Becoming an Academy School in the UK

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With Principal

By

Kathryn August

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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This book is dedicated to children and young people living in circumstances that make their lives harder than they should ever be and to the policy makers who can choose to make things better.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This story of Manchester Academy is only possible because of the many, many excellent people who believed in the vision and worked tirelessly to create it.

I salute you all!

FOREWORD

REFLECTIONS ON WORKING AT/WITH MANCHESTER ACADEMY

As Catering Manager, I had worked at Ducie High School for three years and transferred to Manchester Academy when it opened in 2003. On some days at Ducie I felt like I was going to war. Students were verbally abusive and sometimes it could and would go much further.

The Dining Room experience was like a daily battlefield and the atmosphere was extremely hostile.... there were no rules or expectations ... some of the students were intimidating and were allowed to dictate to staff, using bad behaviour as a way of getting what they wanted. They were not challenged to adhere to any behaviour code, as dysfunction was the 'norm'.

I had suffered injury from one of the missiles thrown when a student threw a steaming hot bowl of custard at me as he didn't have enough to pay for it. The custard landed on my chest and blistered my skin.

I turned to the teacher who stood next to the student and asked him what was going to happen. The teacher replied, " Oh, I will have a word with him later when he has calmed down"

In 2003 as Ducie became Manchester Academy it was clear that things were going to change for the better. The unity within the school was gaining strength all the time. The whole atmosphere of the school was becoming 'warm' it was if the heart was being re-installed into a place that had died and a sense of purpose which had been lost was being revived.

The school became a place of belonging for all staff and even more so, students. You could see the change in students.

There were always senior leaders available. There was always humour and the students appreciated being treated like they mattered. The students knew they were cared about. Every member of staff was treated as an equal whether you were a student, a cleaner, a catering assistant, or the SLT team your title was not important, YOU were!

It is not very often one or two people can walk through a door of an establishment and change it for the better. To sum it up in one sentence;

when Manchester Academy opened, I witnessed the arrival of greatness; drive effort, belief.

When the school was judged “Outstanding” by Ofsted, Kathy August personally went to every single staff member regardless of job title from the cleaners, caretakers just everybody and personally thanked every single individual for their contribution to the school and what we had “ALL” achieved.

The Principal said, “We have done it, all of us we have ALL made this happen",

I have to say that I feel privileged to have witnessed the transformation of a school and to have worked with a team that believed that Moss Side and its children were worth it.

—Lisa Flowers

INTRODUCTION

This book tells the story of Manchester Academy, Moss Side. It was one of the first ever City Academies established in England. It describes the background to its inception, the changing educational landscape in which it was set and how, against all the odds, it became an outstanding school in just five and a half years after opening.

It is not a book about the theory of the leadership approach or tactics that school improvement research suggests is needed in a hostile environment. Nor is it an account of a heroic leader succeeding against the odds. It is simply the story of how the original vision for City Academies was implemented in one of the most challenging and challenged communities in the country. It describes how success was due to the collective endeavour of groups cooperating and collaborating in a way they had not done before. It was because of the culture which was created, the relationships that were established and carefully nurtured together with the high expectations set which resulted in the judgement that few in the beginning had ever thought possible.

CHAPTER ONE

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

The City Academy Programme presented a huge change for English education. The adage, "Change is a process not an event" is an apt one when revisiting educational changes that have happened regularly and frequently over the last twenty years.

The speed at which new theories arrive and are heralded as the Holy Grail of School Improvement before being discarded as they fail, is fast and furious.

The dawn of the new millennium brought with it one of the most significant of all educational changes to hit public education in 100 years. This was the City Academy Programme.

When the first City Academies opened in 2002, they were described by one educationalist of great repute as an aberration. This was accompanied by the dire warning that the policy signalled the end of the comprehensive ideal. I could never fully understand the logic of this argument.

I had been Headteacher of two comprehensive schools. The first was on the edge of inner city Manchester and the second in an archetypal leafy suburb, Stockport. The only thing the two schools had in common was that they were comprehensive. The Manchester school had a Free School Meals entitlement of approximately 40% compared to the Stockport school of 8% in the late 1990s. In the Manchester school, parents with Level 3, i.e. equivalent to 'A' Levels and above qualifications was about 40% fewer than parents of the school in Stockport and their jobs and professions contrasted similarly. In all respects the schools were completely different. Simply describing both as comprehensive did not make them the same. There was a polarisation contained within the description "comprehensive." This was never questioned when academies were accused of ending the comprehensive ideal. In addition, the original "City Academies" comprised the most disadvantaged and desperate schools. They were lower on almost every indicator than the lowest performing secondary modern in those Local Education Authorities (LEAs) that had retained selection. There was no secondary modern school in the neighbouring authority of Trafford that was as poor in its performance as the worst Manchester comprehensive school.

