both my research and professional interests demonstrated a significant variation in the agency achieved by different teachers and also by the same teachers in different situations. This clearly suggests that context plays a role in the emerging nature of agency. For this reason, the ecological view of agency was the one I identified with most closely and hence its selection for analytical purposes within this thesis.

4.3.5   Emergence

Elder-Vass (2010) considers the casual efficacy of social structure in his theory of *relational emergence*. Drawing heavily on the work of Bhaskar (2008) regarding the nature of causality and Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach to emergent social systems, he argues convincingly of the *emergent properties* that entities can have which are not possessed by any of the individual parts of the whole. Further, the whole would have other properties if the parts were formed or put together differently:

> An emergent property is one that is not possessed by any of the parts individually and would not be possessed by the full set of parts in the absence of a structuring set of relations between them.
>
> (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 17)

There are two important aspects from the work of Bhaskar (2008) and Elder-Vass (2007, 2010) influencing my research. The first is that entities (e.g. the governance structure of a school) have real causal powers—essentially they have emergent properties. The second is that when explaining events we must recognise that they are rarely, if ever, the result of some single causal precursor, but rather the result of combinations of causal powers interacting to produce the event. This is very different from the positivist view of causality, where an event of 'type *x*' almost always is followed by an event of 'type *y*'. Viewed from a critical realist perspective

(as discussed in 4.7), an event of 'type *y*' is almost always the outcome of multiple other events (their causal powers) interacting to produce it. It may be that sometimes the causal power *x* might be present and consequence *y* may not occur. So causal powers in this type of model are always tendencies—there is a *tendency* for *x* to produce *y*. However, this tendency will depend on a number of other factors and might be frustrated and prevented in particular cases.

In the context of my research, an academy can be seen as being stratified (i.e. operating on different layers) by considering individuals (e.g. teachers and pupils), key groups (such as governors, senior leaders, departments) and the school as a whole. Priestley (2011) highlights the concept of *emergence* as being key to this depth ontology, where:

> Each successive stratum possesses properties not possessed by individual entities that come together to form an emergent whole. Thus, for example, a social group such as a school department will possess certain emergent properties (e.g. certain forms of power/influence) not possessed by the individuals within the group, by dint of the relationships that bind it together.

<div align="right">(Priestley, 2011, p. 228)</div>

Clearly, emergence is central to the concept of the ecological view of agency with entities combining and interacting, and operating at different levels to produce causal effects.

4.3.6 Reflexivity and Personal Identity

According to Archer (2010b), *reflexivity* is a mediatory process which is crucial in determining how people react to the situations in which they find themselves and which they have to confront involuntarily. This gives rise to different trajectories of how people make their way through the world and how they make a place for themselves in it. Crucially, Archer emphasises that it is through reflexivity that people can find a place where they can exercise some governance in their own lives and become something of the person they wish to become within the roles that are open to them in their social contexts.

A crucial aspect of this self-governance is a 'sense of competence' attained through 'positive feedback from practical reality signalling (some) performative achievement' (Archer, 2000, p. 196). With a focus on *personal dialogue*, Archer (2002) outlines her theory of *personal identity*, which she describes as being what we care about in the world. She suggests that our personal identity emerges as a matter of how we prioritise one concern as our 'ultimate concern' and how we subordinate, but yet accommodate, others to it. Because our concerns can never be exclusively social—and since an *active* and *reflective* agent works out a *modus vivendi*—personal identity cannot be a gift of society. Archer describes that the challenge of constructing a *modus vivendi* out of many commitments is 'an active process of reflection', which takes place through what she calls an 'inner dialogue' (ibid., p. 16). It is via these internal conversations that our concerns and commitments attain a 'unique pattern', which generates our personal identity. Since the process is fallible (we may get it wrong or we may change) and the commentaries will not be unanimous, the inner conversation is a continuous process and involves 'testing' our potential and ongoing commitments against our emotional commentaries. This involves 'evaluating them, promoting some and subordinating others, such that the ultimate concerns we affirm are those with which we feel we can live' (ibid., p. 17).

Archer's theory of personal identity proved to be an important concept in developing my research. Teachers who achieve agency act with intentionality, and this necessarily involves prioritising concerns, partly based on people's experiences of the past—but also with a view to the future—but carried out in the present. The theory also helped me make sense of my fieldwork in Bucklands Academy. Some teachers were willing to accept policies and reforms about which they had significant reservations. However, reflexive deliberations led them to subordinate these concerns to other benefits which arose from teaching at the school. It became a matter of what the teachers 'care[d] about in the world'. This is discussed further in 7.3.5.

4.4   Culture

A central argument in the ecological view of agency is that capacity itself is never a sufficient condition for achieving agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2015). Agency is always achieved in concrete situations, which are affected by culture. Archer (2000) places culture as a key concept alongside structure and agency. Culture refers to ideational contexts (e.g. ideology, societal or institutional views which can be articulated or are implicit in rooted traditions and ways of being) (Pantić, 2015). According to Archer (2000), culture does not just exist in the minds of people; it has an object reality independent of the knower. Knowledge and traditions pre-exist human actors: as each new-born comes into the world, they are born into a world that abides by particular laws and certain customs. Ideas of the past can continue to influence the social practices of today, and in turn these social practices influence the form culture will take in the future.

Archer argues that social structures need to be distinguished from the 'ideational' influences on agency, although they are related (e.g. through morphogenesis, cultural change can lead to the transformation of structures). Agents emerge in a dialectical process in which structural and cultural powers impact upon the human powers of the 'self' and 'personal identity' (Archer, 2000, pp. 254–255). We become what we are through a process that involves both social reproduction and transformation (see 4.8).

Archer talks of culture as being the relationships between pre-established ideas, and that these ideas must come from somewhere. An observation is not 'a naked, self-announcing piece of obvious truth; it is a *human artefact* we choose to pick up, with a background, which we present to the foreground; it does not present itself' (Archer, 2014). She refers to Benton's (1989) *contextual dependence*, which posits that when people act, they need to have *some idea* of what they are doing. So, for example, through cultural knowledge, people know to behave differently in a supermarket from the way they would behave in a pub. Hence, contextual independence is important, because an individual's selection of concept for the same action or course of actions colours the account he will give. Porpora *et al.* (2013) illustrate this in a study of the ways in which the rhetoric used to justify why the Americans went to un-mandated war

in Iraq changed. Conceptually it began by talking about 'weapons of mass destruction', but when no such armaments were found, the rhetoric changed to 'humanitarian aid'. Archer (2014) stresses, therefore, that 'contexts play a huge role, they are not just innocent markers to track what we are doing'.

4.5   The Chordal Triad of Agency

The ecological view of agency developed by Priestley *et al.* (2015) was guided and influenced by the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998). They argue for a concept of agency which aims to overcome the one-sidedness of existing theories which 'tend to focus on either routine (acquired patterns of action), or on purpose (motivating "forces"), or on judgment (the engagement with the situation in the here-and-now)' (Biesta *et al.*, 2015, p. 626). The link with Priestley and colleagues is that Emirbayer and Mische call for an understanding of agency as encompassing an *interplay* between all three of these foci—but which also takes into account 'how this interplay varies with different structural contexts of action' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 963).

Hence, Emirbayer and Mische suggest that agency should be understood as a temporal process of social engagement informed by influences of the past, orientations towards the future and engagement with the present. They identify three dimensions of agency, which they call the *chordal triad of agency*. They refer to these as the *iterational*, the *projective* and the *practical-evaluative* dimensions of agency. The *iterational* dimension relates to making choices based on past experiences; the *projective* is about making choices based on future trajectories, hopes and fears; and the *practical-evaluative* is about making choices in the present from different trajectories in recognition of external demands, dilemmas and ambiguities:

> our central contribution is to begin to reconceptualize human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also orientated toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).
>
> (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 963)

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This view of agency has its roots in the theory of action as developed by pragmatist philosophy thinkers such as John Dewey and George Herbert Mead. Action is not perceived as the pursuit of pre-established ends, abstracted from concrete situations, but rather:

> ends and means develop coterminously within contexts that are themselves ever changing and thus always subject to reevaluation and reconstruction on the part of the reflective intelligence.
>
> (ibid., p. 971)

In defining what they see as *human agency*, Emirbayer and Mische stress that in any concrete action, all three dimensions play a role in its emergence, but the degree to which they contribute varies. However, they also argue that dynamic interplay between the three dimensions and how this varies in different contexts allows for both the *reproduction* and *transformation* of those very same structural contexts for action:

> The temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.
>
> (ibid., p. 970)

I found the chordal triad of agency powerful in helping me identify and understand the 'temporal relational contexts of action' the teachers at Bucklands Academy were working in. My data showed clear examples of teachers achieving agency within each of Emirbayer and Mische's three domains of agency and the interplay between them.

Having mapped out the key theoretical concepts of structure and agency, I now turn specifically to *teacher agency* and consider teachers as agents of change.

4.6   Teacher Agency

4.6.1   Conceptualising Teacher Agency

As discussed in 4.3, agency *per se* has been extensively theorised, particularly in sociological terms—mainly as a result of the ongoing 'structure-agency debate' (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984; Archer, 1988). However, there has been little explicit research on *teacher* agency (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007), and it is only recently that specific studies around the concept have started to emerge (see Pignatelli, 1993; Biesta and Tedder, 2007; Priestley *et al.*, 2012, 2015; Biesta *et al.*, 2015). The term 'agency' has begun to appear recently in school improvement literature where it is taken to mean simply 'the capacity to make a difference' (Frost, 2006, p. 20).

In defining their understanding of teacher agency, Toom *et al.* (2015) suggest that the concept has emerged to 'describe teachers' efforts to make choices and intentional action in a way that makes a significant difference' (p. 615). Teachers are required to plan innovative learning experiences, adapt to diverse challenges arising from their working environment and work with colleagues in order to interpret and enact policies. In doing so they are required to 'make independent choices and find a balance between their personal preferences and shared collegial understandings' (ibid.). Teachers' professional agency refers to their ability to act in new and creative ways, and even resist external norms and regulations when they are understood to contrast or conflict with professionally justifiable action (Lasky, 2005). It is through these efforts that teachers aim to build a relevant and inspiring educational environment for their pupils, one in which they can work collaboratively and constructively with their colleagues.

Pyhältö *et al.* (2014) consider teachers' professional agency as 'a capacity that prepares the way for intentional and responsible management of new learning, both at the individual and community level' (p. 306). Accordingly, teachers' agency is not the fixed disposition of an individual teacher, but is highly relational and is thus embedded in professional interactions between teachers, pupils and parents, as well as with other members of the school community.

4.6.2   Teachers as Agents of Change

Helbsy claims that it would be unwise to assume that the policy created within the *context of influence* (Bowe *et al.*, 1992) offers an adequate account of what is happening in our classrooms, and that teachers' agency enables them to develop their own professionally developed approaches against a backdrop of structural change:

> Both in work generally, and in schooling in particular, external imperatives are constantly mediated and moderated through human agency and are incorporated to a greater or lesser extent into existing practice. In this way the nature of any change to teachers' work is never predetermined, but instead results from actions and choices that are made at different stages in the long process from the initial production of central education policy texts through to the day-to-day policy realization in the classroom.
>
> (Helsby, 1999, p. 15)

The generation and implementation of educational change in schools largely depends on teachers. Hence it is acknowledged that teachers' agency, i.e. 'their active contribution to shaping their work and its conditions' (Priestley *et al.*, 2015, p. 1), is viewed as an integral and essential part of successful school reform. Accordingly, the idea of a teacher as an active agent of school development has long been central to successful educational practices. Where there is a lack of teacher agency, especially in terms of taking collective responsibility for the educational change, this is recognised as presenting a barrier to school development (Pyhältö *et al.*, 2014).

It appears that interest in teacher agency is increasing, and with good reason. The idea that teachers are in charge of what happens in the classroom has long been a central assumption of how the wider public view their professional role. The closed-door nature of a teacher's job suggests that they have professional autonomy—directing the learning activities of their pupils. However, two factors have militated against this in recent years. Firstly, schools and individual teachers have become increasingly accountable through inspection systems, national performance measures, teacher appraisal and school choice for parents. So what goes on in the classroom is now everyone's business. Secondly, as discussed in Chapter 2, there has been an ebb and flow over recent decades as to who controls the curriculum, with the professional role of teachers having changed accordingly. We have moved from what was viewed until

the late 1970s as a period of teacher autonomy towards an increasingly centrally controlled system, particularly after 1988.

In some jurisdictions, however, there are signs that this trend is reversing and that responsibility is being given back to teachers on matters relating to the curriculum, e.g. in Finland (Sahlberg, 2011) and in Scotland through Curriculum for Excellence (Priestley *et al.,* 2012). In Australia, Judith Sachs has argued that teachers must be part of what she calls 'an activist profession' (Sachs, 2003). In this contemporary debate there is an implication that teachers have influence, and hence are required to lead and make decisions about important aspects of their work. Priestley *et al.* (2013) point out that this is 'a significant shift in emphasis following several decades of policies that worked to de-professionalize teachers, replacing teacher agency with prescriptive curricula and oppressive regimes of testing and inspection' (p. 189).

This shift in emphasis brings its own challenges, and not only with policymakers who are developing new ways of understanding the role of the teacher. Some teachers themselves may not fully appreciate what it means to be a professional educator in the post-directed era. There is a danger that teachers' agency has been 'tamed' by externally determined aims and purposes, or directed towards improving their own self-worth and wellbeing so that success comes from working compliantly and receiving recognition from quality assurance systems. For example, most teachers hope to emerge from school inspections having 'performed' well. It has been suggested that 30 years of top-down decision-making and accountability frameworks have created a 'directed profession' (Bottery and Wright, 2000). This has led to some teachers feeling more comfortable with the requirement to comply than with the opportunity to lead, believing that their role is to 'deliver' the curriculum rather than create it (Trafford, 2010; Priestley, 2011, 2015).

McLaughlin (1997) argues for a 'new professionalism' and Hargreaves (1997) talks of teachers being at the leading edge of change. Some writers (Gronn, 2000; Frost, 2006) see shared leadership of learning as being a cornerstone of teacher professionalism. The extent to which leadership is 'stretched' across members of the school community is fundamental in facilitating teachers' agency (Harris, 2002; Spillane and Sherer, 2004). Durrant and Holden describe the characteristics of agentic practice:

> In short, the purpose of leadership is to facilitate the growth of a learning organisation … this requires schools to move away from bureaucratic, linear and hierarchical approaches to management, to a more participative, flexible model of school development based on the principle of teacher agency. Such a model should grow out of a culture of reflective practice, criticality, professional dialogue and a commitment to shared decision making, involving all members of the school community.
>
> (Durrant and Holden, 2006, p. 155)

Some practical strategies whereby headteachers can support teacher leadership have been identified. Frost and Durrant (2003) recognise that a main challenge to teacher agency comes from the fact that in many schools 'head teachers and principals have more of a grip on the levers of power' (p. 3). In recognising the importance of teacher agency, Angus agrees with this and argues:

> Those who hold administrative positions need to realise that their best contribution to educational reform may be to use the authority of their position to facilitate the agency of those of their staff who, for one reason or another, have begun to examine critically, and engage in dialogue about, educational issues and educational purposes so that they are rendered problematic and subjected to scrutiny.
>
> (Angus, 1989, p. 86)

I understand Angus' argument as resting on the concept of the ecological view of teacher agency posited by Priestley *et al.* (2015). Administrators influence the ecology of the school and the environment teachers are working within and so have the power to create the conditions under which teachers' agency can emerge.

Improvements in learning are achieved as teachers shape practice according to their own developing understandings, concerns and priorities. Durrant and Holden (2006) claim that this requires cultural change within which teachers can gain confidence, allowing them to develop the tools and the strategies to 'make a difference'. They argue that if we are to break the cycle of professional development 'apartheid' and the

'deprofessionalisation' identified by Hargreaves and Evans (1997), teachers have to be *critical activists*. There is a need to engage 'intellectually, emotionally and politically' with school improvement processes (Basica and Hargreaves, 2000, p. 20). This increases teachers' ability to think and act strategically as they confront the complexity of real-life situations, enabling them to collaborate in leading learning and managing change more effectively. Teachers' experiences and perceptions of their own agency, activity and ability to influence structures, systems, interrelationships and layers of learning are essential in achieving successful reform aimed at improving learning (Giddens, 1984; Frost *et al.*, 2000; Frost and Durrant, 2003).

Teachers are considered by most school change experts to be the centrepiece of educational change. The success of reform strategies is dependent upon the efforts of teachers. In what is a direct link to my research, policies aimed at decentralisation, including through academies and free schools in England, charter schools in the USA, and self-managing schools in New Zealand, all rely on teachers to 'reinvent' their schools through reflection, innovation and creativity (Datnow, 2000). School change researchers also echo the belief that schools are best changed from the bottom up (McLaughlin, 1976; Fullan, 1993; Cuban, 1998; Elmore, 2004). Teachers need to own the process of change, and reform efforts need to be grounded in an understanding of teachers' professional lives and development (Datnow, 2000).

In pointing to the futility of externally imposed reforms which fail to acknowledge the role of teachers, Tyack argues:

> I think it is fair to say that pushing changes in pedagogy from above has a spotty and largely disappointing history … Improving classroom instruction—the most important kind of reform, especially in poor and minority communities—has typically succeeded best when teachers were active partners in the process, and this is key, I believe, to decentralized strategies of change.
>
> (Tyack, 1990, p. 187)

Tyack claims there is a need for 'professionalizing teaching and decentralizing instructional decision-making in individual schools', stressing that successful policy enactment is based on the idea that 'any new programme needs to be developed by those who carry it out' (ibid.).

A theme running though these arguments is the repeated failure of policymakers to understand that externally imposed school reforms struggle to become embedded and survive, failing to recognise that: 'Teachers have become experts in accommodating to, deflecting, or sabotaging changes they do not desire' (ibid., p. 188). Cuban (1988) claims that 'innovation after innovation has been introduced into school after school, but the overwhelming number of them disappear without a fingerprint' (p. 86).

In explaining curricular continuity and stability in schools since the 1870s, despite repeated efforts to bring about change, Cuban uses the metaphor of a hurricane to illustrate how teachers and schools can bury unwanted reforms:

> Hurricane winds sweep across the sea, tossing up 20-foot waves; a fathom below the surface turbulent waters swirl, while on an ocean floor there is unruffled calm.
>
> (Cuban, 1993, p. 2)

Cuban is comparing the hurricane to any new curriculum theory and associated policy-talk. Despite the flurry of activity from policymakers and administrators, 'most publishers continue producing texts barely touched by the new theory and most teachers use methods unmarked by either controversy or slogans' (ibid.).

4.6.3 *Making Sense of Teacher Agency*

Research on teacher learning (Pyhältö *et al.*, 2014) suggests teachers' involvement in educational changes largely depends not only on contextual factors and teachers' skills and knowledge, but also on teachers' professional efficacy, beliefs and their motivation to adopt and process new ideas at several different levels in their daily work. A teacher's professional agency depends on the situation as well as the social and personal resources available. Thus, the demands, possibilities and constraints that a situation brings regulate a teacher's professional agency. In a study of vocational teachers in Finland, Vähäsantanen *et al.* (2009) found that their agency differed considerably in relation to a variety of individual and social resources and constraints in their work.

Agency is often seen as a relational phenomenon (Archer, 1995; Edwards, 2005; Priestley, 2011; Hökkä and Vähäsantanen, 2014), one that is intertwined within sociocultural conditions and suggestions. In the case of teachers, these social suggestions include matters such as policy mandates, curriculum guidelines and national standards. They also involve the resources available to teachers, their positions within discourses and the norms associated with the role of a professional teacher.

Within education reform, transformations in the curriculum can be seen as the most pivotal, since these directly affect the work of teachers and the implementation of educational policies at classroom level (Priestley *et al.*, 2013). In situations where teachers who achieve strong agency are supportive of a proposed change, transformation is possible. Importantly, teachers with strong agency also have the capacity to obstruct reforms. In schools where teachers' agency is weak, it is easier for managers to mandate change, but more difficult to achieve and embed sustainable change (Vähäsantanen *et al.*, 2008; Hökkä and Vähäsantanen, 2014).

When teachers are being confronted with an innovation in their work, they do not simply accept or reject it. It is suggested that, instead, they actively position themselves in relation to the innovation by comparing their personal beliefs, values and desires with the characteristics and demands of the proposed change (Spillane *et al.*, 2002). Hence teachers' agency is a central feature of transformational change, both in realising it and obstructing it. When confronted with large-scale educational developments, teachers and teacher communities use their prior knowledge and experience to make sense of policy. Thus 'policy to practice connections are mediated by teacher sense making' which produces qualitatively different understandings among teachers, thus leading them to 'adopt, ignore or modify policy guidance' (Spillane and Burch, 2006, p. 95). Institutional tradition, therefore, needs to 'pay more attention to human agency in its efforts to understand relations between policy and the technical core' (ibid.).

Osler (2001) highlights a more radical view of teacher agency and talks of the need for *subversion*, which she contends is the outcome of restricted influence or power. Although concerned primarily with the transforming potential of education, she argues nevertheless, that to realise such a vision subversive tactics are sometimes needed.

Robinson (2012) illustrates the subversive nature of teacher agency by describing how teachers in an Australian primary school resisted the requirements of the Federal government for schools to use quartiles to show the position of a student in a particular class relative to his/her peers:

> The teachers' strong collaborative professionalism allowed them to reflect on how they could equate their practices with the requirements of the policy-making bodies … The strength of their professional agency allowed teachers to actively adapt the requirements from policy-making bodies and to maintain the beliefs and values the teachers wished to demonstrate in the end-of-year reports.
>
> (Robinson, 2012, p. 242)

Marshall and Drummond (2006) found that teachers with a strong sense of agency tend to attribute their successes and failures with an innovation to themselves, while teachers with a lack of agency tend to attribute it to external factors. It is to be expected, therefore, that teachers who experience a high degree of agency in their work will initiate actions aimed at reaching their work related goals and feel in control of situations happening in their classroom.

4.7   Critical Realism

Accepting Pring's (2000b) argument of the 'false dualism', and in an effort to provide the best explanation available for the lived realities of the individuals in my case study, I have sought to find a more appropriate 'methodological point of entry' (Scott, 2007, p. 152) for my research. I now wish to outline my research philosophy and ontological stance for this study, that of *critical realism*. I believe critical realism provides the strongest meta-theoretical perspective (Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006) from which to conduct research into teacher agency. It was by using this theoretical framework that I made sense of the data from my fieldwork, enabling me to offer explanatory critique within my main findings.

Located within the post-positivist tradition, critical realism is most associated with the work of Roy Bhaskar (2008). It is a philosophy which is presented as a critical application of realism and produces a stratified understanding of the world, dividing the real from the actual or empirical. It holds that an objective (*intransitive*) world exists independently of people's perceptions, language, imagination and human

consciousness. However, it also recognises that this world is historically contingent and our knowledge of it is socially constructed, consisting of subjective interpretations which influence the ways in which it is perceived and experienced (the *transitive*). Hence, the world can never be fully understood but only be approximated and should be understood in terms of an ongoing process, 'whereby selfhood is socially mediated but not socially determined' (Cruickshank, 2003, p. 1).

