
Building new narratives: academies, aspiration and the education market

Children who come from unstructured backgrounds, as many of our children do, and often very unhappy ones, should be given more structure in their lives. So it means that the school in many ways becomes a sort of surrogate parent to the child and the child will only succeed if the philosophy of the school is that we will in many ways substitute and take over where necessary ... Therefore we want staff who commit themselves to that ethos. It's not a nine-to-five ethos; it's an ethos which says the only way that these children will achieve is if we go the extra mile for them. (Mr Culford, Principal of Dreamfields Academy)

This research focuses on Dreamfields Academy,¹ a celebrated secondary academy based in the borough of Urbanderry, which is located within the large urban conurbation of Goldport, England. Dreamfields' 'structure liberates' ethos claims to free children from a culture of poverty through discipline and routine. Since Dreamfields opened in 2004, it has become popular with parents, politicians and the media and is continually referenced as proof of the academy programme's effectiveness. The New Labour government opened over 200 academies between 1997 and 2010. The subsequent Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government and Conservative governments rapidly expanded and reformulated the programme so that by 1 July 2016, 5,302 schools were academies while 1,061 were on the way to becoming one (DfE, 2016). Academies were originally created by New Labour to 'break the cycle of underachievement in areas of social and economic deprivation' by 'establishing a culture of ambition to replace the poverty of aspiration' (DCFS, 2009; Adonis, 2008). Former Minister of State for Education Lord Adonis described how these schools would build aspirational cultures and act as 'engines of social mobility and social justice' at the 'vanguard of meritocracy' (Adonis, 2008). Poverty is not framed as a structural problem, but born out of 'cultures of low aspiration'. Academies have faced opposition for their lack of democratic accountability as they can set their own labour conditions, deviate from the national curriculum and operate outside local authority control.

Urbanderry is a socially and economically mixed borough where poverty and gentrification coexist. Forty per cent of Dreamfields students receive free school meals, while over eighty per cent of students come from ethnic-minority backgrounds with black African, black Caribbean, Turkish, Bangladeshi and Indian

students comprising the largest groups. These statistics, indicating Urbanderry's poverty and ethnic diversity, are frequently juxtaposed with Dreamfields' outstanding test scores, which have consistently exceeded the national average in terms of the number of students achieving five A-star to C grades at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) level. This capacity to generate results has continued throughout the sixth form, with numerous students receiving offers from elite universities.

Dreamfields has dazzled politicians with its results and received a revolving door of visitors keen to replicate its magic recipe. I watched Dreamfields steadily garner public acclaim while I worked at the school; its accumulation of accolades against the odds was the stuff of Hollywood films. The 'structure liberates' ethos certainly 'worked' in terms of producing good grades, but what else did this ethos do, and how did it do it? There was clearly more going on than the straightforward achievement of test scores, as an economically deprived and ethnically diverse student population was allegedly culturally transformed. These 'goings-on' within the school connected to points beyond its iron gates, both locally and globally. My personal troubles at carrying out the ethos began to relate to wider public issues and a sociological project came into being as I sought to apply my life experiences to my intellectual work (Mills, 2000: 8–10). Surveying the largely proud student body, I could not help but feel pleased to see children who might have endured a crumbling school with substandard provision experience a sense of achievement and potentially gain access to a slice of the 'good life'. But this uplifting tale seemed to ignore the more complicated stories underlying its glossy veneer of success. Les Back writes about trusting your interest as a researcher and pursuing niggling feelings of uncertainty while others seem certain (2007: 173). Dreamfields' road to a brighter future is paved with the soaring rhetoric of the self-made citizen; however, this road and the demands made along it are rarely questioned, but positioned as an unexamined social and cultural good. This chapter begins by mapping the key questions framing the research and begins to explore the Dreamfields ethos, before examining how the birth and development of the academies programme embeds and extends a vision of marketised education originating in the 1980s. This connects to a wider turn towards authoritarian methods in education.

Mapping the questions

This book examines how raced, classed and gendered subjects are (re)produced in urban space through the discursive practices of the market-driven neoliberal school. It examines how hierarchies are being reformulated, as race and class are lived in and through one another in complex ways. At a Specialist Schools and Academies Trust annual conference Tony Blair pronounced that 'education is the most precious gift a society can bestow on its children' as he called for more academies (Blair, 2006). This research interrogates the social and cultural dimensions of this gift that seeks to graft more 'suitable' forms of capital onto its students. I will focus on the conditions underlying this gift's exchange with children, parents

and teachers, remaining conscious of how value is generated from the power, perspective and relationships that create the initial conditions of possibility for exchange (Skeggs, 2004).

Dreamfields' 'structure liberates' ethos does not govern from a standpoint of neutrality, but through the daily imposition of norms. Principal Culford's interview extract at the start of this chapter signals how his interpretations of Urbanderry and its residents are presented as 'common-sense' truths; this is further explored below and in Chapter 2. Although Dreamfields' public discourse clearly states what the school is attempting to do and implements a policy with which to do it, my questions are concerned with what the discourses deployed by Dreamfields *actually do* and how they are translated into everyday practices of the self (Foucault, 2001). It explores how individual pupils, teachers and parents come to act on themselves and others in relation to Dreamfields' discourses.