This was Ducie High School that would become the Manchester Academy, the first every City Academy in the north west of England.

It was a matter of worrying fact to Manchester LEA that Trafford, a selective LEA, drew large numbers of children particularly from the south of Manchester to attend its schools. Not all of them passed the 11+. When I was Director of Education in Trafford I spoke with a number of aspirant parents in this area of Manchester. Those with whom I spoke clearly felt that their children would receive a better education in a Trafford Secondary Modern school than they would by remaining in Manchester. Yet the legitimacy of this parental concern was never recognised by opponents of Academies.

The weakness of this argument against the Academy policy was also rooted in History. In the 1964 Labour Party Manifesto Comprehensive education was described as, "Grammar education for all."

> Labour will get rid of the segregation of children into separate schools caused by 11 plus selection; secondary education will be reorganised on comprehensive lines. Within the new system, grammar school education will be extended.

Photographs of the first students attending the first comprehensive schools reflect this ambition, with all wearing the traditional school uniforms and carrying satchels, a symbolic association with grammar schools.

Those schools that became City Academies from 2001 until 2010 did not reflect in any way the original vision of comprehensive schools, instead they constituted some of the most depressed, dysfunctional, dystopian places imaginable. Many, if not most, were unsafe and little learning took place in them. The local community had lost faith in the school whilst neighbouring schools resented the cost to their budgets of keeping a failing school afloat financially despite the many and costly efforts to revive the failing schools, nothing had worked. One anti Academy argument cited the loss of democratic accountability if the schools became academies. This rang hollow when considering what had become of Ducie High School. In its case and in that of the other schools in the early Academies, democratic accountability was a chimera. Almost all had the same see-saw history of failure, resource heavy improvement initiatives, temporary minor improvement and then failure. The depressing cycle had been repeated time after time, there were spasmodic improvements in some, but nothing that lasted beyond the completion of yet another initiative. Once the money dried up and the project leads left, things returned to how they had been, or worse, before any improvement initiative had been tried.

When I was appointed to the post of Principal of Manchester Academy in 2003, I described my view of the policy as being the last chance for delivering the original vision for comprehensive education contained in the 1964 Labour Party manifesto. Anyone who visits the Academies in the best performing multi academy trusts will see this in action within the Trusts and their schools keeping to the principles set out in the City Academy prospectus.

The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there.

This opening sentence from the novel, "The Go Between" by L P Hartley was one of the set texts for "A" level English Literature when I was in the Sixth Form. I enjoyed the book, but it wasn't until I was older that the full meaning of it became clear.

I was born in 1952 and the received wisdom then, which continued for some time, was that children would not be unduly affected by childhood traumas as time alone would heal and no other intervention would be needed. This enabled lazy and generalised assumptions to be made about children, their thoughts and feelings, their hopes and fears. Children are not adults they do not respond in exactly the same way to trauma as adults do. There was little questioning that when a child did not react as an adult in a difficult situation it did not mean they were unaffected and as a result needs were frequently unrecognised and ignored.

When I left childhood behind me and became a teacher, I wanted to make sure my experience of education should be consigned to the "things (done) differently" category. In truth, it has been more than that as the way in which distressing life events of my childhood were made worse by the adults around me laid the foundation from which, in time, my approach to school improvement originated.

My happy and carefree childhood ended for me midday on a bitterly cold third week of January 1962.

The winter of 1962/3 was according to records the harshest for two hundred years. The Spring Term had just started when during the first week back I went home as usual for lunch. I went to push open the front door, only to find it locked and the house empty.

By the end of the day, I knew my dad was in hospital and would soon be dead.

He had been diagnosed by the GP with pneumonia, but the harsh reality was he had Stage 4 lung cancer that had metastasized, invading all major organs. My mother was told he would be dead in one to three months. Although chemotherapy was used quite widely by the early 1960s, in my

father's case the family were told that surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy would be of no use.

There were no Hospices available as the Hospice movement itself did not begin until 1967, so rather than my father remaining in hospital my mother decided he should be brought home and she would nurse him until he died. There was an occasional visit from a District Nurse but other than this there was no support other than from family and friends. The manner of his dying and the effect of seeing his thin and ravaged body wasting away had a traumatic effect on me as a ten year old.

My ten year old self knew that him dying meant that he would be gone and I would never see him again.

The way his death would impact me forever was gradually revealed.

It may be bizarre to read how this happened, but remember this is how it was for me as a ten year old. Insight began to dawn when my mum explained that we would not be able to keep the golden retriever puppy I had got as an early Christmas present.

Reasons which, to my adult self are entirely sensible, such as she would need to get a job and so the dog would be on its own in the house all day which would be unfair on it, but more significantly the upkeep would be too expensive, seemed like another of life's betrayal.

I can still recall how the dog being re homed felt like a second bereavement. I had lost my dad and now I was losing the puppy that consoled me in my sadness.

