

# SCHOOL IS FAMILY: a metaphor too far for Academies?

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## Abstract

The Academy school programme, initially a Labour government project, has been enthusiastically promoted by the current coalition government – making it a policy which, unusually, has had the support of all three major UK parties.

While the Academy programme has largely been successful in educational terms, it has remained within the pre-existing ethos of school management, an ethos that has been developed and refined over more than 100 years, and which should not – and cannot – be arbitrarily replaced. The Academy is still a school, and its primary role remains the successful transition of students from childhood to adulthood. As a system for bringing up children, its role resembles that of the family; and in the current social environment it has increasingly undertaken tasks that traditionally were family-based: sex education, social and cultural education, and even morality training. The SCHOOL IS FAMILY metaphor has been productive and effective, and it describes the management systems that work best at schools: the teachers act *in loco parentis* to the students, and the head teacher acts *in loco parentis* to the teachers.

Academy schools, however, have a range of new tasks that were formerly undertaken by local authority education departments. The Academies therefore have a new type of employee whose commitment is primarily to their role in the organisation, and not directly to the process of education. These employees often come from industries which operate in a more democratic way; so how do they adapt to the SCHOOL IS FAMILY system, and how does it adapt to them?

This paper looks at the changing nature of the secondary education organisation, and considers whether the management paradigm of SCHOOL IS FAMILY is still effective for Academy schools.

## School is family

The idea that a school is like a family is an old concept, an obvious comparison based on the convergence of their roles. In educational terms, though, it is nowadays considered somewhat

outdated. Yes, a school consists of adults and children in mentoring and mentored roles, there are power relationships where financial and sanctioning powers are available to one side and not the other, and the formal school “transaction” is the one-way passing of knowledge; but schools nowadays are interested in student participation, preparation for citizenship, and student empowerment. Compared to the traditional family, there is a greater involvement in negotiation with, and democracy for, children in the modern school: students at all levels are encouraged to be more than passive sponges for their education, and they are taught to see themselves as controllers of their own fates. This would seem to be far from the model of education that was popular in my childhood of over 40 years ago.

The current model used to establish the relationship between schools and parents talks in terms of a family-school partnership (Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2006, pp665-684). It uses terms such as “family friendly”, “family oriented”, or “family neighbourhood school”; but there still seems to be a tendency for schools to less formally describe themselves in *loco parentis* terms: “like a big family”, “a family atmosphere”, or “immensely proud to be a part of the [school] Family”<sup>1</sup>. It would seem that, even though educational theory has officially moved away from the SCHOOL IS FAMILY metaphor, the reality is that the metaphor is far from dead.

The school and the family, for at least a century in Western democracies, have acted as twin institutions involved in the acculturation of the next generation; and the parallels that can be drawn between them do encourage one to emulate the other. This is no bad thing: it provides continuity for young people, and it simplifies the complex cultural models they have to negotiate in early life. Having the school function in a similar way to the family also means that the school, by its existence, reinforces good parenting practices and challenges bad practices – this is all laudable social engineering.

What happens, though, when the idea that a school is like a family becomes a metaphor for the way the organisation works? Which aspects of the metaphor support the organisation, and which interfere with its good running?

## SCHOOL IS FAMILY

The collocation of functions between the school and the family gives a secure basis for modelling one on the other; and the development of the metaphor SCHOOL IS FAMILY out of that collocation over the past century has created a distinctive, student-centred approach to education in Britain (Baldi, 2010). Exploiting the correspondences between families and schools has been valuable for the planning and design of education, and it has directly affected the way schools have developed over the past century.

An important instrument in the development of this metaphor was the 1902 Education Act. This was, when it was enacted, a deeply divisive piece of legislation which pleased nobody: the funding of religious schools, the establishment of a grammar school system, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Examples have been taken from a selection of prospectuses and websites for UK Academy schools.

reining in of nonconformist higher education, were all choices that had profound effects on British education for decades. There was, however, one aspect of the Act that initiated a move towards educational uniformity in the primary and secondary sectors: power over the schools and their curriculum was taken away from the school boards and invested in the county and borough councils, which had been recently set up in 1888. One effect of this was to take the decisions about the financial and economic management of the school away from the school – to a large extent, the school was left to concentrate on its primary task of education.