The research examines how Dreamfields fits within a wider trajectory of education policy and local governance. The academy's discourses draw on historical representations rooted in empire, industrial capitalism and the development of classificatory mechanisms which constitute raced and classed forms of personhood. I interrogate how Dreamfields governs through a range of disciplinary practices before asking how students, parents and teachers interpret and receive these practices from a variety of situated positions. The research builds a complex, yet incomplete picture illuminating how neoliberal modes of governance play out in daily practice. This action occurs against the backdrop of the evangelical promotion of social mobility and meritocracy, despite increasing poverty and the continued dismantlement of the post-war settlement. I set out to provide a contextualised study of the education market in action by showing the implications neoliberal reforms and a result-driven focus have on the shaping of subjectivities. The book approaches these questions by putting Dreamfields' institutional discourses in conversation with the narratives of students, teachers and parents in order to place the macro, micro and shades in between in relation to one another. As discussed in Chapter 2, the research draws on ethnographic, interview and participatory methods to examine the research questions. Now I will use ethnographic fieldnotes to introduce and reflect on the Dreamfields ethos.

Building aspirational spaces and futures²

It was a late July morning in 2011 and my last day of fieldwork at Dreamfields. It was also the end-of-year assembly when over 900 pupils from Years 7 to 11 are brought together in the sports hall for speeches and awards. Fitting all these bodies into one room was a meticulously executed operation and the school was abuzz with hushed excitement. The sounds of the school band filled the room until head-teacher Culford took the podium. The room fell silent as he asked students to spend a couple of moments reflecting on the year and what they had or had not achieved. The heavy silence of hundreds of bodies shifting in plastic chairs was finally broken by Culford saying that students should never take these years for granted because the past year was a year they would never have again. He reiterated this point with

such sombre conviction that I started to reflect on the previous year with newfound regret – I could have, I should have done more. Culford also urged students not to take Dreamfields for granted, pointing out the numerous advantages they had, how lucky they were and how good Dreamfields was compared to other schools. He repeated the frequently referenced Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills) report which described it as outstanding. Besides the amazing extracurricular activities and lessons, Culford pointed out what a wonderful building they had to learn in. He described how many schools he had visited across England were depressing places to spend the day, while Dreamfields was light, airy and open. Culford confessed that he had never given much thought to buildings before working with architects on Dreamfields’ building, but he was now very aware of design.

Large images of familiar skyscrapers and prestigious buildings in central Goldport were projected onto the wall. Culford said he found these iconic buildings and centres of global finance important because they showed man’s power to effect change. Regarding these towering beacons of capital, Culford pronounced that the world does not impact upon us, but we have the power to impact on the world and effect change through bold ambition. He qualified this claim with a quick under-the-breath aside that sometimes the world did affect us, but forged onwards, adding that he wanted Dreamfields students to be ambitious. Culford used the example of ancient cave paintings to demonstrate how ‘man’ had chosen to impact on the world by showing human ingenuity. And because of Dreamfields’ no-excuses culture, it meant that it did not matter what background you were from – you could and would achieve here.

Culford then showed a picture of Larchmont Grove, the comprehensive school that Dreamfields had replaced. An image of a decrepit pre-fab building mottled with graffiti was placed beside an image of Dreamfields’ gleaming new structure, juxtaposing the failure of the past with the success of the present. Finally, Culford announced that there were currently 12 million Somalians starving. In response we should appreciate what we have and give money to worthy causes, as this was all we could do to help. After this curt conclusion to a complex geopolitical disaster, he asked students to close their eyes, bow their heads and think about people who were sick, dead, or in trouble. A grave silence followed until Culford raised his head and left the podium. Gradually the mood lightened as the band launched into the feel-good hit ‘Forget You’ by CeeLo Green.

The message of Culford’s assembly speech was similar to those preceding it: aspirational subjects can transcend structural inequalities through sheer determination. ‘Structure’ liberates students from their positioning, making poverty or racial inequality irrelevant. Culford has described Dreamfields Academy as an ‘oasis in the desert’ of Urbanderry, positioning the borough as culturally deficient while also justifying the use of disciplinarian approaches. Meanwhile, monuments to capital in wealthier districts of Goldport represent success and a wonderland of infinite possibility accessible to newly mobile subjects. Like the smaller weekly assemblies that conclude with students bowing their heads in self-reflection, the

self and its achievements are continuously scrutinised and act as the focal point for intervention. Culford works hard to instigate a belief that mobility dreams can come true, reiterating the advantages held by Dreamfields students. Larchmont Grove's crumbling remains are employed to signify the supposed failure of comprehensive education to provide these opportunities. Dreamfields marks a break with this failure by asserting that students can write their own biographies (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994).

Approaching the site

Urbanderry is an ethnically diverse borough. In addition to residents from white British and other white backgrounds, there are substantial black British Caribbean and black British African populations, as well as Turkish, Indian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Bangladeshi and Pakistani residents. Crime rates are falling, but remain higher than the Goldport average, while significant amounts of residents receive benefits and live in social housing. Housing in the borough is disproportionately costly and gentrification has long been under way, making Urbanderry a popular destination for middle-class professionals. A mixture of estates and increasingly expensive Victorian properties surrounds Dreamfields. Growing inequalities are often brought into sharp relief through the geographic proximity of rich and poor residents (Dorling, 2014). To the north-east of Dreamfields several speciality shops stand adjacent to a block of council housing. Further north is a street lined with cafés and boutiques where patrons tinker on iPads and eat expensive sandwiches. These residents coexist with other residents like the Urbanderry Boys, a local gang. One café's sign announces that pavement seating is for customers only, while the one or two chicken and kebab shops left on the street and a small collection of public benches host a very different audience. These classed and racialised divisions in urban space are rendered highly visible due to their intense proximity, highlighting how a social mix does not infer mixing or subsequent social parity, as cleavages run across social and material space (see Benson and Jackson, 2012; Butler and Robson, 2003; Byrne, 2006; Hollingworth and Mansaray, 2012). Flattening out these glaring disparities is a key feature of Dreamfields' aspirational narrative, yet what signifies gritty appeal for some is actual danger for others.

