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Abstract

The academisation of schooling in Northern England is an example of a new mode of educational governance that promises greater autonomy for schools and school leaders. A common claim regarding the benefits of academisation is that it will improve student outcomes by delivering greater autonomy for Headteachers. In this paper, six Headteachers from Northern England, who had decided to academise their schools for various reasons, reflect on this promised autonomy. In particular, their initial, cautious optimism regarding autonomy has been replaced by frustration as they have been 'outmanoeuvred' by subsequent policy changes. We develop the concept of 'indentured autonomy' (an outcome of negotiating autonomy, continued precariousness and cruel optimism) to explain how these Headteachers' initial optimism for the academies programme has given way to the concern that they are probably less autonomous now than what they were previously. Paradoxically, these HTs still express a desire for autonomy, even as they reflect that the promised autonomy has not delivered what they had hoped.

Introduction

School autonomy is not what it used to be. Changing policy ensembles, new modes of governance and ever-increasing demands placed on schools mean that autonomy has become a critical concern for systems, school leaders and researchers interested in education policy (Ball & Junemann, 2012). Who has autonomy, how it is afforded, how it can be wielded and with what effects are key contours of this new mode of governance. This paper takes up these questions through the concept of 'indentured autonomy', which has been developed from data collected from interviews with Headteachers (HTs) in Northern England. We use the concept to understand the ways governance now works in some English schools under the Self Improving School-led System (SISS) policy agenda (Greany & Higham, 2018).

Rose (1999, p.141) argued that the emergence of new modes of governance in advanced liberal societies exemplifies a paradoxical situation where citizens are governed through their desire for freedom. This shift in the rationality of power, from government to governance, operates through particular vectors or discourses that "enable people to be governed, and to govern themselves" (Rose, 1999, p.84). Governing themselves, understood as the desire for autonomy, plays out in public policy as the idea of giving professionals the freedom they need to do the best work possible. And this often resonates with those professionals, after all, who would argue for less freedom?

The desire for autonomy has always been present, to different degrees, in the profession of teaching, mediated as it is by various controls, expectations and legislation imposed by the State. In the 1980s, Grace (1987, p.195) argued that autonomy has been the centre of an "extended war of position" between the State and the profession in Britain. More specifically, autonomy has been a pressing issue for headteachers in England since the introduction of the local management of schools following the Education Reform Act of 1988 and also in relation to the establishment of Grant Maintained Schools with autonomy from Local Authorities following that Act. Since then headteacher autonomy has been the focus of research (e.g., Levacic, 1998; Levacic and Hardman, 1999). Academisation represents a

contemporary, vernacular expression of this war of position and a rearticulation of headteacher autonomy that is the focus of this paper.

The academisation of schooling in Northern England is a good example of private and third sector actors working with the State to deliver greater autonomy for schools and school leaders (Higham & Earley, 2013). We focus here on the ways that these policy reforms are experienced, and understood, by a small group of those Headteachers (HTs). Our interest is not to read these experiences through a perspective on leadership, but rather to examine what these experiences of HTs tell us about these new modes of governance. Converter academies, schools rated as 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by OFSTED that decided to leave their Local Authority through academisation, are particular examples of this new governance within the English education sector. The option to convert to an academy was a policy option offered by Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove and the DfE for greater autonomy post-2010 in England.

Our interest concerns how the general political commitment to more autonomous schools is understood by HTs in Northern England. In desiring freedom from Local Authority (LA) control, and the concomitant freedom of a professional to make decisions on behalf of their local communities, HTs often advocated for academisation to their school communities. However, participant HTs initial, cautious optimism regarding autonomy has been replaced by frustration as they have been 'outmanoeuvred' by subsequent policy changes. We develop the concept of 'indentured autonomy' to designate the ways that these HTs' initial optimism for the academies programme has given way to the concern that they are probably less autonomous now than previously. Paradoxically, these HTs still express a desire for autonomy, echoing Levacic's (1998) findings following the first wave of local management of schools in England in the 1990s.

This paper proceeds in four parts. First, we sketch a brief history of academisation policy in England, then we proceed to suggest that academisation represents something interesting about advanced, liberal economies and polities in relation to the play of autonomisation and responsibilisation. We then introduce the interviewees and their perspectives on academisation in Northern England, before concluding by thinking through the implications of these HT perspectives, particularly in respect of the concept of indentured autonomy.

A brief history of academisation policy in England
The academies programme was introduced in March 2000 by David Blunkett (New Labour Secretary of State for Education), in a speech to the Social Market Foundation entitled 'Transforming secondary education'. The speech built on the appeal of autonomy for school communities that has been a 'persistent preoccupation' in England from at least the 1970s (Glatter, 2012). The first academies were announced in September in a programme specifically linked to 'under-performance' and schools in cities working in 'difficult circumstances'. The DfES Green Paper *Schools: Building on success* (2001a) proposed that the city academy programme, as it was then called, would raise standards through innovative approaches to management, governance, teaching and the curriculum with a specialist focus on one area. The programme built on the Conservatives' CTCs (City Technology Colleges) initiative, which was in turn informed by the development and experience of charter schools in the USA (PWC, 2005).