If we look at this effect from the viewpoint of the employees of the school, it creates a particular psychological environment which reinforces the SCHOOL IS FAMILY metaphor. Teachers are largely divorced from the economic side of the school, and are reliant on their departmental leaders for any particular project funding they may seek. They, in turn, are reliant on the funding plans of the Head Teacher's team. It bears more than a passing resemblance to the "pocket money" system that families use to fund children's wants. Individual salaries are not part of the school system, they are administered by the local authority, as are complex capital projects to develop the infrastructure of the school. This creates an ideational separation of individual remuneration from the work done to support that remuneration, and it reduces the need for employees to be aware of, and involved in, the long-term financial security of the organisation.

This separation of personal interest from organisational interest facilitates a patriarchy model for school organisation (Grady *et al*, 1996). The members of the Head Teacher's management team act in parent-like roles, with the Head Teacher himself in a head-of-household, "benevolent despot" role (Morris, 1998). The individual teachers are then cast in the role of "children" to this parental group. This model is reflected at the departmental, or faculty, level; and also in individual classrooms, where the benevolent despotism of the teacher over the students is a necessary condition of the safeguarding role they undertake (Gilliat, 1998).

This method of organisation, often referred to as "silo-based", is an appropriate response where each individual in the organisation has a high level of autonomy, and there is also a good separation of roles between individuals. Despite the continuing expansion of the duties of Ofsted since 1992, teachers still retain a high level of autonomy in the classroom; and (a continuing frustration for the teaching profession) each child has absolute control over whether they learn or not, and how they approach their learning. In this circumstance, the organisation is best served by supporting and managing the autonomy, rather than attempting to control it<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> At the school level, the Department for Education say on their website: "In many of the most successful education systems in the world, individual schools are given a high level of autonomy. It is headteachers and teachers, not bureaucrats and politicians, who inspire pupils and drive school improvement." (<http://www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/departmentalinformation>)

So the “school is family” comparison has become ingrained in our education system as the SCHOOL IS FAMILY metaphor, creating correspondences throughout the school system. It has been a fruitful and productive metaphor, creating a model of education which has served the nation’s children well. Children are not adults, and the process of turning one into the other requires a specific, child-aware approach. Treating the roles of teacher and student as collocational with parent and child gives the student-child a single model of behaviour to adopt: in a non-dysfunctional family and non-dysfunctional classroom, the student-child has a single role to fulfil, so they need only a single set of strategies to handle all adults.

The metaphor is also useful at the organisational level. Many teachers leave school, attend University, then go back to school<sup>3</sup>. Their experience of organisational systems is largely limited to the patriarchy of the school, and the peculiar economic relationship of Higher Education (H.E. is one of the few systems where, if a product fails testing during the production process, it is usually the paying customer’s fault). Newly-qualified teachers are therefore able to apply their still-current knowledge of how a school works for students to their new roles as teachers. The difficult process of learning to become a teacher is not accompanied by the burden of learning novel organisational systems (Steinbock & Owens, 1989). The SCHOOL IS FAMILY metaphor creates a system which is reassuringly familiar to everyone involved in the metaphor.

## School is Academy

In 2000, David Blunkett, the Education Secretary, sanctioned the creation of a new type of school. Based on the perceived need to remove failing schools from Local Education Authority control, the new Academy school was intended to be a stand-alone educational organisation. It drew its money directly from central government, and it was financially and organisationally distinct from any local authority. The first three Academies opened in 2002, and the programme has been expanding ever since (Leo *et al*, 2010, ch1). By June 2012, 1,877 academy schools were open in Britain<sup>4</sup>.

So what differs between the traditional school model and the new Academies? At the teaching and learning level, very little has changed. Indeed, one academy that attempted to revise their teaching and learning systems “on the hoof” (at the insistence of the Department for Children, Schools and Families) failed badly, and was only rescued by a new Principal insisting on a return to traditional classroom methods – a process the new Principal labelled as “retrovation” (Leo *et al*, 2010, pp144-145).