As a result of the stratified and nuanced understanding of the world, critical realism provides a distinctive challenge to versions of positivism, but also offers an alternative to the social constructionist accounts of the social world. Hence it bridges the ontological divide between the two main research paradigms by occupying the intellectual 'space' between the two ontologies. It marries the positivist search for evidence of reality external to human consciousness with the insistence that all meaning to be made of that reality is socially constructed. While reality can never be known for sure, it can be described with better or worse, truer or less true accounts. However, the obligation to search for the account that comes closest to approximating and explaining what is real provides the moral and professional impetus for my research. The incremental truth-making nature of critical realism is illustrated by Collier (1994):

> To claim objective truth for one's statements is to lay one's cards on the table, to expose oneself to the possibility of refutation. It is to make clear one is talking about something … this makes it possible for others to point out features of that something that are not as claimed, and hence to disprove your opinion.

<div align="right">(Collier, 1994–cited in Oliver, 2012, p. 374)</div>

Because critical realism claims that there is only *one* reality, usually with multiple interpretations, there is something against which to compare and evaluate competing knowledge claims (Easton, 2010). This makes it a useful research philosophy in the field of educational reform in which policy-makers and researchers must balance respect for individual meaning-making with evidence to test that meaning-making for its correspondence to an external reality (Oliver, 2012). It offers the kind of nuanced understanding the researcher is seeking, rather than generalisable laws (positivism) or simply identifying the lived experiences or beliefs of social actors (interpretivism).

Recognising both the intransitive and transitive domains is important in overcoming the simple dichotomy between objectivist approaches, which are typically associated with quantitative methods and also subjectivist approaches, which are more closely related to qualitative methods. Bhaskar (2008) asserts that empiricism is anthropocentric, that there are few universal natural laws and no universal social ones. He argues that agents have free choice and that these choices are not determined solely by social structures created by human beings, but that these structures precede society and arise out of it. Critical realism combines metaphysical arguments with realist ones, 'to create a more real than real world that explains what the world "must" have been like after the event, but outside of and beyond the experience of that world by people' (Jeffries, 2011, p. 3).

Critical realists are not naïve realists and so reject the view that variables mirror facts and that correlations between variables are to be taken as causal relations. Variables are seen as conceptual interpretations, and correlations between variables are taken as *descriptions* rather than causal explanations in themselves; correlations between variables are contingent effects of underlying causal processes (Archer, 2000; Cruickshank, 2003; Hartwig, 2007; Bhaskar, 2008). Critical realists argue that the *self* can obtain knowledge of a reality which is separate from our representations of it. This does not mean we have direct access to a manifest truth, but instead means that we have access to reality via fallible theories:

> This view of knowledge holds that there is an objective reality, and instead of hoping that one day we will somehow have absolute knowledge, the expectation is that knowledge claims will continue to be better interpretations of reality. As knowledge claims are fallible, the best we can do is improve our interpretations of reality, rather than seek a definitive, finished 'Truth'.
>
> (Cruickshank, 2003, p. 1)

Epistemologically, critical realism indicates more clearly than other positions the appropriate direction and context of explanatory research. It is able 'to avoid the partiality of other positions, which seize upon one aspect (e.g. experience, interpretation) of the total research process to the exclusion of others' (Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006, p. 280). Bhaskar (2011, p. 24) draws on Locke's (1690) works to describe critical realism as being the 'underlabourer' for other philosophical traditions, ranging from Marxism to neoclassical economics—'removing some of the rubbish that

is in the way of knowledge'. It is characterised as being a 'maximally inclusive' approach, and is justified in preference to other research philosophies by the fact that:

> it is ontologically least restrictive, allowing the exact nature of the determinations and their interactions to be empirically determined case by case. And it is maximally inclusive insofar as it can accommodate the insights of other meta-theoretical positions while avoiding their drawbacks.
>
> (Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006, p. 280)

Hence, critical realism implies a stratified, depth-reality of generative mechanisms with particular causal powers actualised in events and experienced and interpreted by people who construct knowledge of what are otherwise open systems (Hartwig, 2007).

4.7.1   Domains of Reality

The social world has intentionality which involves people making choices from a repertoire of possibilities. Critical realism holds that reality can be apprehended and second-order knowledge generated by tracing it from origins of experience through to the level of events, and then to underlying structures and processes (Archer *et al.*, 1998). Critical realism is premised on the understanding that the world has depth, is stratified and that what is real cannot be reduced simply to experience. Bhaskar (2008) therefore distinguishes between the *real*, the *actual* and the *empirical*. The real includes mechanisms, events and experiences, and as a researcher I was interested in how these cause the messy outcomes at the level of direct experiences in the everyday world of the empirical.

Priestley (2011) draws on the work of Elder-Vass (2004) in illustrating critical realism as a *depth ontology*, with the conception of Bhaskar's (2008) three domains of reality:

- The *real*—the domain of structures, mechanisms—and their liabilities and causal powers. Human beings have no direct access to the domain of the real. Instead, the real must be *inferred* through observation of its effects.

- The *actual*—what happens when structures and mechanisms are activated—the domain of *processes* and *events* and is at least in part knowable.

- The *empirical*—elements of reality that are directly experienced by human beings.

Bhaskar (1998) clarifies the distinction between the three domains:

> Structures and mechanism then are real and distinct from the patterns of events they generate; just as events are real and distinct from the experiences in which they are apprehended.

(ibid., p. 41)

He uses the term 'ontological stratification' to describe the three overlapping domains of reality as shown in Table 1.

	Domain of Real	Domain of Actual	Domain of Empirical
Mechanisms	✓		
Events	✓	✓	
Experiences	✓	✓	✓

Table 1: Bhaskar's (1998) three domains of reality

Bhaskar's conception shows the empirical to be a subset of the actual, which in turn is a subset of the real. Elder-Vass (2004) represents these inclusion relations in the Venn diagram shown in Figure 2.
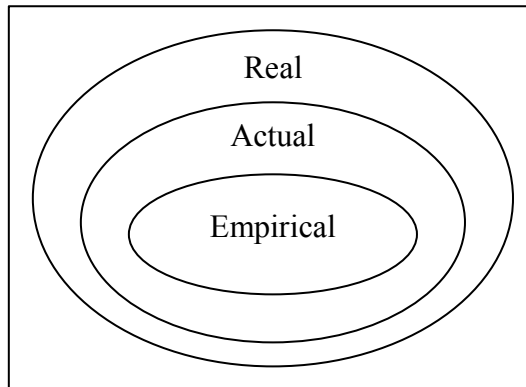
Figure 2: Bhaskar's three domains of reality—inclusion relations

Ayers (2011) explains that critical realists regard the empirical and actual as *surface phenomena*, which sets their stance apart from that of empirical realists:

> Whereas empirical realists insist that our empirical experiences constitute the sum total of reality, critical realists seek to explain events and processes of the actual in terms of the structures and causal mechanisms of the real: physical, chemical, biological, economic, social, psychological, and semiological dimensions of life that have their own distinctive structures and that have distinctive generative efforts on events via their particular mechanisms.

(Ayers, 2011, p. 348)

4.7.2 Key Assumptions of Critical Realism

In comparison to other forms of realism, critical realism postulates that 'some of our perceptions may be illusions or even hallucinations … some … may be true or false or, alternatively, some of our perceptions are "more accurate" or "closer to the truth" than others' (Hunt, 1990, p. 9). Table 2 enriches the description of this approach using Sayer's 'signposts' for critical realist thought.

1.	The world exists independently of our knowledge of it.
2.	Our knowledge of the world is fallible and theory-laden. Concepts of truth and falsity fail to provide a coherent view of the relationship between knowledge and its object. Nevertheless knowledge is not immune to empirical check and its effectiveness in informing and explaining successful material practice is not mere accident.
3.	Knowledge develops neither wholly continuously, as the steady accumulation of facts within a stable conceptual framework, nor discontinuously, through simultaneous and universal changes in concepts.
4.	There is necessity in the world; objects—whether natural or social—necessarily have particular powers or ways of acting and particular susceptibilities.
5.	The world is differentiated and stratified, consisting not only of events, but objects, including structures, which have powers and liabilities capable of generating events. These structures may be present even where, as in the social world and much of the natural world, they do not generate regular patterns of events.
6.	Social phenomena such as actions, texts and institutions are concept dependent. We not only have to explain their production and material effects but to understand, read or interpret what they mean. Although they have to be interpreted by starting from the researcher's own frames of meaning, by and large they exist regardless of researchers' interpretation of them. A qualified version of 1 therefore applies to the social world. In view of 4–6, the methods of social science and natural science have both differences and similarities.
7.	Science or the production of any kind of knowledge is a social practice. For better or worse (not just worse) the conditions and social relations of the production of knowledge influence its content. Knowledge is also largely—though not exclusively—linguistic, and the nature of language and the way we communicate are not incidental to what is known and communicated. Awareness of these relationships is vital in evaluating knowledge.
8.	Social science must be critical of its object. In order to be able to explain and understand social phenomena we have to evaluate them critically.

Source: Sayer (1992, p. 5)–cited in Easton (2010, p. 120)

Table 2: Sayer's (1992) 'signposts' characterising critical realism

Having shared the theoretical stances on the concept of agency, I then extended my discussion into teacher agency in particular. It was important to establish the theoretical framework of critical realism before now proceeding to the final section of this chapter, which pulls together the notions of agency from a critical realist perspective to make sense of teacher agency. I now refer to two final issues before concluding the chapter: social reproduction and transformation; and the framework for understanding teacher

agency developed by Priestley *et al.* (2015). These concepts draw on the earlier discussion in this chapter, and help explain why teachers act in the ways they do to either maintain the status quo or exercise their agency to transform their contexts by acting back on the structures which shape their work. Hence their coverage at this point.

4.8   Social Reproduction and Transformation

By definition, the ecological view of agency is dependent on recognising the interplay between structure, culture and individual actors. In this research, *structure* refers to the political and governance frameworks under which teachers are working in my case-study academy. This could include the powers of the Secretary of State for Education, but it could also be institutional arrangements such as the structure of promoted posts and positional authority within the school, exercising of power and dictating who can and cannot speak on certain matters. The cultural systems include norms and accepted ways of doing things within a school which shape and constrain how teachers operate in order to fit in within terms recognisable to school leaders, pupils, parents and the wider public. This includes ethos-related factors such as a the school's educational philosophy built up over generations, school uniform, prefect systems, the importance attached to the views of parents, the management of pupil behaviour, etc. New teachers are expected (and required) to fit in and not disrupt the status quo on how things are done.

I find the *model of social reproduction and transformation* developed by Priestley (2011), shown in Figure 3 and derived from Archer's (1988, 1995) social theory, helpful in understanding the emergent nature of agency. This illustrates that there is interplay between structure, culture and actors to allow agency to emerge. Importantly, it also shows that the emerging agency can *act back* on the three sub-sections of the model. So, for example, culture can influence agency, but then the agency can act back and change the culture (what Priestley refers to as *cultural elaboration*). Similarly, *structural* elaboration can take place, as can the *identity formation* of actors as a result of structure and culture.
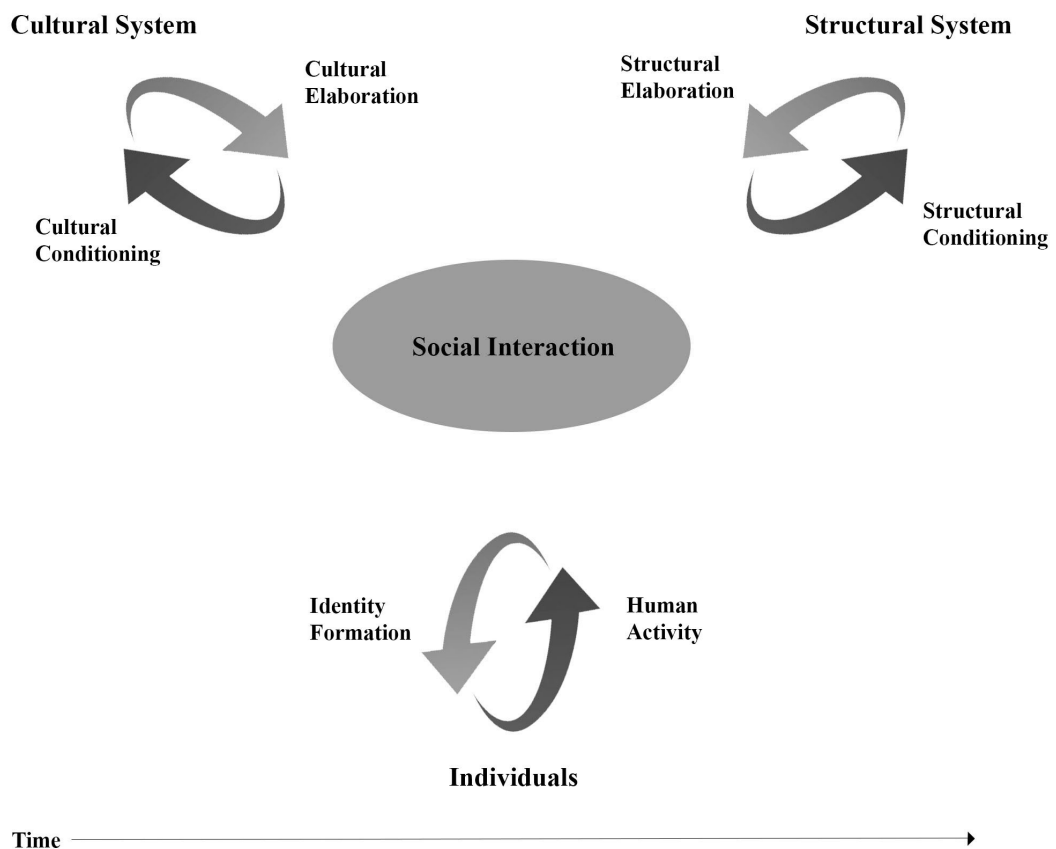

Figure 3: Social reproduction and transformation

In making links to Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) chordal triad of agency, cultural conditioning would lie partly within the iterational dimension of agency, reflecting what values and attitudes people bring to the job. It also reflects the practical-evaluative domain—the expectations and influence of the school and what it thinks it should be like as a result of its 'academy status'. Structural conditioning comes about through both the *practical-evaluative* (coping and surviving in the here and now) but also the projective (how things are going to be different now that the school has 'academy status').

4.8.1   Morphogenesis and Morphostatis

Inherent to the model shown in Figure 3 is the understanding that social relations can act to change or maintain existing social structures, as well as leading to the evolution of new cultural, structural and individual forms. Archer's (1995) model of *morphogenesis/morphostatis*, denoting change and continuity respectively, points to the interaction between the three domains—the cultural, structural and individual—which brings about social reproduction or transformation. It allows us to disentangle the various aspects that contribute to the unfolding of a given social situation. Archer suggests that the interplay between culture, structure and human activity is variable and occurs at what she calls the *socio-cultural level* (Priestley, 2011).

Within this interplay there are emergent properties which evolve, establish or are reinforced as a result of the interaction between the three spheres on Archer's model. For example, within a school, teachers are conditioned to accept that the hierarchical nature of the leadership structure generates a power imbalance, so that a head of department will have a degree of control and/or influence over a classroom teacher. This is how schools are organised, reflecting Archer's *morphostatis*. However, should a new teacher join this department with a cache of expertise not shared by the head of department or other staff, e.g. in the use of information technology, then that teacher's influence will act back on the power imbalance and inevitably generate a change in the structural dynamic—*morphogenesis*.

Using Priestley's model in Figure 3 enabled me to go beyond surface evaluation of the academy, and instead support an 'explanatory critique' (Bhaskar, 1998) of the deeper roots of social interaction between cultural systems, structural systems and individuals, and how this allows teachers to achieve agency. This is central to my research question and will hopefully inform the areas of educational research and policy formulation of the role of academies in nurturing teacher agency and educational reform. Collier (1994) captures some of the complexity of my research strategy:

> [S]ocial science does not only bring into view beliefs, their falsehood and their causal relations with the social structures; it also reveals human needs, their frustration, and the relation of those needs and that frustration to the social structure.

<div align="right">(Collier, 1994, p. 182)</div>

As stated above, the continuous interplay of generative mechanisms and the looping relationship between ideation and reality (Hacking, 1999–cited in Oliver, 2012) result in any school having a shifting and unpredictable social reality.

4.9   A Framework for Understanding Teacher Agency

A framework for understanding teacher agency has been developed by Priestley *et al.* (2015) and is shown in Figure 4. This builds on the concept of agency developed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) by extending it to consider the factors which influence *teacher agency* in particular. The model illustrates how the three dimensions of agency are separated out for analysis. With regard to the *iterational* dimension, a distinction is made between teachers' general life histories and their professional experiences (including their own education as a teacher and their cumulative experiences of being a teacher). The *projective* dimension distinguishes between short-term and longer-term orientations of action. With regard to the *practical-evaluative* dimension, distinction is made between structural, cultural and material aspects. Cultural aspects have to do with 'ways of speaking and thinking, of values, beliefs and aspirations, and encompass both inner and outer dialogue' (Priestley *et al.*, 2015, p. 30). Material aspects have to do with resources which either promote or hinder agency and the wider physical environment in which agency is enacted. Structural aspects have to do with social structures and relational resources which contribute to the achievement of agency.
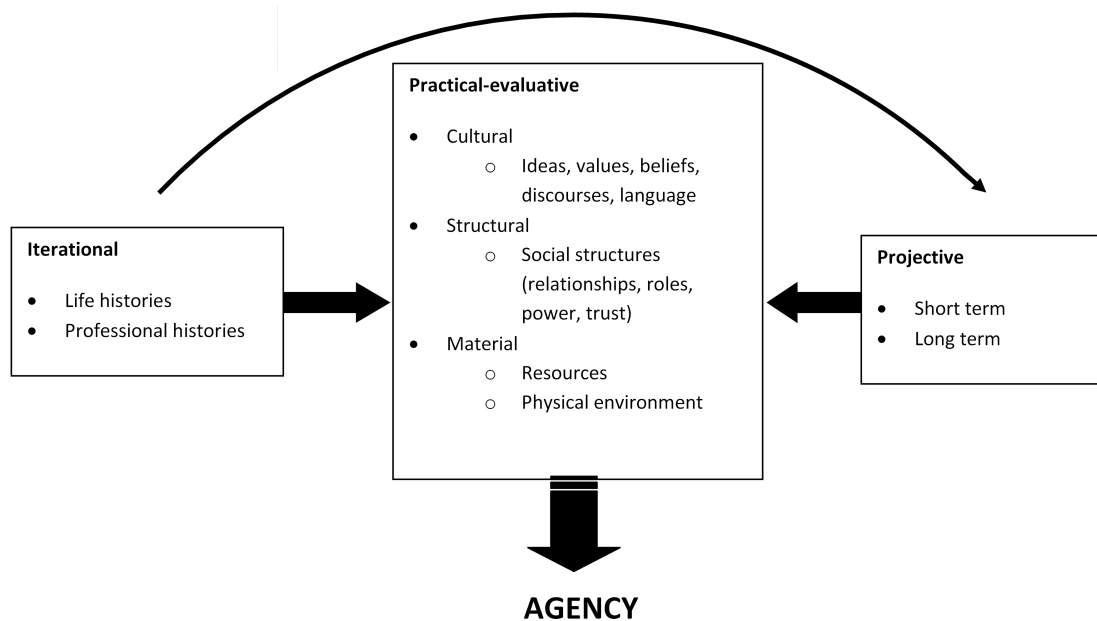
Figure 4: Framework for Understanding Teacher Agency

I found this model of making sense of teacher agency helpful in analysing my fieldwork conducted in Bucklands Academy. It clearly illustrated the influences on teachers' agency and how it can emerge or be constrained. However, some of the policy texts introduced by governments in recent years have led to the enactment of notable changes to the basic underlying structures of schooling that have been largely outside teachers' control. Particularly relevant to this study is the dismantling of accountability to local education authorities and subsequent changes to funding and governance agreements which have handed power to individuals and the private sector through the introduction of academies and free schools. The extent to which these reforms produce significant change is limited and Fullan (1993) argues that 'you can't mandate what matters' (p. 21) and that there are limits to what can be achieved through structural as opposed to cultural changes: 'Changing formal structures is not the same as changing norms, habits, skills and beliefs' (ibid., p. 49). Neither structural nor cultural changes will do much to improve schooling unless they take into account the active agency of teachers in constructing the reality of educational practice on a day-to-day basis in their classrooms. Elmore reiterates the significance of teacher agency:

> You don't change performance without changing the instructional core. The relationship of the teacher and the student in the presence of content must be at the center of efforts to improve performance. If you can't see it in the classroom, it's not there.
>
> (Elmore, 2004–cited in Henry, 2012)

It is important to note that a value-laden and contested area such as educational reform displays what Giddens (1984) refers to as the 'duality of structure', whereby social actions both create, and are restrained by, social structures. By their actions, human beings may either transform or reproduce such structures. Ball (1994, p. 21) argues that, 'any analysis of policy requires an understanding that is based not on constraint *or* agency but on the changing relationships between constraint *and* agency and their inter-penetration'. The degree to which either structure constrains human agency or is transformed by it is dependent upon the context and culture within which people operate (Helsby, 1999, p. 31).

4.10   Conclusion to Chapter 4

The methodological ontology adopted for this research involves looking for social structures, their causal powers and relations between them. It also looks for interaction between entities which generate mechanisms which have power. This involved me hypothesising about particular kinds of powers and investigating these and the mechanisms they produce. Elder-Vass (2010) emphasises that this iterative process means we have to be prepared to change our ontology in response to what we find, and perhaps even our philosophical ontology. So it is ultimately a practical process rather than seeking theoretical closure:

> We validate *theory* by working out its implications for the actual world in the form of hypotheses that can be tested against empirical evidence, and then revise the theory if it proves inadequate to the case. In meta-methodological parallel, we can validate *metatheory* by working out its implications for the development of theory in the form of methodological inferences that can be tested in the process of theorising.
>
> (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 75)

I now move to Chapter 5 to explain the research strategy and methods I adopted in an attempt to understand the structural, cultural and human interplay within the context of my case-study academy.

Chapter 5

Research Methods

For a research community, case study optimizes understanding by pursuing scholarly research questions. It gains credibility by thoroughly triangulating the descriptions and interpretations, not just in a single step but continuously throughout the period of the study. For a qualitative research community, case study concentrates on experiential knowledge of the case and close attention to the influence of its social, political and other contexts.

(Stake, 2005, pp. 443–444)

5.1   Introduction

This chapter sets out the rationale and design for the empirical enquiry in this thesis and is divided into three parts. I first explain the research strategy adopted and my approach to the enquiry as a researcher. I then provide information about the research methods used, which include semi-structured interviews, observations and documentary analysis. I conclude this by discussing the political and ethical considerations arising from the methods of enquiry.

5.2   Research Strategy

The strategy adopted for this research is that of an exemplifying case study. It was my intention to develop and experience a close relationship with a real-life situation in an established academy in England. My aim was to use this as the basis for gaining an insight into the educational approach of one of these schools and to consider the impact this has on teachers' agency. My research involved data collection within a real-life context, making a case study the appropriate choice of strategy (Robson, 2011).

Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) suggest that 'the use of case study in research has generated a good deal of debate … largely concentrating on issues of validity, reliability and generalisation' (p. 23). Bell (1999) warns of the difficulty in cross-checking information, which can lead to the 'danger of distortion' (p. 11). Immersed in the situation as one often is, a case-study researcher could face accusations of bias, and so the question of how a researcher has been able to achieve objective distance is often posed.

Critics of the case-study approach argue that generalisation is not always possible and question the value of the study of single events. Despite the criticisms made, Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) suggest that 'the case study is in many ways the most appropriate format and orientation for school based research' (p. 316). Denscombe (2007) believes there is scope for generalisation: 'the extent to which findings from the case study can be generalized to other examples in the class depends on how far the case study is similar to others of its type' (p. 43). Bassey takes a similar view, but uses the term 'relatability' rather than 'generalisability'. He states:

> [A]n important criterion for judging the merit of a case-study is the extent to which the details are sufficient and appropriate for a teacher working in a similar situation to relate his decision making to that described in the case-study. The relatability of a case-study is more important than its generalisability.