The first tranche of Academies was run by their sponsors on the basis of a funding agreement with the DfES, negotiated separately in each case. This 'quasi-contractual' model of working had distinct parallels with the creation of 'executive agencies' within the civil service initiated through the Next Steps programme in the 1990s. The academies were 'publicly funded independent schools' (DfES, 2005) outside Local Authority (LA) control. They were to have, as the 2005 White

Paper described it, 'freedom to shape their own destiny in the interest of parents and children' (DfES, 2005, p 24).

In many respects the academies programme was a condensate of New Labour education policies, an experiment in and a symbol of education policy beyond the welfare State and an example and indicator of more general shifts taking place in governance and regulatory structures. Innovation, inclusion and regeneration were tied together in the academies rhetoric and, to some extent, at least, realised in practice, and were intended to address local social problems and inequalities and histories of 'underachievement'. Labour's Academies were also supposed to enact a new set of potential relations between education and the economy within which schools would be required to take much more responsibility for fostering 'knowledge cultures' as part of economic regeneration programmes in 'entrepreneurial localities' and in relation to the requirements of the digital workplace. Finally, they were intended to blur welfare State demarcations between State and market, public and private, government and business and introduce and validate new agents and new voices within policy itself and into processes of governance; they were indicative of a 're-agenting' (Jones, 2003) of education policy. However, the academies programme continued to evolve and mutate under New Labour and the Coalition (2010-2016) and subsequent Conservative governments.

In June 2008 Ed Balls, then Labour Secretary of State, launched the National Challenge and identified the 600 worst performing schools that might be closed and taken over by private companies, universities or merged with other successful schools, and suggested that 70 of these could be re-opened as Academies. In 2010 the Coalition government Secretary of State Michael Gove extended the scheme to primary schools offering them the chance to have 'the freedom and the power to take control of their own destiny' as it was put and become academies[1]. The Coalition government also used Academy conversion as a way of 'tackling' under-performing schools 'partnering them with a strong sponsor or outstanding school' (DfE 2010, para. 7.18). The number of Academies grew dramatically under the Coalition government, from 203 in May 2010 to 2,075 (out of 3,381 secondary schools) and 2,440 (of 16,766 primary schools) in February 2016. In 2016, the Conservative government announced that it would bring forward legislation to require all schools to convert to academy status in cases where the LA "can no longer viably support its remaining schools", for instance, if a "critical mass" of academy schools already existed (DfE, 2016). This would have, in effect, ended entirely the link between Local Authorities and schools that began in 1902. However, in May 2016 in the face of opposition, including from Conservative LAs, the Secretary of State announced that this would not proceed.

As the programme has evolved academy 'chains', or Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) run by charitable and social enterprise organisations, have developed. There are currently 738 Multi Academy Trusts in England that manage at least two schools; 13 MATs have 26 or more schools, 27 have between 12-25 schools and 111 have 6-11 schools; the majority of MATs – 587 – have five or fewer schools. However, sponsors have been difficult to find for schools in challenging circumstances and the distribution of sponsored schools across the country is very uneven. This reluctance to take on difficult schools is a concern raised in a National Audit Office (NAO) Report published in February 2018. The Report concludes that there is "substantial variation across the country" (NAO, 2018, p.13). Furthermore, while there are some differences in terms of performance, improvement and inspection gradings between academies and non-academy schools, there are also differences between academies, between MATs and between academies in the same

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[1] As of May, 2017 22% of primary schools had taken up this option.

Trust. MATs perform more or less well, but some are performing badly enough to have been "paused' from taking on or opening new schools.

The politics of education in England has always been marked by an urban and a London bias. English education policies have always primarily addressed urban problems and currently London is the base of virtually all the main 'think-tanks' and policy entrepreneurs that have sought or had influence in education policymaking. This London focus has been exacerbated by the Academies programme itself, focused on the DfE, and the concomitant erosion of LA powers. Furthermore, the paraphernalia of the national curriculum and other policy moves have meant that sources of innovation and fresh thinking outside of London have been cut off – except in the selective use of exemplars from abroad. This concentration of influence in relation to policy reflects a more general literal and metaphorical redrawing of the 'map' of education policy and policy 'spaces' in England. As is evident in data presented later, the HTs of schools in the North we interviewed had a strong sense of being on the margins of policy, as being both neglected and taken for granted, and the feeling that policies from the South often do not address or fail to understand their specific local problems.

OFSTED published a report in 2019 that aimed to understand "how their [OFSTEDs] central vision and approaches influence day-to-day practice in schools, and to what extent they are having a positive or otherwise impact on the work of leaders and teachers" (OFSTED, 2019, p.1). OFSTED interviewed over 700 MAT CEOs, HTs, local governors, middle leaders, and board representatives. The study was "not designed to evaluate the work of individual MATs", but rather they wanted to know what it meant to work within one (OFSTED, 2019, p.6). The report suggested that while there are common functions across MATs, there was also significant variance in relation to centralisation, expectations and teaching and learning strategies and this was affected by the origin (such as whether it was a converter or sponsored school) and size of the MAT. Benefits included distinct models of teaching and learning; a system for training teachers and other staff; the ability to deploy staff across the chain; centralising resources and systems; collaborating on curriculum and assessment; and geographical proximity (OFSTED, 2019, p.14, 16). Concerns were raised about finances and the size of the top slice percentage, the loss of HT autonomy such as decision making power (OFSTED, 2019, p.18) and the pressure for growth.