The bubble of grief the family existed in whilst my father was dying was buffeted by other stresses and strains with money and employment being constant fears. For me a hard reality was school. Along with all other children in the last year of primary education at that time, the 11 plus test was taken in the Spring term.

As I made my way to school on the day of the test my mum's words rang in my ears, "Do your best as it would make Daddy so happy if you passed to go to the Convent." (The Roman Catholic direct grant grammar school in Blackpool). In the event, I did pass and then had to sit and pass the Convent Entrance Exam in order to secure a free place in secondary school.

A decision my mother made when my father died was one she later regretted, although at the time she did it for the best of reasons. She felt it would be less upsetting for me if I didn't attend the funeral. Instead, I went to school. I wasn't resentful of this but can remember feeling excluded and fearful that a funeral must be such a terrible thing that I needed to be protected. Longer term, when experiencing a low mood swing, it would lead me to question if my Dad really was dead, or if it had been a mistake or even a lie.

Some might say that these sorts of experiences builds resilience in children. I disagree. Going through life changing events with little or no support leaves scar tissue. It can continue to give discomfort for years afterwards. Resilience building should not depend on an experience of trauma.

The cumulative impact of events resulted in my experiencing continuous heightened anxiety. This soon affected my attendance at school. I would complain of feeling ill, having stomach ache, headaches, or feeling sick. All of which I felt, but the trigger was not clinical it was emotional. I was terrified that I would come home again one day and find that another catastrophe had occurred.

After a number of absences, my mother was called in to see the Headmaster who told her my absences were unacceptable. He then saw me and said the same but added that I was getting my mother into trouble by my not attending school. This approach, short on empathy and long on judgement, did not help in building resilience. It soured the memories of school and increased the anxiety to which I was already subject.

By the time I left Junior School I was a sad and anxious child just short of eleven years old. I took up my place at the direct grant grammar school a few weeks later and it did little to ameliorate how I felt.

My mother at the same time was relearning her shorthand and refreshing her touch typing in order to get a job. One of my sisters went away to college and the other was married and living some distance away. There was no support with any homework difficulties, my mother started with the first of many bouts of depression and my anxiety remained.

I soon felt that perhaps I'd been allowed to pass the 11 plus because my Dad had died, and people had felt sorry for me. Otherwise, why would I be feeling like I did?

Nowadays, this self-doubt is referred to as the 'imposter syndrome' and it can be crippling.

The quality of secondary education I, and others, experienced at the school was not the best. Elitism was rife, not necessarily within the student body but certainly within the staff. Teaching staff comprised both nuns and lay staff. The religious teaching staff or academic staff, as they were described, were verging on the contemptuous of the kitchen staff and the feeling was mutual. Sister Finbar, from the kitchen redressed what she saw as social inequity by providing us with more than generous food portions. Thank you, Sister Finbar, wherever you are!

When I started secondary school I felt socially, intellectually and economically inferior to most of the other girls. I am sure I wasn't the only one, but bereavement exacerbated everything. I can recall one particularly

embarrassing moment when in the Dining Room, at each of the long trestle tables, a Sixth Former would be in charge of the younger girls. One day she interrupted our eating to instruct me in how to use my knife and fork properly when eating peas. She, no doubt, felt she was helping improve me, I felt second class or "Non U" as the term in use at the time.

In terms of strengths, as a learner, I was firmly located in the Arts. Despite the pretensions the school had, teaching staff were not the best. A number had qualified under the fast track post war emergency recruitment drive. I like to think that if the teaching had been better, resources more available and if my father had been alive, I would have been stronger than I was in science and maths. Each year group had two classes the "A" stream and the "Alpha" stream. I was destined for "Alpha". Most, but not exclusively, the girls who had been fee-paying pupils in the Convent Preparatory School were in the "A" stream.

My father was an engineer. Despite being born in poverty in a tenement in Leith, Edinburgh and leaving school at 14 to work in the shipyards, he had attended workers education classes at night school and eventually won a Bursary to study Engineering at Herriot Watt University.

My mother was born the youngest of thirteen. She won a scholarship to attend a selective school in Manchester. However, pupils had to buy their own text books and this put an end to her dream of being a teacher before they were even able to take shape.

Education was of huge importance to my father particularly hence the reason I felt such pressure to pass the 11 plus.

It should be no surprise to know that in this single sex convent school the science and maths teaching at the school was less effective than the arts subjects. My struggle with them confirmed, for me, the imposter syndrome.

The assessment system in place didn't help much either. This was simply referred to as "Averages". The way it worked was that every piece of work done by pupils was marked out of ten. Each week all marks were averaged, and the class ranked accordingly, and the lists pinned on the classroom notice board. Each term the weekly averages were averaged, and the term average was sent home. On the last day of the school year all the termly averages were averaged and students were ranked in their classes. On this occasion the averages were read out in front of the entire school. It was a very formal affair. The pupils sat in the body of the School Assembly Hall and the staff, all wearing Academic dress, would be seated on the stage.