> (Bassey, 1981, p. 85)

The aim of the research was to understand if school autonomy enables teacher agency to emerge in the context of a *single* academy, rather than to attempt to prove any predictive theory. This is important to state for two reasons. First, the extent to which different academies embrace their freedoms will vary significantly and will be heavily influenced by the ecology of the school context (Priestley *et al.*, 2015). Second, as Flyvbjerg (2006) points out, predictive theory in social science probably cannot exist, and what is possible instead is 'context-dependent knowledge' (p. 223).

5.3   Selection of the Case Study

Flyvbjerg (2006) stresses the importance of the strategic selection of a case study when the objective is to achieve the greatest possible amount of information on a given problem or phenomenon, arguing that random samples seldom produce this insight. As was discussed in 2.3, the term 'academy' no longer helpfully describes the different array of schools which form part of the academies programme in 2015. This research does not claim to offer findings which relate to the many different forms of academies, but instead focuses on a single *sponsored* academy launched between 2002 and 2010. My preparatory visit to Bucklands Academy suggested that it was *typical* of the first group of sponsored academies started under the New Labour government, and so any conclusions drawn may offer insights helpful to other *similar* schools. It was for the

reason of *typicality* that I selected Bucklands as my case study, thus improving the validity of my fieldwork in addressing the research questions. I was able to reach this conclusion as a result of early background research on the school which showed that it had achieved national recognition for its innovative and transformational approaches to curriculum planning, learning, teaching and pastoral care. Furthermore, the sponsors of the academy consider its independence from the local authority as being fundamental, allowing them to act differently and radically in what they believe to be in the best interests of their students. Three days were spent on a pre-fieldwork visit in July 2012, observing the work of the senior leadership team, meeting teachers and observing lessons and other activities. From my detailed insights into the workings of the school, I was confident this particular academy would be a rich source of data to inform the research findings.

5.4   The Case Study Approach

A case study is the exploration of a 'specific instance … designed to illustrate a more general principle' (Cohen *et al.*, 2000, p. 181), making it a suitable choice of research strategy for this enquiry. A case study can include: rich description and narrative; analysis of events; a focus on perceptions of a group of those involved; a focus on particular events; the involvement of the researcher in the case; and presentation of the case in a way that captures the experience. Through the case study approach it is possible to develop what Flyvbjerg (2006) describes as a 'nuanced view of reality' (p. 223).

According to Cohen *et al.* (2000), 'case studies investigate and research the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relations and other factors in a unique instance' (p. 181). They suggest that a case study provides a 'unique example of real people in real situations', which yields more than 'abstract theories or principles' (ibid.). Bell makes a similar point:

> The great strength of the case study is that it allows the researcher to concentrate on a specific instance or situation and to identify or attempt to identify the various interactive processes at work.

> (Bell, 1999, pp. 10–11)

Case studies strive to portray 'what it is like' to be in a particular situation, to catch the close-up reality and 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973–cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2000) of participants' lived experiences. Hence, 'it is important for the events and situations to be allowed to speak for themselves rather than to be largely interpreted, evaluated or judged by the researcher' (Cohen *et al.*, 2000, p. 182).

Edwards (2003) emphasises the power of the case study to explore a phenomenon in order to unearth patterns that could be later explained through the application of theory. She points out that it may not be necessary to have a hypothesis in place, and that the evidence gathered could be organised into sets of variables and explored to answer, as she puts it, the 'What is going on?' question (p. 5). Charmaz (2006, p. 20) also asks this same question at the early stages, along with 'What are the basic social processes?' and 'What are the basic social psychological processes?'. I found these broad questions helpful in defining the research in attempts to get beneath the surface of the academy and establishing what exactly lies behind its work and its approach.

5.5   Triangulation

Triangulation is essential to the validity of the investigation. The multi-method approach allows for this and can be defined as:

> cross checking the existence of certain phenomena and the veracity of individual accounts by gathering data from a number of informants and a number of sources and subsequently comparing and contrasting one account with another in order to produce as full and balanced a study as possible.
>
> (Open University, 1988–cited in Bell, 1999, p. 102)

Cohen *et al.* (2000) suggest that triangulation can be done in several ways. Findings can be examined over a period of time (longitudinal studies) or compared across different environments. One approach is *methodological triangulation*, which uses the same method on different occasions or different methods on the same subject of study. Case study data are strong in reality and grounded in lived experience. By informing the enquiry through contextual research about Bucklands Academy and its predecessor school, a rich body of information was created from which to draw upon in the interviews, helping me probe in more depth. I was able to research a significant amount

of information online about the school prior to my fieldwork, and this included Ofsted reports, local authority committee reports, newspaper articles, minutes of meetings and information from the 'anti-academy' campaign organised by protestors. I was able to triangulate interview data with my preliminary research and also through my observational studies conducted in the school in October and November 2012. Triangulating findings of the research enquiry in this way was important as it helped me to abstract meaning from the verbal data in interviews. Thus, the literature review, the documentary analysis and the interview data had a *dialogical relationship* (Brown and Dowling, 1998), which added depth to the empirical enquiry. The findings from the interview respondents could be matched against the documentary analysis, contextual information and the literature review, and thus assist interpretation. In a small-scale study such as this with limited scope for empirical research, this was helpful.

Whilst the use of case study design has limitations, this method was the most fitting (Yin, 2014). It became clear to me early in my research that the lived experience of people working in the academy might be different from the official discourse at policy and school levels. Therefore, I decided that the documentary evidence alone would not be sufficient to answer my research questions. In addition, there were many variables to interpret and multiple sources of evidence to triangulate. Hence, I adopted a mixed-methods approach to the research design. Although the methods used for research were mainly qualitative, some quantitative data were also included, e.g. in the documentary analysis and literature review, which considered the expansion of the academies programme and the trends in performance over time at Bucklands Academy.

5.6   Researcher Identity

I am aware that I approach this research as an experienced secondary headteacher, and that I will inevitably bring preconceived ideas and potential bias to the data collection and analysis. As a researcher, my role is to interpret the outcomes. But I am also the headteacher of a converter academy, and therefore I am likely to have a particular perspective, which may influence my interpretation of the results. It is also possible that I share the outlook and prejudices of the senior leaders in the case-study school. The danger inherent in *professional* reflection does not mean that such reflection has no

value. Reflection as a practitioner is a central principle of the Doctorate in Education and it represents the core of my own professional learning in undertaking this research. Far from being a disadvantage, this reflection on practice is the main advantage of the EdD for me as a serving headteacher. Indeed, Pring (2000a) argues that although 'common sense' has an uncritical manner within which beliefs are held, it also refers to the structure of beliefs which, though they are to be contrasted with theory, are for many purposes quite adequate. Pring warns:

> Such common sense needs to be rejected by researchers with caution. Without this link to such common sense, specialized thinking, with its technically defined terms and its restricted subject matter, would have no 'purchase' upon the questions we ordinarily ask.
>
> (Pring, 2000a, p. 87)

The experience I have gained as a senior leader since 1993, including developing my wider understanding of education through my MEd, all helped define my understanding of Bucklands Academy. This helped me to contextualise the school in broader national and local structures, as well as identifying a focus for the research and interpreting the social world and day-to-day realities it faced. Like any researcher conducting a case study, I had to understand the local and national structures within which Bucklands Academy was located. Only after such understandings were developed was I able to draw case specific conclusions (Simons, 2009; Yin, 2014).

5.7   The Research Sample

In selecting the subjects for interview I chose examples of staff at different stages of their careers, some of whom had taught previously in other schools including the predecessor school. It was also important for me to interview people at different levels within the hierarchy of the school, from newly qualified teachers (including *TeachFirst* trainees) to the principal. It proved difficult for me to gain access to governors, and despite my efforts it was clear that the principal was uncomfortable with this and would not authorise such access. This was disappointing but I had to respect this restriction and find ways to understand the governance of the school from the perspective of other key stakeholders. I was granted a 30-minute interview with the main sponsor 11 months after my main fieldwork had been concluded at the school. Another limitation on my research was that I had no direct access to parents, and only had written historical data

from a small number of parents of the predecessor school from which to gain information. Finally, it would have been helpful to interview someone from the local authority to gain their perspective on Bucklands Academy, but again the principal requested that I avoid doing so, which I respected. Having reflected on the principal's stance regarding my access to governors and the local authority, I infer two things. Firstly, he may have felt that his accountability to the governors was such that it may have left him professionally exposed to their criticism to have a researcher investigating whether academy status was helpful in supporting teachers' agency. My reading of this situation is that the sponsors had no doubt whatsoever that academy status and their personal involvement with the school were good for Bucklands, and they may not have welcomed any investigation that might ask questions to the contrary. Secondly, the principal was consistent throughout my time in Bucklands Academy that the predecessor school and its history 'did not exist'. The history of Bucklands as far he and the sponsors were concerned started the day the new academy opened, and this included professional links with the local authority.

Although the variety of perspectives provided interesting findings on the role of the teacher within the case study, this variety itself could have been one of the main disadvantages of the research. Any potential lack of standardisation in gathering data could have led to questions about the reliability of the research (Robson, 2011). The common pitfalls in qualitative data collection include equipment failure, environmental distractions and interruptions, and transcription errors. The use of an 'audit trail' to help 'rule out threats' to validity is advised, although there is no 'foolproof way of *guaranteeing* validity' (ibid., p. 159). The point is made that in flexible design research such as that being conducted in this enquiry, 'most threats to validity … are dealt with *after* the research is in progress, and using evidence which you have collected *after* you have begun to develop a tentative account' (ibid.).

I was extremely conscious of the need for accuracy during my fieldwork and was thorough, careful and honest in carrying it out. Planning the interview process to address validity concerns was essential. There was a range of entry points of participants taking part in my research. Some teachers had given little thought to the fact they were working in a sponsored academy, and others were acutely aware of it

(some having specifically chosen it). As a result, a higher number of interviews than is usual for this size of study was undertaken (25 in the school alone) to ensure that consistency in findings emerged. Whilst this was a disadvantage in relation to the use of my own time due to the large quantity of data gathered, it did nevertheless yield a rich seam of useful information, which was extremely powerful and added value to my findings. I was fastidious in clarifying what subjects meant when they were answering my questions and ensured that all interviews were transcribed in full, followed by checks for accuracy from myself by reading over the transcripts whist listening to the recordings. I also sent transcripts to subjects for their approval, although it should be noted that no respondents took up the offer of continued dialogue over their initial interview data.

The study was not approached with or evaluated against a preconceived hypothesis. Instead, the intention was to develop a narrative of the extent to which, if any, teacher agency can emerge within the ecology (Priestley *et al*., 2015) of the school. I consider this to be important because, according to Flyvbjerg (2006), researchers who have conducted in-depth case studies of this type typically report that any early assumptions were wrong and that the case-study material has compelled them to revise their hypothesis. Edwards (2003) makes the point that, particularly in case studies, researchers often bring their own work within the field to the study and then question the rationale for a particular strategy or approach in the light of that work. I am conscious of these issues and deliberately approached the fieldwork in the role of 'researcher' rather than 'headteacher', avoiding the temptation to start the research with any preconceived ideas.

5.8   Research Methods

Although my research involved me working with Bucklands Academy over a six-month period, I was only able to access a wide range of data from participants over a series of short visits. As was discussed in 4.9, the way in which teacher agency emerges means that much of the information relates to participants' personal backgrounds, previous working environments and their personal development since childhood. The focus of this case study includes teachers' professional journeys and an insight into the extent of freedom, autonomy and teacher agency at different levels within Bucklands Academy at this point in its history. As such, a multi-methods approach was used to gather data, which included interviews, observation and documentary analysis.

5.9   Data Collection

5.9.1   Interviews

Interviews were the principal method of data collection in this research. Interviews are considered by Guba and Lincoln (1981) to be the 'backbone of field and naturalistic research and evaluation' (cited in Clarke, 1999, p. 71). Cohen *et al*. (2000) make the point that the interview marks a move away from seeing human subjects as simply being manipulable data which are external to the research. They cite Kvale (1996) who stresses that the interview moves research towards 'regarding knowledge as generated between humans, often through conversations' and that it is 'an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest' (ibid., p. 267). Kvale emphasises the centrality of human interaction for knowledge production and the social situatedness of the research data. In line with my research philosophy of critical realism, Cohen and colleagues make the point that as a result of this human interaction, interviews are not exclusively subjective or objective, but rather are more accurately located as being what they describe as 'intersubjective':

> Interviews enable participants—be they interviewers or interviewees—to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view. In these senses the interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is part of life itself, its human embeddedness is inescapable.

> (Cohen *et.al.*, 2000, p. 267)

A general distinction is made between three basic types of interview format: structured; semi-structured; and unstructured (Bell, 1999; Clarke, 1999; Cohen *et.al.*, 2000; Silverman, 2000; Radnor, 2002). For the purposes of this research, the semi-structured interview approach was felt to be most appropriate because it allowed data and research findings to emerge from the fieldwork. Cohen *et al.* (2000) suggest that semi-structured interviews tend to be used because they enable respondents 'to project their own ways of defining the world' (p. 146) and that they 'permit flexibility rather than fixity of sequence of discussions' (p. 147). They also allow the participants to raise and pursue issues and matters that might not have been included in a pre-devised schedule. Robson (2011) suggests that researchers approach semi-structured interviews with a 'shopping list' of topics and want to get responses to them. This allows considerable freedom in the sequencing of the questions, in their exact wording, and in the amount of time and attention given to different topics. He advises that this type of interviewing is 'most appropriate when the interviewer is closely involved in the research process (e.g. in a small-scale project) when the researcher is also the interviewer' (ibid., p. 285), which was the case with this enquiry.

The open-ended questions, whilst remaining focused on the theme of the research questions, were designed to elicit rich qualitative information. Although there was an interview schedule, it was not essential that the questions adhered to a predetermined sequence, and the interviewer probed for information by encouraging respondents to digress and expand upon their answers.

Radnor (2002) emphasises the importance of active listening in the approach to semi-structured interviews in order to check validity and encourage examples and expansions of what is being said. She stresses that this is necessary because:

> An interpretive researcher wants rich data from her interviews in order to build up a picture of what is happening from the perspective of the interviewee … the active listener does not 'hog' the interview and does not give out her opinions. She constantly searches for the interviewees' meanings and practices.

<div align="right">(Radnor, 2002, p. 61)</div>

I approached the interviews in the belief that they would uncover multiple meanings from the point of view of participants. As Silverman (2000) suggests, interviews uncover 'actively constructed narratives, involving activities which themselves demand analysis' (p. 36). This research was not approached with a view to gaining direct access to 'experience', and as such the researcher's role was in uncovering and analysing sub-texts and looking for underlying messages and meanings rather than taking things at face value.

The interviews were face-to-face, allowing me to make effective use of probes and prompts to clarify meaning with respondents and to triangulate answers with data gleaned from documentary analysis (Creswell, 2009). This method permitted much more comprehensive access to what respondents knew, understood and interpreted. It opened up the respondents' preferences, values, attitudes and beliefs to closer analysis (Cohen and Manion, 1994).

5.9.2   Interview Questions

The interview questions flowed directly from the main research question and its sub-questions. The questions were formed both in relation to the findings in the documentary analysis on the academies programme and to the theory on teacher agency considered in the literature. In line with the approach to semi-structured interviewing, I had a guide that served as a checklist of topics to be covered and default wording and order for the questions (Robson, 2011). The interview questions in Appendix 2 show the collection of data was, to some extent, pre-coded through the structure of the schedule. Pre-determined questions were modified, omitted or added to as the interviewer deemed appropriate (ibid.).

It is recognised that the purpose of interviewing is to capture the experiences, perspectives and understandings of the interviewees. Clarke (1999) emphasises that the quality of the final analysis is contingent upon the accuracy with which the data are recorded. With the individual permission of each interviewee, I recorded the interviews so that a full text could be reproduced for the purpose of detailed analysis. Notes were

also taken during the interviews to prompt the researcher during analysis of the interview transcripts.

A detailed schedule of interviews is shown in Appendix 1. The outline interview questions are shown in Appendix 2.

5.9.3   Observation

The research involved systematic observation as a direct method of collecting primary qualitative data. Gold (1969–cited in Clarke, 1999) outlines four types of role for the evaluator in observation studies, each being differentiated by the degree to which the observer participates in the group or organisation which is the subject of the study. They are: *complete participant*; *participant-as-observer*; *observer-as-participant*; and *complete observer*.

Burgess (1982—cited in Clarke, 1999) notes that within the context of a single study, the researcher may, from time to time, move between the roles. I adopted the role of observer-as-participant in that I had minimal involvement in the social setting in the school. I had some connection with what was being observed (e.g. participants at meetings were aware of my attendance and my role as a researcher), but I was not normally or naturally part of those groups. As with all observation research, my principal aim was not to interfere with or affect the people or activities under observation and maintain objectivity at all times (Angrosino, 2005).

The advantage of observation over other data collection methods is that it allows the researcher to draw on tacit as well as propositional knowledge in order to describe a situation or series of events. Guba and Lincoln (2005) note that observations can provide new insights by drawing attention to actions and behaviour normally taken for granted by those involved in the programme or activities, and therefore not commented upon in interviews.

5.9.4   Documentary Evidence

Burgess (1984) draws a distinction between primary and secondary sources of documentary evidence. Primary sources refer to documents compiled by individuals who have first-hand experience of the events described, including minutes of meetings, memoranda and school guidelines. Secondary sources are documents produced by individuals who do not possess personal knowledge of the situation, an example of which might be references to the academy from people beyond the school.

Documentary analysis can provide a valuable source of information about formal goals and aims of a programme. For example, content analysis of the minutes of committees and working groups can provide a useful record of problems and challenges associated with programme implementation. However, as Clarke (1999) points out, documentary analysis requires careful handling and it should not be assumed that documents constitute independent, objective records of events or circumstances:

> Texts must be studied as socially situated products. The evaluator must develop an understanding of both the process by which the document is produced and the social and political context in which it is embedded.
>
> (Clarke, 1999, p. 85)

5.10   Analysis of Fieldwork Data

In understanding how the data from my fieldwork were analysed, it is important to recognise two points. The first is that the same approach was adopted for all three research methods. Secondly, the interpretation of the data was an iterative process, which took place both during the fieldwork itself and also over the months that followed. Miles *et al.* (2014) advise against separating data collection and analysis as it 'rules out the possibility of collecting new data to fill in gaps or to test new hypotheses that emerge during analysis' (p. 70). In taking this approach it allowed for 'interweaving data collection and analysis from the very start' (ibid.), requiring me to cycle back and forth between thinking about existing data and generating strategies for collecting new data.

To understand how I made sense of the data, I begin by describing the approach to analysing the interviews, as the same approach was taken with observations and documentary evidence.

5.10.1 Analysing the Interviews

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, thus providing hundreds of pages of data to be analysed. Personally transcribing the interviews enabled me to become extremely familiar with this data set. Silverman (2006) notes the requirement to do more than just listen or read, explaining that 'the interpretation of transcripts may be gravely weakened by a failure to note apparently trivial, but often crucial, pauses, overlaps or body movements' (p. 46). Following Silverman's advice that non-verbal actions and body movements also contribute to data, I noted these and drew attention to them in the transcripts in an attempt to capture the tone and mood of certain contributions. I considered that this would extend the analysis beyond the words on the page and avoid giving a misleading impression of rigour and objectivity (Humes, 2010).

In analysing the interviews I was careful to ensure that I was systematic throughout by following the same steps and procedures with all transcripts. I was seeking to evaluate them in terms of:

- *Content Analysis*—examining the interviews to identify key words, paragraphs or themes;

- *Discourse Analysis*—going beyond the key themes to examine the ways in which these were expressed, including the actual words used during the interviews;

- *Relational Analysis*—by identifying the concepts emerging from the interviews and going beyond this to explore the relationships between these.

5.10.2 Stages of Analysing the Interview Transcripts

In analysing the interview transcripts, I used a combination of *inductive* and *deductive* approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2006). An initial set of themes was identified from the review of literature and policy documentation, creating what could be thought of as 'closed' codes. This drew upon the deductive approach and was seen as a preliminary and tentative stage in the analysis. I then examined the transcripts to determine the provisional emerging themes (the inductive approach). I quickly read through all the transcripts, making notes about my first impressions.

To develop more specific themes from the data, I began by carefully analysing the first interview, which was with the principal of Bucklands Academy. The transcript of this interview was scanned line-by-line to identify themes, taking account of those which had emerged during earlier analysis. I then proceeded to refine and develop these themes as I repeated the same process with the remaining 24 interview transcripts. See Appendix 3 for an example of the coding process conducted with the transcript of the interview with Teacher 7.

The following stages were followed to analyse each interview transcript:

Stage 1
I identified the units of analysis in the transcript by breaking up the interview into chunks of data—words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs.

Stage 2

The interview transcript was analysed by going through a hard copy and giving a one- or two-word summary, or 'code' (Taylor-Powell and Renner, 2003), to each chunk of data. These labels were about actions, activities, concepts, differences, opinions and processes. This initial or *open coding* (Saldaña, 2009) was used to accurately describe the meaning of each segment of text. The decision about what to code arose from themes that were repeated in several places, things which surprised me, where the interviewee explicitly stated that s/he felt it was important or where I had read about something similar in the literature or policy discourses.

Stage 3

The themes were then grouped into categories based on their similar characteristics in order to 'consolidate meaning and explanation' (Grbich, 2007–cited in Saldaña, 2009, p. 8). The aim was to conceptualise the data by identifying a smaller number of overarching themes (five) which could be used to group my codes—what Saldaña refers to as *focused coding*. This was an iterative process and required me to go back to the original data and check that the new themes matched the emergent ones, referred to as the *constant comparison method of analysis* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The final list of focused themes comprised:

- governance

- autonomy

- accountability

- teacher agency

- performativity.

Different coloured codes were used within the same theme for fine analysis. For example, within the theme of *teacher agency*, I coded those data relating to the iterative dimension of agency in cyan, and those showing action-orientated agency in red.

Stage 4

I brought all the individual quotes for each theme together by literally cutting up the interview transcripts and putting all the quotes highlighted in the same colour together. I then examined the themes and looked for key ideas within each one.

I then collected all the ideas across the transcript which made up the focused themes and looked at how these interacted with each other, e.g. was there a particular sequence or order noticeable? Similarly, I looked for the relationships between the overarching themes.

Stage 5

The same process was then repeated with the remaining transcripts, whilst at the same time checking for any emerging themes. It was important for me to return to the earlier interviews and to compare new and old themes and adjust my ideas accordingly (constant comparison).

Stage 6

The final stage was to construct the narrative from the themes, sub-themes and codes. I did this through describing themes and quotes from the interviews to support my ideas, as well as creating a discussion arising from the inter-relationships between themes. In essence, this was the theory I set out to develop. It was important at this stage to use a neutral voice and to avoid interpreting the results.

5.10.3 Analysis of Observational Data

My observations were unstructured and naturalistic in that I neither stipulated nor stimulated the behaviour of those whom I was observing (Punch, 2009). The data were qualitative in nature and included meeting notes, observing interactions, identifying the focus of discussions, witnessing how decisions were made, and noting any non-verbal signals from participants. I endeavoured to carry out the observations in a natural and open-ended way in order to maintain objectivity and allow the data to speak for themselves. The behaviour was observed as 'the stream of actions and events as they naturally unfolded' (ibid., p. 154). This allowed concepts to emerge later in the research rather than being brought to the fieldwork and imposed on the data from the start.