It is not just politicians and governmental agencies who have investigated academisation, there has also been a significant focus from the research community. This research has focused on whether or not academisation has been effective at improving school performance (Exley, 2017); the impact that this has had on equitable school enrolment practices (Rayner, 2017); the conflict HTs have experienced between the demands of national education policy and the values and ethics that led them to teaching (Rayner, 2014); the negotiations, tensions and drawing of boundaries between HTs and sponsors (Papanastasiou, 2017, 2019); primary HTs' views regarding the autonomy they experienced (Boyask, 2018); the development of new forms of privatisation due to academisation (Wilkins, 2017) and so on.

Drawing on evidence from a sample of school leaders across England, Greany and Higham (2018, p. 12) argued that the academisation policy effectively operates as a form of "chaotic centralisation", where the system has created multiple relays of competing claims of authority and legitimacy, at the same time as losing local knowledge about schools. Rather than creating more autonomy for schools, Greany and Higham (2018, p.16) found that the national SISS policy agenda "has intensified hierarchical governance and the state's powers of intervention, further constraining the professionalism of school staff and steering the system through a

model we term 'coercive autonomy'". This is an intriguing claim, namely that the system is such that people are forced to enact autonomy because it suits a given policy agenda. Specifically, the authors point to accountability machines such as OFSTED, as central to this coercive autonomy. The threat of forced academisation is perceived to hang over school communities, as it is likely to mean "less operational power to [individual] schools". This is the case as the MAT takes over many of the functions that a school leader might reasonably expect to be responsible for. This concurs with aspects of OFSTED's report, which argued that some HTs felt that "MATs promised schools a great deal of continued autonomy at the point of joining, but not all schools felt these promises were kept" (OFSTED, 2019, p.18).

However, the 'coercive' model, and specifically the concept of coercive autonomy developed by Greany and Higham (2018), seem to miss that many schools academise because they want to. While coercive autonomy might be useful to explain sponsored academisation, it seems to ignore the expressed enthusiasm, however cautious school leaders might be in expressing it, for national policy that promised autonomy as a way to respect them more as professionals capable of leading their school communities, able to make staffing and curricular choices and so on. In other words, coercion is not adequate to fully understand the range of motivations for academisation and different modes and experiences of it.

It is not just coercion, but advocacy, optimism and the responsibilisation that many leaders feel for their schools and pupils that need to be understood in the context of autonomy and academisation. For this reason, we suggest that autonomy is a tool for indenturing, rather than simply compelling or coercing.

Responsibilisation and Autonomisation

In advanced liberal nations in times of crisis or turmoil, policy has been used to unbind (destabilise) and bind (reconstitute) in that order as a process to effect change[2]. The State also sets frames, both material and ideational, within which policy actors come to understand their possibilities for acting. The contemporary frame and foundation of these possibilities is the "entrepreneurial subject". This subject is encouraged to make choices that demonstrates a new relation between the State and its citizens and between society's social and economic domains. This entrepreneurial subject (seemingly self-directed) is the antithesis of the bureaucratic subject (seemingly externally-directed). Shamir (2008, p.4) argues that responsibilisation "constructs and assumes a moral agency" on the part of subjects. It is this moral codification which compels certain actions. Responsibilisation is necessary to the collapsing of the distinctions between the social and the economic, and to the specific practices, and/or institutions, which come to govern individual actions, behaviours, desires and thinking within a framework of moral choice(s). Responsibilisation central to academisation has different effects from earlier practices of the local management of schools in England; in effect it involves the 'moral burdening of the entity at the end of the pipeline' (Brown, 2015, p.132). This is evident in the move from bureaucratic state structures framing and directing policy to the self-responsibilising endemic to policy practices of the current moment and to contemporary governance; "while obedience had been the practical master-key of top-down bureaucracies, responsibility is the practical master-key of governance" (Shamir, 2008, p.4). Responsibilised people and institutions, however, are not left to their own devices; rather, new

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[2] This paper was being reworked during the Coronavirus global pandemic. It will be interesting to see the longer term impact of this on the governance of advanced liberal societies and to understand the unbinding and binding work of policy in any subsequent changes.

metrics, accountabilities and compliance requirements are used to 'nudge' behaviours and dispositions in specific ways and in particular directions. This "transforms 'individual responsibility' from its traditional liberal understanding as ex post accountability for one's own actions … into an ex ante virtue, which emphasises acting in the present and preventing undesirable situations and events" (Peeters, 2013, p.588). The autonomous, self-responsibilising individual of contemporary governance is thus constituted to act in particular ways and is morally burdened in the process (Shamir, 2008).

The desire for responsibilities of this kind, articulated as autonomy, is particularly evident in the way that contemporary education policy works, with its interests in devolution, steering at a distance, datafied accountability and competition. Autonomy seems to be a polysemic concept whose meaning can only be determined in its use and whose meaning has been rearticulated over time from the 1988 Education Act and local school management through to the present. This flexible, polysemic character enables its effectiveness as a policy mechanism in that it can appeal to a wide range of actors and ideological positions. There is also a common-sense appeal. Much policymaking plays on this appeal to promise schools and their leaders greater autonomy, and control over resources, often as the resources required to enable this autonomy are reduced and "accompanied by new forms of State control" (Higham & Earley, 2013, p.703), specifically effected through new modes of data and test-based accountability. The reduction of funding and the interplay of responsibilising and autonomy lead to what Brown (2015, p.132) evocatively calls "ghostly autonomy", a good reminder that responsibilisation is always intertwined with autonomisation (Rose, 1999).