As previously mentioned, I became acquainted with Dreamfields through my employment at the school. I had never intended to work in a school – an establishment I had few fond memories of – yet the contradictory complexities of this space brought together a number of my previous interests in unanticipated ways. Shortly after moving to Goldport with my partner, we discovered that his relative had taken a post at a new academy adjacent to our flat. While I was in need of some part-time work to supplement my work as a writer and performer, Dreamfields needed extra hands to move boxes and furniture into classrooms in frantic preparation for its September opening. A few days' heavy lifting became a long-term, part-time job, first teaching drama and later working as a learning mentor. Initially I was bewildered by Dreamfields' dynamic, disciplinarian

environment. While it was undeniably positive to watch pupils receive excellent grades, the securitised, authoritarian atmosphere felt uncomfortably draconian. Yet it was repeatedly stressed in staff briefings that structure was good for students – it allowed teachers to teach and students to learn. It appeared to work, so I placed my reservations aside and tried to perform my role with conviction. Many of my subsequent interviews with teachers mentioned similar qualms and feelings of surveillance that I did not actively articulate at the time but certainly felt. As Les Back describes, by seeking out the alternative stories that are seldom the obvious feature of dominant narratives we can read against the grain and locate the bumps littering the smooth terrain of success (2007: 9).

Dreamfields has been evidenced as proof of the academy programme's effectiveness and its ethos used a blueprint for numerous urban schools and academy chains. While I am not claiming that all academies mirror Dreamfields, it is a valuable site for examining how aspirational academy rhetoric plays out in practice. This book seeks to shed light on some of the less dominant stories weaving their way in, around and through celebratory portraits of a smiling, multicultural student body unproblematically headed towards success. Now I will examine how the roots of the academy model stretch back to the education reforms of the 1980s.

Education comes to the market

Dreamfields Academy is not an anomaly, but descends from a long trajectory of educational reforms. Thatcher's 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) dismantled the post-war education settlement through pivotal changes that shifted power towards central government while decreasing the power of Local Education Authorities (LEAs). The ERA introduced parental choice and open enrolment, monitored school performance through regular testing and the publication of results and established the national curriculum. It also evolved budgets to individual schools and instated routine inspections. Open enrolment prevented LEAs from balancing intakes across schools, allowing some schools to become over-subscribed while others withered. Linking intake to funding meant each child recruited added to a school's coffers, while losing students meant losing resources and an accelerated decline. The steady decline of Dreamfields' predecessor, Larchmont Grove, from the late 1980s until its closure in the mid-1990s can be partly attributed to these reforms.

These alterations reconfigured parents as consumers and schools as small businesses competing for survival in a local market. This focus on raising standards through competition has left behind any ideals of equitable provision for all as 'market rights' replaced 'welfare rights' and public values were effectively privatised (Ball, 1990: 6, 8). 'Choice' acts as a disciplinary mechanism, not a promoter of equality, within a market that 'rewards positioning rather than principles and encourages commercial rather than educational decision-making' (Gewirtz, 2002: 71). Middle-class cultural capital is privileged and outcomes are not meritocratic, but reflect the unfair advantages and disadvantages held by those entering this

market (Reay, 1998). The national curriculum was ‘steeped in a neoconservative glow’ and prescriptive ideas of national culture, while the activities of progressive local authorities attempting to address issues of race, class and gender were curtailed (see Gill, Mayor and Blair, 1992: vii). Meanwhile the GCSE pass rate, the dominant way of measuring success or failure, has ‘created an *A-to-C economy* in schools where “the bottom line” is judged in relation to how many higher passes are achieved’ (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000: 43; emphasis added). Dreamfields’ colour-blind approach and strict focus on producing the ‘bottom line’ efficiently caters to market demands.

The Conservatives’ City Technology Colleges (CTCs) were the prototype for New Labour’s academies programme. CTCs were inspired by US magnet schools implemented in urban areas in the 1970s with the intention of promoting racially and socially mixed schools through increased parental choice and competition. Although results improved, these schools were criticised for promoting inequality. Geoffrey Walford describes how the appeal of CTCs rested on breaking the influence of leftist LEAs by attracting selected pupils into a private sector while claiming to provide opportunities for inner-city youth (1991). New Labour’s academies were a reincarnation of CTCs using public–private finance and were initially established in urban deprived areas. A private sponsor would contribute £2 million in exchange for shaping the school’s ethos and providing inspirational leadership, while the government footed the remaining bill.³ While private investment was highlighted, the state stumped up over £20 million to build Dreamfields compared to the sponsor’s £3 million contribution.

Lord Adonis (2012: 7) proclaims that academies reinvent the inner-city comprehensive; however, academies are working from a fundamentally different premise. Funding was progressively shifted towards some disadvantaged areas of England to give New Labour’s programme a social justice angle, yet the discursive shift from welfarism to a new managerialism remained intact (Gerwitz, 2002: 46). The initial academies were ‘a *condensate* of state competition policy with all its tensions and contradictions in microcosm’, concerned with flexibility, entrepreneurship and the participation of ‘heroes of enterprise’ (Ball, 2007: 160; emphasis added). Academies signified ‘a “break” from roles and structures and relationships of accountability of a state education system. They replace democratic processes of local authority control over schools with technical or market solutions’ (Ball, 2007: 177; emphasis added). Although some individuals may have gained access to money, jobs and status, marketisation fundamentally altered how the education system works.

