

Article

An Evaluation of Education Policy in England since 2010 and the Policy Consequences for Small Primary Schools

Tanya Ovenden-Hope 

School of Education, Plymouth Marjon University, Plymouth PL6 8BH, UK; tovenden-hope@marjon.ac.uk

Abstract: The fate of small primary schools (pupils aged five–eleven years old) in England is linked to education policy reforms. This paper presents an evaluation of selected education policy reforms in England since 2010 with suggested consequences for small primary schools. The research was undertaken using a qualitative research methodology that employed a document analysis method to create a Policy Document Analysis Frame (PDAF) for the policy evaluation. The implications of the policy reforms for small primary schools were examined through the conceptual lens of Educational Isolation. Educational Isolation identifies the limiting factors of place for a school's access to the resources required for school improvement. Education policy reform is focused on school improvement. Small primary schools in England are typically located in rural neighbourhoods with sparse populations, resulting in an average of just over 100 pupils per school. The findings suggest that the contextual factors of place and size for small primary schools in England present disadvantages in relation to the selected national education policy reforms. The national funding formula, Multi Academy Trusts (groups of schools independently regulated but centrally funded by the state), and National Standards are the key policy reforms, driven by a neo-liberal ideology, that are suggested to have implications for the future of small schools. Recommendations are offered to the new 2024 Labour government that would support the re-instatement of small primary schools as an integral part of the education landscape in England.

Keywords: small schools; rural schools; primary schools; education policy; multi academy trusts; educational isolation



Citation: Ovenden-Hope, T. An Evaluation of Education Policy in England since 2010 and the Policy Consequences for Small Primary Schools. *Educ. Sci.* **2024**, *14*, 1164. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14111164>

Academic Editors: Beng Huat See and Loraine Hitt

Received: 30 June 2024

Revised: 23 October 2024

Accepted: 24 October 2024

Published: 26 October 2024



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1. Introduction

The fate of small primary schools (pupils aged five–eleven years old) in England is linked to education policy reforms, as are the futures of schools globally [1]. Education policy is not value-free, it has a value-based intent [2] that directs the functions and the outcomes for state-funded and -regulated schools. In England, all state-funded schools (including those with independent regulations) are required to respond to policy reforms. But not all schools have the same resources to be able to act upon policy reforms. Small primary schools are typically located in rural neighbourhoods in England, with an average pupil population size of just over one hundred and a small staff complement [3]. The place and size context of schools is not typically considered in education policy reforms, and when there is reference to rural- or small-school-specific contexts, the policy does little to create equity with the urban or large schools that are also enacting those policy reforms [4]. This paper offers an evaluation of selected education policy reforms in England that are relevant for the suggested consequences for small primary schools. The findings were collected using a qualitative methodology that employed the document analysis method to create a Policy Document Analysis Frame [1]. The findings of the evaluation of the policy were examined using an Educational Isolation lens [5] to unpack the implications of education policy on small primary schools in England.

Policy is considered as a direction for action that has an embedded political or ideological position [6]. For schools in England, education policy is a means of change that

determines the resources received, the outcomes expected, and the accountability applied. Small primary schools experience these changes more acutely due to having fewer resources, fewer students to participate in norm-referenced assessments, and fewer teachers to take accountability. Policy documentation provides the guidelines for school practice, and school leaders implement these guidelines [6]. In small primary schools, leaders typically have teaching and leadership roles, which reduces their available time to implement policy reform or access reform opportunities [4].

Small primary schools generally have school leaders that teach alongside their leadership and management duties and, consequently, do not have the same time to digest policy and embed it into practice as non-teaching school leads do. The challenges of time and capacity for small primary school leads can be considered as a school-structural factor, as this includes the characteristics inherent in the school, such as the school's size [7]. For a small primary school, the structure limits the school's workforce number, based on the methodology used by the Department for Education (DfE) to calculate the workforce needed in schools [7]. Small primary schools in England, therefore, have funding for a small workforce:

“Small schools do not have sufficient funding to support more than a skeleton staff, frequently no more than a teaching head, a part-time teacher and an administrator. . . The situation also demands that staff are teaching across multiple age groups at all times and there is little opportunity to develop or access specialisms.” [3] page 13.