Where the State has regulated a profession closely, as it has in regard to teachers and HTs, the desire for autonomy is perhaps more closely held and more strongly desired (Hogan & Lingard, 2018). At the same time, as States advocate for more open systems, to responsibilise or 'steer' the professionals 'at a distance' through data, metrics and standards, this becomes a problem of governance (Kickert, 1995). There is something of a double bind here (Bateson, et al, 1956), professionals desire more autonomy, yet this requires a commitment to the morality of the policies in play. This observation mirrors Keddie and Mill's (2019) argument that the autonomy delivered through academisation essentially proceeds through a "dis-embedding of markets with the devolving of governance away from States to schools and the dismantling of the LA" (p.18). This dis-embedding of governance is facilitated by "a proliferation of new and/or re-articulated accountability regimes and compliance mechanisms" that act to re-embed the market "to control this increasingly dispersed system" (p.18). HTs are autonomous, but responsibilised to act in particular ways; responsibilisation and autonomisation are always intimately interwoven. In the English schooling policy context, HTs have been responsibilised /granted autonomy in a time of funding austerity, which strengthens the moral burden they carry.

Lauren Berlant (2011) argued that double binds usually conceal a cruel optimism at work. Cruel optimism is a "relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realisation is discovered either to be *im*possible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic" (p.24). Berlant reminds us that the attachment to the object, the desire for the cluster of promises that it represents, is an ontological concern, such that even when all the evidence points to the cruelty of the attachment, the subject may not be able to walk away from that attachment. This is derived from that "cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us" (p.23). This is an optimistic stance: "the subject leans toward promises contained within the present moment of the encounter with her object" (p.24). In this instance, this plays out in the awareness that the desire for autonomy will necessarily require a patchwork of trade-offs, negotiations, and

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frustrations, always in the hope that through these frustrations the goal of being respected as professionals becomes closer to fruition. The ultimate resolution is the principal settling for an autonomy as part of a MAT that is, paradoxically, less autonomous than what they experienced before in the hope that over time a truer autonomy may emerge. We have called this 'indentured autonomy' in relation to HTs experiences of academisation in the north of England. This is the sinking realisation that in the pursuit of more school and professional autonomy, HTs have found themselves locked into a series of policy demands that are of a kind they were desperately trying to escape.

Methods

The research from which this paper derives adopted a qualitative design using a purposeful sample. The purposive sample targeted HTs of academies whose schools had chosen to become academies because they had received an OFSTED 'Good' or 'Outstanding' grade. All participants worked in Northern England in cities/towns such as Manchester, Wakefield, Leeds, Gateshead and York. Northern England was chosen because, when compared to other parts of England, it is typified by higher levels of child poverty, economic disadvantage and generational unemployment (Round & Longlands, 2020). A key sentiment in Northern England is that government policy, including education, is driven by the interests of London and wealthy counties and that those in the North are often disadvantaged by resultant policies. As this paper addresses why schools in Northern England decided to academise, the data are drawn exclusively from interviews with HTs (n=6). These semi-structured interviews used a common interview schedule and were conducted in September 2018. All of the participant HTs indicated that their schools were in economically deprived areas when compared with the rest of England. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts.

[Table 1 about here]

Analysis
Negotiating autonomy
An important theme that emerged across the research was the uncertainty, and even suspicion, that many of the HTs expressed regarding the shifting emphasis of the academisation policy in its different iterations. As HT2 described, much of the motivation for choosing to become an academy was the desire to take control of their own futures. Not to academise, meant living with the fear "*that we'll be taken over by a larger chain, because that seems to be the government agenda.*" When asked what this had meant, HT2 responded by saying that her school had become a sponsor for other schools, taking on other schools whose poor OFSTED results meant that they were being forced to become academies in order "*[t]o be sustainable. Originally, they [the DFE] were saying five schools, then they went to ten, and they're talking about twenty now, but we think with ten, we should be safe*". The fear of being taken over outweighed their desire for independence, such that becoming a converter and then sponsoring academy was the accommodation necessary to maintain control of their school and its direction, ironically through becoming responsible for the performance of other schools. The HTs were picking their way through an unstable and changing policy environment.

For HT4, academisation was a political commitment originating in London to challenge the power of Local Authorities. He argued that the 2016 White Paper *Education Excellence Everywhere,* which committed to all schools in England becoming academies by 2020, was essentially a re-centralisation of authority.