Narratives of failure and ‘loony-left’ problems

The spirit of the Swann Report (1985) and its aim of ‘education for all’ where schooling addresses racism and promotes an understanding of multiculturalism are past-tense concerns in the era of academisation. In fact, these concerns are frequently associated with educational failure. Instead of the negative perceptions and unfortunate condition of some Urbanderry schools from the late 1980s

throughout the 1990s being directly related to the ERA's market-led reforms, they came to be associated with anti-racist education or the goal of a comprehensive system. A significantly more complex terrain often underpinned dominant narratives portraying schools like Larchmont Grove as irredeemable sites of failure. In many urban areas in England, racial and gender-based discrimination were being fought out against a backdrop of entrenched poverty, shrinking central government investment, the implementation of school-choice policies and council mismanagement. Within the Conservatives' standards agenda, testing and inspection regimes became equated with progress. A failure–success binary became the bedrock of debates, without recognition of how the ERA structured this binary, by plunging many urban schools into daily crises that left little time for strategic management and subsequently fostered low standards and poor teaching quality (Mirza, 2009: 26).

These changes intersected with the widely publicised ridicule of some local councils as bastions of 'loony-left' policies by New Right Conservative politicians and the popular press. The New Right used numerous fictitious tales targeting white anxiety to attack anti-racist education, presenting it as the cause of British cultural decline (see Gordon, 1990). Concerns over local anti-racist movements were crafted 'into popular "chains of meaning"', providing an 'ideological smoke-screen and hence popular support for the Thatcherite onslaught on town hall democracy' (Butcher et al., 1990: 116). Outlandish tales of political correctness gone awry blurred the lines of causality, with New Right organisations tying left-wing extremists and slumping educational standards to the development of anti-racist education (Tomlinson, 1993: 25–6). Many local authorities adopted less robust approaches to race equality towards the late 1980s owing to negative publicity, while the Labour Party avoided directly identifying with radical urban left authorities. Sally Tomlinson (2008) describes how there was far more commentary on anti-racist, multicultural education than action within schools. Yet the political climate of the late 1980s veered towards framing anti-racists, rather than racist attitudes, as the problem (Ball and Solomos, 1990: 12).

'Loony-left' labels discounted racial discrimination and promoted division, while concealing legitimate struggles within urban areas where radical councils were hardly equitable utopias, but also struggling with discriminatory practices (Ball and Solomos, 1990). Some ten years later, the academy programme offered a route of securing long overdue investment for Urbanderry's schools. Academies were presented as an 'apolitical' means of remaking Urbanderry while diminishing the power of LEAs. The rise in investment and attainment in urban areas like Goldport has coincided with more middle-class families migrating back to urban centres and sending their children to state schools (Butler and Robson, 2003; Hollingworth, 2015).

A progressive 'crisis'

Movement away from a comprehensive system can be traced to developments in the late 1960s and 1970s as the New Right skilfully mobilised and manipulated

populist narratives to generate moral panics about falling educational standards prompted by progressive methods. The Black Papers, an influential series of pamphlets, epitomise this critique of the comprehensive system. The Black Papers were released shortly after Anthony Crosland's Labour Government requested LEAs to start converting all schools into comprehensives. Written by various authors, these polemics offered 'common-sense' home truths and claimed to speak both for and to a 'silent majority' of 'ordinary' parents who feared for their children's future. Comprehensives were framed as harmful to intelligent working-class children while eugenicists were referenced to conclude that intelligence was hereditary and made class differences inevitable (Cox and Dyson, 1969: 20). Contradictory ideas were amalgamated and framed as complementary, while the abstract figure of the 'ordinary' parent acted as a unifying concept where anxieties could be projected and differences glossed over. The Right drew on justifiable insecurities in the face of an economic downturn, placing marginalised groups in competition with one another while appealing to the individual's perceived powers to exercise choice. The Black Papers found a receptive media audience, while Labour lacked a cohesive rebuttal or coherent package of progressive policies, and Crosland's circular was revoked in 1970 by Edward Heath's Conservative government (CCCS, 1981: 163–5).

Dreamfields' focus on discipline, results and respect for authority descends from this New Right focus. The now familiar-sounding solutions to alleged violence and anarchy in schools included stricter standards for students and teachers, as well as parental vouchers promoting school choice. While the right claimed to crusade against unfair taxation and state oppression, paradoxically it enabled the creation of a more authoritarian, less visible state (CCCS, 1981: 250–1). This dynamic has been further accelerated by academies' centralisation of power and the hollowing-out of local participation in education. In the late 1970s Stuart Hall described how calls for heightened classroom discipline and an 'assault' on progressive methods were authoritarian state practices imposed in the face of an ideologically constructed crisis (1978: 34). Similar calls for discipline were made in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and the welfare state has been steadily eroded through the imposition of austerity policies. In 1981 the text *Unpopular Education* concluded that Labour needed a more imaginative vision for education; they did not possess original ideals, interrogate its contents, or unsettle assumptions that it should cater to industry (CCCS, 1981: 265). Over thirty years later, Labour's new vision has struggled to arrive. Lord Adonis (2012) defended the Conservatives' development of free schools⁴ in a *New Statesman* article entitled 'Labour should support free schools — it invented them'. Differences have become a matter of packaging and terminology, not principle. Labour's election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader in 2015 and his re-election in 2016 with an even larger mandate could signal a shift away from academisation in the future; however, the party is divided and its future direction uncertain (Mansell, 2015).