Each class was called out in turn and stood in horseshoe stage at the front of the hall with the staff looking down. Girls were arranged alphabetically and their names were read out in rank order. When your name was read out you took one step out of the line up, curtsied and waited while your averages

were read out, rounded off with either a complimentary or withering summary comment. The process for me was hideous. Some scholarship girls gave up and left as soon as they could and who could blame them?

What these life and school experiences taught me, as a child, was not about how to do things well as an adult. Instead, I learned a more valuable lesson on how not to do things badly.

My decision to become a teacher was not clear cut. It was not something I felt drawn to.

Without the influence of my Dad and his view of education I was encouraged at home to think of a career as a Hairdresser or as medical secretary. One of my sisters had gone into nursing and the other sister became a teacher but my mum explained that she was cleverer than me. (She probably is actually!) My secret ambition was to go into Law.

Economics raised its head again as when I opened up about this as an idea, my mother who was a typist in a solicitor's office, was anxious that after a degree came articles and law society exams. How would this be paid for? She was supportive of me doing a degree, but this was when there were no fees and there was a maintenance allowance. Fast forward to today's context and she might have thought very differently.

After my degree and Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE), I found my first teaching job on the edge of inner city Manchester and was ambivalent as to whether I would stay after my NQT year. Having failed to find a more interesting job and wanting to enjoy being free from penny pinching I stayed and it was in the second year of teaching that I decided this was the career for me. I was 24 and 45 years later I am still glad I did.

The voice of my 10 year old self has been present throughout.

I had entered the profession in 1975, took on my first headship in 1988 and have lived and worked since, through major education system change. In the now famous landmark speech by James Callaghan PM, known as his "Ruskin Speech" a "rational debate based on the facts*"* was called for about state education. He described a public service which was patchy and in need of a shakeup. Three years later in 1979 when the Conservative Party was elected to govern the country the shakeup began and it does not seem to have stopped since.

The neo liberalism of the Conservatives influenced their education policy by enabling schools to respond to market demand through allowing the most successful and popular schools to grow. Previously, it was the LEA who exercised responsibility for allocating children to schools. This reduction in the power and influence of the LEA continued to be a feature of education policy from then on.

By the 1990s, education had surged to the top of the political agenda and many working in education thought that once a new Labour Government was elected there might be a back-pedalling on change, whilst at the same time investing more resource. A speech by Tony Blair in 1996, the Labour Party Leader from 1994, challenged this and instead promised more change if Labour won the election. This it did in 1997 with a landslide majority of 179 seats.

In his 1996 speech Blair had said, "ask me my three priorities for government, and I tell you: Education, Education, Education."

The City Academy Policy was launched in 2000 becoming simply, "Academies" in 2004. As with Fresh Start and Education Action Zones, this new type of school was intended to improve pupil performance and to break the cycle of low expectations. City Academies took on many of the City Technology Colleges characteristics such as the involvement of business sponsors, greater school autonomy over, for example term dates and the terms and condition of staff.

The suspension of the National Curriculum was one of the freedoms that becoming a City Academy provided. This was relatively minor when considering what the full implications of the City Academies meant. The role and responsibilities of Local Education Authorities had been subject to change, particularly from 1979 and change escalated from 1988. There was an increasing emphasis on the active involvement of Business including eventually sponsorship. The emphasis on sponsors was not simply monetary. Sponsors would be expected to play a leading role in ensuring the educational improvement of the Academy they sponsored. An initial target of thirty schools was identified and one of these was Ducie High School in Manchester. The first four Academies opened in 2002 and a further nine the next year. Manchester Academy was one of the nine.

There were some embarrassing failures in these early days, but they were at least balanced if not outweighed by the successes of others.

> Most academies are achieving increases in academic attainment for their pupils compared with their predecessor schools …… However, a small number of academies have made little progress, particularly when English and mathematics are taken into account." (National Audit Office Report 10 September 2010).

As the policy developed so it evolved and changed.

The first change was the nomenclature, when "City'" was dropped and Academies started up in less highly urban areas, but it was in 2010 during the coalition government that the biggest change occurred. This was when

the Governing bodies of maintained schools, judged to be outstanding or good could opt to convert to Academy status. Previously academies had required a sponsor but these "converter academies", so called, did not.

In 2002 however, the original intention of the policy was exclusively about improving the worst schools so that the poorest communities had a good school on their doorstep. It was not the first policy initiative that had been aimed at this group of schools.

The intent of the programme titled "Fresh Start" had been to revitalise "failing schools" which were mostly, but not exclusively, to be found in highly urban areas. Increasingly the findings of a body of educational research (School Effectiveness and then School Improvement) highlighted the importance of leadership in schools. The assumption held that school failure must therefore be as a result of poor leadership. The seemingly obvious course of action that followed was to change the leadership.