The process of observation evolved through a series of activities. It began with gaining permission from the principal to attend a number of planned meetings, completing classroom observations, taking learning walks and observing aspects of general school life (e.g. assemblies, student behaviour, etc.). As the study progressed, the nature of the observations sharpened in focus as themes began to emerge which linked more closely to my research questions. The observational strategy adopted was informed by Silverman (2006), who suggests five stages in organising an initially unstructured observational study: beginning the research (by proposing a very general set of

questions); field notes (beginning with broad descriptive categories, but later developing into more focused codes and categories); looking as well as listening; testing hypothesis; and making broader links.

All observations were written up and recorded immediately following the events as they occurred. This included physical configurations of meetings, details of attendees and notes relating to what had been observed and how any events had been conducted. Some observations were recorded as field notes, with others resembling minutes of meetings, to which my observations and annotations were added. Using the themes previously generated for the analysis of the interviews, I then coded the observation field notes and an example of this is shown in Appendix 4.

5.10.4 Analysing the Documentary Evidence

All documentary sources are based around certain ideas, theories or taken-for-granted principles, and these are located within the constraints of particular social or structural contexts (Punch, 2009). It was my aim to establish what these were in relation to the academies programme generally and within Bucklands Academy in particular. Jupp (1996) makes the point that meaning varies according to social and institutional settings, thus texts studied in isolation from their social contexts are deprived of real meaning. I was seeking to identify the political and professional discourses inherent with the various documents analysed. I was also aware of the *social organisation* of the documentation, whereby even apparently 'objective' documents are 'artfully constructed with a view to how they may be read' (Silverman, 1993–cited in Punch, 2009, p. 201).

None of the documents analysed were produced at my request for this particular research but instead were 'simply "out there" waiting to be assembled and analysed' (Bryman, 2016, p. 546). Robson (1994) refers to this as an *indirect approach* to research in that the documents have been produced for some other purpose. One of the advantages of using documents for research purposes is that they are *non-reactive*, meaning that because they were not designed for the purposes of the research the

possibility of a reactive effect can be largely discounted as a limitation on the validity of data (ibid.).

Scott (1990, p. 6) identifies four criteria for assessing the quality of documentation for social science research:

- *Authenticity*—is the evidence genuine and of unquestionable origin?

- *Credibility*—is the evidence free from error and distortion?

- *Representativeness*—is the evidence typical of its kind, and if not, is the extent of its untypicality known?

- *Meaning*—is the evidence clear and comprehensible?

It was against these criteria that I analysed the documentation linked to my research.

A great deal of the data derived for my research, particularly for Chapter 2, was produced by the state in the form of statistical information, Acts of Parliament and official reports. In terms of Scott's four criteria, such material can be seen as *authentic* and as having *meaning*. However, *credibility* and *representativeness* require greater consideration. The issue of credibility raises questions as to whether the documents are biased, and Bryman (2016) suggests that caution is necessary in treating such documents as depictions of reality. The issue of representativeness is not easy to assess as material of this nature is often unique. My approach to dealing with this issue was to evaluate the documents against my theoretical framework of critical realism in an attempt to establish an explanation for the key narratives.

The main sources of documentary evidence relating directly to Bucklands Academy were derived from the large number of written policies, memos, inspection documentation, governing body reports and publicity material produced by the school. Some of this material was in the public domain (e.g. newsletters and prospectuses); some was not (e.g. the school's self-evaluation for Ofsted and the principal's reports to the governing body). Evaluated against Scott's criteria, I considered the documentation

analysed to be authentic and meaningful (i.e. it was clear and comprehensible). However, as with the government documentation, the issues of credibility and representativeness were more difficult to evaluate. The fact that there were a number of critical voices from key stakeholders regarding school policy was important in confirming the validity of the data. However, as Scott (1990, p. 6) points out, despite the apparent authenticity, these documents could not be regarded as 'free from error or distortion', as they represent one view within the organisation and do not necessarily represent an objective account of reality in the school. It was important, therefore, that I examined and interrogated the documents in the context of other sources of data.

Bryman (2016, p. 554) argues that issues of representativeness are 'likely to loom large in most contexts of this kind' with the possibility that the researcher might not have had access to a fully comprehensive set of documentation. The relevance of this applied directly to my fieldwork in my attempts to uncover documentation relating to Bucklands Academy's predecessor school. The principal took the view that this school no longer existed and was irrelevant to the new academy. He stated that he had no record or interest in school documentation relating to the old Bucklands School. Indeed, it was difficult for me to obtain open access to inspection reports relating to the predecessor school and this was only possible following a direct approach to Ofsted to release archived copies for my personal use.

Analysing both the official and school documentation involved me reading beyond the text to identify the underlying themes. I identified the themes in the documents by applying codes (categories) to the sources in a similar way to that employed during the analysis of my interview transcripts. In addition, I noted the context within which the key documents were generated. The process was, again, iterative in that I was constantly revising the themes and categories distilled from the examination of the documents.

The official policy documentation analysed is detailed in the List of References. The school documentation relating to Bucklands Academy is listed in Appendix 5. It should be noted that for the purposes of anonymity, any references to the original case-study school have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

5.11 Reliability and Validity

Reliability is traditionally defined as the extent to which a test or procedure produces similar results under constant conditions on all occasions (Bell, 1999). As Hammersley (1992) puts it:

> [reliability] refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions.
>
> (Cited in Silverman, 2000, p. 9)

As was discussed in 4.7, the theoretical framework of critical realism adopted for this study is premised on the acceptance that truth can only be approximated. This is consistent with the stance of Richardson (1994–cited in Guba and Lincoln, 2005) who states that '[the] postmodern turn suggests that no method can deliver on ultimate truth, and in fact [he] "suspects all methods" the more so the larger their claims of delivering truth' (p. 205). Guba and Lincoln (2005) stress the importance of being *interpretively rigorous* and that the test of validity in interpretive studies relates to the rigour of the application of the agreed research methods combined with community consent. They locate the criteria for judging the process and outcomes of naturalistic enquiry as: *fairness*; *ontological authenticity*; *educative authenticity*; *catalytic authenticity*; and *tactical authenticity* (p. 207).

Validity is defined as 'the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers' (Hammersley, 1990, p. 57). Creswell (2009) stresses the importance in qualitative research of determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participants or the readers. Multiple strategies are recommended to assess the accuracy of findings as well as convincing the reader of that accuracy. The following methods (Creswell, 2009, pp. 191–192) are adopted in this research to ensure validity:

- *Triangulation* of different data sources and using this to build up a coherent and accurate picture. In this study triangulation is achieved by comparing inspection reports, principal's reports, school policies and procedures, and comparing these with the views of teachers and students.

- Use of *member checking* to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking sections and themes back to participants to confirm accuracy. This may involve follow-up interviews if necessary.

- The use of *rich descriptions* to provide detailed perspectives about a theme, context or issues to validate shared experiences.

- Adding *negative or contrary information* which contradicts or challenges the main theme(s) emerging from the evidence.

- Clarifying clearly the potential *bias* the researcher brings to the study through self-reflection and honest narrative. This aims to reassure readers of the researcher's reflexivity.

- The use of *peer de-briefing* by a member of the academy community who has not been part of the research project. This person will review and ask questions about the study and provides an additional interpretation beyond the researcher and participants.

5.12 Ethical Considerations

5.12.1 Confidentiality

During the preliminary visits to Bucklands Academy I sought the consent of participants through personal approach and the approval of the principal.

The data collected has only been available to the researcher and his supervisors. The principal will have no access to the data. The researcher will not comment on the data to third parties or other participants.

Hard copy data is stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home. Soft copy data is stored in password-protected files on the researcher's computer. Extreme care was taken during the fieldwork to ensure that field notes and books were not left unattended at ant time.

Each participant was informed at the start of each interview or piece of data collection of the relevant confidentiality measures outlined above.

5.12.2 Ongoing Ethical Considerations

What has been a priority throughout this enquiry was to avoid putting the staff and students of Bucklands Academy at any form of risk as a result of their participation in my research. I see my ethical responsibility as being 'a sensibility, a way of being in the world as a researcher' (Thomson, 2015). The academies programme is a high profile and politically sensitive policy context. Bucklands Academy was one of the first wave of academies with a prominent sponsor who has a very distinctive educational philosophy. When it was decided that the former Bucklands School should become an academy, a campaign to oppose academisation was launched by some staff, students and members of the wider community, which developed into an acrimonious and at times bitter battle of ideologies. I am aware that the findings of this research could be contentious and that those who provided evidence could be at risk—affecting their continued employment at the school, future career prospects and relationships with colleagues.

The first thing I did to address this concern was to give an assurance to all those involved in the research that the school and any documentary and online evidence pertaining to it would be anonymised. 'Bucklands Academy' is a pseudonym and I have avoided giving details of the geographical location of the school. I gave careful consideration to anonymising the respondents in the study, referring to them using labels such as 'Teacher 3', 'SLT 1', 'the principal', rather than by name. Despite it detracting from my ability to contextualise the argument, I have not referred to the subjects that people teach, and instead have just linked, say, 'Teacher 5' to 'Subject 5'. When teachers were discussing points which would indicate which subject they might teach, I have removed these statements from the transcripts and replaced them with terms such as 'in a particular topic', etc.

Prior to conducting my fieldwork, I received ethical approval from the University of Stirling to conduct the research and also sought the ethical approval of each subject prior to their direct involvement (see Appendix 6). Further, I did not assume that having given their initial consent to be involved in my research, they would continue to be comfortable with this as the enquiry developed. I was aware that as various interviews developed, the nature of the discussions meant that some people may have felt uncomfortable about what they had told me. I did three things to take account of this. Firstly, I sought assurance from them at the time that they were in agreement for me to use their evidence. Secondly, I sent respondents a copy of their interview transcripts for checking. Finally, a year after the completion of my fieldwork visit, I contacted the respondents to seek their agreement that they were still happy to continue to be part of my research and to make it clear that they could still withdraw at that stage if they so wished. It should be noted that no respondents raised any concerns with the transcripts of their interviews or requested that I withdraw their evidence from my research. Whilst I have not offered respondents the 'right of veto of the elements of the resulting thesis text' (Thomson, 2015), I did offer them the right of veto over their elements prior to my final write-up. I have also committed to informing all respondents when the final thesis text is available for them to read. The one person who was most likely to be identified as a result of my research was the principal. As well as taking the steps outlined above, I had regular telephone contact with him in the months that followed my fieldwork and he gave me his continued permission to include him in my enquiry. His potential

vulnerability was alleviated when he subsequently left Bucklands Academy. At this point, he confirmed that he had no concerns about his continued input to my research.

I had to make some difficult decisions not to include potentially rich sources of data which I had gathered in order to protect the anonymity of the school. Former parents of the school had written publicly of their experiences of the predecessor school and of the process of academisation, offering deep insights into the policy process and how decisions were made. The sponsor had fascinating connections which presented a picture of someone who was not only able to influence the levers of power for Bucklands Academy, but also the academies programme itself. During the interviews, teachers and students in the school were able to offer insights into the implications of the networked nature of the sponsor and how this affected them and their school. However, I made the decision not to include any of this evidence in my research in order to protect the school and its staff and students. In doing so I was not taking on the role of 'the arbiter of what constitutes harm' (Thomson, 2015). I asked difficult questions of individual respondents and allowed *them* to decide whether or not they wished to answer them. However, in gathering the *overall* evidence, I made the decision to protect the school *as a whole*. In this research I had an important responsibility to understand that my ethical responsibilities extend beyond simply gaining the consent of respondents. I had to manage my research strategy, my interactions with people and the trust they invested in me, as well as the decisions I made after my fieldwork—always with an 'ethical eye' (ibid.).

5.12.3 Researching Up

It is worth noting that in this case study my research involved the politically sensitive process of what Walford (1994, p. 3) refers to as 'researching up'. By this he means examining those who hold power through their professional or political positions. My fieldwork included interviewing a serving minister who is a Conservative Peer at the Department for Education. Separately, I also interviewed Lord Adonis, a Labour Peer and former minister in Gordon Brown's government and advisor on education policy and the academies programme to former Prime Minister Tony Blair. I was aware that due to their political positions, they may not be able to be as open and transparent

in their views around policy decisions as I might have hoped. Humes (1997) refers to this as the 'inside approach' to research, which relies heavily on the insights of those who have been intimately involved in shaping and developing policy. He suggests that although the inside perspective is 'indispensible', there can be restrictions on what subjects are able to discuss resulting from contractual and confidentiality clauses, e.g. the Official Secrets Act. Those in positions of power may also withhold key information if it is likely to cause them 'embarrassment'. This discretion is normally justified as being in the 'public interest', but it is suggested that it is normally motivated by the 'self-interest' of those in positions of power (ibid., p. 22).

Walford (1994) agrees that researching the powerful is problematic and has several features which differentiate it from most other research. Citing Whitty and Edwards (1994), he points out that those promoting or implementing a policy initiative may resist scrutiny from researchers not already vouched for as being from their 'side'. On the other hand, those in power who are in opposition to a particular policy development may refuse to co-operate with the researcher because they feel that *any* research may help legitimise the policy itself. Additionally, politicians and senior government officials are well versed in controlling any information they provide and present considerable difficulties in the decoding of the views they express:

> Certainly there have been few good studies of elite decision-making, researchers having found it difficult to break into the networks of influence well practised in maintaining secrecy.
>
> (Whitty and Edwards, 1994, p. 18)

Humes (1997) cautions the researcher regarding those on the 'inside' being too close to the policy to be able to offer a balanced view as they will have been subject to a 'socialisation' process which prevents them from evaluating and describing it in a 'proper' way. To be thorough in one's approach to researching the powerful policy elite, the researcher needs to complement the 'inside' tactic with that of the 'outside' approach (ibid.). The 'outside' researcher relies heavily on documentary sources, both formal and informal, aimed at different audiences. These allow the researcher to see the connections between people and between institutions, as well as building up a picture of policy networks. The 'outside' approach to policy analysis must retain a critical perspective and avoid being drawn into the 'assumptive worlds' of the subjects

(McPherson and Rabb, 1988, p. 55). The critical view calls for a high measure of scepticism about official accounts of the policy process:

> The 'outside' view assumes that the principal actors are inclined to give a distorted picture of what happens. They will conceal important evidence and will be inclined to reveal only what is likely to reflect well on their own contribution.
>
> <div align="right">(Humes, 1997, p. 22)</div>

The danger of the outside approach is reading too much into the documentary evidence, presupposing lines of thought from ministers and officials which in reality are not there. Humes refers to this as 'jumping to conspiracy theories on the basis of inadequate evidence' (ibid., p. 23).

Whitty and Edwards (1994) highlight the problem of attempting to examine a controversial policy initiative simply in terms defined by its supporters, or indeed by terms defined by its critics. The challenge is to go beyond those definitions to a wider and more theoretically informed analysis. Humes (1997) indicates that without some kind of conceptual framework with which to make sense of the research material, all that will be achieved is '"undigested", anecdotal treatment of data' (p. 23). In this case study, which researches the contested policy on academies, it is easy to feel both the strengths of arguments for and against. For example, the ever-changing debate continues, with the new Labour Party leadership advocating at their Annual Conference in September 2015 that they will 'return' what they describe as 'unaccountable' free schools and academies 'under the control of local authorities' (*The Telegraph*, 2015b). As outlined in Section 4.7, to make sense of this complexity I have adopted the theoretical framework of *critical realism* to draw explanatory conclusions from the research data.

A number of writers (Ozga, 1990; Grace, 1991; Whitty and Edwards, 1994) refer to the challenge highlighted by McPherson and Raab (1988) that a political sociology of education policy, particularly when 'researching up', should involve 'an attempt to relate the micro-politics of personal relationships to a wider analysis of power' (p. xii). Hence, Whitty and Edwards (1994) stress the importance of analysing policy from the focus of its origins right through to its implementation and effects. They also urge researchers to explore how particular policies are positioned in relation to other wider

policies and 'how they can be understood in terms of changing modes of social solidarity and changing modes of regulation in contemporary societies' (ibid., p. 29). This is an important aspect of my research as academies are part of a wider reform of the public sector which has the aim of reducing the welfare state, curbing 'big government' and increasing the involvement of private and voluntary sectors in the delivery of public services. My meetings with senior figures in positions of power allowed me to discuss their ideologies, and within these identify the place of academies and self-governing schools.

I found gaining access to both Peers easier than anticipated and both subjects were accommodating in meeting with me to discuss my research. I noted a clear difference in the candour of the two individuals during their interviews. Lord Adonis was passionate in his manner but stuck rigidly to descriptions and accounts which I had previously researched in documentary analysis and literature (Adonis, 2012). As a result, I did not feel I gained any additional insight into the policy or decision-making processes during this meeting. However, this was not the case with the serving minister at the DfE, who was candid and confident in discussing the Government's political motives. He also alluded to barriers and constraints which, as he saw it, arose as a result of being in coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, as well as openly criticising the economic policies of the previous Labour government. At one point during our meeting he spoke of achieving his goals through 'stealth' rather than legislative change where it was felt this would be problematic (see 3.9.4). I found this fascinating and insightful, and it illustrated the determination of the Government to achieve its goals irrespective of whether or not there was a wider political consensus across Parliament. This was intriguing to me, as this was someone in a ministerial position through a Life Peerage rather than as a result of the democratic process. I reflected on the comparison of this approach of effecting change with that of my own context as a headteacher and the absolute necessity of taking key stakeholders with me in order to achieve successful policy implementation.

Despite the differences of approach, it was noticeable that both individuals controlled the flow of information and left little room for me to explore what might be seen as more controversial aspects of the academies programme. It was interesting to note that DfE officials carefully supported the meeting with the minister at the Department for Education. This included conducting research into my own professional background, thus enabling him to comment unprompted on my role in a recent Ofsted inspection.

5.13   Conclusion to Chapter 5

This chapter has outlined the approach to research and the methods used in this thesis. The structure of the enquiry was that of an exemplifying case study which drew upon a range of documentary evidence, academic literature and empirical enquiry. The methods were linked with the research philosophy outlined in Chapter 4. The research questions and methods of data collection, as well as the approach to the study, were carefully constructed to eradicate possible bias and ethical issues, as far as possible.

The research sample has provided as full a range of perspectives as could be accommodated in a thesis of this size. The questions and questioning were carefully thought through and designed to be open and exploratory. Codification and analysis were under constant scrutiny to ensure as much objectivity as possible. Whilst the enquiry is an exemplifying case study rather than being a representative or generalisable one, the design of the research was such that it should be possible to replicate it in another sponsored academy to further test these findings.

An in-depth case study such as this makes a contribution to the field of education and the professional role of teachers. The research design was carefully created to ensure that the rich source of data that was available was trawled to its fullest and to ensure that findings were reliable. The opportunity for my professional learning afforded by researching a contemporary policy in situation through a close-hand encounter was fascinating and one I grasped enthusiastically. Whilst there was some complexity regarding scale, manageability and bias, the insights gained have been invaluable. The

generosity of the research respondents in giving their time so freely and willingly testifies to the importance of this research and the significance of its findings.

Chapter 6 explains the findings in two sections. First it focuses on those responsible for the strategic priorities of Bucklands Academy: the sponsors and the principal. I secondly move on to share the findings from teachers and pupils in the academy. What emerges is what at times is a complex story of life inside a busy, successful school showing how policy is put into practice. The empirical findings stretch beyond what was discovered in the documentary analysis and theoretical review of the key literature. It provides a richer understanding of what was happening in Bucklands Academy from the perspective of teachers and pupils, describing the lived experience of policy in practice.

Chapter 6

Case Study Findings and Discussion

> I suppose I feel that, *maybe*, perhaps too much structure can undermine, like creativity—you know, what staff really do, like teacher agency. When coming up with ideas and policies, I suppose it is always about just trying to get that balance right so that you bring the best out in everybody.

> (Teacher 1)

6.1 Case Study

For purposes of analysis, I cover the description and explanation of the case study in three parts. As was stated in 3.3, I am interested in what school autonomy means for teachers and their agency. For this reason it is necessary to analyse the context of the academy, including an overview of the issues involved in the closure of its predecessor school. Similarly, the role of the sponsor(s) and governance arrangements, including the agency which emerges for them as a result of the academies programme, are discussed to illustrate the impact they have on teachers' agency. The final section of the case study considers the experiences of teachers[14] working within the academy and how policies adopted by the school enable or constrain their agency. To do this I have analysed fieldwork conducted in late 2012—which consisted of 25 interviews with teachers, support staff, pupils and other stakeholders—as well as observational studies of meetings and analysis of documentary evidence.

6.2 Bucklands Academy

Bucklands Academy[15] is a medium-sized 11–18 secondary school[16] situated in a large urban conurbation in England. It has approximately 1,200 pupils on roll, with 170 being in the sixth form which is part of a local authority collaborative. It is an academy sponsored by the registered charity *Aspire*. The school operates an open and

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[14] The term 'teacher' is taken to denote teaching staff at all levels within the promoted-post structure, including members of the senior leadership team, middle leaders, main scale teachers and newly qualified teachers.

[15] Pseudonyms are used to identify the academy, staff, governors, sponsoring charity, local authority and other key stakeholders where they are named to protect anonymity.

[16] Although designated an 'academy', Bucklands will be referred to throughout as 'the academy' or 'the school' interchangeably.

comprehensive admissions policy managed by the local authority; demand for places in Year 7 is high and the school is heavily over-subscribed, with many applications coming from neighbouring council areas.

6.2.1   The Predecessor School

Bucklands Academy opened at the start of a new academic year towards the end of the 'noughties' following the closure of its predecessor establishment, Bucklands *School*, in the July of that year. The local authority had expressed concerns about Bucklands School over a number of years regarding its overall effectiveness and serious problems of indiscipline. The last inspection by Ofsted[17] prior to academisation had judged the school to be 'inadequate' and in need of 'special measures'. The main findings of that Ofsted inspection were as follows:

- Pupils were not making sufficient progress, particularly in Key Stage 3

- The quality of teaching was unsatisfactory, leading to poor behaviour

- Standards at GCSE were low and pupils made inadequate progress by the end of Year 11

- Leadership and management were not sufficiently effective

- The Sixth Form was good.

The inspectors then identified four key issues for improvement, which can be summarised as: progress and standards; teaching quality; assessment; leadership and management.

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[17] No citation of the actual Ofsted report or its publication date is given to protect the anonymity of the school.

The outcome of the Bucklands School inspection was publicly contested by groups of staff, parents, unions and other interested observers, with some claiming that the 'inadequate' judgement was politically motivated to justify 'forced academisation'. One member of the local community described the old Bucklands School as 'a once proud and self-confident comprehensive school', with a former parent governor stating:

> [I]t was a special place; an illustration that [the LEA] (for all the reservations I had about it) was never intent on a 'one size fits all' uniformity … it was a specialist school, well ahead of its time.
>
> (Former Parent Governor)

The inclusivity and success of Bucklands School can be gleaned from the following extract from a report by consultants commissioned by a group opposing academisation. The report describes hearing from two former students:

> It was particularly impressive to hear from two very different ex-pupils, one a postman, the other studying philosophy at Oxford, who spoke in very similar and very powerful ways about their valuable and productive experiences as Bucklands pupils and what they had gained from the school socially and intellectually and what they wanted to remain available for future pupils.
>
> (Consultants' Report on Bucklands School)

The conflicting views of the school, with a distinctive ethos on the one hand, but serious indiscipline on the other, was consistent with accounts gained from the group of four sixth form students interviewed as part of my fieldwork in November 2012. Two of the students, Fraser and Leon, had joined Bucklands School from primary school and had experienced the transition to academy status two years later:

> *Fraser:* One thing that I feel is that you become very loyal to the school … with some people, the school really resonates with them, and I think there's a certain type of person who really enjoys coming to this school, especially the old Bucklands School. It's a much more widespread group of people who come here now. But especially back then; if you enjoyed it, you *really* enjoyed it. You realised that discipline was non-existent basically, but for some reason you wanted to stay and you just really enjoyed it.
>
> *Researcher:* And was the discipline bad?
>
> *Fraser:* Oh yes! (Others laugh).
>
> *Leon:* I mean non-existent—I would say it was bad!
>
> *Fraser:* I think we were the good year.