Non-democratic solutions

Technocratic settlements offered common-sense solutions in the face of difficult negotiations within urban spaces like Urbanderry. The absence of a coherent, broad programme of opposition compounded by the long-term underfunding of schools and low expectations faced by many students made academies an often welcome development. Several parents described how Urbanderry deserved Dreamfields (see Chapter 4). Overhauling ‘failure’ creates an opening for radical agenda-resetting, yet this settlement disregards battles over inequality while curtailing civic participation. Rather than addressing these issues, Dreamfields attempts to transcend contentious terrain through the erasure and denial of inequality. ‘There is no room for voice, only for choice’ as parent–school relations become a commodified matter of exchange value (Ball, 1990: 10). Schools and teachers must reconceptualise themselves as businesses, where workers produce test results via the students. Power is centralised, as the Secretary of State individually contracts each academy, and accountability to an elected local body disappears (Clayton, 2012). David Wolfe, QC, at Matrix barristers’ chambers, explains how parents and pupils at academies have few direct legal rights compared to their counterparts at maintained schools, as they are no longer party to these contracts (Wolfe, 2015).

Finance capital’s participation in education has also grown through academies’ focus on entrepreneurialism. Take Arpad Busson, the founder of the Absolute Return for Kids (ARK) academies chain and global education corporation, who was also a founder of EIM, a hedge fund-management company.⁵ These networks extend into new territory, but Ball points out how they exclude certain actors – particularly ‘problematic’ entities like trade unions. Membership to this network requires being on the same ideological page (2007: 133). Changes to education’s administration and governance are not just technical alterations in management, but part of what Ball calls a ‘broader social dislocation’:

It changes who we are and our relation to what we do, entering into all aspects of our everyday practices and thinking – into the ways that we think about ourselves and our relations to others, even our most intimate social relations. It is changing the framework of possibilities within which we act. This is not just a process of reform; it is a process of social transformation. (2007: 186–7)

This social transformation highlights how the discourses, policies and practices of neoliberalism have been planned and funded by actors who stand to profit from the deregulation of labour and resulting capital flows (Davies and Bansel, 2007: 48; see Saul, 2009). As the neoliberal state hands power to global finance and recasts people as strategic producers of their life narratives, education functions as a key site for remaking and reshaping the field of human action in ways that benefit the powerful. The financial benefits being realised by academy chains or multi-academy trusts (MATs) have resulted in numerous scandals as public funds are being paid into the private businesses of MAT trustees and executives as the

private sector accesses public coffers (see Adams, 2016; Boffey, 2013; Boffey and Mansell, 2015, 2016). While global capital attempts to morally legitimate itself through running public services like education, the state validates itself through the market by allowing our public institutions to be remade as private enterprises.

Through this process, spaces of negotiation formerly provided by local authorities are forced out of existence as power is transferred to central government and its various partners in business, finance and beyond. Although often flawed, local authorities did provide a route for democratic participation. Residents were positioned as citizens and potential contributors rather than consumers. Impenetrable to the local citizen and removed from public scrutiny, these new structures do not provide any mechanism for public intervention. Instead parents, teachers and students act as passive respondents to customer satisfaction surveys. Ball describes how this new 'architecture of regulation' involving complex, intertwined relationships based both in and beyond the state is accompanied by a subsequent 'opacity' in policy which renders boundaries between the public and private ambiguously blurry (2007: 131). Actors can occupy various roles simultaneously within business, the state, philanthropy or non-governmental organisations as it becomes less obvious how, why and where decisions are being made. Opacity and 'questionable practices' were highlighted by a recent report showing that conflicts of interest were common in academy trusts, while the auditing of trusts was weak and many boards were not adhering to guidance (Greany and Scott, 2014). MATs have come to preside over numerous schools, acting as a privatised replacement for local authorities without being subject to the same level of accountability. The faceless control of unaccountable structures guiding education without a public brake to temper its motion signals the need for robust, local democratic structures.

Academies remade

Teachers' and parents' capacity to shape educational provision has been further eroded under the Coalition and Conservative governments. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition oversaw a rapid expansion of academies and free schools that further detached education from structures of local accountability and embedded the academy model as the norm. The Academies Act 2010 invited all schools to apply for academy status and was rushed through Parliament using a compressed process usually reserved for the passage of emergency legislation. Widespread critiques were made as the tabling of amendments by MPs after its second reading was restricted to 30 minutes compared to the usual period of days or weeks (Vaughan and Marley, 2010). Its quick passage at the end of the summer session allowed outstanding schools to be fast-tracked into academy status by September.

Although schools deemed to be 'underperforming' still required a sponsor to convert, this was no longer necessary for adequately performing schools. For many schools, conversion was more about the hope that their budget would increase rather than the pursuit of freedom (Abrams, 2012). In January 2011 all local authorities suffered a top slice off their allocated grant to help fund the

programme – regardless of the number of academies in their area; the 2011–12 slice was £148 million, rising to £265 million in 2012–13 (Benn, 2011: 29). Councils had to use £22.4 million from their budgets from 2011–12 and 2013–14 to cover the costs of schools becoming academies (Local Government Association, 2014). Benn describes how ‘the aim was to create a majority of privately managed institutions ... leaving a rump of struggling schools within the ambit of the local authorities, themselves undermined by savage budget cuts’ (2011: 29). This extension of academies has altered the rationale behind New Labour’s original policy, shifting funding away from poorer areas and creating an opening for wholesale privatisation.