The premise that there was a clear correlation between failing schools and failing heads was a false syllogism. Whilst evidence of failure can be obvious not all the reasons for failure are so visible. Ill-judged and poorly implemented "support" along with naïve and/or inadequate governance is often a highly relevant contributory element.

Fresh Start removed the existing Headteachers and replaced them by appointing a so-called "Super Head." The policy was a dismal failure for the ten schools involved, as within months most of the **"**Super Heads" had gone and the policy consigned to history. One well publicised failure was that of Islington Arts and Media school. The school opened in 1999 with additional money and resource but it's newly appointed "Super Head" left after two terms. The school and its "Super Head" were featured in a BBC documentary which was embarrassing for all involved. In his book "Education, Education, Education", Andrew Adonis described the Islington School as it opened under the Fresh Start banner.

> On the opening day of the 'new' school, there was no timetable, no IT, the bells and fire alarms weren't working, and the school was a dangerous building site.

Adonis located accountability of this firmly with the LEA and not the policy itself. I am still not convinced. There is no doubt that the policy damaged, if not ended, the careers of a number of Headteachers who had been lionised on appointment but who then quickly became an embarrassment and a convenient scapegoat when things did not improve.

I felt it reflected a naivety among the new team at the DFE. There was a lack of understanding of the complexity of why schools become dysfunctional and what needed to change before they improved. It also

demonstrated the increased risk for government through centralising both policy making and policy implementation.

Naivety was in abundance in the early days of the Academy programme when huge amounts of money were spent on leading architects' ideas of what a 21st century school should look like. Some of the early academy buildings were classic illustrations of "form over function." In recent years more public money had to be spent on these "iconic" buildings installing some more traditional features, such as walls to create separate classrooms rather than having "Open Learning Zones."

The City Academy programme was different from its inception to the Fresh Start Policy. Firstly, it was not completely new as it borrowed heavily from City Technology colleges and also the American Charter Schools. These were precedents upon which Policy makers could draw.

Speeches and texts launching the academy policy revolved around two key words, transformation and innovation. In early conversations when I posed the question, "So, what does transformation mean?" I was told it meant "doing things differently as what has been done does not work," whilst "innovation" was defined as the "difference." Although an experienced educator, I didn't find this particular example of sophistry helpful. A number of Principals of the earlier academies spoke with passion and eloquence about their vision of innovation and how they would break the mould of traditional comprehensive education. There would be iconic buildings, a more relevant curriculum, and new forms of pupil organisation and new governance structures all of which would ensure that poor results, bad behaviour, and lack of engagement would be at an end. This is what happened in some of the academies but by no means in all. The first academies provided evidence for opponents of the Academy policy. For example, Unity Academy in Middlesbrough was described in 2005 by Ofsted as not having the capacity to bring about the necessary improvements. The Business Academy, Bexley was found to be "inadequate" in its first full inspection.

I explained to the civil servants responsible that this was not going to be my intention or approach to innovation in Manchester

The underpinning principles of my approach to school improvement were honed and tested when teaching in schools, sixth form colleges, leading authority wide projects and headships.

It was during the final headship as Principal of Manchester Academy that the approach was tested to destruction and evidence of its effectiveness undeniable.

My approach isn't resource dependent or elaborate. It didn't and doesn't require exhaustive materials or attendance at expensive courses. It is

dependent on the "how" rather than the "what" is done. It grows from the culture established with attention being paid to eliminating the wrong ways of doing things rather than prescribing the way things must be done.

My approach to the leadership at Manchester Academy was never complicated. It was straightforward, authentic and didn't try to recreate the past, as …. "they do things differently there."

Simply: -

- Always respect, protect and preserve learners' dignity (they are not averages!).
- Never allow a position or title to promote impunity.
- Have a focus on followership, not just leadership.
- Be alert to signs of hubris and never forget its twin, nemesis.
- Ask and listen to the answers of those with least power and most to lose.
- Always look happy and pleased to be with learners.
- Be serious when needed but strike an 80/20 balance (20% serious 80% joyful).
- Accept willingly and understand that the people being paid the most should face the greatest challenges.
- Celebrate and congratulate regularly for things you know others do better than you.
- Think of what you would hope learners will say they remember about their experience 10, 15, 20 years after they have left you and what if anything you might need to do differently to ensure they do.

The way in which each are extrapolated and implemented looked different in different contexts and organisations that I led. In some, those most in need of understanding of how leadership would work were adults. Learners recognise the need for leadership. Irrespective of the "who" when you dug down the same principles lay as bedrock to the leadership practice.

Whether or not this would be innovative or transformational enough for the Department, I did not pause to consider.

I would not be adopting the Department's view of innovative practice.