The capacity of the workforces in small primary schools in England is not sufficient to engage with policies and embed them into practice, compared to average-sized urban schools with much larger workforces and school leaders that do not teach, yet have the same policy reform requirements. Research findings have identified difficulties in attracting early-career teachers and school leaders [5,8,9] to small primary schools in rural areas. However, the length of teachers' service (or a lack of teacher churn) in small primary schools can also affect the schools' improvement [3,7].

1.1. Educational Isolation

English schools in rural, coastal, and ex-industrial areas have been relatively neglected in research. This neglect is, in part, because the existing research has been steered by the English government's focus on large schools in densely populated/urban areas, where policy is considered to have a greater reach and impact [10]. There is, however, a growing evidence base identifying “place” as an indicator of differential outcomes for schools, as well as pupils' outcomes [7,9,10]. The concept of Educational Isolation [7] has been used to consider policy evaluation findings and thereby suggest the contribution of place to the implications identified from policy for small primary schools. Place is seen to directly contribute to school size (based on the population size being served) and to the school's access to the resources required for school improvement [7,9].

The Educational Isolation concept is not a deficit model about schools, it is an indicator model of the place-based factors that can reduce schools' access to resources [7]. The concept can be applied to all schools, to further the understanding of the locational limitations on their access to resources (negative or positive) [7]. It is a useful concept through which to inform policymakers of the importance of targeting resources to schools, according to place-based need [7]. In England, coastal, rural, and ex-industrial locations are more likely to have Educationally Isolated schools. Small primary schools are typically located in rural areas, and in England, rural schools are more likely to experience the three place-based elements of Educational Isolation [11].

The Educational Isolation concept has three combined place-based elements that constitute the schools' location: geographical remoteness, socioeconomic disadvantages, and cultural isolation (from cultural opportunity and diversity). These elements act to limit a school's access to the resources required for school improvement [7]. These resources include school support and staff development, access to external funding for educational interventions, and a high-quality workforce (see Figure 1).

“Educational isolation is complex, grounded in location, situated in access to resources and results in reduced agency for schools”. [7] page 4.

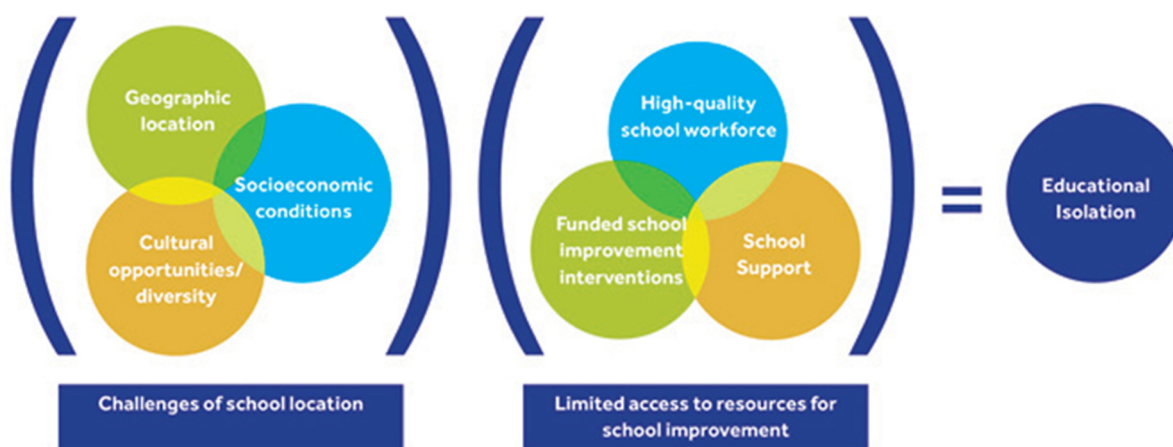


Figure 1. Educational Isolation diagram (Source: [7] p. 4).