The Education Act of 2011 further centralised power by giving the Secretary of State the right to direct the closure of schools causing concern. While the National Governor’s Association added a clause to the bill requiring governing bodies to consult the local community before converting, these consultations have been criticised as toothless exercises. Former Secretary of State Michael Gove wielded this power with great controversy, publicly overriding parental opposition to conversions. Despite 94 per cent of parents voting ‘no’ to the conversion of a London primary school, it was taken over by the Harris Federation which runs a chain of 38 academies across the capital and is sponsored by Carpetright millionaire and Conservative Party peer and donor Lord Philip Harris (Aston, 2012; Sahota, 2012). Gove dubiously justified this forced conversion by appealing to racial and social inequality. Twisting the lines of causality, he referred to dissenting parents as ‘ideologues who are happy with failure’ who are really saying: ‘If you’re poor, if you’re Turkish, if you’re Somali, then we don’t expect you to succeed. You will always be second-class and it’s no surprise your schools are second-class’ (Harrison, 2012). Parents at a Croydon primary school who unsuccessfully tried to block another Harris conversion called the Department for Education’s (DfE) ‘consultation’ processes ‘farcical’ (Baynes, 2013). Invoking ‘inequality’ to impose further inequality is an ingenious discursive conflation whereby resisting the privatisation of public services is equated with promoting prejudice.

While the Education Bill 2011 was presented as raising standards through a return to discipline and promoting localism by reducing bureaucracy, in practice it further centralised government control and deregulated labour (Harrison, 2011). Teachers were given new powers to search and discipline pupils, while parents lost the right to complain to a local commissioner. Parents’ right to redress was also curtailed, as the independent appeal panel considering permanent exclusion cases was replaced by an independent review panel (IRP) without the power to direct the reinstatement of a student, even when the original decision was flawed (see Kulz, 2015). Control was further centralised by abolishing quangos like the General Teaching Council for England and the Young People’s Learning Agency and transferring their powers directly to the Secretary of State. The School Support Staff Negotiating Body was also abolished without any replacement, with Gove commenting that this body did not fit with the DfE’s deregulation priorities. These authoritarian tactics and the limiting of democratic process both mirrors and legitimates Culford’s ‘short, sharp’ approach discussed in Chapter 4. While

Culford once worked outside the bounds of the law, his maverick approach has become government policy.

Changes to the Ofsted rating system in January 2012 both complemented and accelerated the changes instigated by these two bills. The category 'satisfactory' was changed to 'requires improvement' with the idea that this relabelling would prevent mediocre schools from coasting. Recalibrating the yardstick of measurement does important work by remaking what is and what is not within the framework of possibility. As teaching unions argued, reclassification functions as a mechanism for academisation as many more schools automatically become eligible for government intervention.

The move towards total academisation continued with the passage of the Education and Adoption Bill in March 2016 under a Conservative government with Nicky Morgan as education minister. The bill abolished any form of local consultation process prior to conversion, with schools deemed to be 'coasting' eligible for intervention and conversion. 'Coasting' was defined as less than 60 per cent of students achieving five or more good GCSEs. This twenty percentage-point increase on the previous floor target of 40 per cent automatically makes more local authority schools available for academisation. Coasting schools must create an improvement plan that will be assessed for credibility by one of eight regional school commissioners. If commissioners do not support the plan, the school will be converted. Yet regional commissioners are not elected, but appointed, and act on behalf of the Secretary of State. Many have previous experience as chief executives of academy chains and trusts or as management consultants, while a leaked internal DfE report described how they should act as 'advocates for the academies programme' (Mansell, 2014). Hardly impartial actors, commissioners are active promoters of academisation.

Scrapping local consultation has been presented as cutting through bureaucratic and legal loopholes exploited by parents and teachers to hold back school improvement (Adams and Perraudin, 2015). Instead of local debate and decision making being valued, it is portrayed as selfish and damaging to children. Parents and teachers are depicted as blindly ideological while the government claims to be altruistically motivated. Yet one Liberal Democrat MP highlighted the ideological drive towards full academisation by asking Morgan if coasting academies would also be turned back into schools (Crace, 2015). Neither the House of Commons Education Select Committee nor a report by the Sutton Trust has found any evidence that academies raise educational standards more than maintained schools (Hutchings, Francis and Kirby, 2015). Yet these pieces of legislation and Ofsted reclassifications show how a pincer movement is being used to accelerate conversion. A fast-tracked voluntary process for outstanding and good schools is met by the mandatory conversion of inadequate and now 'coasting' schools to cover each end of the spectrum.

Meanwhile the shrinking and professionalisation of governing bodies also downsizes local participation in education. Lord Nash, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Schools, has described how local parents are not needed on governing bodies because there are better places for them to offer their opinions;

however it is not clear where these places are located. The May 2016 White Paper 'Educational excellence everywhere' furthered Nash's comments by announcing that parents would no longer have two seats on an academy's governing body. It also announced that heads could award teaching qualifications and, most controversially, that all state schools would become academies by 2022. Compulsory academisation and doing away with parent governors met substantial opposition from Tory-led local councils and backbenchers, prompting the government to back down on these issues. Yet Morgan commented that the 'goal' of academisation remains the same, but will be pursued by a 'different path' (Adams, 2016). Justine Greening has since taken up the role of education minister in Theresa May's cabinet since the resignation of David Cameron in the wake of Britain voting to leave the European Union. Although Greening is the first education minister to have attended a comprehensive school, she is reportedly open to the return of grammar schools – a policy championed by May. While both Greening and May have described their passion for social mobility, with May keen to fight the 'burning injustice' of inequality, it is difficult to see how raising tuition fees, restricting young people's access to training and cutting benefits will achieve this goal (Mortimer, 2016).