> *The academisation programme, from within the education system, is viewed as an attempt to break the local authorities. It was an attempt to wrest control from the local authorities because it was felt that by and large the local authorities were not necessarily doing a very good job, and I think there's a tenuous difference between that and breaking the LA. It seems the local authorities had too much power.* **HT4**

One effect of the policy of trying to amalgamate individual academies into MATs in the interests of sustainability was the effect of creating MATs that functioned essentially as (privatised) Local Authorities. As HT5 argued; "*In effect, you could describe the LA as a large multi academy trust … so in fact the LA is, was, a big MAT.*"

In legal and practical terms there is more than one type of academy, and more than one type of MAT. These participants characterised these types in various ways, but what was common was a dichotomy between desirable and less desirable academy trusts. HT4 characterised the less desirable as "*offensive academy trusts*" run by "*people or teams at the helm that are in education for the wrong reasons… to build a profit*", while feeling that he belonged to an "*academy trust that's got values and principles that we all espouse and we hold very dear.*" HT1 named these less desirable as "*corporate trusts*", where she saw "*schools being stripped of their individual identities, seeing HTs losing their autonomy, losing their titles… the uniforms had to change, the school name had to change, to reflect that they were part of this organisation, and it just left me feeling cold*". According to HT5, much of the negative media reporting that MATs had received was down to "*a number of high profile MAT's who are – I would describe it as absolutely outrageous, their behaviour - in terms of off-rolling[3] and exclusions*".

Within this policy frame where the aim was complete academisation, where there were good and bad academies trusts that differed both in their philosophies and their (mandated) policies and practices, the justifications given for academising are illustrative. First, a common reason was that there was a possibility, no matter how unlikely, that HTs would be able to take control of their destinies as schools and school communities. As HT1 explained: "*I didn't want to be in an organisation where you lost the individual nature of your school, and as a community school it was really important that we reflect the children and families that we serve*". Despite being opposed in general to the idea of academisation, for HT1 it was her awareness that the policy shifts meant that if they did not act now, future possibilities looked bleak.

> *I'd had some experience when I did my professional qualification for headship, of what a faceless Multi Academy Trust could look like. A very corporate experience which I did not like, and completely did not want for our school. So, when it was suggested within the local cluster of schools, by the secondary head, that we consider creating our own multi academy trust so we could protect the nature of our schools, that interested me more, and it was a*

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[3] Off-rolling refers to the removal of children from school rolls, often to improve a school's position on some performance metric.

case of, "Let's make this decision while we can have some control," rather than waiting to be told that we have to join an organisation whose values didn't fit with ours.

Another common justification for becoming an academy concerned the status of the LA. This manifested in two ways; first in a criticism that the LA had been unable to support schools appropriately, particularly to improve their practices. HT4 argued that, when schools desperately needed support to deal with problematic OFSTED ratings, many LAs did not have the resources, expertise or recent experience that could help a Headteacher and their school. There is, of course, a self-fulfilling element to this. As more schools become academies, LAs have less resources to meet the needs of local schools.

I think the quality of the support that was available from people that had been in education for a long time (people who have been in education for a long time failed in the classroom, failed in leadership, and therefore went to work as a consultant for the LA) deliver expert [help] to people at the chalkface, and leaders at the chalk face, about how to improve your maths results, how to narrow the gap between pupil premium[4] and non-pupil premium students, [when they] couldn't do it themselves… they are bereft of ideas, because they haven't been in the classroom. So the out of touch-ness, the lack of a rapid response.

The second motivation regarded a strategic consideration of the likely impact of academisation and future budget cuts to LA budgets and their ability to give future support. This was outlined by HT2, who stated the "*initial decision to convert to an academy status… we didn't see that there was any real benefit to our children, but we could see what was going to be happening in the future*". HT1 worried about a "*divided*" LA, where less funding as more primary and secondary schools became academies, created a "*knock-on effect*" where LA schools were left with the more difficult to educate students. HT4 expressed it as:

The fear, certainly in the LA I was working in when we were a State-funded LA maintained school – was that the number of schools that were becoming academies, either on their own or as part of academy trusts, meant that the impact and the quality of the support and challenge from the local authorities was then inevitably going to be watered down, and we would need to look elsewhere for consultancy support, school improvement support, and we thought that was best served in a partnership of schools that were all academies together.

For HT3, the decision to convince his parent community to academise was similarly concern about the financial sustainability of support from the LA. While "*our LA have tried really, really hard, and are continuing to try really hard, to provide a valuable service to its schools and to its communities, and they've done that, I think*", they had now reached a tipping point where because of the schools that had already converted to academies "*the LA, in my opinion, can't offer that support that they have been able to, because fewer and fewer schools are part of the LA, so fewer and fewer schools are then paying in for the services*".

HTs thought they were being granted autonomy, but their actual experience of the new governance was that this autonomy, as the data show, had to be continually (re)negotiated. The new conditions of this negotiation suggest that the limits on their negotiation of autonomy can be seen as a constitutive element of indentured autonomy.

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[4] Pupil premium refers to funding given to students designated by the DfE as the most disadvantaged.

Continued precariousness

Being part of a MAT did not much change the fear that HTs had regarding job security. As HT4 remarked: "*So now, I'm part of a multi academy trust and clearly fearful for my job. Ofsted's due any time now. I could get the phone call during this interview. You know. The school's been Requires Improvement for the last two inspections... When LA was involved, LA would be coming in and packing my suitcase for me, and saying, 'Pick up your personal effects, and we'll manage you out of the building'*". The precariousness of life as a Headteacher continued regardless of whether it was a LA or a MAT nominally in charge of the school. In salary terms, we need to note that HTs had benefitted to a considerable extent by academisation and as such were also conduits for this reform.