Educationally Isolated schools are in places that have experienced a sustained decline in employment and opportunity, with intergenerational low, seasonal, or unemployment, which has created pockets of increased socioeconomic disadvantage. Infrastructural difficulties, ranging from poor/no public transport to limited affordable or appropriate housing, combine to limit a school’s access to resources, particularly teachers. Educationally Isolated places are typically hard to get to and out of, offer little to attract new residents, and have reduced the educational ambition of those that live there [10]. Lacking large scale employers and with few visible signs of future affluence, the communities in which Educationally Isolated schools’ leaders work establish a challenging canvas on which to paint a future of educational success. With one fifth of primary schools in England being in rural neighbourhoods and having an average of just over one hundred pupils, these rural, small primary schools can only be considered contextually by place and size.

One of the key consequences of being an Educationally Isolated school is limited access to a high-quality workforce [7]. The limitations on teacher recruitment for Educationally Isolated schools are greater than for other schools and are linked to the infrastructural challenges of their location. Within the current teacher shortage crisis in England [12], the long-term position for small primary school recruitment looks bleak. Small primary school leaders have reported that they face particular difficulties in recruiting teachers [7]. The heavy workload associated with a small staff number, the lack of employment opportunities for spouses, high/low housing prices, and poor public transport were all contextual issues that were identified as problems affecting teacher recruitment [7]. The three place-based elements combine to create a less-than-attractive prospect for a sustainable workforce in a small primary school.

The time involved in travel for school-to-school support and/or continuing professional development (CPD) for schools in geographically remote locations can restrict and reduce development opportunities for teachers and school leaders. Small primary schools that may already struggle to release teachers for CPD, due to their small staff complement, are challenged further by Educational Isolation [3]. High-quality CPD is important for school improvement, but the need to travel long distances for training and having relatively few staff in small schools mean that it can be difficult to find the time to release teachers for CPD [7].

The education policy’s context sets out an Education Inspection Framework for England with standards and expectations aligned to cultural diversity and opportunity. However, limited cultural opportunities and cultural diversity can be experienced in rural, small primary schools placing an additional workload for teachers to create the culturally diverse school experiences expected [13]. For small primary schools that are Educationally Isolated,

cultural isolation creates an additional workload and expense (to travel to engage with cultural opportunities) that can be ill afforded.

Place is being recognised by governments and academics as a criterion that can affect a school's access to resources [11,14]. "Opportunity Areas" [15] were the first policy reform of the Conservative government, which was in office from 2010 to 2024, to consider place as a factor for improved social equality. There were twelve low social mobility Opportunity Areas in England that received funding and strategic government support, including to improve educational outcomes, from 2018 to 2022. In 2022, the new Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities, issued the "Levelling Up in the UK" White Paper [14] (as part of the Conservative manifesto promise from 2019). The Levelling Up white paper identified 55 "Education Investment Areas" (EIAs) (including the previous Opportunity Areas) and was to address the "sustained low performance across key stage 2 and key stage 4 in 2017 to 2019" that had been demonstrated by a third of local authorities in England [16]. The consequences of these place-related policy reforms are yet to be seen for small primary schools in Educationally Isolated areas.

1.2. Defining Small Schools

"...in the context of a long-standing community, in which most people were educated in the village and still know each other, the [small] primary school occupies a powerful symbolic, cultural and temporal position." [17] page 47.

The educational, social, and community benefits of small primary schools have been well documented (see, for example, [3,8,17–22]), yet in England, these schools exist within the precarious context of having no nationally agreed definition of their constitution. The categorisation of small primary schools ranges from fewer than 210 pupils on roll [3] to fewer than 101 [23] and as low as under 91 [24]. Interestingly, secondary (post 11 years of age) small schools have been identified within the same size parameters as primary small schools, at under 200 pupils [18], in England. The threshold for a small secondary school has greater pupil numbers, at under 400 [19]. School leaders in England have also struggled to reach a consensus on what pupil number constitutes a small primary school, identifying school pupil numbers within the range of 50 to 275 [20].

The paucity of research on the specific challenges for small primary schools in England is, in part, due to the lack of consensus around what size a "small primary school" is (or should be). As the pupil number ranges in small school definitions, so does the number of teachers and the size of the estate. The contextual considerations for understanding a small school are complex. The analysis of education policy reform presented later suggests the context of small primary schools is poorly considered in relation to place (rurality) and size (the national funding formula) or not considered at all (academies and standards). For clarity, the definition of a small primary school that was used for this research is based on pupil number, being defined as a school with 210 or fewer pupils.