On the teaching side, therefore, “tried and tested” remains the methodology. An Academy school is just an ordinary school but with more autonomy. However, it is precisely this autonomy that has created an important challenge to the SCHOOL IS FAMILY metaphor which

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<sup>3</sup> Although the ratio of older newly qualified teachers to younger is rising, at about 40% it is still a minority route into the profession.

<sup>4</sup> Department for Education website,

[www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/academies/b00208569/open-academies](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/academies/b00208569/open-academies)

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has served the traditional British school system so well. With autonomy comes a new raft of responsibilities that the academy has to meet, and a new set of tasks the academy school has to undertake. These are tasks and responsibilities that were previously undertaken by the Local Education Authority, and in which the educationalists who ran traditional schools had no interest or expertise. They include simple organisational details like payroll, personnel and pensions (traditional Human Resources management); whole-organisation financial accounting and reporting; autonomous Information Technology management, both hardware and software; and publicity, public image, and press management. There is also an increase in the autonomy of more traditional school functions, such as secretariat; student intake management; duplication and printing service management; examination management; student pastoral services; and even library services. Up to 40% of the academy school workforce is engaged in tasks only indirectly related to teaching, compared to about 10% in traditional schools.

These new employees are not just more numerous than in an ordinary school, they are often differently career-oriented, being skilled practitioners in their fields. They are mostly recruited from non-educational organisations, and they bring with them their own expectations about how organisations work. The organisations they are used to working in are often large, multinational firms with inclusive and democratic management systems: they are used to working as part of a team, often with an established project methodology which ensures full accountability at all levels. If there is a continuum between leadership-rich organisations and management-rich organisations, these companies are towards the management-rich end, while traditional schools are towards the leadership-rich end (Handy, 1999, ch5). Success in management-rich environments is a product of planning, and careful execution of those plans.

This contrasts with the leadership-rich organisation of an academy school<sup>5</sup>. The Principal is seen not just as the person at the top of the pyramid, but as an exemplar, an inspiration, a paradigm; leadership in the school model “is about direction and influence” (Leithwood *et al*, 2006, p11). The SCHOOL IS FAMILY model elevates the Principal beyond a CEO-type role to a “parent of parents” role: buttressed by tradition and perceived wisdom, the Principal has more in common with a spiritual leader than a corporate manager. For employees used to negotiation, discussion and team decisions, this makes the academy a very strange environment, and one which is often inimical to their standard methods of working.

## Academy is not family

Having worked in other management systems, the non-teaching experts at academies – HR managers, communications managers, technical team managers, trained accountants – are often accustomed to more civil and inclusive work environments. The SCHOOL IS FAMILY

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<sup>5</sup> A search for the two terms “leadership” and “management” on the Department for Education website shows 2,150 references to leadership and 2118 references to management. However, where most of the leadership occurrences refer to teaching and learning in schools, most of the management occurrences refer to financial management in schools, or to the Department itself.

paradigm, based on a strong and traditional hierarchy, produces robust and challenging management styles, more directive than discursive. This generates swift decision-making and innovation, but it also means that arbitrary decisions are sometimes made, often accompanied by a “because I said so” approach to discussion. Success in Academy school projects is largely a product of intuitive experience rather than planning, an intrinsic rather than extrinsic approach to managing projects. Failure, similarly, is seen as a matter of personal responsibility, so praise and blame are often allocated to individuals rather than shared corporately. This is not what the non-teaching experts have been trained to see as good practice, and it leaves them feeling out of their depth and de-skilled. Inevitably, this affects their performance.

The SCHOOL IS FAMILY paradigm is deeply embedded in British primary and secondary education. A look at some of the definitions of a good teacher<sup>6</sup> show that leadership traits (confidence, decisiveness, nonconformity, compassion) figure high on the lists, while team skills (compromise, negotiation, monitoring) are identified as weak points for many teachers. Of particular interest is the skill of communication: it is seen as crucial for teachers, but it is described as “about getting the same message across”, and “Effective teachers give information clearly” – the emphasis is on the sending side of communication rather than the receiving side. In other words, the skills required to be a good teacher are about being a good parent-like figure in the classroom.