Relatedly, academising had done little to relieve the workload of HTs, and in fact added to it in various forms. A common reflection was that OFSTED, and the associated expectations, ameliorated any potential that academisation had to alleviate the workloads of teaching staff and HTs. HT5 stated:

> The government's really saying "We don't want to be prescriptive in what you must do there," but actually, if you don't do it and they come in here and don't see books marked, and you get judged to be a 3, it's fatuous what they say in there, really. It's frightening that about forty percent of newly qualified teachers leave the profession within five years. There are not enough teachers coming into the profession in relation to leaving the profession there... I do seventy-plus hour weeks, but teachers who are main scale will comfortably do fifty-five, sixty hours a week. I actually think now we're at a tipping point, because if something isn't done soon, then actually my children's children – I'm not sure who'll teach them, it's reached that point where the pressures and the accountability, particularly with Ofsted, it's not worth it, increasingly, for an increasing majority of people.

HT1 supported HT5's perspective, arguing that "*there's a concern about workload, full stop, in schools in England, because the goal posts keep changing, the pressures are enormous, and the threat of Ofsted and league tables – you know, there's the constant fear of shame, public shaming*". Becoming an academy had increased, not lessened that workload. HT1 argued that academisation had resulted in "*Hours and hours of more work! (laughs) With very little change within the school*". She argued that the "*increase in workload for myself and the business manager is phenomenal. We spent two years without really having a personal life, because we were constantly working, and it didn't impact on the staff and it didn't impact on the children.*" HT6 said "*I think the pressure's always going to be on the Headteacher. You've got to perform, you've got to get the kids to pass the exams, but the high stakes, high achievement agenda that this government has got, and has had for the last ten years, I think makes this job untenable, if I'm honest*".

Another concern that participants expressed was that initial funding available to newly formed academies had given a mistaken impression that academies would be somewhat insulated from funding cuts. Their anxiety regarding how they were going to manage budget cuts was obvious. HT1 outlined this depressing reality: "*We find ourselves in a position where the money that we are getting in, based on our pupil numbers, doesn't meet the staff salary every month...yeah. It's shocking. I could weep*". For HT1, their success as a school was a double edged-sword, as they had become a desired school for parents of children with additional needs, meaning "*we have also had an influx of a number of children with additional needs*

who require one to one support. We're in the process of applying for education and health care plans that give us additional money, but they're worth £6,000, and we have to find the rest of that staff salary, up to £14,000, from our budget". HT4 was grappling with the realisation that "*the staff that I've currently got in the building, even with the same amount of kids next year, we're probably going to lose ten of them, which is probably around 6% [of my staff], because I'll be bankrupt if I try and pay their salaries*". This necessitated a counterintuitive response: "*So the expensive ones will have to go and be replaced by cheaper, less experienced alternatives… in many cases, you chip experience out of a school, provision becomes weaker, naturally*". HT6 lived with the implications of the funding formula and how he would have to let teachers go: "*We've got a situation in a year and a half's time, there's going to be £2.5 million taken out of [our local schools], based on the new national funding formula… For us, seven teachers gone*". The responsibilisation of the HT as a financial manager dealing with the threat of bankruptcy presents one effect of this autonomisation where the State has managed to devolve itself of responsibility for the ways that funding affects schools. The HTs carried this moral burden.

With the Department's desire that converter academies would partner with poorly performing sponsored academies, the teaching and learning autonomy school communities were promised also became contingent. For example, HT1 found that as they added more schools to their MAT often in response to pressure from the DfE, particularly those schools forced to become academies by the DfE due to low OFSTED ratings, the governance structure required to manage these challenging schools impacted the philosophy that led them to seek to academise in the first place.

> *It was Roger and I, our schools that first took the step to become a Multi Academy Trust, and then a junior school joined us … we've now got two secondary schools that are joining us, and it's shifting, and it is slowly becoming more corporate, which leaves me feeling a bit cold. The organisation is growing, and we have to have systems, and there has to be a level of consistency, but what really fascinates me is, can we maintain this moral integrity, the reasons we set up this MAT as it grows? Is that going to be possible? And I don't honestly know… the downside is that as a newly-formed, baby MAT, we're like one step removed from the DfE. We don't have that freedom or autonomy anymore. Everything is monitored, and everything is measured, and we're all having to justify so much more.*

Precarity of employment mediates any potential for autonomy that academisation might allow. As long as systems like OFSTED provide impetus for firing principals, or at least for placing them under heavy scrutiny, the potentials for autonomy can never be realised, as these HTs necessarily play it safe within a competing system. By this we mean that autonomy is always contingent upon the fear within the system of the effects of accountability. This is another constitutive element of what we are calling 'indentured autonomy'. The precarity of teachers is one aspect of a system that operates through keeping education professionals 'on edge' – whether it is expensive senior teachers who know that they may lose their jobs due to budget pressures, or HTs who feel they have lost any semblance of work-life balance as they strive (often futilely) to satisfy accountability demands.

Cruel Optimism
These HTs' experiences of academisation suggest that the appealing autonomy promised by the DfE in 2010 had been rolled back by subsequent policy that 're-embedded' external mechanisms of control over their schools. This is why we see academisation as exemplary of a new mode of

governance in education systems. This re-embedding occurred even as the HTs felt they were the responsibilised actors within the system. This is perhaps best expressed by HT1, who argued that despite her experiences, she still held out hope that if only they could crack the code, a more satisfactory future might be possible.