Education as mobility miracle

Academies like Dreamfields are consistently portrayed as engines of social mobility, with Gove proclaiming that one chain was 'the biggest force for social progress and social mobility in the whole of the south of London' (Davies, 2012). Education has long been promoted as a miracle salve curing urban deprivation and balancing capitalism's inequalities, yet Basil Bernstein famously commented that 'education cannot compensate for society' (1970: 26). Still, the faulty notion persists that if teachers are skilled enough, the social context of education will become irrelevant (Reay, 2006: 291). Although the UK has one of the poorest records on social mobility in the developed world, mobility is presented as synonymous with social justice (Causa and Johansson, 2010). Reay describes how social mobility occupies a 'totemic role in UK society', featuring in elite policy yet 'also capturing the popular imaginary' (2013: 664). The academy programme deftly combines elite and popular dreamscapes, championing the aspirational self and creating potent confections as social mobility's 'mythical qualities' make it 'an extremely generative and productive myth that does an enormous amount of work for neoliberal capitalism' (Reay, 2013: 664). Rather than critiquing a lack of practical equality within and beyond the school gates, the emphasis rests on providing individualised equal opportunities through school effectiveness. This was reflected in Culford's speech detailed earlier in this chapter.

Former Prime Minister David Cameron announced that many academies were 'working miracles' in deprived areas and signalled a 'great revolution in education' (Cameron 2012). Cameron concluded that success stemmed from autonomy, transparency and parental choice, adding: 'these things happen if you trust in schools, believe in choice and give parents more information'. All of

this culminates in ‘real discipline’ and ‘rigorous standards’. Not only are these narratives of freedom and trust at odds with centralised regimes of inspection and testing that all schools must follow, they are also contradicted by a recent report charting the performance outcomes of disadvantaged pupils in sponsored academy chains. The report found that the majority of chains still underperformed the mainstream average for disadvantaged pupils (Hutchings, Francis and De Vries, 2014). The political rhetoric surrounding academies frequently does not match the realities within schools.

National imaginaries, militarism and discipline in schooling

Marketised educational confections are frequently coated in a romanticised neo-conservative glaze. Reverting to what Culford terms ‘a traditional approach’ plays a role in restoring Great Britain’s faded grandeur post-empire. This safe return to a bygone era becomes a remedy to the destabilisation caused by the unravelling of the post-war settlement: discipline will prompt the return of ‘true’ British culture. Or, as Ball (2011) comments, there are two political fictions: ‘One is a fantasy market of perfect choice and perfect competition. The other is a fantasy curriculum based on Boy’s Own comics and a vision of England rooted in the one-nation Toryism of Disraeli, Baldwin and Butler.’ Authoritarian approaches are presented as the obvious response to England slipping down the international league tables and wider anxieties over national decline. The Coalition’s 2010 White Paper on education claimed strong discipline, ‘traditional’ uniforms and a Troops to Teachers programme to attract ‘natural leaders’ from the Armed Forces would make Britain ‘an aspiration nation once more’ (DfE, 2010). Introduced in 2013, Troops to Teachers seeks to discipline racialised, poor young people living in urban areas, and as Chadderton (2014) describes, is both informed by and feeds on discourses of white supremacy while devaluing teacher education. Hard structure is presented as what problematic raced and classed populations need to succeed; rather than being eschewed, aggression is promoted (Leonardo, 2009; Zirkel et al., 2011). Gove also enlisted right-wing empire-apologist Niall Ferguson to assist with rewriting the history curriculum which will discontinue the ‘trashing’ of Britain’s illustrious imperial past and Britain’s inspiring ‘island story’ (Gove, 2010). A story of western domination led by a triumphant Britain will be restored to history’s centre, yet this story suffers from a continuing, damaging amnesia as historical narratives are reshaped to present Britain as a tolerant place advocating fair play (Alexander, Chatterji and Weekes-Bernard, 2012).

Rather than attending to structural issues of poverty and discrimination, poorer students are portrayed as lacking the character traits for success. Nicky Morgan announced how a Character Intervention Fund of £9.8 million supporting projects teaching character in schools is part of the Conservative Government’s ‘core mission to deliver real social justice’ (DfE, 2015b). Former Labour Shadow Education Secretary Tristram Hunt embraced this initiative, describing how ‘resilience and the ability to bounce back’ was part of the ‘great British spirit’ and

essential for young people competing for jobs and university places (Hunt, 2014). Students can beat the competition by being taught a nationalistic spirit that is contradictorily regarded as innately British. Several projects receiving funding described how they increased the motivation, confidence, leadership skills, curiosity, behaviour and aspiration of disadvantaged students. Poorer students are seen to be at a disadvantage because they lack the character traits of their more privileged counterparts; however it has been shown that poor students possess similar aspirations, but these aspirations can seldom be realised due to structural obstacles (see Baker et al., 2014; MacLeod, 2009). Similarly, Dreamfields' 'structure liberates' ethos assumes that disadvantage stems from the defects of individuals and their families and that grafting appropriate capitals onto the bodies of its students will solve this problem.

Reverting to authoritarian educational methods in the face of global competition, coupled with the denouncement of multiculturalism and a desired return to some happier, traditional culture via education carries all the symptoms of Paul Gilroy's 'complex ailment' of post-colonial melancholia. Gilroy argues that the continuing power of Second-World-War images of Britain signals a neurotic search for the juncture when Britain's national culture felt more liveable. He urges us to understand how 'wholesome militarism has combined pleasurably with the unchallenging moral architecture of a Manichean world' to produce a 'warm glow' that is relied upon to do cultural work in the present (2004: 95–6). It overlooks growing inequalities at home, while recalling a time when Britain faced indisputably diabolical enemies. This melancholia attempts to locate 'the place or moment before the country lost its moral and cultural bearings'. This desire for 'reorientation' cannot be severed from homogeneity's lure or an aversion to newcomers, for wanting to turn back is a rejection of 'the perceived dangers of pluralism and from the irreversible fact of multicultural' (2004: 97).