> *Leon:* I think that was the year it all kind of really calmed down. For example, one of the things that stuck out for me was the tradition when the new Year 7s came in: the Year 8s would beat them up. But with our Year, for some reason, we didn't at all—we kind of helped the Year 7s get involved, and I think that kind of highlighted the change in mentality of the whole school.

It can be inferred from a number of different sources that concern over indiscipline was one of the factors that led to the poor Ofsted report of the predecessor school. However, there was suspicion that the inspection was politically motivated and prompted by the local authority and its unhappiness with the school's progressive ethos (Local Newspaper, 2007). A parent, who was the headteacher of a primary school in a neighbouring local authority, claims that Ofsted's decision 'was a harsh judgment on the school's failings'. Irrespective of the fairness of the judgement, it allowed the Conservative-led local authority to remove the governing body, which had staunchly opposed privatisation, and replace it with an Interim Executive Board. The school's headteacher was forced to 'retire' and an interim 'super head' from a neighbouring 'outstanding' school took over to allow the council to press ahead with plans for academy status, even though the previous year's GCSE and A-level results were the best in the school's history.

It became apparent when I interviewed those who had been part of the predecessor school that they had been worried that the change to academy status would threaten the good things that Bucklands School had been known for, as well as the recent improving trend in GCSE attainment[18]. Some expressed concern about the potential undermining of the role of music in the school, as well as the school's culture with its open and liberal ethos and vibrant atmosphere, which was a key reason for many parents and children choosing the school. Music was referred to when I interviewed sixth-former Fraser during my fieldwork, and he stated passionately:

> One thing … a large part of my life at Bucklands is music. The music section of the old Bucklands School was, like, *amazing*. I got to go on tours to like Prague and all that sort of stuff. But when they were trying to save it [the school], with like the academy and all that sort of stuff [and the appointment of the interim headteacher]—it got toned down a bit.
>
> (Fraser)

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[18] Two years before academisation the percentage of pupils gaining 5+ A*–C GCSE passes including English and mathematics was 14% behind the national average. The year prior to becoming an academy the gap had halved to 7% (http://www.education.gov.uk/cgi-bin/schools/performance/archive).

6.2.2   Academy Profile

The majority of students attending Bucklands Academy during the time of my fieldwork lived in council wards recognised as being amongst the most socially deprived in the country. The key characteristics of the student profile include:

- The proportion of pupils known to be 'disadvantaged' was more than twice the national average.

- 22% of all students were of White British heritage; 43% did not have English as their first language. The largest minority ethnic groups were Black Caribbean and Black African.

- One-third of students had moderate learning difficulties, which was above the national average, as was the proportion with statements of special educational needs.

- In 2012 the percentage of students designated as 'high attaining' on entry to Year 7 was lower than the national average, while the proportions deemed 'middle' and 'low attaining' were both higher (Ofsted/DfE, 2012).

- In 2013 the percentage of students attaining 5+ A*–C GCSE passes including English and mathematics by the end of Key Stage 4 was significantly higher than the national average, as was the percentage achieving or exceeding the expected levels of progress in English and mathematics.

The new academy was inspected by Ofsted two years after it opened and was judged 'outstanding', as was its capacity for sustained improvement. The inspection report noted the improvements that had taken place since the academy conversion:

> Bucklands Academy is outstanding as the Principal's outstanding vision and leadership of his staff have ensured a true equality and high quality of educational opportunities for all students to excel. Since its opening … this ethos and practice have successfully raised educational aspirations and accelerated standards of learning from a very low base … the vast majority of [students] make outstanding progress in their personal development and studies and attain above national average GCSE standards at 16.
>
> (Ofsted Inspection Report)

It can be inferred from the official documentary evidence, that unlike claims made about 'improvements' in some new academies which may have been a result of reducing the proportions of students coming from deprived backgrounds and those who are low-attaining (Gorard, 2005; Wrigley, 2011), the high levels of attainment at Bucklands Academy were not a result of selection by aptitude in the chosen specialism(s) or by reducing the proportion of disadvantaged students. Indeed, the most recent Ofsted report makes reference to the academy's inclusive ethos and how this had successfully overcome significant challenges in a very short period of time:

> Overcoming the numerous challenges of high staff turn-over, poor student behaviour and low educational standards through establishing a highly positive ethos of achievement and inclusion within a relatively short time, serve to demonstrate the academy's outstanding capacity to improve.

<div align="right">(Ofsted Inspection Report)</div>

6.2.3   Staff Profile

Like many sponsored academies, the staff turnover following academisation was high, with many teachers employed by the predecessor school having left through choice or as a result of capability procedures or compromise agreements. What is striking about Bucklands Academy is the high proportion of young staff, many of whom are in their twenties. This reflects a recruitment policy which has made extensive use of *TeachFirst*. Similarly, it is noticeable that members of the school's thirteen-strong senior leadership team are young in comparison to many schools, with three of the assistant principals having less than five years' teaching experience. With a large proportion of young staff, many of whom had trained in the school, it may have been easy to mould them into the sponsors' vision. It could be inferred, therefore, that they were more likely to be compliant than experienced teachers who had worked in other contexts, thus potentially reducing their professional agency. The principal was appointed after 12 years in teaching and believed the sponsors were attracted to a candidate with no preconceived ways of thinking about headship and who would adopt their vision. As the principal explained:

> I think what appealed to [the sponsors] is that I *hadn't* been a head before … I think they felt I was 'mouldable'. I think they also felt I wasn't going to come with a set way of doing things. [And] I think I felt they were open to persuasion because they hadn't worked in a school previously.
>
> (Principal)

I will return to this point later when analysing the role of the sponsors in shaping the academy to meet their own personal vision and the degree of autonomy they assumed to enable their own agency to emerge from within a structure created by the Department for Education.

6.3   The Importance of Knowledge

Before sharing further findings from my fieldwork, it is worth noting that the data collected presented a very mixed picture of Bucklands Academy. Much was positive, but there were significant elements of concern and professional debate regarding particular aspects of the school, and these merit extended discussion. Two particular issues were: the introduction of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum; and whether academisation was necessary.

The sponsors' decision to introduce a knowledge-based curriculum in Key Stage 3—the *Core Knowledge Sequence* (CKS)—proved to be contentious. This approach is based on the work of E. D. Hirsch, Jr. and his concept of *Cultural Literacy* (Hirsch, 1987). The CKS is predicated on the belief that children's ability to learn is greatly enhanced when they can draw upon a wide body of knowledge, allowing them to make connections between new and previous learning. The Core Knowledge Foundation in the USA believes that the school should compensate for the lack of cultural literacy gained in the homes of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. For the sake of academic excellence, greater equity and higher literacy, schools need to teach a coherent, cumulative and content-specific core curriculum:

> Our society cannot afford a two-tiered system in which the affluent have access to a superior education, while everyone else is subjected to a dull and incoherent classroom experience. Academic excellence, educational equity and fairness demand a strong foundation of knowledge for *all* learners.
>
> (Hirsch, 2014)

Given the student profile described in 6.2.2, it could be argued that this was applicable and appropriate in Bucklands Academy.

The journalist and free school founder Toby Young argues that the approach advocated by Hirsch Jr. and the philosophy of a 'classical liberal education' should be central to the curriculum policy of all schools. In defending the Secretary of State for Education, who in February 2014 referred to those in favour of progressive methods of education as 'the Blob' (*The Independent*, 2014), Young writes:

> I prefer to think of the Blob as a particular ideological outlook rather than the people who've been captured by it. It's a creed, a movement—what the American educationalist E. D. Hirsch calls a 'thoughtworld'. For those of us who favour a knowledge-building, teacher-led approach, it is this ideology that is the enemy, not those who believe in it.
>
> (Young, 2014, p. 3)

From a critical realist perspective, this viewpoint gives a powerful insight into the concept of the struggle between structure and agency. In defining 'the Blob', Michael Gove describes what he sees as the *downwards conflation* brought about by a structural ideology of the 'educational establishment'. He is critical of what he perceives to be the establishment's privileging of 'skills over knowledge' through an accent on problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, and 'learning by doing'. The Secretary of State's view of this constraining structure is explained as follows:

> [The Blob] is not a shivering amoeba—but an army of bureaucrats, academics and teachers' unions … thwarting the changes that have to be made if we are to have a world-class education service. A lot of people, though, do not believe it exists … Few in the education world have been publicly identified as members of 'the Blob'.
>
> (*The Independent*, 2014)

It was against this ideologically contested backdrop that my research was conducted in Bucklands Academy. Many teachers and leaders expressed concern about the philosophy of the prescribed CKS and the manner in which it was being introduced. It had been mandated by the sponsors and was being developed by a newly formed Curriculum Centre, which was external to the school and was funded by the sponsors' charity *Aspire*. The manner in which this new policy development arose was of concern to one member of the senior leadership team (SLT 2). She described what happened:

> The sponsors returned from a holiday in Barbados where they had been made aware of a Core Knowledge Curriculum. Later, they travelled to the USA with the principal to visit a number of charter schools running this curriculum. It convinced them that they should return … and introduce it in Bucklands Academy in Key Stage 3. The sponsors then arranged a meeting with [a right-wing policy think-tank] to discuss setting up the new curriculum in our school.
>
> (SLT 2)

The knowledge-based curriculum consisted of pre-prepared notes which were issued to teachers and had to be copied by the students. This was followed by multiple-choice testing of (only) knowledge. The school's curriculum policy was felt by most teachers interviewed to infringe recognised good practice and to be at odds with respected research on pedagogy. One of the vice-principals indicated that he was concerned that the prescribed approach to teaching would be criticised in any future school inspection, with the expectation from Ofsted that pupils are actively engaged in their own learning. Examples of these concerns arose during my interviews with two different teachers:

> [T]hey basically gave us the American Core Curriculum, but it's essentially a [subject 1] appreciation course and that's completely different to the [subject 1] education tradition we have in the UK. We said to them that this is so far removed from what we consider good teaching to be, that it seems to be meaningless.
>
> (Teacher 2)

> I think the key difference is that I think [subject 2] has to be taught through a conceptual framework, and that a knowledge-based approach is not really acceptable and just doesn't work. I think we differed on the kind of pedagogical approach. And there are issues around things like the [topic 2] and how life got better for everybody and [subject 2] finishes then. There's a clear kind of political story behind that, and I think this needs to be picked apart a bit more.
>
> (Teacher 7)

The highly political nature of the curriculum reforms at Bucklands Academy was evident in media coverage and also by the endorsement of Michael Gove in a speech[19] given to a policy forum event. The Secretary of State for Education welcomed the spirit of innovation shown by the school in developing its own curriculum, praising its rigour and in particular its approach to the teaching of history and science. He was particularly fulsome in his praise for the school's commitment to developing a knowledge-based curriculum.

This demonstrates extremely hands-on and operational involvement by government in relation to not only how schools are structured and organised, but also in commending one particular school's curricular philosophy. Interestingly, the endorsement of the academy in taking advantage of its freedom to 'develop' its own curriculum may be slightly erroneous as the school was actually adopting a commercial approach developed in the USA. However, as was clear from the fieldwork interviews, this is not a vision which sat comfortably with all of the staff and leaders in the school. What became clear from my research was how the sponsors' agency 'acted back' (Archer, 1995; Priestley, 2011) on a structure that was well established by the traditions, beliefs and approaches of the teaching profession ('the Blob'). However, it was also clear that individual teachers exercised their own agency to reinforce their own structural and cultural approaches in the face of competing pressures introduced through academisation and the role of sponsors.

6.4   The Role of the Sponsors and Governance at Bucklands Academy

In this section of the case study I will consider how the sponsors operate within the academy and the form that governance takes. In particular, I will consider the ideology of the sponsors and the degree to which the autonomy afforded to them through the structure of the academies programme allows their agency to emerge in order to realise their vision of how they believe a school should function. I will draw on a series of semi-structured interviews as well as from a range of documentary sources. In doing so, I will show how on one level it appears that the sponsors are able to 'act back' against

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[19] No citation of this speech is given to protect the anonymity of the school.

an established professional culture to bring about a morphogenesis (Archer, 2000) of how state-funded schooling might operate differently. However, I will also argue that partly as a result of the dominance and downwards conflation of a political structure, the sponsors have been able to gain access to the mechanisms of power and control in order to achieve their agency. In some ways, it can be thought of as the political agenda trumping the professional agenda. Finally I will consider the impact of the agency achieved by sponsors on the structure and agency of other key stakeholders in the academy.

6.4.1 The Sponsors and their Vision

The main sponsor is a graduate of Cambridge University and trained as a barrister, before developing his career in financial trading. His wife is a history graduate from London School of Economics, and following a career in stockbroking and international banking she now focuses her energy on having a direct involvement with the sponsorship and running of Bucklands Academy. As co-sponsors and co-chairs of governors, the couple ensured that the subject specialisms of history and the visual and performing arts were part of the academy's funding agreement, reflecting their personal interests in these subjects and the importance they attach to ensuring that all pupils study them until at least the age of 16. I consider this to have serious moral implications for the running of a publicly funded education service. I suggest that there is a moral implication in allowing private individuals with no teaching qualifications to determine what is taught in a school based on their personal preferences. This presents serious challenges to the professional agency of the teachers working in the school, as well as challenging the local democracy of parents and pupils who may not agree with the sponsors' vision.

In my meeting with the main sponsor he stressed the need for 'strong executive leadership' on governing bodies. The interview revealed a clear ideology based on the involvement of the private sector in the strategic leadership of schools and a rejection of the importance of local accountability to parents and local communities in the governance of schools. It also revealed a strong business approach to the running of schools and a clear endorsement of academy chains and their New Public Management

approach (Hood, 1995). His belief was that the only aspects of running a school which should be left to teachers are those relating to teaching, learning and behaviour management; all other matters should be decided by governors and/or a finance director (this is arguably disingenuous as the sponsors were also prescribing what was to be taught in the school). This is consistent with the experience shared in an earlier interview I conducted with a member of the senior leadership team (SLT 4) who recounted the sponsors speaking to a full gathering of staff at the start of the academic year. SLT 4 was struck by the visionary zeal shown by the sponsors as effectively 'owning' the school and not being afraid to stamp their authority on it. She recalled the co-sponsor's words to the staff:

> Well, she said herself to the whole staff, 'We lead the school and the [senior leadership team] are operational'. The thing is I'm not sure she really knows how a school operates.
>
> (SLT 4)

What was clear was that the agency being achieved at the system level was emerging as a result of key actors having access to the levers of control and power. For example, during my interview with the Government minister at the DfE (see 3.9.4) he recognised the difficulty in legislating to achieve his desired goals around governance. However, he was able to navigate his way around this obstacle by being in a position to influence the performance measures by which schools' governing bodies will be judged by Ofsted. With the role of central management increasingly resting on monitoring systems and the production of information, this engenders what Lyotard (1984–cited in Ball, 2003) calls 'the terrors of performativity'. It is explained:

> Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change—based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic).
>
> (Ball, 2003, p. 216)

This demonstrates that powerful individuals are in a position to shape the system in line with their own vision, and are thus able to influence the accountability systems by which schools will be judged.

In considering the role of the sponsors, I will now analyse data collected from my fieldwork under the three sub-headings of:

- perceptions of the sponsors' vision and ideology

- sponsors' agency

- the impact of the sponsors on the academy.

6.4.2   Perceptions of the Sponsors' Vision and Ideology

As might be expected, there are mixed views on the sponsors' vision and the approach they take to the governance of the school. It was interesting to note that the sixth form students interviewed were able to discuss in a balanced manner the potential benefits as well as the possible pitfalls of having people from the world of business as sponsors of schools. The extracts from the interview data below illustrate the students' awareness of the sponsors' involvement in the school and of the difference in class backgrounds between the sponsors and themselves, making the point that this could bring its advantages as well as challenges:

> *Jacob:* I think it's okay, because especially with Mr and Mrs [sponsors], they come into school, they try to talk to you and they're very involved with the school. So I don't really have a problem with it. I think they're trying to help us.
>
> *Fraser:* To be fair, you can tell that Mr and Mrs [sponsors], they're not really '*in tune*' with probably … the students here, but you can tell they're at least *trying*.
>
> *Researcher:* What do you mean 'not in tune'?
>
> *Fraser:* You can just sort of tell they're not from the same background. They're very *different* types of people—like upper class.
>
> *Leon:* You'd never be able to relate to them, tell them about anything.
>
> *Fraser:* But I'd still rather they came in and still wanted to see the school, rather than just fund it and not really see it.

It was interesting to note that the students were aware of the political nature of academy sponsorship, as Leon made clear:

> But you could see the problem with sponsors. For example, if there was someone with a political agenda and they wanted to get back at the government for some reason, as an example. They might kind of twist the school to suit what they want, rather than what's in the best interests of the students. I don't think it happens here, but you could see there is a possibility of it happening.
>
> (Leon)

This is in line with the views expressed by others (Beckett, 2007; Benn, 2012) about the dangers of sponsors having a personal agenda in the running of schools. However, there was no cynicism from the students about the sponsors or their role, and in fact the difference in class backgrounds was thought to hold potential advantages for them:

> *Leon:* [The sponsors help fund] university visits and theatre trips.
>
> *Bonnie:* And Passport Days, when Years 7–12 come off timetable and go out to different places, like museums.
>
> *Fraser:* And the Intervention Tutors [people employed by the academy to support achievement and onward destinations]. I've been put in contact with important people in the NHS because [main sponsor] knows people, which really helped my personal statement.
>
> *Researcher:* So connections?
>
> *Fraser:* Yeah, connections are a great thing.

This is consistent with the point made by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) who argue that teachers who have high social capital and who work to create a collaborative community improve student attainment and achievement. They argue that high social capital and high human capital need to be combined. Individualism does not create the same growth in students as those schools with high social capital.

Views expressed by some of the staff, possibly as a result of differences in ideology between themselves and the sponsors, illustrate concern about private individuals being given the autonomy to run a state funded school as they wish. The following interview with a member of the senior leadership team makes the point:

I don't agree with [pause], I don't see why people who have money can basically buy children's futures—it's too important. It doesn't qualify you, and also I think it just quite ironic—it's supposed to improve social mobility, and yet in itself is proof that, actually, if you want power, money and being wealthy, being part of that elite is (pause) the only way to get it. If we really believed in social mobility, we would be taking those schools that were struggling and we'd be getting the very, very best people who've proved themselves, making sure that they have the power [agency] to do that.

(SLT 4)

Practical experience of the influence of the sponsors' vision and agency was shared by another teacher:

The whole Key Stage 3 curriculum thing is coming from them and a few other things. But I find it a little bit concerning how much input they have. I didn't really know before I started working in an academy ... because I always assumed the National Curriculum dictates what you can teach ... and I thought the sponsor had a kind of silent role in it and did things kind of extra-curricular based. But they do have quite a lot of input in what we teach, which I think is, I don't know, a little bit concerning. It doesn't affect a subject like mine so much because it's quite prescriptive. But in other subjects I think it's caused huge changes in what they would normally teach and the way in which they would teach. I know some people have really struggled with the curriculum and they feel quite strongly against it ... that they have not been able to do anything about it.

(Teacher 3)

What this illustrates is the constraining effect of the governance structure, which appears to be restricting teachers' professional agency. There is an irony here that SLT 4 above sees social mobility as arising from having agentic teachers working in 'struggling schools' and yet the sponsors in this academy are restricting the agency of their teachers, which in turn may stint the social mobility of its pupils.

For Teacher 8, finding out about the role of the sponsors came through experience. He stated, 'I will be honest I knew very little about the sponsors and their involvement in the school, but I quickly found out about that!' However, like the sixth form students, Teacher 8 sees benefits to having a significant involvement from the sponsors:

They have quite a bit of influence at the school and it's become increasingly more obvious over the years. [But] they are supportive in a number of ways. I am in charge of [a key initiative] across the curriculum, and financially I have been able to approach the principal and I could go to the sponsors and pretty much everything I asked for was approved. So, I mean it was positive, it was *only* positive and it was *all* for the students.

(Teacher 8)

This points towards a form of teacher agency in that Teacher 8 is acting with intentionality and is clearly functioning within the projective dimension of agency in leading the whole school initiative, as well as the iterative dimension as he surveys the changes over time. The teacher's agency is clearly emerging out of the interplay between these dimensions and within the contextual setting where power, influence and financial resources exist to allow the teacher to achieve his aims.

6.4.3   The Emergence of Sponsors' Agency

What was evident from interviewing staff, students and the main sponsor himself was the degree of independence given to this state-funded school and the level of autonomy granted to the sponsors to run the school as they saw fit. The early indications of this were illustrated by the principal when he shared his recollections of the approach taken with his own appointment and his personal attraction to leading this academy:

> I think I had an idea that the sponsors would bring something different. What appealed was that in my last school there were 25 or 30 people on the governing body and you couldn't get a decision—they were fragmented and there wasn't any level of cohesion, which I found quite difficult. There was no real vision for the school, except in maintaining the status quo. Whereas here, I felt the sponsors had real vision and that they believed that a school like this could provide an education as good as a private school.
>
> I knew straight away that things were going to be different, because it wasn't about the governing body; it was about the sponsors—the Chair and Director of their charity, that was it. It became very apparent very quickly that this was not going to be a big governing body. These two [husband and wife sponsors] were going to make all the decisions. These were the decision-makers, and without them having to say it, it was absolutely clear this was a new way of doing things. Everything the school did previously—forget about it!
>
> (Principal)

Reflecting on the fact that the sponsors had ignored DfE advice on appointing him as principal, he states: 'these are not people who are going to be told by the Department for Education who they're going to appoint as a headteacher'. In exploring whether or not the structure of the academies programme enabled the sponsors to act in this way, the principal stated passionately:

> It did, but I would make a very important point … that *they* made the structure allow it. Other academies I know of have sponsors who are unsure about how far they can go. Our guys do it, and they don't even ask questions later. It's like they own this; this is theirs. He [the main sponsor] said to me early on, 'I see you as my chief executive and this is your role'. These people wanted something vastly different to anything I heard of before. And it was something I passionately believed in: that inner-city kids can achieve as much as anyone else if they're given the right opportunities and we stop making excuses for them.
>
> (Principal)

This is a good example of the interplay between two of Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) chordal triad of agency—the *iterative*, where the principal is making choices as a result his own human and professional formation based on past experiences and the *projective* which is about making choices based on future trajectories, hopes and fears—that inner-city youngsters can achieve highly given the right circumstances.