> *We still, behind closed doors, we still believe that if we can find a way to give them what they want, and jump through the hoops, we will be able to do what we really believe in underneath, but there are so many hoops to jump through, and keeping the standards high, and keeping everybody happy with diminishing resources. I mean, the finances – don't even get me started. It's really hard.*

One common point was that none of these HTs felt that academisation was a systematic intervention capable of improving educational outcomes, and ensuring subsequent societal benefits, across the country. They remained concerned that in acting in what appeared to be the best interests of their students, schools and communities, they could be actually preventing politicians, bureaucrats and governments being held to account for the problems within their systems. HT3 expressed it as a concern that in choosing to become an academy, he was part of a system that left many people out in the cold.

> *A concern would be that it's almost "I'm alright, Jack." As long as I'm OK, as long as I've got enough money in our trust, or in our community, I don't really care about anyone else, and I think that worries me a lot, and I think the reduction in finances that are going into public services have a knock-on effect … those children don't get the support they need, which then has a knock-on effect in that they become teenagers that don't get the support they need, which then means they become adults that don't get the support they need, who then – well, I don't know where we'll go with that.*

For HT4, the loss of cohesive community he saw across England troubled him and the concern that young people were not going to have the same opportunities and experiences in their schools as he had when he was young.

> *I'm glad – it sounds very – it's quite a nihilist view, and it's not me at all; I'm glad I'm 46 and not 16, because I think if I was one of these kids here, or a kid anywhere, I think I'd be pretty scared right now about going into the world… the number of people that are going to get left behind over the next generation is going to be quite scary.*

One effect of the autonomy delivered through the academisation policy is that it makes HTs responsible for implementing financial decisions made in London, and it installs economic and market modalities as the central concern of HTs. This effectively depoliticises issues such as budget cuts and 'austerity politics' because they become seen as economically inevitable. The bait-and-switch of policy promising teaching, curricular and staffing autonomy to HTs, while delivering economic uncertainty which responsibilises the HT, makes systemic change seem impossible.

The new structures of governance (MATs and Regional School Commissioners), the devolution of responsibility for providing and managing schools, and austerity budgets meet head-on HTs' dispositions to do the best for their schools and communities. These structures powerfully frame, and therefore limit, how an individual HT can respond to their desired autonomy, and this is why in its current manifestation it is an example of cruel optimism. Autonomy under academisation is a

closed frame, where HT autonomy is always circumscribed within this closed frame. Even when the HT demonstrates autonomy, this can only be in forms that the system has already decided are desirable and acceptable.

Discussing Indentured Autonomy

Rose (1999) argued that our current milieu is typified by a new relation between the State and its citizens. One mode of this new relation concerns how "autonomisation plus responsibilisation" are internalised by subjects (1999, p.154). This vector is visible in education systems inflected by marketisation that responsibilise families, HTs, teachers and other education workers. While the policy sociology literature has become enamoured of 'governance' as a descriptor of new relations within education, what is often neglected is how this governance actually works. Autonomisation plus responsibilisation is a successful technology of governance because it enlists the support of those whose desires are to be governed. While there are always specific histories, experiences and cultural realties that mediate these desires, it is always the desire to be governed, and in particular ways, that is a key driver of how policy is taken up. In this case, it is a form of optimism based on some ideal form of autonomy imagined by the participants that presaged their commitment to academisation, even as they did not trust government motives for it.

What interests us, and animates this article, is the particular ways that academisation was experienced by those HTs who chose to academise. The promise of increased autonomy, for all of them, was enticing, even if they did not believe that the policy was the solution to problems facing contemporary schooling in Northern England, a view they strongly articulated in research interviews. The interviews with the HTs point to three common experiences of HTs that we have called negotiating autonomy, continued precariousness and cruel optimism. For us, these themes constitute three elements of what we have called 'indentured autonomy'. As we have outlined earlier, indentured autonomy is not a universal concept. It is always vernacular, grounded in local specificities as a response to emerging policy ensembles and modes of governance.

The concept of indentured autonomy complements Greany and Higham's (2018) 'coercive autonomy'. Coercive autonomy, for Greany and Higham is "a new mode of hierarchical governance" where HTs become beholden to, or the servants of, the policy frames of MATS. Our analysis suggests another phenomenon is also at work, one that operates through enlisting the support of HTs through the promise of autonomy as the best possible response to the set of policy conditions that we know as academisation. While coercive autonomy operates through the imposed brokering of an 'underperforming' school to an MAT, indentured autonomy is as much about the dispositions and desires of HTs who choose to academise, sometimes as the best possible bad decision, sometimes because it plays upon their professional desire for autonomy. The experiences of HTs show that despite the appeal, there is a closed policy frame at work that effectively stymies this autonomy. The concept of indentured autonomy adds a new understanding of the mode of governance at work in English schooling in relation to the policy of academisation and HTs visceral experiences of this mode of governance.

The policy frame around academisation, including forced academisation, the brokering of schools into MATs and the reduction in funding/resourcing of Local Authorities, forces HTs to encounter the limits of their optimism and they experience this responsibilisation as a moral burden, as suggested by Shamir (2008). This encounter crystallises one aspect of the responsibilisation of the

HT as the decision-maker for a school community. What do careful consideration and the need to make the best decision for the school community both now and in the future look like? Of course, this encounter is necessarily rendered within a wider frame of teacher professionalism in Northern England. As Thomson (2010) has shown, one of the effects of responsibilisation is that HTs come to see themselves as embodying their community as much as their school. Such responsibility is not offered to teachers. The history of seeing teachers and HTs as problems (Jones, 1990) means that the promise of being granted autonomy by the State is especially motivating as an imprimatur of HT and teacher professionalism, while concomitantly at the same time, any possibilities of teacher autonomy are displaced.