Manchester Academy innovation would be achieved when children and young people were happy to come to school on time, five days a week, in uniform, relieved that adults were in charge because they believed and trusted it was going to make a difference to their lives.

CHAPTER TWO

A LEAP OF FAITH

One of the first City Academies was Unity City Academy in Middlesbrough. It was sponsored by Amey Builders and was opened in 2002 with its pupils coming from two Ofsted rated inadequate secondary schools in the city. Its first inspection as a city academy also resulted in an "Inadequate" judgement. Two years later it was judged as "Satisfactory" and in 2009 it received another "Satisfactory" judgement, but in 2012, it was deemed "Inadequate" for a second time. Eighteen months later, eleven years after opening it was judged as "Good". In 2016, however, it was judged to be "inadequate" again. This meant that many children had the whole of their secondary experience in an inadequate school despite the unprecedented capital investment and new approach. The sponsor changed during the process but despite the replacement, additional resourced support was still needed from the DFE.

Losing out on a good education is always unacceptable. It is worth noting that in the case studies of schools included in the book, "Excellence in Education: the making of great schools" *(*Cyril Taylor and Conor Ryan 2005), that it took for those schools, regarded as being at the bottom of the pile, an average of seven and a half years to improve.

Improvement can happen quickly, but the degree of improvement described as "transformation" needs longer. The assumption made by the Department for Education (DFE) and Ministers, I was led to understand, was that the worst school could become outstanding in four years. There are so many variables at work that this is rare to happen. When it does, close examination often shows that the school had only relatively recently become inadequate and was not deeply dysfunctional or the improvement had been achieved by short term and unsustainable tactics.

In those schools that became the first City Academies, their spiral of decline had lasted at least ten years. In the case of Ducie it had been much longer, and it was Ducie High School in Manchester that was to become the first City Academy in the north west.

Having worked in Manchester since the late 1970s I knew what the reputation of Ducie had been since that time. What I didn't know with any

certainty was if the reputation was deserved. I was left in no doubt when at a conference after the Academy had opened a deIegate told me that as a pupil at a nearby secondary school in Manchester in the 1970s she and her friends took a longer route home to avoid walking past the school. The reason being that on one occasion they had been chased by Ducie pupils who, when they caught them, set fire to their blazers. This apparently was not an isolated incident.

There had been a Ducie High School in Manchester for over a hundred years by the time it closed in August 2003. In this time it had changed its designation a number of times. Whilst it existed, Ducie High School had produced a number of significant alumni including the actor John Thaw and Sir Howard Bernstein, the renowned Chief Executive of Manchester City Council. There are many other highly successful professionals included in its roll call, academics, entrepreneurs, artists, politicians, trade unionists and senior police officers. Over the years that it had existed the school had changed its location, demographic and status many times, becoming a comprehensive school in 1967. By 1993 it had the highest truancy rate of schools in England and the performance of the school in its core purpose of educating children was woeful. The full extent of its weaknesses was made explicit with the first publication of the School Performance Tables in 1994 and the subsequent and continued public scrutiny. It escaped the doomed Fresh Start initiative but was involved in other improvement initiatives such as “Education Action Zones” and “Excellence in Cities”.

Despite the additional resources both of these initiatives brought with them, Ducie did not improve. “The most gang infested comprehensive school in the country.” was how Andrew Adonis described it in his book “Education, Education, Education.”

> “I was a Ducie High School student for my first year, and I can honestly say that a more appropriate name would have been ‘Ducie Fight Club’. Every day was a struggle to focus on the actual reason for being in school, learning something”. (M.A. Alumnus)

It is difficult to imagine how a school in the heart of a great city like Manchester could have declined in such a dramatic way. It was not because of lack of money. A multi million pound remodel and refurbishment had been conducted in 1996, unifying the previous split sites the school had occupied and making it co-educational. However, anyone who visited the Ducie building would have been forced to ask what the money had been spent on, I know I did. For no discernible reason a glass elevator was installed running the height of the building at a cost of approximately one million pounds. This had nothing to do with standards but looked like

architectural hubris. It certainly did nothing to improve what went on inside of the school.

The building however was just the tip of the iceberg. The briefest of looks at the school's budget made clear its dire financial position. In 1997/8 the school's deficit was £162,582, which by 2000/1 had risen to £737,000 and by 2002/3 the school was losing £1.5 million a year. It was no exaggeration to say that the school was haemorrhaging money and students. In five years, the school lost over £3 million, and it had nothing to show for it. While such a financial position might have been mitigated by students making remarkable progress and achievement Ducie students did not do this. From 1993 to 2003 the highest results the school achieved was 13% 5 'A'*- 'C' and when 5 'A'*- 'C' with English and Mathematics was the focus, the best outcome had been 2%. The damage inflicted on children's life chances was deplorable and the numbers of students whose whole secondary education was blighted must have run into thousands. The individuals lost out, their communities lost out, the city lost out and umpteen professions missed out on the untapped potential of able and talented young people.