Asked about whether anyone from the DfE or local authority would challenge the sponsors' approach or decisions, the principal stated emphatically:

> No. And they do things with such conviction. 'We're doing that … this is what we believe in and we don't really care what the rules state; if someone wants to pick us up on it, we'll do something about it.' Everything with them is a 'yes' or a 'no', there's no debating or long drawn-out discussions. And there was a *power* … they had a conviction about them; a naivety but also a real conviction.
>
> (Principal)

He then went on to explain that as the grades for the school improved, particularly when the 'outstanding' judgement was received from Ofsted so early on, that it was very hard for anyone to challenge the sponsors:

> It's very hard to challenge them. Who would challenge them? It has its disadvantages, but it certainly gave them the freedom to do what they felt was right.
>
> (Principal)

It is interesting to note that the principal viewed the strong Ofsted grading as strengthening the hand of the sponsors, whereas I would have considered this to have enhanced the agency of the principal himself. The principal's view is perhaps a reflection of a context in which there is a clear power imbalance between the sponsors and the principal, thus restricting his agency. The principal's comments are also a good illustration of the 'terror of performativity' (Ball, 2003) strengthening the hand of the New Right ideology of autonomous, self-governing schools which are given the

freedom to run as they wish and which will stand or fall on how they measure up to centrally prescribed performance indicators.

The approach taken with the introduction of the CKS curriculum in Key Stage 3 and the main sponsor's view about the narrow focus of a teacher's role, together with the strong culture of performativity, illustrates what Priestley *et.al*. (2012) describe as positioning the teacher 'as a curriculum deliverer and producer of performance statistics, rather than as a curriculum developer, a responsible professional and an agent of change' (p. 87). There is a view shared amongst some (Helsby, 1999; Gewirtz *et.al*., 2009; Priestley, 2011) that this has been highly damaging to teachers' professional agency and that the scope for professional influence on policy and practice has diminished. Ozga and Lawn (1981) call this the *proletarianization* of teachers' work, i.e. the removal of personal control, autonomy and flexibility for teachers in exercising professional judgement. During my interview with Teacher 1, this was a theme that came over strongly with her experience of working with the Curriculum Centre in implementing the new KS3 curriculum:

> When I first started here I was trusted and given the freedom to try new things and feed back on how they went. With the new curriculum it is now very top-down and so more and more we are having less and less say. I feel it's the governors who have the autonomy in this academy and they tell the principal what they want and then he tells us, so it's very controlled. They've decided on a set curriculum and it's been an absolute battle. We've said to them that the way you want us to teach will be graded as 'unsatisfactory' by Ofsted and they've said, 'We don't care about Ofsted; Ofsted are wrong and we want you to teach like this'. If it's something they've decided then there is absolutely no room whatsoever for debate. I told the principal that I see this as de-professionalising teachers, but his response was that the only teachers that could describe themselves as 'professionals' were those who produce consistently excellent examination results.
>
> (Teacher 1)

So what has emerged is a school which has significant autonomy from the Department for Education and complete autonomy from the local authority. However, this autonomy appears to lie almost solely with the sponsors. It is clear that there is a strong culture of performativity and compliance amongst teachers and leaders—and so 'a kind of *values schizophrenia* is experienced by individual teachers where commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance' (Ball, 2003, p. 211). There is a potential 'splitting' between the teachers'

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own judgements about 'good practice' and student 'needs' and the rigours of performance.

6.5   Teacher Agency in Bucklands Academy

To explore this further, I will now turn to how agency is achieved and constrained with teaching staff, including the senior leadership team. My analysis began by identifying common themes across the interviews and then coding significant data within each transcript to narrow the focus for my evaluation. The themes identified were:

- what it means to work in an academy
- the lack of professional autonomy experienced by teachers
- performativity and accountability
- implementation of the new curriculum in Key Stage 3.

I draw upon the framework for understanding teacher agency developed by Priestley *et al.* (2015) in developing my analysis of the main findings on teacher agency.

6.5.1   The Influence of School Culture on Teacher Agency

The data presented a mixed picture of the culture within Bucklands Academy. Despite the difficult and emotional transition to academy status, there was a general acceptance amongst staff and pupils that since becoming an academy many improvements had been secured and higher standards achieved. A clear distinction between the old and new cultures was observed. The predecessor school had been seen as 'a left-wing, open-minded school, well-known for art and music' (Teacher 5). After academisation, the school became more formal and structured, with clear expectations for pupils and staff. For example, school uniform had been introduced and sixth-formers were required to wear business dress, where previously there had been no dress code.

Pupil behaviour in the new academy was exemplary as a result of a strictly enforced discipline policy. Pupils in the main school and students in the sixth form made reference to this policy, stating that if a teacher were to threaten to call '300' [removal from class], pupils would immediately regulate their behaviour. Without exception,

every teacher interviewed spoke of the high standards of behaviour and stated that this was the best school experience they had known. The school enforced strict standards of behaviour from all pupils relating to appearance, punctuality, behaviour in class and conduct towards staff. During my observation of a senior leadership team meeting, the principal announced that he wanted one of the Assistant Principals to improve the general behaviour of the pupils at lesson changeovers or he would introduce a 'silence in corridors' rule from the start of the new term. Such draconian measures might not be possible for the headteacher of a maintained school, suggesting academy status was enhancing the principal's agency around behaviour management. A former pupil of the school who had returned to the academy as a teacher said:

> I think that [the behaviour] is definitely something the school has got right. I mean, the kind of behaviour procedures that are in this place are amazing … I think the kids know the system … if they get removed they will automatically get an hour's detention and a phone call home. If they don't turn up it gets extended to two hours.
>
> (Teacher 4)

The students had responded well to the change and appeared to be proud of their school. Two Year 8 girls interviewed said they felt lucky to have been given a place at Bucklands Academy and they were aware that the school was over-subscribed.

A strong neo-conservative influence emerged from the data. The principal and sponsors spoke of 'real' subjects being important and were planning to remove what they considered to be 'applied' A levels, including business studies and psychology. In Key Stage 3, design technology and physical education had been removed from the formal curriculum and were being delivered through the compulsory after-school enrichment programme. Year 7 pupils had compulsory 'Prep' on Monday evenings after school.

Teachers responded differently to the fact that Bucklands was now an academy. Although everyone interviewed recognised the problems of indiscipline in the predecessor school, there had been great affection for its ethos. Notwithstanding, some teachers were attracted to the new ethos and talked of the *problems* of the predecessor school's approach:

> I think there's often that comfortable lifestyle that *is not* for anyone's gain, and at some stage [this] has to be tackled … [It is] a sad reality when people have been in jobs for a long time and have got too comfortable, you know someone's got to make some tough decisions. I wasn't, you know, *ashamed* to be part of something like that. Actually, I quite agree with it in many ways. I see big difference here, in a more business-like, professional way when it comes to standards and what's expected. I don't know if that comes back to the Bucklands Academy brand—that ethos—which shows great confidence.
>
> (Teacher 1)

This demonstrates the teacher's reflexivity about dealing with the here and now through the *practical-evaluative*, but also having a clear vision of the type of school s/he wanted to be part of.

One aspect of the culture of the school where teachers felt peer pressure was in relation to workload and staying late in school. Many talked of being in school very early and rarely leaving before 8.00pm. Teacher 4 talked of staff feeling 'guilty' if they left school at the end of the normal working day. The requirements from Ofsted to be able to demonstrate pupil progress over time had led to the school demanding high levels of detailed marking of pupils' work. One teacher said:

> People are very, very stressed and have huge amounts of work to do all the time. It's not a particularly sociable school because people don't have the time to talk to each other. I feel there is a temptation to work in a normal school, as I put it, just to be able to have like a normal job and normal expectations. But at the same time, I know I wouldn't be happy with that.
>
> (Teacher 3)

Another teacher described the staff as 'disgruntled' because of workload and tiredness. In his 20s, he had decided that if he were to consider starting a family he would 'definitely consider working in a different school' (Teacher 6).

Teacher 7 had reflected on how he would manage workload moving into the future:

> I think I make a lot of trade-offs in terms of my private life and my personal wellbeing to work in a school like this. … So, my kind of ideal vision now would be to spend the next couple of years here and then go and take a Head of Department job in a more suburban school, where I can have a much better life balance. By that time I would be having a family anyway. But there is no way I can be here to my late 30s and 40s and doing this.
>
> (Teacher 7)

In triangulating the responses of teachers, I found that there were 'costs' to working in Bucklands Academy, which related to work/life balance, health and wellbeing and social life. The pressures of performativity were intense, e.g. marking, work scrutiny, data tracking, target setting, etc. However, younger staff were willing to offset these costs to be part of an 'outstanding' school with exemplary behaviour and exceptional resources.

Some teachers felt like it was *their* personal responsibility to ensure that pupils passed their examinations. Teacher 4 stated: 'There is quite a lot of pressure on teachers to get those grades up … I think it is kind of a teacher's responsibility to get those grades'. She felt that the school putting pressure on staff was justifiable: 'if a teacher "mucks up" … I think they should almost be scared of the consequences'. This points to Foucault's (1979) notion of 'self surveillance' and this is discussed in greater detail in 7.3.1.

Year 13 students recognised the culture of performativity and accountability within the school:

> The teachers have expectations on them … they have to make sure they're working hard to make sure that we're doing well. If we don't do well [the school's view is] it's the teachers that are obviously doing something wrong.
>
> (Fraser)

Another student had noticed a change from when the academy had first opened, believing that the performativity agenda had begun to overshadow the teaching and learning agenda:

> When the academy first started, teachers started to get more freedom, they could try out new techniques and that kind of helps the students to find out what they like, and kind of adjust [the teaching] to what they like. [But] I think with all the checks on the teachers, it's gonna kind of constrain them once again. So for example, if the folders aren't up to date … they might be forced into changing their teaching style to make sure that it's all organised, it's all set to a specific curriculum. I think that might work against [helping the students].
>
> (Leon)

This suggests that contrary to experiencing a degree of autonomy to teach in ways they felt to be appropriate, teachers were adjusting their teaching to accommodate the

demanding monitoring systems. Furthermore, pupils were aware of these systems and understood the pressure on teachers to conform, meaning that in some ways teachers were directly accountable to their pupils.

6.5.2   The Influence of Structure on Teacher Agency

As part of my research, I was seeking to establish how teachers felt about working in an academy. I wondered if they had chosen to work in this type of school because they thought it would be a place 'where different methods of teaching and learning can be pioneered' (Gove 2012b). In other words, was there an 'academy factor' (Pearson/RSA, 2013) which was attracting them?

Some of the teachers interviewed had been working in Bucklands School prior to academisation, and their feelings about transferring to the academy related mainly to uncertainty about whether or not they would fit in and whether the new school would wish to retain them. Some had concerns about what would happen to the ethos of the old school and what this would mean for the pupils. One teacher explains how she felt when the announcement of academisation was made:

> I thought, 'Here we go again!' I wasn't worried at all about our school having 'academy status', but simply about the change that would come with it. I was concerned about people being parachuted in and not taking account of the school's strengths and potential.
>
> (SLT 2)

Some teachers had given no thought to the fact that the school they were going to be working in *was* an academy. However, they did notice the difference in approach in the leadership of the school:

> [T]o be honest with you, I didn't know much about academies. But when the new management came in, we noticed the difference. They had a plan; they came in knowing what they wanted to happen … with ethos, behaviour … things were just a lot more clearly defined.
>
> (Teacher 6)

This suggests that the new leadership team in the academy was not starting off with the aim of seeking the involvement of staff in formulating new policies. They had a 'plan' and teachers were required to comply with it. This is not a cultural context in which

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teachers' agency can emerge easily, but one which teachers were willing to submit to in return for the improvements in behaviour from the pupils.

Teacher 8 talked about the experience of his interview to join the academy and the principal coming across as being 'very professional' and 'clearly delivering on the vision'. He stated 'I felt secure that I could learn a lot here, and grow here—which I have'. The teacher explained that he had not been concerned about the predecessor school having been in 'Special Measures', and that the attraction of it being an academy was that he saw it as 'a new experience and a new start for the school as well, and that certainly came across in the interview'. There was 'a lot of energy … people were working together and it wasn't a lot of tired people sat across a desk that had been here for a number of years'. This all fits clearly within the *Projective* domain of agency—having a clear vision of how things could be different in the future.

Other teachers identified that as a result of the strong discipline in Bucklands Academy, it was actually possible to *teach*, instead of just managing pupil behaviour. This was a key attraction, rather than the status of being an academy:

> If this was going to be my profession for the rest of my lifetime, which I think it probably will be, the *one* thing that I *really* want to be good at is the teaching part, because it's still the thing that makes you feel better than anything in the job.
>
> (Teacher 1)

A point worth raising here is that some teachers are more concerned with working in a school where behaviour is managed effectively than in one where they have the freedom to develop the curriculum and to teach as they wish. A teacher who transferred from the predecessor school reflects on the difference:

> The [predecessor] school itself had a different ethos then, but discipline became really difficult. Senior management was very weak, there wasn't much happening … you almost couldn't teach. The classes were really difficult to manage and the children knew it, and that was a shame. But now that's very different; we have this '300' system now and if anybody misbehaves they are out. The system is administered centrally so teachers don't have to do that, which is fabulous. That works really well in this academy … really, really well!
>
> (Teacher 5)

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This teacher's account and level of satisfaction with the school's policy on behaviour reflected the views of almost all the people I interviewed. The language used (e.g. 'really, really well') suggests that the teachers appreciate the level of support they are given and consider Bucklands a safe and disciplined school to teach in. It is also clear that this teacher appreciates the improvements which have occurred since the school became an academy. It is debatable whether high standards of behaviour result from academy status, rather than simply strong leadership, which could take place in any school. However, one structural factor which facilitates the strictly enforced behaviour policy is that the school is not accountable to the local authority for its disciplinary sanctions, including fixed-term exclusions. Hence 'academy status' enhances the agency of the principal and the leadership team through greater independence. This in part helps answer the third research question, which asks how academy status has improved the standard of education provided by Bucklands Academy.

6.5.3   The Emergence of Teacher Agency

The most significant finding from my fieldwork related to the introduction of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum. This new policy initiative demonstrated fascinating insights into teacher agency, both the lack thereof with some staff as a result of the requirement to comply with top-down directives, but also in showing how teachers were mediating and negotiating their way around policy to teach as they wished.

6.5.4   Restricting Teacher Agency

The clearest indication of the top-down approach to policy development in Bucklands Academy was the manner in which the new Key Stage 3 curriculum was introduced. Many teachers spoke of their concern over a number of inter-related matters.

The first was that the sponsors paid little attention to the professional views of the staff around pedagogy and curriculum. They had set up a Curriculum Centre to prepare teaching materials to hand to teachers to deliver, most of which were perceived by staff as being pedagogically flawed. An example of the widespread concern was illustrated by a member of the senior leadership team:

> I am a [Subject] teacher and we're not allowed to teach our own lessons [said quietly and despondently]. We've had them planned for us and sent over the summer; they're terrible. I mean, I showed them to my friend who's an adviser and she said, 'these are "requires improvement[20]" lessons. The lessons were given to us because we weren't trusted to write our own. I am supposed to be in charge of [a whole school responsibility] and I'm not [laughs] trusted to write my own lessons for Year 7! I don't recognise them as [Subject] lessons.
>
> When I first got this stuff over the summer, as a teacher—and this is not even as a leader—I was in tears. I love teaching and I really love my subject, and I know what the potential of my subject is. And I knew I was going to be standing there doing something I don't believe in and had no choice over.
>
> (SLT 4)

Linked to this first concern was the lack of professional respect some teachers felt from the sponsors of the academy. There was a feeling that sponsors had ignored the context in which teachers were working and that this had led to difficulties. Another member of the SLT reported that staff morale was low as a result of people with no teaching experience directing the work of teachers. She expressed her concern at having to organise continuing professional development aimed solely at addressing the 'subject knowledge deficit' of the teachers:

> Increasingly it could be the case that the Curriculum Centre takes an increasing role in developing teaching materials. So, for example, with training … ehmmm … they [the sponsors] have asked that every half term that staff have a designated training session that is purely to do with subject knowledge, as opposed to, really, pedagogy or teaching and learning.
>
> (SLT 5)

Another colleague confirmed this approach, citing a time when:

> they informed me I had to tell teachers that they had to read certain books over the holiday, and I had to order the books and give them to the staff. You know, like [informing me] that the teachers need to improve their subject knowledge—they don't know their subjects well enough!
>
> (SLT 4)

---

[20] Grade 3 judgement from Ofsted.

She went on to ask what she considered to be fundamental questions:

> Who is making decisions? What are their motives and what is their expertise? Are they [the sponsors] the best people to be ensuring equality of opportunity? And students' lives aren't being played with? Really? We've got loads of money, but I think it's basically such a shame to use all of that to indoctrinate children in an ill-thought-out way.
>
> (SLT 4)

This brings into focus where the greatest agency appears to emerge in Bucklands Academy, i.e. with the sponsors. It calls into question the acceptability of non-educationalists being granted the freedom to make unilateral decisions on important matters such as curriculum design without a mandate from key stakeholders. It appears this can lead to decisions being made which are thought by some of the teachers to be educationally flawed, thus potentially putting the educational progress of children and young people at risk.

6.5.5   Teachers Achieving their Own Agency

At Bucklands Academy, the clear culture of performativity coupled with the ideological commitment to a knowledge-based curriculum presented challenges to teacher agency. There was a clear neo-conservative, traditional approach being developed by sponsors and the principal, even in creative subjects where this was felt to be educationally questionable (e.g. art and music). One teacher described a project he was leading which aimed to foster creativity in pupils and was linked with other schools across the UK. However, this presented difficulties for him in Bucklands because it was not aligned with the vision of the school. He explains:

> Some of these things [in the creativity network] go against the ethos of … how do I put it … a more sort of … statistical, ehmmm … and scientific approach to education. I see my department now where I have to give marks to pupils breaking down their writing into small sentences, punctuation and grammar and I have to … put all this data in a spreadsheet and sometimes it feels like you lose the perspective of a [Subject 8] teacher— of the piece of work and the meaning of the writing behind it. When they [the sponsors] introduced the Core Knowledge Sequence, this was questionable for me. It was conflicting with my view of education. We are testing [Subject 8] students using multiple-choice tests, which for me I've never done. So yes, I have concerns.
>
> (Teacher 8)

The teacher finds ways to balance the demands of the school with the needs of his pupils. In exercising agency, he states:

> [I]t is a negotiation between what the school wants and what you think is best for the students. It would be irresponsible of me just to go headstrong and independently into what I think, because then I wouldn't be responsive to other learning and feedback from my peers and my seniors.
>
> (Teacher 8)

This is a good example of Edwards' (2005) 'relational agency', which is based on the notion that teachers' agency partly results from collegial activity and relational dialogue with colleagues, as well as their ability to draw on relational resources.

One teacher spoke of the conflicting messages and contradictions inherent within the coalition government's education policies identified by Greany (2014). He spoke of the confusion emanating from the government granting academies the freedom to depart from the National Curriculum, but simultaneously being over-prescriptive in defining subject content for schools through revised examination specifications. The teacher spoke of the importance of taking account of context when planning learning and referred to his previous experiences:

> When I taught in [Council A], there were lots of Vietnamese students there, and like for me, the curriculum needs to represent some form of Vietnamese [Subject 7]. The school I went to was a boys' Catholic school, one-third of whom were Irish and at no point in the curriculum did we ever deal with Irish [Subject 7], and I thought that was a real mistake.
>
> (Teacher 7)

This teacher is clearly demonstrating an *iterational dimension* to his agency, drawing on cultural background and identity as being an important factor in deciding what should be in the curriculum. His concern about the knowledge-rich curriculum being implemented in line with the sponsors' wishes was that he felt it was both culturally adrift from the pupils and pedagogically flawed. He believed the sponsors were critical that the old curriculum focused mostly on *doing* things, whereas they felt it should be more concerned with what *knowledge* pupils were gaining. The teacher's concern about this was: 'for me, I think [Subject 7] has to be taught through a conceptual framework, and knowledge of stuff is not really acceptable' (Teacher 7). In reflecting on how his department was implementing the new curriculum, he stated:

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As we have moved further away from the starting point, I think we have moved much closer to what *I think* constitutes good [Subject 7] teaching … I think because I have become much more involved in it. Clearly, I think what I do well is what I think good [Subject 7] is, which is a good balance between knowledge and the conceptual framework kids develop so that they can do something with that knowledge.

(Teacher 7)

This is a clear demonstration of the teacher adapting and amending policy to allow it to fit in with his own beliefs, what Bowe *et al.* (1992) refer to as the *context of practice*. This teacher went on to describe how he negotiates his way around both the academy policies and the accountability framework in the school:

To be frank, at the end of the day I am teaching the lesson in the classroom, so I will teach a lesson how I will teach it. And fine, [the leader of the Curriculum Centre] can go and plan a booklet, but I disagree about how she goes about doing it. She can continue to produce this resource, which I think has some pedagogical issues with it, but in my class I will use it how I will use it. And at the end of the day, if [the principal] comes in and he questions that ... ehmm—this is how I teach! But having said that though, and I think I must be frank here, if I know for example that the sponsors are coming to the school, I know I will plan a lesson heavier on the narrative side. And essentially, to be frank, I am kind of giving them what they want to see, but therefore it allows me the kind of capital to go away and when they are not there to do what I ... [want]. Because I imagine, to be frank, I imagine what [sponsor] thinks I do in my class is slightly different to what I *actually* do.

(Teacher 7)

This provides a fascinating insight into teacher agency. The teacher understands the context he is working within and is 'playing the game'. He is enabling his own agency to emerge by carefully managing his environment, taking account of the structures within which he is working and finding ways to *act back* on these through his own activity.

There was a feeling in Bucklands Academy that despite the rhetorical discourse around autonomy and the place of the teacher in decision-making, many staff did not feel they had professional trust or autonomy. The excerpt from an interview with one member of the SLT captures the feeling:

Researcher: How does the level of freedom and autonomy for teachers in academies compare with your experience in maintained schools?

SLT 4: It's less.

Researcher: So does that suggest that teachers' creativity and freedom may be stifled?

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SLT 4: That's absolutely right. Nobody who works day-to-day in this building has autonomy.

Researcher: It appears that the sponsors have a significant level of autonomy and can pretty much do whatever they want. But below the level of sponsors, there's no autonomy?

SLT 4: No.

6.6   Conclusion to Chapter 6

Before progressing to the final part of the thesis, it is important to highlight the key issues arising from the fieldwork discussed in this chapter.

I found it to be a rewarding experience analysing my fieldwork data, which yielded rich sources of evidence from which to draw main conclusions. I achieved my aim of collecting valid and reliable information to help me understand and explain the structural mechanisms which were established in Bucklands Academy, primarily as a result of academy status. This assisted me in answering my main research question. I also gained insights into the agency achieved by key stakeholders, including the sponsors, the principal and the teachers, which informed my analysis in relation to my second research question.

As I now proceed to my conclusions, I suggest that there are a number key points which need to be discussed in Chapter 7. They are:

- Teacher agency was not flourishing in Bucklands Academy. However, it was being achieved by some teachers.
- The young age profile of the teachers enabled the sponsors to be heavily influential in shaping and moulding the approach taken by the staff. It may have led to a greater compliance than one might have witnessed in other contexts.
- The agency achieved by the sponsors was significant, and this had led them to introduce a new Key Stage 3 curriculum about which the majority of the teachers had serious concerns.
- There was a strong culture of performativity and competitive ethos amongst the staff, which had implications for teachers' work-life balance. This was an important finding in helping answer my third research question.

- Despite the excessive workload for teachers and the top-down approach to decision-making, particularly around the curriculum, staff saw significant benefits to working in Bucklands Academy (e.g. standard of pupil behaviour and levels of financial support). It could be inferred that they were willing to subjugate their desire to have curricular influence to their 'ultimate concern' (Archer, 2002) of working in an 'outstanding' school with exemplary behaviour and obvious career opportunities.