The number of small primary schools in England has been in decline since 1980, with a reduction of more than half, to 5406 in 2018 [25]. Large primary schools (with over 600 pupils) concurrently have increased exponentially from 49 in 1980 to 780 in 2018 [25]. The findings from the evaluation of the education policy reform that are presented in this paper suggest that these changes in small school numbers are largely a consequence of the education policy, related to funding and school structures, that has been implemented since 2010. The small primary school context matters, as rural, small primary schools are twice as likely to close as the national average [25].

In this paper, the implications of education policy reforms on the decline in the number of small primary schools were explored. A qualitative research methodology was used, employing document analysis method to create a Policy Document Analysis Frame (PDAF) with which to analyse the selected policy and reforms (see Section 2). Findings were considered through the conceptual lens of Educational Isolation [5]. The findings are presented and discuss the potential consequences of education reform in England since 2010 for small primary schools (see Appendix A). The discussion focuses on the

national funding formula (how state schools are financed), Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) (the state's preferred school structure), and the National Standards (run by the Office for Standards in Education). Recommendations for the new 2024 Labour government education policymakers are offered in the Conclusions Section, and they are intended to provoke considerations of the small primary school context, particularly place and size, for future education policy reforms.

2. Methods

A qualitative methodology was used for this research. The methodology employed the document analysis research method to explore education policy documents using a Policy Document Analysis Framework (PDAF), developed by the researcher. The PDAF was selected as the most appropriate research method to answer the study's research question: 'in what ways, if any, have education policy reforms since 2010 in England had consequences for small primary schools'.

The data collected for this research were education public policy documents, published in England between 2010 and 2020, that were relevant to small primary schools. Relevance for the selection of policy documents was defined as 'a policy reform that would effect change in a state-funded primary school'. The policy document analysis enabled an examination of policy documents to understand their purpose and function [1]. A Policy Document Analysis Frame (PDAF) that considered policy context, policy text, and policy consequences [26] was developed by the researcher to support the robust and systematic evaluation of the policy documents selected (see Section 2.2 for the selection process). A literature review of all the areas relevant to this research was conducted for the robustness of the analysis.

The PDAF (see Section 2.2) allowed a comprehensive policy analysis through the critical questioning of assumptions, gaps between intentions and outcomes, and how policies operate in practice. It did this by examining policy context, policy text, and policy consequences to explore and develop foci for answering the research question. The results were examined using the conceptual lens of Educational Isolation [5] to understand the full context of small primary schools by size and place and were located within the literature on neo-liberal policymaking.

The advantages and disadvantages of the document analysis were fully considered for this research. A clear advantage of the document analysis was that it enabled the research question to be explored in an easily accessible and cost-effective way, through access to publicly available policy documents. The disadvantage of this method in relation to limitations in document access and retrieval were negligible due to the public and open access nature of the policy documents being used.

It was recognised throughout the analysis phase that the policy documents were not produced to support research and may, therefore, not contain the detail of information required to offer a robust insight into the research question. The construction of the PDAF was an attempt to mitigate the use of irrelevant or insufficiently detailed education policy documents. Any potential bias in the documents relating to education policy was mitigated by using the government's education policy documents instead of digests, which could potentially interpret the policy with a particular bias. The potential for a researcher bias in the document analysis was mitigated by development of the PDAF process (see Appendix B).

2.1. Education Policy Document Selection (Data Collection)

The PDAF was developed through seven phases (see Appendix B), with the selection process being the first three:

1. Define scope:

- What are the research questions?
- What types of policy documents will support answering the research question?

- What levels of these types of policy documents (strategic, organizational, or procedural)?
 - The preliminary identification of documents.
2. Set the selection criteria:
 - Clearly define and document the criteria used for selecting policy documents.
 - What documents are appropriate for answering your research question? Why is this the case? Is there any researcher positionality/bias in your selection?
 - Ensure the criteria are applied consistently across all the document types.
 - Policy document selection based on relevance, this being 'a policy reform that would effect change in a state-funded primary school'.
 - Identify the author and the intended audience for the documentation.
 - Who wrote the document?
 - Could it be biased?
 - For whom was it written?
 3. Sifting and sorting:
 - Review the policy documents to remove documents that are unhelpful in answering the research questions.