The poor performance directly impacted upon the financial position of the school. According to the 2002 Public Consultation Report, the combination of a dangerously low pupil intake and "high historic staffing costs" meant that the school was incapable of balancing a budget. The same report points out "it might properly be asked how this situation was ever allowed to develop, and crucially, was never addressed satisfactorily."

There are other statistics that compound the picture presented by the above. For example, secondary schools can't exist without primary children coming to them. Ducie was surrounded by some of the most successful primary schools in the City yet it did not have a working relationship with any of them. Of the eight primary schools which were intended to form Ducie's annual student intake, only 13% of the parents across the eight schools chose Ducie as their preference. This demonstrates that the community around the school had no confidence in it.

It was seen as a place where children ran riot and teachers were reduced to trying to manage mayhem. It was not easy to disagree with them. Parents who do not care about their children's education are few and far between, the parents in Moss Side are no exception. Parents had, over the years, attempted to secure their children places in schools other than Ducie with the annual pupil drain from the City sometimes being as high as a thousand. Each year large numbers of families made their lives more difficult in order to avoid their child having to become a Ducie student. As anyone with children will know, organising the school run is an intensely difficult

process and yet every year about 83% of all potential Ducie students' families would do just that, making their lives more difficult in order to secure what they felt would be a safer, more effective education for their child.

Poor achievement and behaviour will always drive parents away from a school. The behaviour at Ducie was appalling and some of the worst I have seen in a lifetime of working in schools. The data speaks for itself.

In 1998 there were 428 fixed term exclusions. There were 604 pupils in the school that year and yet there were 428 exclusions. Clearly exclusions didn't work but the school's sole behaviour management strategy seemed to be that of exclusion. In the interests of fairness, it should be pointed out that 1998 is something of a statistical anomaly. In 1992, 192 pupils were given fixed term exclusions and in 2000, 137. This still works out as approximately a third of the school being excluded over the course of an academic year. Exclusion rates are a good indicator of a school in crisis. In these children and adults simply tolerate each other's presence, social spaces are a sort of *"no man's land",* and learning, the purpose of the school, happens if it happens, accidentally and not by design.

Perhaps this sounds unduly harsh. Certainly, Ducie was not without its good points. There were many good people who were deeply committed to the students at Ducie High School. They wanted Ducie to succeed and devoted their entire careers to try to achieve this. To fully understand the magnitude of the change, which becoming an Academy meant, it is necessary to understand how dysfunctional Ducie was. Despite the desire and ambition of many of the staff the facts were as they were. The position of the school was such that the DFE doubted if a sponsor prepared to commit 10% of the costs of a new building to house the Academy could ever be found. Who would be prepared to contribute such a large amount of money to what must have appeared as a lost cause?

The initial plan had been for the Manchester Science Park (MSP) to be the sponsor. Whilst this proposal was given consideration by the DFE there were three difficulties. One was because the DFE required two things of City Academy Sponsors. It expected them to contribute 10% of the costs of either building a new or radically refurbishing an existing school. Secondly, it also wanted sponsors to play a significant role in running the new schools. This was not going to be possible with MSP as the sponsor because of what MSP was. It had been established in the early 1990s as a strategic initiative led by the Local Authority and the City's Universities. Its initial purpose was to provide a base for small new tech based business start-ups providing facilities at low rent and discounted rates that would otherwise be out of

reach for ‘start ups’. Its Board Membership reflected the public/private nature of the MSP.

Manchester Science Park pledged to deliver the equivalent contribution of 10% cash in terms of time and advice from the Parks’ businesses but the amount of cash it could provide was minimal. Added to this, the third difficulty for the Department to accept, was that the majority of the MSP Directors were from the local authority. This was the same organisation that had already failed to secure improvement in the school despite the major refurbishment it had financed a few years earlier. A further ‘rebranding’ of Ducie to become an Academy and meet the exacting standards expected by the DFE was not possible with the limited amount of resource that the MSP would be able and required to invest.

The DFE rejection of the suggested sponsorship arrangement and its decision was not popular locally. It was then up to the DFE to find a sponsor while the MSP retained the role of a local and subsidiary sponsor. The search for a sponsor for such a dysfunctional school was not going to be easy.

DFE officials working on the City Academy Programme had approached a number of potential sponsors for Manchester Academy. Those that were prepared to travel from London, which was where most sponsors were based, were quick to turn round and return to London once they saw the challenge Ducie High School presented. To be fair this was very understandable. They were told about the early previous investment that had done nothing to improve the school and did not believe that yet more investment would work nor were they prepared to risk donating their money and reputation to “a dead cert for failure.” To an extent this was also due to the location of Ducie. Moss Side in the 1990s was the reason for the image of Manchester going from being “Madchester” thanks to the Happy Mondays and others, to being described by the national media as “Gunchester.” Between 1996 and 2000 there were an estimated 139 shootings in the area.