It is unremarkable that particular character types do well in teaching; and, in the traditional school where the vast majority of contacts are teacher-student or teacher-teacher, the character traits that make a successful teacher will make a successful head of department or principal. The SCHOOL IS FAMILY paradigm supports the traditional school system at all levels.

Academies, however, are not just schools. In many ways they are businesses, and the range of employee skills needed to run the business requires a formal range of managerial responses to employees’ needs. This is not just about comfort zones: if you want an effective administrator you must provide the tools that make them effective; and an important tool is appropriate management of their work.

So what can be done? Some academy groups have gone back to the local authority model, setting up a central administration for a group of academy schools. For instance, the Harris Federation supports 13 academy schools, providing a range of services which were formerly carried out by local authorities. The separation of the education leadership and administration management functions has been largely restored, and the SCHOOL IS FAMILY paradigm is left to work where it works best. The Haberdasher’s Livery Company of London has also attempted to bring its many academy schools into a working federation, although less

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<sup>6</sup> e.g. The seven secrets behind great teaching, *TES*, 8 May, 2009; Top 5 (Plus 14) Character Traits Of Superior Teachers, *TDA website*, [www.soyouwanttoteach.com/top-5-character-traits-of-great-teachers/](http://www.soyouwanttoteach.com/top-5-character-traits-of-great-teachers/); Admirable Teaching Traits, *Education World*, [http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_curr/curr387.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/curr387.shtml).

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successfully than the Harris group. Other possible groupings, such as the City of London group of three academies in Southwark, Islington and Hackney, remain largely unexplored.

A second solution is to provide a “two-track” management system: the teaching and learning staff remain within the SCHOOL IS FAMILY paradigm, which means that students and parents also remain within the paradigm they recognise as “schoolish”; and the administration staff work under a more recognisably commercial paradigm. This requires a Principal who is willing to abrogate a large part of their powers over the administration team to, say, the Finance Director, and who is willing to maintain that separation of responsibilities and reporting in the face of the insistence of their leadership team – and, sometimes, the Governors. It is unsurprising that this model, though commonly adopted initially, tends to break down.

The third solution is the worst of all and, in the few cases where it has been attempted, it has signally failed: making a school function like a corporate entity does not work. Marlowe Academy, for example, replaced the worst-performing school in Britain in 2005, and the new Principal attempted to introduce an inclusive, discursive form of management at all levels of the Academy. In 2010 the academy failed its Ofsted, in August 2011 the Principal resigned, and in November 2011 it was put into special measures<sup>7</sup>. The new leadership team has moved more closely to the traditional SCHOOL IS FAMILY paradigm, and the academy is now making satisfactory progress out of special measures<sup>8</sup>.

## Conclusion

SCHOOL IS FAMILY is a very different type of metaphor to the physical concept-based forms, like MORE IS UP (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999). Where the latter recognises a necessary, physical relationship, the former represents a cultural collocation – a bit stronger than “pink is for girls”, but certainly not a necessary relationship. Yet the metaphor SCHOOL IS FAMILY has shaped the organisational systems of British schools, creating a management form that is archaic, unrepresentative of modern commerce, and yet highly effective. In the environment in which it developed, the metaphor has proved itself a valuable cognitive shortcut around which educational success can be built; but, after the announcement of the Academies programme in 2002, the educational environment has been changed fundamentally.

The return of powers from local authorities to individual school boards has, to a large extent, reversed the key effect of the 1902 Education Act: school boards, mostly selected rather than elected, are once again the centres of power in the national education system; locally elected bodies have been bypassed; and the central government role has largely been redefined as funding, reviewing, and measuring. Currently, the reforms that academisation has introduced seem to be working in terms of student achievement – and, in that respect, the ends do justify the means. However, there are long-established cultural “memes” behind the former system of educational management; and the tensions between the old and the new, represented particularly by the SCHOOL IS FAMILY metaphor, have not yet been resolved.

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<sup>7</sup> Ofsted report: [www.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/files/1937647/urn/128340.pdf](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/files/1937647/urn/128340.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Ofsted report: [www.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/files/1942967/urn/128340.pdf](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/files/1942967/urn/128340.pdf)

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