The preliminary identification of policy documents (2010–2020) that related to education reform and schools was undertaken using an initial google search of all the education policy, law, and literature. These education policy documents included government press releases and policy announcements, consultation papers, government responses to public consultations, Select and Joint Committee reports, Ofsted (Education Inspectorate) frameworks, legislative developments and parliamentary proceedings, statistical publications, and research/evaluation reports relating to state-funded schools to locate and make secure the findings. To provide a documentary policy context for pillar one of the PDAF, the following websites were visited to identify and utilise any further relevant information:

- Relevant government websites, including gov.uk, DfE.
- Relevant parliamentary websites, including the Education Select Committee and the Public Accounts Committee.
- The UK legislation website
- Relevant Non-Departmental Public Body websites, including Ofsted,
- Think tank and education research organisation websites, including the Education Policy Institute, the National Foundation for Education Research, the Sutton Trust, and the Education Endowment Foundation.
- National Children's Bureau database.
- The British Education Index (BEI)/ERIC bibliographic databases.
- For specific news items, the education site pages of the BBC, The Guardian online, The Times Educational Supplement, The Times Higher Educational Supplement, and Schools Week.
- Third sector organisations working on specific areas of education, including Barnardo's, The Children's Society, and the NSPCC.

The searches and the supplementary website reviews enabled the selection of relevant education policies and reforms relating to state-funded primary schools in England for their potential consequences for small primary schools. Reading widely in the first phase of the document selection established a solid foundation for analysing the policy context (pillar one of the PDAF) of the documents.

Following the sifting and sorting of the policy documents for relevance, the final selection of the public education policy documents focused on education in the state-funded sector only, which included the education of children aged four (reception) to eleven (year 6). Policy documents that were not included due to their lack of relevance were

- Early years education and childcare, unless of specific relevance to children in reception class.
- Elective home education.
- Independent schools.
- Specific subject areas in the curriculum.
- Teachers’ pay and conditions.

The policy documents selected for the analysis can be found in Appendix A. The relevant policies are presented in the results chronologically, in line with an evaluation using the PDAF, which focussed the analysis on policy context (and the way in which policies relate to other education polices), policy text (and the inferences of purpose and values, ideological or otherwise), and policy consequences (recognizing that policies do not develop in isolation and that the implementation of multiple policies over time, and in sequence, can have far-reaching consequences). The PDAF was applied to the selected education policy and policy-related reform documents.

2.2. The Policy Document Analysis Frame (Data Analysis)

This research located the method of document analysis within the context of public policy (policy produced by the government). A PDAF was developed by the researcher, adapted from the robust policy document analysis method [26]. Seven phases for the PDAF development were identified and followed (see Appendix B); three focused on document selection, one on document collection, two on standardisation and quality assurance, and one on review. The three pillars of policy analysis—policy context, policy text, and policy consequences [26]—were adapted [6] to create a straightforward frame of questions under each pillar to be answered to form a review of the policies selected (see Table 1). The PDAF provided a systematic approach to evaluating public education policy documents for the implications for small primary schools in England. To support the trustworthiness of the findings, an example of the policy document analysis using the PDAF can be found in Appendix C.

Table 1. Policy Document Analysis Frame.

| Pillar One Policy Context | | Pillar Two Policy Text | Pillar Three Policy Consequences |
|------------------------------|---|--|---|
| History | | Content | Evaluation |
| 1. | What are the drivers (social/political values/history) behind the policy? | 1. Why is the policy structured/framed as it is? | 1. What has been the outcome of implementing the policy reform for small primary schools? |
| 2. | How does this policy relate to other education policies? | 2. What inferences exist about the policy’s purpose and values? Where politically/socially/ideologically are these situated? | |
| | | 3. Is expected content missing from the policy? | |

The PDAF was used to explore each selected policy reform pillar by pillar. The social, political, and historical drivers behind the policy, and how it related to other policies, were key to understanding the policy context (pillar one of the PDAF). The sequential boiling down of the documentary evidence in the process of selection, described below, supported the development of a nuanced understanding of the policy text (pillar two of the PDAF). The researcher developed a familiarity with the all the documents, whether selected or unselected for evaluation. Understanding why the policy was framed in the way it was, with inferences about the values and purpose of the policy (and the possible reasons for obvious omissions, such as place, from the policy) were crucial to the analysis. The evaluation of the education policy selected was completed with an analysis of the policy consequences (pillar three) to establish the outcome of implementing the policy for small primary schools.