These HTs shed light on why it is that schools may choose to become academies, particularly those who do not have an ideological commitment to academisation. While policy agendas often evoke strong reactions, the ways that individuals negotiate these policy frames, and the justification for their actions, beliefs, values and desires in relation to these decisions remain important. Many of these school leaders, both desiring autonomy and fearing forced academisation, decided to academise because they were frustrated at the quality of service they received from their LA, particularly regarding the LA's ability to prepare them for and protect them from OFSTED inspections. They saw that LAs were unlikely to be able to offer satisfactory support in the future because, as more schools become academies, there would be less LA funding to support schools that have to deal with complex problems. Yet at the same time schools were buying support from private providers. This included needing support to prepare schools for OFSTED inspections, to provide professional learning experiences for staff, to support students with complex needs and so on. The worry was that LA schools would be 'left behind', and as HTs needed to advocate for their communities; this was a risk that could not be justified, even if the HT had an ideological commitment to the LA system.

One emergent consideration is that what we see in the data is a closed policy frame at work. Whilst we expected HTs who have ideological or political commitments to autonomisation to be supporters of academisation, it is the capture of those who are predisposed towards collective politics, who wanted to remain part of a collective system, but became convinced to academise in spite of their convictions, that is most interesting. The motivations of those who do not necessarily desire to be part of a large, corporate Multi-Academy Trust (MAT), yet opt to become academies, are important. The HTs interviewed express a number of justifications including a fear in light of the government claim that by 2020 all schools would be academies and that they would be forced to academise anyway. In order to protect the integrity of their school, its responsiveness to their local community and their beliefs around education practices, the decision to academise was to make the best of a bad situation. Academisation, then, closes possibilities in that even non-believers choose to academise as a means to prevent being forced to become a sponsored academy or possibly shopped to an MAT whose educational approach was opposed to theirs.

What characterises the academisation policy is uncertainty by design. Justifying decisions to academise seemed to be made more difficult by subsequent official policy shifts and unofficial rumours about what was to come next. Further policy uncertainty regarding DfE advice as to what constitutes a viable size of an MAT - at first one school was acceptable, then schools were encouraged to partner, then 5 schools was seen as suitable, now 10 schools and perhaps 20, carried with it an implied threat that even converter academies were always at risk of being taken over by larger MATs. This has forced schools that initially wanted to be autonomous, both from LAs and

from corporate MATs, to either agree to broker or partner other schools, becoming in effect a more corporate MAT, even where that was the opposite of what was desired.

Indentured autonomy is the name that we give to policy processes that work through promising autonomy to professionals within complex systems as a means of regulating and rearticulating possibilities. The paradox is, in order to be afforded the right to autonomy by the State, HTs have found themselves trapped by the demands associated with that autonomy. We use the word 'indentured' to signify both the length of time of an academy contract (7 years) and to indicate the realisation over time that the autonomy on offer cannot resolve the problems of workload, funding, high-stakes accountabilities and wider societal inequalities and individualist fragmentation. The HTs and their schools sign up, hoping that they will be better situated to respond to local circumstances, but find that macro-policy levers (such as austerity measures applied to school budgets and the impact that this has on things like staffing) make this less possible. In fact, it may be the loss of LAs as advocates for groups of schools that makes the funding cuts deeper, and more pernicious, than they would have been otherwise. Tellingly, these HTs feel that academisation has resulted in an increase in their workloads and responsibilities at the same time as funding and support have decreased. Changes in academisation policy since 2010 have meant that the autonomy HTs desired when choosing to become converter academies has become the ideological tool that now cruelly constrains and compromises their possibilities (Berlant, 2011).

Indentured autonomy is also a vernacular process. There are particular histories, sets of experiences of economic, social and education policy in regards to Northern England at work here. We do not claim that indentured autonomy is the only experience of academisation available to HTs and school communities across England. It may be that there are some individuals, groups and communities who have done very well out of academisation. We also note the particular role of the HT, and the absence of teacher, student and community perspectives in our analysis. Our concern has been to explain the "effects of policy" (Ball, 1994), to probe how academisation policy has played out in Northern England from the perspective of those HTs intimately engaged with it. More broadly, we have been concerned to understand what appear to be new relationships between the State, its institutions and the professionals who work on behalf of the State and what this tells us about governance today.

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Tables and Figures

Participant	School Info	Gender	School Status
HT1	HT of an 'academy primary school in a village outside of Manchester	Female	Academy since 2012
HT2	HT of a 'lead school' in a MAT in Barnsley	Female	Academy had recently become a MAT
HT3	HT of a primary school in Hartlepool	Male	Recently begun the process to become an academy
HT4	HT of a large secondary school in inner-Leeds	Male	Part of a MAT
HT5	HT of a large secondary school in outer-Leeds	Male	Part of a MAT
HT6	HT of large secondary school in Hartlepool	Male	Standalone academy school

Table 1 HT participants

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