A potential sponsor was eventually found after Andrew Adonis gathered representatives from a number of education charities together for an event to which he invited their involvement in the new Academy Programme. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of one small charity that ran a handful of independent schools, Ewan Harper from Church Schools Company (CSco) was in attendance. He was engaged by the proposition and took it back to his Board. It was serendipity, as the Board chaired by the ex-Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord George Carey, had been revisiting the original aims of the CSco as the millennium drew near. CSco had been founded in 1883 with the aim of educating young women based on Anglican values. It eventually

became a group of fee-paying schools and so had moved away from the original intent of its founders.

When the CEO proposed that the charity could return to its original mission by sponsoring an Academy, the Board agreed. Originally, this was to be an academy in Lambeth. However, the approach of the charity and its CEO was such that, as officials found it increasingly difficult to find a potential sponsor for the academy in Manchester, they asked Ewan Harper if CSco might consider sponsoring it.

As I was working for the DFE at that time I was the official who hosted Ewan's first visit to Moss Side to see Ducie High School. It was with some trepidation that I drove him into Moss Side as he sounded and looked as if he had stepped out of a P G Woodhouse novel. His trademark red socks were clearly visible when he sat down and crossed his legs much to the fascination of the group of students with whom he met and spoke.

I would like to say it was my persuasion that resulted in CSCo agreeing to sponsor Manchester Academy, but it was not. This was down to two students who spoke to Ewan when he had a very well rehearsed tour of the school. Both students described their background and what their ambitions were. As the CEO of a charity which ran selective independent schools, he could see all too clearly that Ducie was not going to give them the education they needed for the life chances they both deserved. Ewan saw just as clearly that if implemented correctly the City Academy policy could. Driving him to Manchester Piccadilly to catch his train home he spoke of the two students he had met. They had clearly impressed him with their raw ambition that he described as tangible. As he rushed off to catch his train, I had no idea that the next day, I would be able to report to the Department, "The man from CSCo…he said yes!"

With a sponsor now secured the process to close Ducie and open Manchester Academy began in earnest. Shortly after, I ended my role at the DFE and returned to a post as a Director of Education in a Local Education Authority, I assumed that academisation of Ducie would continue seamlessly. However, I heard from previous colleagues about the difficultly it was proving to be for the sponsor to appoint a Principal for the Academy. Most potential Principals understandably felt that to take on the "old Ducie High school" would be career suicide, they had only to look at the experiences of the "Fresh Start" leaders for evidence to support their reluctance.

In my post as LEA Director, I was safe and comfortable but not particularly excited by the job. However, being the single wage earner in my family with three dependents, career suicide was not an option.

Why I agreed to apply for the post of Principal at Manchester Academy I am still not exactly sure. It was a combination of the challenge to my being seen as an effective school improver, the excitement of being at the centre of such a new and highly politicised policy area, the courage shown by the sponsor and a feeling that it was the right thing to do.

It is testament to their faith in me that my family did not demur at my giving up a safe job and taking on such a high risk one, instead they gave me their total support. Perhaps it was my own personal experience as a child from a terraced house in Blackpool, my Father dying when I was 10 years old and having been unhappy with my own secondary education in a convent Grammar school that made me want to have the opportunity to show children from the poorest places that they could flourish in a good school.

Whatever the cognitive processing that took place that made me do it, I decided to follow Ewan Harper in making a "Leap of Faith."

In recognition of the challenges the first City Academies posed, the first tranche had substantial planning and preparation time for opening as academies. Most were given at least three terms and sometimes more. We did not have this luxury and instead there was less than two terms between 1st February and 31st August 2003 to establish the new Manchester Academy, which had to be different in every way to the Ducie High School that had gone before.

The rationale for this speedy opening was entirely pragmatic. The Local Authority, which remained in control of admissions, warned that if we were to wait until 2004 it would be too late for a number of reasons.

Ducie was continuing to lose students and many parents went through the LEA's Appeals process to avoid their children being placed there. Ducie's budget was catastrophic and secondary Headteachers were increasingly angry that it was having a negative impact on what was available for their schools. "There will be no Academy to open if you wait until 2004" was the stark warning given. Whether the warning would have been quite as dire had the original sponsor not been relegated to second place is uncertain.

It was undoubtedly difficult for the City Council to accept that despite pouring resource into Ducie over a number of years the school had been impervious to every attempt at improvement. Ducie becoming an academy highlighted this.

Why did the LEA not solve the Ducie problem simply by closing it and not replacing it? On the surface this looks to be the obvious solution.

At the time the City was leaking children at the primary/secondary transition phase. These went to other adjoining authorities. There was no