I now draw these themes together in Chapter 7.

Chapter 7

Discussion of Main Findings and Conclusions

> Throughout the research process, I engaged with social theories and organizational theories concerning autonomy, power and control. But in doing so I made a conscious decision to remain sensitive to my case, and allow it 'to speak for itself', rather than force it into a predetermined or programmatic theory. As such, the research was flexible by nature, as I attempted to study the social life of Northern Academy with an 'open heart and open mind'. I was particularly sensitive to this as I remained immersed in the unfamiliar. I did not want to rush into any conceptual conclusions, thereby increasing the chances of misrepresentation or cultural confusion.
>
> (Salokangas, 2014, p. 63)

7.1 The Scope of the Enquiry

This research set out to consider whether the educational approach adopted by one sponsored academy enabled teachers' agency to flourish. Teachers who exercise agency are able to act with intentionality in order to make decisions relating to important aspects of their work. The findings take account of the national policy context, the literature review process and empirical research conducted in a case-study school. The starting point for the research was, in short, to see if there was any validity in the claims made by politicians that academies are more successful than maintained schools, with the implication of this being that the quality of teaching must be better in academies. With the importance that academies attach to their independence and the government's policy rhetoric that these schools are places 'where different methods of teaching and learning can be pioneered' (Gove 2012b), I made the assumption that there must be space for teachers to develop innovative ways of teaching. This suggests they must be agentic.

In an effort to achieve an appropriate depth of enquiry in a thesis of this size, I considered that it would be difficult to research teacher agency in sponsored academies in general. The scope of this research, therefore, relates to a single case study.

This chapter addresses the three research questions:

- Is this academy a place where teacher agency can flourish?

- In what ways did key stakeholders in Bucklands Academy achieve agency?

- How has 'academy status' improved educational standards in Bucklands Academy?

7.2   Main Findings

It is possible to see ways in which the model for understanding teacher agency developed by Priestley *et al.* (2015) applies in Bucklands Academy. Teachers in the school found that their agency was both constrained and enabled by cultural and structural influences, as the literature generally recognises. It was clear from the interviews conducted that teachers' agency was not simply influenced by social and cultural structures; the concerns expressed by the teachers themselves also gave shape to their agency, as did the reflexive deliberations in which they engaged.

I was able to expose how the effects of structure were mediated by the agency of some teachers working in Bucklands Academy. Indeed, my research showed that the school's new Key Stage 3 curriculum caused concerns relating to the style of teaching required by the staff, and these concerns were then addressed through reflexive deliberation. Such a focus on reflexive deliberation allowed for the place of human subjectivity in achieving agency, as Archer (2002) suggests. Agency was achieved over time and through experience.

The study supports the notion of an interplay between human activity, structure and culture, which has been demonstrated in relation to dimensions of the iterative, practical-evaluative and projective dimensions of agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2015). The interviews revealed that being a professional teacher involves a great deal more than a static set of skills, personality attributes or knowledge. Contextual features constrain or enable a teacher to achieve agency. Agency as a teacher is exemplified by many self-initiated activities such as reflection, innovating, engaging in professional

development, and on occasions, working against the grain. Agency is not free floating, but emerges from, and impacts on, the various contexts and personal attributes. Archer (2000) puts this succinctly:

> Our continuous sense of self, or self-consciousness, is advancing as emerging from the ways in which we are biologically constituted, the way the world is, and from the necessity of our human interaction with our external environment.
>
> (Archer, 2000, p. 50)

7.2.1 The Gap between Policy and Practice in Bucklands Academy

The government talks of a key role for 'educationalists' and the importance of the autonomy of 'head teachers and teachers' in England's schools. This was clearly stated in the Foreword to the coalition government's first White Paper on education, which made the link between school autonomy and the world's highest performing jurisdictions:

> The OECD has shown that countries which give the most autonomy to head teachers and teachers are the ones that do best. … In this country we have seen the success over the past two decades of the City Technology Colleges (CTCs) and then the Academies programme. … This week's Ofsted Annual Report confirms their success—explaining that their freedoms allow them to innovate and 'ensure that educationalists can concentrate on education'.
>
> (DfE, 2010, pp. 3–4)

With government recognition of the importance of teacher autonomy internationally, it was interesting to find a conflict between this and the professional practice observed in Bucklands Academy, which showed that teachers' work was being tightly controlled. My own understanding of the concept of 'autonomy' was that it would recognise the professional role of the teachers and thus enable their agency to emerge. However, rather than teachers being free and trusted to develop new ways of teaching, their approach was dictated by the requirements of the sponsors and the principal. This had a direct impact on the agency teachers were able to achieve. Two major structural influences militated against teachers achieving agency.

- *The knowledge-based curriculum mandated by the sponsors, with an insistence that it was taught in line with their personal preference:* The sponsors considered that the teachers' preferred natural teaching styles lacked academic rigour and that the pupils were not learning enough facts. Despite their lack of teaching qualifications and experience in education, the sponsors clearly defined the curriculum content at Key Stage 3 and the didactic approach that was to be adopted by all teachers in delivering it. The principal's role was to ensure this was happening.

- *The culture of performativity in the school aimed at maintaining the school's current Ofsted rating of 'outstanding':* Although academies are free to depart from the National Curriculum, the inspection regime managed by Ofsted offers little incentive for schools to hand teachers complete responsibility for writing the curriculum. Thus, teachers in Bucklands Academy were required to teach to the test to ensure that examination results remained high. The principal was unwilling to take risks with pedagogy, which innovation requires. Most pedagogical approaches in Bucklands were heavily steered by the requirements of national examinations.

7.2.2   The Autonomy of the Sponsors at Bucklands Academy

My research has found that the vision and educational philosophy of sponsors of academies have the potential to restrict teachers' agency. This has created a situation where teachers may be contractually obligated to deliver a programme of education to pupils about which they may have professional misgivings. The specialisms of history and the visual and performing arts adopted by Bucklands Academy were the result of the personal preferences of the sponsors; the principal and his staff had no involvement in the curricular emphasis of the school. Elsewhere, the sponsor of one of the earliest academy chains insisted that creationism be taught as part of the schools' core curricula and that evolution was to be seen as a 'faith position', rather than being part of the science curriculum (BBC, 2003; Pike, 2010). I find this noteworthy for two reasons. Firstly, it should be of concern that private individuals are free to dictate a school's specialism without consulting the principal and his staff, thus side-lining their role as

teachers and quashing their professional agency. Secondly, to prescribe a curriculum is worrying enough when it at least has its foundations in recognised curriculum theory; it is of even greater concern when it could be thought of as being evangelical or ideological. It is important to remember that whether or not academies have private sponsors, they remain publicly funded schools with the responsibility of ensuring young people's entitlement to an education without bias or discrimination.

7.3 Assessment of the Main Findings

First research question: Is this academy a place where teacher agency can flourish?

7.3.1 *Social Structures in Bucklands Academy*

My research philosophy of critical realism helped me make sense of the social structures which influenced teachers' agency in Bucklands Academy. On the basis that reality can never be known, the best we can hope to achieve through research is a better understanding of the structures and mechanisms which form part of the *real* domain (Bhaskar, 2008).

Through this enquiry I developed an understanding of three important social structures in Bucklands Academy, all of which influenced teachers' agency. They were:

- class structure;

- political connections;

- the performative culture of the school.

Social Structure 1—Class Structure: Teachers and pupils at Bucklands Academy saw the sponsors as upper class, privileged and powerful agents. This contrasts with the demographic of the pupils who, as was established in Chapter 6, were not from this background. What became evident through my research was that there was a power imbalance between the sponsors and those working and studying in the academy. Year 13 students referred to the sponsors as being 'very *different* types of people—like

upper class' and that they [the students] would 'never be able to relate to them'. One member of staff made reference to the elite nature of the people making decisions in the academy:

> It's what Gove wants … all the people on that committee [governing body], they are all Eton-types and privately educated. [The sponsor] made a sack-load of cash, and his wife—you know—was, I think, from a manor-house background, that type of thing.
>
> (SLT 1)

Another teacher reflected on the imbalance of power, and as a result of her experience would advise caution when thinking about working in a sponsored academy:

> I don't think I realised how much power [pause] the sponsors had and how little power practitioners had. So I would choose *really, really* carefully; it's taught me a lesson.
>
> (SLT 4)

I do not interpret these views as representing class prejudice on the part of staff and students. Rather, I suggest they reflect the experience of being in a school where the sponsors have the social and professional confidence to 'do as they like' (Principal). Evidence suggests that the sponsors' vision for the academy was not constrained by the views of others, including Ofsted. A teacher offered a helpful insight:

> The Chair of Governors [the main sponsor] came to talk to NQTs [newly qualified teachers] and said: 'This is the way we are going to do things here. And we are working on changing Ofsted so they agree with us'. Ehmmm … the only trouble is, he's on [a particular committee] so he probably *can* change Ofsted, which is a bit nuts.
>
> (SLT 1)

Social Structure 2—Political Connections: As discussed in Chapter 3, in the early days of the academies programme the government found it difficult to find sponsors, and so often had to rely on personal connections and the persuasion of individuals known through professional and political networks (Beckett, 2007; Adonis, 2012). This led to some sponsors having access to the levers of power and being able to influence education policy in England. Staff working in Bucklands Academy were aware of this and so felt that the approach being taken by the sponsors in their school had the endorsement of government and represented the view of the political establishment.

Social Structure 3—Performative Culture: The third social structure resulted from a culture of performativity and peer pressure amongst teachers. Staff felt pressure to stay late at school marking and preparing lessons, and so social structure had an impact on the activities of these teachers. Viewed critically, it could be argued that this behaviour develops and instils 'self-surveillance' and 'mutual surveillance' (Foucault, 1979). Professionality is replaced by accountability; and collegiality is replaced by competition and interpersonal performative comparison. The subtle nature of this performative culture is explained by Ball (citing Rose):

> These are forms of power which are realised and reproduced through social interaction, within the everyday life of institutions. They play upon the insecurity of the disciplined subject. They do not so much bear down upon but take shape within the practices of the institution itself and construct individuals and their social relations through direct interaction. This is, at least in some respects, a constructive rather than coercive power. It does not simply constrain and oppress; it articulates a mode of personal existence which is inscribed within the 'minute arts of self-scrutiny, self-evaluation and self-regulation' (Rose, 1989).

(Ball, 1997b, p. 236)

In answering the main research question, I would argue that this academy was not a place where teacher agency was able to flourish. Key influences constraining teacher agency included class and political structures, which led to a significant imbalance of power between those governing the academy and the teachers working in it. The imbalance of power was seen most clearly in the sponsors' decision to implement a knowledge-based curriculum in Key Stage 3, even though there was almost universal concern about this amongst the teachers interviewed. This suggests that there was little room for teachers to achieve agency in *defining* the curriculum. The culture of performativity in Bucklands Academy bore down heavily on teachers, who felt highly accountable for the academic attainment of the pupils and the need to maintain the school's 'outstanding' Ofsted judgement. The culture, which prevailed as a result, was one where compliance with interventionist rather than 'pioneering' teaching was required, with examination results dominating all decisions relating to teaching and learning.

Although Bucklands Academy was not a place where teacher agency was able to flourish, it did clearly emerge in the form of adaptation of policy. Although teachers could have exercised their agency by leaving the school, as a result of *inner dialogue*

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(Archer, 2002) they found ways to nuance and adapt policy to suit their own educational philosophies. There were many benefits to being a teacher in Bucklands Academy, and so finding ways around a key curriculum reform was something staff were willing to do in order to shape their teaching to bring it in line with their own values:

- Some adopted the reform and taught as they were asked to do, ensuring the *fidelity* (Cuban, 1998) with the sponsors' intentions.

- Others ignored important aspects of the reform because they were able to do so without jeopardising their positions in the school, thus creating a situation where there was almost no fidelity with the sponsors' vision.

- Finally, a third group of teachers modified and nuanced policy so that they could have been said to have done what was asked of them, but in reality the day-to-day lessons lacked any serious fidelity with the vision of the new curriculum. Some of these teachers knew how to 'play the game' when it came to accountability measures achieved through lesson observations and curriculum reports. When required to do so, they presented to the sponsors what they wanted to see. This suggests that these teachers were exercising significant professional agency in negotiating their way around what they saw as a set of flawed reforms.

I did not discover any individual teacher exercising agency in the form of outright rejection or refusal. This could have been for a number of reasons, including: a fear of the power imbalance; a commitment to the principal, who was respected; or simply because they enjoyed working in Bucklands Academy. I interpreted the agency of the teachers being exercised as positive adaptation of policy rather than as negative rejection. I make sense of this using Cuban's (1993) metaphor of the hurricane, where despite the wild activity just below the surface of the ocean, on the sea bed all is calm and teachers do what they have always done—partly unnoticed.

Second Research Question: *In what ways did key stakeholders in Bucklands Academy achieve agency?*

7.3.2   School Autonomy at Bucklands Academy

It was clear that Bucklands Academy had autonomy, both from the local authority and also from the immediate community it served. The school was not accountable in any formal sense to parents, and there were no parents on the governing body. Locally elected members had no jurisdiction over the school and could only represent the views of their constituents rather than hold the school to account. As well as having *formal* autonomy, the research found that the school *acted* autonomously—the principal spoke of the sponsors' confidence in doing as 'they liked'. He suggested that the autonomy assumed by the sponsors resulted from their *approach* rather than from 'academy status':

> We can make decisions here quickly because that is the nature of the sponsors—that is their style … There's very little that an academy can do that a maintained school can't. I know quite a few schools that do things they're not supposed to do, because they believe it and do it with conviction.
>
> <div align="right">(Principal)</div>

7.3.3   Teacher Autonomy at Bucklands Academy

While it is clear that the school had autonomy, evidence from those who had worked elsewhere suggests that this was not significantly greater than that of a maintained school. Moreover, it could be argued that teachers in the academy had *less* autonomy than their colleagues in maintained schools, as one of the teachers stated: 'Nobody who works day-to-day in this building has autonomy' (SLT 4). It is unlikely that this would be the case in most local authority schools, where there would be some recognition of the professional role of the teacher.

My research found that the principal had complete autonomy over operational matters, about which the sponsors showed little interest, e.g. behaviour systems. However, in comparison to headteachers of many maintained schools, he had very little autonomy on core aspects of running the school, e.g. design of the curriculum. An interesting

observation from the data is that staff and pupils were supportive of the behaviour management systems in the school (which were under the principal's control) but expressed significant concerns regarding the curriculum (which was not controlled by the principal).

It could be inferred that a reason for the restricted autonomy of the teachers was a result of the journey that Bucklands had been on since it was judged to be in need of 'Special Measures'. As discussed in Chapter 4, the academies programme is highly contested and continues to receive significant media attention. There is an expectation that academies bring about rapid improvements, and where this fails to happen headteachers have been unceremoniously dismissed (*The Spectator*, 2013). This may have led to the principal of Bucklands Academy demanding the compliance of the teachers with the sponsors' policies, even where staff questioned their educational value.

A related factor that may have contributed to central decision-making at Bucklands Academy may have been the unwillingness of sponsors and the principal to run the risk of losing the newly gained 'outstanding' judgement from Ofsted. Having moved to this top grading from 'inadequate' within two years of the academy opening, there was pressure on the school to demonstrate that the improvement was sustainable and not the result of short-term 'tricks' or slights of hand. People's reputations were on the line and so there was no room for teachers straying 'off message'—a message more concerned with examination results than pioneering teaching. Evidence of the attainment agenda displacing the learning agenda was observed during a meeting of the senior leadership team, where the principal indicated he was not concerned about whether or not the teaching of Year 11 was 'pretty', he 'just wanted results'.

7.3.4   Agency Experienced by Teachers at Bucklands Academy

Bucklands teachers' lack of autonomy affected their agency. The ecological view of agency is based on the notion that agency emerges from the interplay between culture, structure and human activity within concrete settings. Teachers in Bucklands were not given the freedom to decide how they wished to teach, and so their agency was

constrained by both the governance structure, which had the power to make this happen, and also the culture of the school.

A key finding from the data was the willingness of most staff to comply with the requirements to deliver pre-prepared lessons as part of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum, despite their pedagogical misgivings. Many of the staff were young graduates who had just joined the teaching profession, many through *TeachFirst*. None of the graduates from this programme had undergone any teacher training prior to taking up their 'on the job' training. As a result, they were unfamiliar with curriculum theory and so not in a position to challenge the curriculum design adopted by the sponsors. Priestley (2011) argues that there is a generation of teachers working in schools who have had curriculum theory omitted from their teacher training and have come to expect that their job is to deliver pre-planned, 'off the shelf' curricular packages. This also includes teachers who have found the prescribed National Curriculum to be a 'safe' structure within which to work, shifting the responsibility for what children and young people learn to outside 'experts' rather than it lying with individual teachers. This may account for the compliance of some staff with new curriculum policy.

7.3.5   Inner Dialogue and Prioritisation

My data gave an insight into what I consider to be a complex dynamic regarding teacher compliance and agency. Bucklands Academy had many strengths in comparison to other schools. The behaviour management systems were highly effective and as a result, pupil behaviour was extremely good. The academy had a positive ethos and pupils were proud to be part of an 'outstanding' school. The school was extremely well resourced, partly as a result of the direct financial support of the main sponsor. There was a wide range of professional development opportunities for staff, including funded support for post-graduate study, which was of interest to many staff working at the school.

Against this backdrop, some staff were willing to surrender their 'professional freedom' over the curriculum to the benefit of working in a successful school. Approximately half the staff interviewed were adopting the curriculum policy as required, despite their reservations. The data showed that this group of staff took this approach because they accepted the authority of their employers and therefore complied with their requirements. Their agency to 'make a difference' (Frost, 2006) remained unexercised. However, it could be claimed that many staff in this category *were* exercising their agency in prioritising the advantages of working in Bucklands over the main disadvantage of the curriculum policy. In other words, they were engaging in a process of reflexivity through their own *internal dialogue* (Archer, 2002), to prioritise what they cared about most. These priorities may change over time, but in 2012 these staff were prioritising being part of an 'outstanding' school.

7.3.6   Playing it Safe

The principal described the challenge from the DCSF's[21] Academies Unit when the academy first opened. There was an expectation that the school would adopt 'transformational' approaches in line with the vision of the academies programme:

> He [the DCSF official] was *obsessed* with this word [transformation]. I used to say, 'It depends on what you consider to be "transformative". We are going to get the children to behave well, we're going to teach them well, we'll teach respect and develop character'. We were going to get the basics right. I'm absolutely convinced that if you have a very good knowledge-rich, challenging curriculum; you have very good discipline; you have staff who are very knowledgeable and very well skilled and inspirational; and you have an enrichment programme that helps students widen their horizons and raise their aspirations … the children will be well served.
>
> (Principal)

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[21] Department of Children, Schools and Families (predecessor of the Department for Education).

The principal then spoke of what he looked for in his teachers:

> I tend to steer clear of gurus coming in who say, 'I can do this with the timetable' or 'I'll bring in this great new strategy that is radically going to change your school'. Nothing will convince me [that] any strategy will radically change a school except making teachers better at what they're doing and having children well-mannered and good discipline.
>
> (Principal)

This provides a helpful insight into the culture within Bucklands Academy which had a bearing on teachers' agency. The principal's vision and approach accord with the research conducted by Fitz *et al.* (1997) that when presented with freedom and autonomy in a market-based system of schooling, headteachers play it safe and actually concentrate on the basics. They do not take risks, and tend to run traditional schools along neo-conservative lines to appeal to the wishes of parents. Furthermore, I would argue that this culture and ethos produced *downwards conflation* (Archer, 2000) on the agency of the teachers: the school did not welcome pioneering approaches to teaching and learning. In making appointments in line with his vision, the principal was closing down the space for *cultural elaboration* (Priestley, 2011).

Third Research Question: *How has 'academy status' improved educational standards in Bucklands Academy?*

This question proved to be difficult to answer. In some respects, the answer is not at all; the improvements brought about at Bucklands Academy could have been achieved in any maintained school. The principal did not believe that the freedoms open to him were substantially greater than those in maintained schools. What he did refer to, however, was a *willingness* in Bucklands Academy to *use* the freedoms available to all schools to do things which may be been seen as contentious in some schools. For example, in talking about the decision taken to drop ICT and religious studies as discrete subjects from the curriculum, he said:

> None of us have ever gone to check the implications of this decision … it doesn't matter what we find, because we're going to do it; this is what we think is the right thing. … I would do exactly the same thing in a maintained school … in an academy, people *think* you can do these things, and it's a much better mind-set, I think, more than anything else.
>
> (Principal)

What I understand to be happening here is that the principal was not making decisions that he would have been unable to make in a maintained school. However, Bucklands Academy is only accountable to its sponsors and the DfE (essentially through Ofsted), and on the basis that the pupil outcomes remained positive it seemed unlikely that Ofsted would change their judgement on the school. So academy status was *facilitating greater agency* for the principal and sponsors to make decisions which may have been challenged in a local authority school.

My research would suggest that Bucklands Academy's confidence to *act autonomously* allowed it to make many rapid improvements in expectations, academic attainment and progress, behaviour and positive destinations for pupils. The school is currently graded as 'outstanding' by Ofsted and is heavily over-subscribed. Hence it is clearly justifiable to describe Bucklands Academy as being highly successful, and I would argue that the mind-set of those governing and leading the school has been a significant factor in the improvements brought about rather than academy status *per se*. The question that might be raised, however, would be at what cost? Chitty (2011) would argue at the cost of local democracy.

7.4   Implications of this Research

This research highlights some important implications for national education policy. Academies are the government's flagship policy for the renewal of state education in England, the vehicle by which the country's schools will be able to compete with the best in the world. However, even if there is a question over whether it is valid to make such international comparisons, one thing many high-performing jurisdictions have in common is recognition of the importance of the role of the teacher.

Various studies show the link between the quality of teaching and successful student outcomes (e.g. Nye *et al*., 2004). A report by McKinsey and Company (1997) claimed that 'The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers' (p. 16). The report's emphasis, however, was on attracting 'more able people into the teaching profession' rather than on ways to improve the quality of teaching. Husbands (2013) challenges this positivist stance which suggests a causal relationship between

who the teachers are and student achievement, arguing instead that the quality of the *teaching* is more important than that of the teachers:

> We can all teach well and we can all teach badly. Even good teachers teach some lessons and groups less well; even the struggling teacher can teach a successful lesson on occasion. More generally, we can all teach better: teaching changes and develops. Skills improve. Ideas change. It's teaching, not teachers.
>
> (Husbands, 2013)

Elmore (2004) talks of the importance of the instructional core, whilst it is argued elsewhere that there is clear evidence that 'teacher effects' greatly exceed 'school effects' when progress over time is studied (Muijs and Reynolds, 2011). Hattie (2012) acknowledges there is significant variation in the difference teachers make, but argues that 'teachers' beliefs and commitments are the greatest influence on student achievement over which we have some control' (p. 25). I suggest that the research on improving teaching all points towards the importance of *teacher agency*.

A noteworthy section of the McKinsey (2007) report was that it found that a factor contributing to successful school systems was the status of the teaching profession. My research has shown that in comparison to some high-achieving jurisdictions such as Singapore, South Korea and Finland, England's teachers have been subject to sustained criticism and suspicion over the last 40 years from those on the political right. This lack of trust affects the autonomy afforded to teachers and thus their professional agency.