While tacitly acknowledging that these citizen-migrants and their children are here to stay, New Labour's academy policy responded to these disorientations by attempting to reorientate these 'others' by grafting on legitimate forms of cultural capital. This reorientation applies not only to ethnic minorities, but to the working classes. Conservative education policy has shown more aggressive, delusional attempts to impose celebratory imperial histories. Rather than simply trying to transform and incorporate disadvantaged urban populations, Conservative policies have also instigated the physical removal of poor populations from urban areas through draconian cuts to housing and social benefits (see Cooper, 2014). Meanwhile racism and class-based discrimination and the fundamental incompatibility of equality with capitalist modes of production remain unaddressed.

Structure of the book

This book draws on a long tradition of educational and cultural studies ethnographies that have unpicked and interrogated how race, class and gender are reproduced in and through institutional practices and negotiated by actors from situated locations. Paul Willis's landmark study *Learning to Labour* (Willis, 1977)

departed from pathological representations of working-class boys' culture to show how boys enacted agency through counter-school culture. Yet the labour market has substantially altered since the mid-1970s; many of the jobs once available to Willis's lads no longer exist. Qualifications are now a necessary prerequisite for employment, while little space is permitted for a counter-school culture at Dreamfields. These changes affect how and to what ends agency can be employed by students. In *Young, Gifted and Black* (1988), Máirtín Mac An Ghaill rejected culturalist perspectives positioning black and Asian communities as hindering students from assimilation and achievement; however this culturalist perspective endures in new incarnations and runs throughout academy rhetoric, as racialised urban culture is blamed for holding students back.

The book also draws on Heidi Mirza's seminal work, *Young, Female and Black* (1992), which unsettles the mythology of ethnic minority underachievement. Mirza shows how young black girls exemplify the inegalitarian nature of our society: although they perform well in school compared with their peers, this educational success does not translate into labour market gains. Over twenty years later, these findings are echoed in subsequent research showing that while ethnic minorities perform well in school and achieve higher qualifications than their white peers, this does not protect them from unemployment (see Burgess, 2015; Li, 2015). A blanket assumption of ethnic-minority underachievement is reflected through Dreamfields' attitude towards 'urban children' and, as Chapter 7 suggests, is likely to have consequences on the type of qualifications available to ethnic-minority and working-class pupils. Finally, in *Formations of Class and Gender* (1997), Bev Skeggs shows how respectability was an issue for the working-class women in her study and encapsulates judgements of class, race, gender and sexuality as groups have different access to the means of generating respectability. Skeggs describes how their 'attempts to claim respectability locked them into systems of self-regulation and monitoring, producing themselves as governable subjects' (162). Similar issues of value and judgement play out at Dreamfields, where students must concede to disciplinary systems to access future gains. Prior to the advent of academies, David Gillborn and Deborah Youdell's *Rationing Education* (2000) used critical race theory to show how teachers and students felt caught within an education system dictated by larger, external forces which disadvantaged working-class and ethnic-minority students (2000: 43). These forces 'setting the pace that all must follow' are readily evident at Dreamfields as teachers and students try to live within and negotiate rigid boundaries.

There have been several qualitative and quantitative studies exploring academies by gauging attainment levels, concluding that the programme was low on effectiveness but high on expense and unaccountable to local communities (Beckett, 2007; Gorard, 2005, 2009). Ball (2007) has interrogated New Labour academies and the webs of actors comprising these public-private partnerships, while Melissa Benn (2011) has condemned the dismissal of the comprehensive model in favour of academies and free schools. While these studies rely primarily on documents to make their arguments, this book aims to extend current understandings of the social and cultural impact of the neoliberal academy model

through an intensive empirical engagement with an institution at the vanguard of these changes.

This book does not seek to excoriate individual teachers, many of who are extremely dedicated, but examines how people are placed in relations of production, signification and complex power relations (Foucault, 2002: 327). Chapter 2 examines how Dreamfields acts as part of a long trajectory of interventions aimed at individualising and transforming a volatile ‘urban residuum’, while also engaging with the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the study. Dreamfields’ ordering of space, time and the body through a dense web of disciplinary practices is explored in Chapter 3, while Chapter 4 moves on to explore how Dreamfields’ disciplinary structures are endured, negotiated and often welcomed by many staff and students. Chapter 5 examines how marketisation privileges the white middle-class student as an ideal ‘buffer zone’ against urban children, while Chapter 6 shows how students negotiate the demands of Dreamfields’ conveyor belt against the backdrop of this ‘buffer zone’. Chapter 7 moves beyond Dreamfields’ gates to examine how parents negotiate the institution from a variety of social locations and how their relationship with Dreamfields is shaped by this location. Finally the book concludes by exploring the endurance of neoliberal subjects in pursuit of ‘good-life’ fantasies, as Dreamfields changes urban culture and rearranges hierarchies. Rather than alleviating inequality, hierarchies are remade through schools like Dreamfields despite their meritocratic, post-racial rhetoric.

Notes

- 1 The name of the school, borough and all participants are pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity. In a few sensitive cases, I have also changed a participant’s country of origin in order to protect their identity.
- 2 I have used italics to indicate when I am using ethnographic fieldnotes.
- 3 Several sponsors never paid the required amount, which had to be covered by the government.
- 4 Free schools operate on a very similar basis to academies, but are meant to be initiated by groups of parents, teachers, charities, trusts and religious or voluntary groups.
- 5 It is interesting to note the fusion of celebrity with education at events like ARK’s annual £5,000 per head fundraising gala attended by Sir Philip Green, Elton John, Liz Hurley, Boris Johnson, Mariella Frostrup and Busson’s wife Uma Thurman, among others. This also raises question of how much additional capital is being ploughed into these academies to ensure they are ‘winners’.