The research above suggests that the way in which teachers approach the practice of teaching is the single most important factor in raising student achievement. I would argue that fundamental to this is the professional agency teachers achieve. What histories and past experiences are they drawing upon (the iterative dimension of agency)? What vision do they have of a future that is better than the present (the projective dimension of agency)? How do they negotiate the challenges of the present (the practical-evaluative dimension of agency)? Using the framework for understanding teacher agency developed by Priestley *et al.* (2015), it can be seen that school context heavily influences the interplay between these three dimensions of agency and these concrete settings can either support or constrain teachers' agency.

The findings from my research show that in the context of Bucklands Academy, the governance structure was suppressing teachers' agency rather than enabling it to flourish. The school's academy status created a situation whereby its governance structure took precedence over a recognition of the professional role of its teachers. This enabled the sponsors to achieve agency which in itself, paradoxically, constrained the agency of teachers.

There are significant implications for the UK Government's aim to raise educational standards, including improving the country's standing in the international benchmarking comparisons such as PISA, if its flagship academies policy has the potential to limit teachers' agency. I argue that it is not as simple as revisiting the 'standards not structures' debate of the late 1990s (*The Guardian*, 2014a). Teachers have historically been able to achieve professional agency in different structural contexts (as was discussed in 2.7 – 2.9), concurring with the well-established claims that it is standards and not structures that make a difference to student learning (e.g. Wiggins, 1991; Fullan, 1993; DfEE, 1997). However, these arguments are based on the premise that the professional standing of teachers is respected and recognised (i.e. a good professional can work in different contexts). What is missing from the literature reviewed in Chapter 3 is what it means for teachers when their professional status becomes subordinate to those outside the field of education, who may not fully recognise the role of teachers as being the 'centrepiece' in educational change (Datnow, 2000).

My research points to clear evidence of private individuals with no teaching credentials controlling what was taught in Bucklands Academy and how this was to be delivered by the teachers. I would argue that this is the antithesis of what Husbands (2013) was calling for and suggest that if this trend continues in the longer term, there could be serious implications for the way in which children and young people are being taught and their consequential achievement.

The focus of this thesis is not to consider whether the involvement of non-educational private sponsors in schooling is a good thing or not, but rather to reflect on what the impact of their involvement means for teacher agency. A major finding from my

research is that the governance structure of a school can significantly influence the professional agency of its teachers. I argue that as the academies programme develops further and we move towards a fully academised system, government policy must clearly define the space for teachers' agency to be achieved and to recognise the importance of the 'teacher effect'. In other words, in this era of polycentric governance, there is a lack of clarity about whose voices should be heard in the best interests of children and young people. We need to clarify the role of the professional and agree how new partners in the *Big Society* can add value to state education rather than potentially destabilise it.

An added consideration in this new world of schooling is that, increasingly, teachers are unable to rely on their professional training from which they can make iterative judgements. University-based teacher education is gradually being replaced by 'on-the-job' training in the very schools where teachers' agency is being constrained. This has the potential for the further *proletarianization* of the profession (Ozga and Lawn, 1981), creating a non-agentic, compliant 'delivery' service in the years ahead. I believe there is a need to review how teachers are trained and educated in a fully academised system.

7.5   Limitations of the Research

As with all case-study research, the main limitation is regarding the scope of the research and the generalisation of the findings to all sponsored academies. However, as stated in Chapter 5, the typicality of Bucklands Academy was such that I believe there is a high 'relatability' (Bassey, 1981) to other academies with similar governance structures. It is also the case that since this research was conducted in 2012, the academies programme has developed significantly. There are now more converter academies than sponsored academies, and the role of multi-academy trusts (MATs) has developed rapidly, meaning that the notion of the standalone private sponsor is possibly less significant than it was three years ago. However, some MATs are chaired by private individuals whose influence is now across a number of schools rather than just a single institution.

A second limitation relates to me as a researcher. First and foremost, I am a headteacher and I come at research from this perspective. Indeed, as was discussed in Chapter 1, my motivation for the research arose out of my interest as a serving headteacher. I am aware that this has the potential to introduce bias: it may be the case that I am instinctively sensitive about the prospect of people from outside education being able to influence policy in schools. Although I did endeavour to adopt a balanced interpretation of the results, I was perhaps drawn too easily to those contributions which were critical of the role of private sponsors.

Finally, my conclusion that teachers were willing to comply with and adapt policy rather than reject it was, as suggested above, probably the result of Bucklands Academy being a successful school. Would the findings have been the same if the school had been challenging and 'failing'? Would the teachers have shown loyalty to the principal and would they have been willing to find ways around the requirements of the sponsors? So it may be the case that the findings of this research are relatable only to 'successful' sponsored academies rather than sponsored academies generally.

7.6   Possible Further Research

I believe a pressing area for further research which emerges from this thesis is to establish what effect, if any, 'off the shelf' knowledge-based curriculum packages have on teacher agency. If, as appears to be the case, schools are moving towards a knowledge-rich curriculum, including the Core Knowledge Sequence, we may be entering a new era of prescribed teaching. If this trend is particularly prevalent in academies and free schools, does it radically alter the academies programme and move it away from the notion of pioneering teaching approaches?

The second area of further research, which builds on this thesis, would be to understand what happens to school autonomy and teacher agency when a standalone academy joins a multi-academy trust (MAT). The government in England now sees MATs as the future of state schooling and pressure is being put on standalone schools to join academy chains (Hutchings *et al.*, 2015). I believe there is a particular dynamic for schools that have been part of a local authority, then become standalone academies

(either sponsored or converter) and then, subsequently, join a MAT. This is quite different from schools which are taken directly from the local authority into a MAT—these schools have never 'tasted freedom'. However, standalone academies will have had a number of years of independence prior to moving into a different collaborative arrangement from the one they were used to previously. Do academy chains represent the new 'centre'? Do they simply replace the one-size-fits-all approach of the local authorities, which academies were introduced to dismantle?

The final area of possible future research is around what it will mean to be a teacher in a fully academised system in England. If the aim is to achieve full academisation, where private interest in education is allowed to shape schooling, what will this mean for the professional role of the teacher? How will teachers develop a professional identity in a system where there is no consistency of approach to initial teacher education and where many schools now employ unqualified teachers? Will this affect the ecology surrounding teacher agency and professional autonomy? How will a for-profit policy context affect the role of the teacher and the possibilities for exercising professional agency?

7.7 What have I learned?

My study of teacher agency within the context of a sponsored academy has been a professionally rewarding journey through a number of domains of learning, from which I have gained considerably both as a practitioner and a scholar. My doctoral research has been driven by a desire to achieve two things. First, I needed to understand more about the educational policy context in England to help me appreciate its distinctive nature in comparison to my experience in Scotland. Second, as a headteacher I have a responsibility as a 'democratic professional' (Whitty, 2002) to understand the role of key stakeholders in contributing to the success of the school—to use 'my authority' to facilitate the agency of others (Angus, 1989). Thus, I wanted to develop a deeper understanding of the role of teachers in embedding school reform.

As an engaged scholar (Boyer, 1990), there are three aspects of this study which have had a significant impact on my knowledge and understanding as a professional

educator. The first is that I now have a strong understanding of the English educational policy context, both historically and in the present day. I have developed an understanding of the policy process in education and now appreciate the policy cycle and the concepts of policy enactment. Linked to this, I have discovered the concept of teacher agency and what this means for the professional teacher. My understanding of this has not only widened my theoretical knowledge, but has also changed the way in which I view the staff who work in my school and the role they play in ensuring that our pupils receive the best possible education. I now see teachers through a clearer lens. Finally, I have had my mind opened up to the challenging theoretical framework of critical realism. This was a taxing part of my research, but one which has developed me intellectually to understand the world in which I live and work, providing an explanatory critique with which to make sense of what I encounter.

7.8   The Endurance of the Teacher as a Professional

This thesis points towards a necessary re-vindication of the human powers that teachers exercise in relation to the development of their teaching, offering hope for engagement in their careers. To construct agency solely in terms of room for manoeuvre against socio-cultural factors represents a reductive approach to teaching. Rather, I suggest that realist social theory offers promising ways forward to reconcile agency and structure, and subjectivity and objectivity, ensuring that teachers are not evacuated of all their powers.

It is important that school governance structures recognise the chaotic environment within which teachers operate. Fielding (2007) argues that conceptual clarity and coherent arguments are vitally important and that these provide teachers with a voice so that they can make considered decisions relating to their work: 'Too often the best of what is intended is denied by poverty of thought and a surfeit of misdirected enthusiasm' (p. 384). Teachers have been subjected to a variety of political initiatives, which increasingly define their role as *educational technicians*, specifying in some detail what is expected of them and require them to transmit and deliver externally defined agendas for change. In England, frameworks like the *Teachers' Standards*

appear so far to have redefined what it means to be a teacher, yet have done little to address the power imbalance affecting teachers' agency. Wheatley argues that:

> Once we stop treating organizations and people as machines and move to the paradigm of living systems, organizational change is not a problem. Using this worldview, it is possible to create organizations rich in people who are capable of adapting as needed, who are alert to changes in their environment, who are able to innovate strategically.

(Wheatley, 2005, p. 76)

The question of the extent to which the teachers can be agentic must be considered alongside the possibility that in Bucklands Academy they have been required to comply with externally and top-down driven agendas for change. The idea of teachers in academies being trusted to develop pioneering approaches to teaching may simply cloak a story of 'smoke and mirrors' in which power is centralised and resides at the top of institutional hierarchies. The true delegation of *power* remains minimal in a situation concealed by the handing over of an increasing range of relatively meaningless administrative tasks.

Yet we should be careful not to dichotomize power and resistance. Giddens' (1984) notion of 'the dialectic of control' holds that, no matter how asymmetrical, power relations are always two-way, contingent and to some degree interdependent. Similarly, and on a note I consider to be a fitting conclusion to this thesis, I finish with the words of the late Professor Stuart Hall, who argued that no hegemonic projects, particularly those based on profoundly undemocratic principles, were guaranteed lasting success:

> No project achieves 'hegemony' as a completed project. It is a process, not a state of being. No victories are permanent or final. Hegemony has constantly to be 'worked on', maintained, renewed, revised. Excluded social forces, whose consent has not been won, whose interests have not been taken into account, form the basis of counter-movements, resistance, alternative strategies and visions … and the struggle over a hegemonic system starts anew. They constitute what Raymond Williams called 'the emergent'—and are the reason why history is never closed but maintains an open horizon towards the future.

(Hall, 2011, p. 26)

………..

Appendix 1

Research Sample

Tuesday 3 July 2012	Wednesday 4 July 2012
Interviews	*Interviews*
The Principal Finance Director Interventions Co-ordinator SLT 1	SLT 2 Two Year 8 pupils The Principal
Observations	*Observations*
General lesson observations	General campus observations

Monday 1 October 2012	Tuesday 2 October 2012	Wed 3 October 2012
Interviews	*Interviews*	*Interviews*
The Principal SLT 2	SLT 2 SLT 3 SLT 4	SLT 5 Teacher 1 Raising Aspirations Co-ord The Principal
Observations	*Observations*	*Observations*
Senior Leadership Team Meeting	General lesson observations Year 11 Assembly	General campus observations

Tues 27 November 2012	Wed 28 November 2012	Thurs 29 November 2012
Interviews	*Interviews*	*Interviews*
Teacher 2 Teacher 3 Teacher 4 Teacher 5	Teacher 6 Teacher 7 Teacher 8	SLT 1 Four Year 13 students
Observations	*Observations*	*Observations*
Meeting of Heads of Departments	Meeting of Senior Pastoral Team	General campus observations

Wednesday 15 May 2013	Wednesday 11 September 2013
Interviews	*Interviews*
Lord Andrew Adonis	Lord John Nash
Venue	*Venue*
House of Lords	Department for Education, London

Appendix 2

Interview Questions

Principal and Leaders

1. How long have you been in post in this academy?

2. Talk about your career path that led you to your current post.

3. Were you always motivated to be a Head/Principal?

4. Was leading in an academy, rather than a maintained school, important for you?

5. In real terms, what do you believe are the benefits of academies in the current educational landscape in England?

6. The DfE website says that academies 'benefit from greater freedoms to innovate and raise standards'. What do you think about this statement?

7. How important is freedom from the local authority for you?

8. Have you had previous experience of working with a local authority?

9. What is the relationship between your academy and the local authority in which it is situated?

10. What do you feel you do 'differently' here? Give some examples.

11. Is 'freedom' important in achieving these goals/objectives?

12. In what ways would you expect the staff to have freedom to work 'differently' at their levels?

13. Do you think your staff take advantage of the flexibility offered within this academy to act differently? Can you give examples?

14. Is the ability to act differently and not always conform an important feature of your recruitment strategy for staff?

15. Academies are described as being 'autonomous', which is different from being 'free' from the local authority. How autonomous do you feel in your role?

16. How important is your autonomy?

17. How accountable do you feel?

18. Who are you accountable to?

19. Describe this accountability.

20. What are the barriers to you and the staff in acting differently?

21. In what ways do you feel constrained to conform to the same agenda as maintained schools?

22. Is there anything you would like to do differently but don't feel you can at the moment?

Teachers

1. How long have you worked at this academy in your current role?

2. What are the main responsibilities of your job? What does it entail?

3. Is working in an academy, rather than a maintained school, important for you?

4. From a teacher's standpoint, what do you believe are the benefits of working in an academy rather than a maintained school?

5. The DfE website says that academies 'benefit from greater freedoms to innovate and raise standards'. What do you think about this statement?

6. How much freedom do you get in the classroom to do things differently? Is this freedom important?

7. Do you think staff take advantage of the flexibility offered within this academy to act differently?

8. Can you give some examples of what you (or the academy) do differently as a result of the freedom you are given?

9. How accountable do you feel?

10. To whom are you accountable?

11. Describe this accountability.

12. What are the barriers to you acting differently?

13. Is there anything you would like to do differently but don't feel you can at the moment?

Appendix 3

Sample of Interview Coding

And we got in a discussion around that, and what I think the key difference is, and for me I think [Subject 7] has to be taught through a conceptual framework, and that knowledge of stuff is not really acceptable and it just doesn't work. Ehmmm … the argument people have given for this move towards knowledge, not just in this school but in a wider thing, is that the subjects are just 'doing'—they are more interested in the *doing* than *what* they are doing *with it*. I think we differed on the kind of pedagogical approach to it. But in terms of actually what we are doing day-to-day, yes, originally we were given some lessons but it was more a kind of booklet with kind of knowledge inside it, which was this is what the kids have to know, and then I've been involved in kind of planning lessons to do with that. And as we've got further away from the start point, I think we are much closer to what *I think* constitutes good [Subject 7] teaching and I guess probably quite consistently, because I've become more involved in it. Clearly, I think what I do well is what I think good [Subject 7] is, which is it's clearly based around knowledge, but there is some conceptual framework the kids access to do something with it. I think the problem is, and maybe something you alluded to, is this idea that you can give kids facts and explanations and they can rote learn it and repeat it which therefore implies that students have understood it. I would challenge that. ***Researcher: Were you under any pressure at any time to do just what you have described: just rote learning—teach the facts?*** Ehrmm … I think to some extent, if not direct pressure, then definitely implied and I had a discussion with [the Principal] about this over the summer and his fears were that students wouldn't be able to ehmmm, learn the facts and [his solution was] that through repetition is the kind of key way to do it. And you know, clearly, *sometimes*	Clear view about how subject should be taught. Criticisms of skills based curriculum.

Teacher confident about his own educ philosophy. Prescribed, top-down curriculum.

Teacher adapting curriculum to suit his approach.

Teacher has a clear view of an approach to the curriculum. Teacher doesn't accept the pedagogical authority of the Curriculum Centre or Sponsors.

Culture of compliance. |

there is a role for rote learning, I mean, I'm not going to close my mind to it, and rote does sometimes work. But it can't be the most significant part of what needs to be a much wider approach to teaching and learning. I had a discussion with the girl from the Curriculum Centre, we had a discussion about this last week and we differed on it and I think we essentially kind of agreed to disagree really. *[Researcher: Are you allowed to disagree? They say, 'Okay we will just have to disagree and you can go and do your job'? Or is it a case of 'you might disagree but you're doing it this way'?]* To be frank, at the end of the day I am teaching the lesson in the classroom, so I will teach a lesson how I will teach it. And fine, she [the leader of the Curriculum Centre] can go and plan a booklet and she can continue to—this is really rude sorry, her name is [Gill], she's brilliant, for what she does—but I disagree about how she goes about doing it. She can continue to produce this resource, which I think has some pedagogical issues with it, but in my class I will use it how I will use it. And at the end of the day, if [the Principal] comes in and he questions that ...ehmmm—this is how I teach! But having said that though, and I think I must be frank here, if I know for example that the governors [sponsors] are coming to the school, I know that in order to … ehmmm ... I will plan a lesson heavier on the narrative side and essentially, to be frank, I am kind of giving them what they want to see, but therefore it allows me the kind of capital to go away and when they are not there to do what I ... Because I image, to be frank, I imagine what [Sponsor's wife] thinks I do in my class is slightly different to what I *actually* do.	Teacher's clear view of how subject should be taught.

Not giving in to top-down demands.

Classic example of teacher agency.

Achieving and exercising agency.

Playing the game — letting the Sponsors and Curriculum Centre think one thing, but doing another. Teacher adapting policy through the agency he achieves. |

Coding: Teacher exercising agency; Accountability; Influence of sponsors; Iterative dimension of agency; Performativity; Autonomy

Appendix 4

Sample of Observation Record

Item 1: Y11–13 Academic Review Day, Thursday 4 October 2012 The meeting was briefed by AP3 over final arrangements for the forthcoming Academic Review Day for Years 7, 11, 12 & 13. Years 8 – 10 not involved; Year 7, will have 'Extended Prep'. Year 7 students will have a meeting with their parents and tutors. Each Y7 student will have a reflection sheet and also be given a mocked up report showing expected progress in each subject. Anticipated outcomes for Y7 meeting with parents:	 Adopting public school ethos.
• Chance to talk through expected progress	Performativity
• Explain to parents about the one-page summary	
• Relate to national progress	Performativity
• It's the first meeting between the tutors and parents (tutors are first point of contact)	
• The new curriculum rationale is to be discussed with parents.	Need to 'sell' new curriculum to parents.
There is an A4 briefing page on this being given to tutors that they will use to inform parents about the new curriculum. AP New Curric has prepared a newsletter on the new curriculum for parents and the rationale for each subject. However, this has not gone out yet.	
Item 2: Behaviour in Corridors and Public Space This item was led by AP4.	
• Classes and individual students are leaving class late.	
• Teachers must facilitate a calm, orderly exit from the class (not all staff are doing this).	Strictly enforced behaviour policy with staff and students.
• The above issue is to be discussed at the SLT Link/Head of Dept meetings (this request/requirement being made by AP3).	
• AP3 stressed and briefed the meeting on the various roles for the SLT at morning interval and lunchtime.	
• Tutors must get to iSpace (see notes elsewhere) on time.	

Coding: Teacher exercising agency; Accountability; Influence of sponsors; Iterative dimension of agency; Performativity; Autonomy

Appendix 5

Bucklands Academy Documentary Evidence

Academy Development Plan (ADP) 2012/13.

Assessment Point Process—House/Student Perspective.

City of ▮▮▮▮▮▮ Council Children's Services Cabinet Report: 'Response to Ofsted Inspection and Interim Management Arrangements for Bucklands School'.

Departmental Revision Resource Bank Plan.

End of Year Report to Governors 2010/2011.

English, Media and Literacy: Exam Analysis and Departmental Priorities.

Letter from Principal to Parents/Guardians about New Key Stage 3 Curriculum.

Meeting of Heads of Departments Agenda 27 November 2012.

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: physical education (PE).

Pastoral SLT Meeting Agenda 28 November 2012.

Bucklands Academy 'What Next?' (Post-16 choice guide).

Bucklands Academy Behaviour Policy.

Bucklands Academy Inspection Report (Date Removed).

Bucklands Academy Learning Walks 2012-13.

Bucklands Academy Ofsted Monitoring Report (Date Removed).

Bucklands Academy Post 16: Staff Handbook 2012–2013.

Bucklands Academy Presentation March 2012 (Publicity Presentation).

Bucklands Academy Senior Leadership Team Responsibilities September 2012.

Bucklands Academy Staff Information Pack 2011.

Bucklands Academy: Academic Target Card.

Bucklands Academy: Behaviour Target Card.

Bucklands Academy: Curriculum Structure September 2012.

Bucklands Academy: Pastoral Structure September 2012.

Bucklands Academy: Post 16 Prospectus 2011/12.

Bucklands Academy: Prospectus 2011/12.

Bucklands Academy: Self-Evaluation 2010 (Curriculum Area Leaders).

Bucklands School Inspection Report (Date Removed).

Principal's Report to Governors—October 2012.

Provisional Year 7 Extended School Programme 2012/2013.

The future for Bucklands School (City of ▇▇▇▇▇▇ Council): Consultation Document (2007).

The Bucklander (Issue 2, September 2012).

The Bucklander (Issue 3, October 2012).

The Bucklands Curriculum Newsletter (September, 2012).

The Bucklands Academy Key Stage 3 Curriculum.

The Bucklands Key Stage 3 Curriculum: Assessment Rationale.

Year 10 Pupil Progress Report.

Year 11 GCSE History—what the Intervention Team need to know.

Year 11 Interventions Priority List 2012/13.

NUT Committee of Enquiry:

'Opening Statement to the Committee of Enquiry into the future of Bucklands School' (No Date).

'Response of ▇▇▇▇▇▇ National Union of Teachers to the proposal to close Bucklands School and to re-open it as an Academy under the sponsorship of ▇▇▇, the charity founded by ▇▇▇▇▇▇' (No Date).

'What Future for Bucklands School?'—Committee of Enquiry set up by Professor ▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇ (No Date).

Committee of Enquiry Submission Statement by a Former Governor (Date Removed).

Committee of Enquiry Submission Statement by the Chair of the Friends of Bucklands School (No Date).

Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Future of Bucklands School (Date Removed).

Appendix 6

Sample Consent Form

The Stirling Institute of Education   **UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING**

Academies and teacher agency: an analysis of academy freedom and autonomy and the extent to which this supports agency in the working lives of leaders and teachers

Consent form

Many thanks for agreeing to participate in this research.

Your views are important to this research. When the researcher reports on the perspectives of everyone who contributes to the study, he will take care to ensure anonymity. The research is guided by the British Educational Research Association's ethical code (http://www.bera.ac.uk/files/guidelines/ethica1.pdf).

While ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ is aware your participation in the research, the researcher will do his best to protect your anonymity. For example, he will only refer to you by role, and will not use your name or name the academy.

- ☑ I am willing to contribute to the study 'Academies and teacher agency: an analysis of academy freedom and autonomy and the extent to which this supports agency in the working lives of leaders and teachers ' by taking part in an interview/focus group

- ☑ I am happy for the interview/focus group to be audio-recorded

- ☑ I understand that my name, personal details and professional identifiers will not be used in the report and that care will be taken to ensure that my views remain anonymous

- ☑ I understand that I may withdraw from that study at any time for any reason. Any information that I provided to researchers can be removed from the study if I choose to remove it, and my withdrawal would remain confidential.

Signature ....▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮..

Date ..3./.10./.18...........

Any concerns about the conduct of this study can be discussed with Professor Richard Edwards, Head of the Stirling School of Education, University of Stirling, telephone 01786 466264

Appendix 7

Examining Committee

Chair: Professor Cate Watson
School of Education
University of Stirling

Internal Examiner: Professor Walter Humes
School of Education
University of Stirling

External Examiner: Professor Chris Chapman
Director of the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change
School of Education
University of Glasgow

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