3. Results

The year 2010 heralded the start of a period of rapid and extensive educational reform in England, marked by the election of a coalition government (Conservative and Liberal Democrat) that declared, through its Programme of Government, its intent for schools. The policy-informing text below demonstrates the purpose, value, and ideological position for the policy and reform to come:

“The Government believes that we need to reform our school system to tackle educational inequality, which has widened in recent years, and to give greater powers to parents and pupils to choose a good school. We want to ensure high standards of discipline in the classroom, robust standards and the highest quality teaching. We also believe that the state should help parents, community groups and others come together to improve the education system by starting new schools.” [27] page 28.

The *policy context* of the reforms of the Academies Bill and Act 2010 embodied the neo-liberal ideological driver for change in English education [28] that remains today. The central component of a neo-liberal ideology is the “trinity” of “three interrelated policy technologies [of] the market, managerialism and performativity” [29] page 215. This trinity is evident in education the policies and reforms of 2010 onwards, embedding a focus on improvement, entrepreneurship (academisation), and the associated competition, targets, and published student data (for comparison within competition). The Teacher Retention and Recruitment Strategy, started in 2019 [30], and the subsequent Initial Teacher Training Market Review, started in 2020 [31], wore their neo-liberal intent proudly on their sleeves. The policy consequence in this policy context is a schools-led system in England that is focused on “efficiency, entrepreneurship, chief executives, audits, market share, value adding and performance indicators” [32] page 1 [33]. For small primary schools, the efficiencies of scale that were expected to result from the reforms were impossible to achieve, and the performance indicators were informed by large data sets that were skewed against successful outcomes [4,34]. The critical element in the analysis of the selected documents, for both policy context and text, was the absence of the consideration for school context (place and size). The implication, or policy consequence, of education policy since 2010 for small primary schools in England is suggested to be their decline [25]. The cause of this decline can be seen in policy text to align with a policy context of neo-liberal marketized efficiencies and performativity that are easier to achieve with large schools [33,35,36].

3.1. The Academies Bill & Academies Act 2010

Michael Gove was the Secretary of State for Education in England in 2010 and became the longest serving Secretary of State for Education, having served for four years when he left that cabinet role in 2014. When examining the education policy reform led by Gove using the PDAF in Table 1, the policy context and policy text demonstrate the education landscape transformation at pace, with the aim of creating a schools-led system that was underpinned by academisation through the Academies Bill 2010 [37]. Academisation refers to the conversion of local-authority-grant-maintained schools into schools that are still funded by the government, but with independent regulations. The Academies Bill 2010 [37] removed local authorities’, parents’, and teachers’ power to stop or oppose a school becoming an academy and enabled schools that were categorised as “outstanding” by Ofsted (the national regulatory standards body for schools) to “fast-track” the process. The consequences of the Academies Bill 2010 [37] for small primary schools is not readily apparent in the policy text but is evident in the policy ideology and the neo-liberal purpose of self-regulation that is inherent in a school-led system. School self-regulation requires capacity within the leadership and funding to ensure appropriate resources, neither of which are forthcoming in the policy from 2010 onwards for small primary schools [4,35].

The policy context of the Academies Bill 2010 [27] was one of discontent, challenged by the government opposition. The Shadow Secretary of State for Education (Ed Balls) at the time prophetically warned that the reform in the Academies Bill 2010 would split the

education system in England by creating two very different types of schools: both types funded by the state, but one type with the autonomy to self-regulate.

“...the Bill will create unfair and two-tier education in this country. There will be gross unfairness in funding, standards will not rise but fall, and fairness and social cohesion will be undermined.” [38] Cols 35–36.

Regardless of wider political concern, The Academies Bill became law as the Academies Act 2010 [37] and laid the foundation for the current multi-type school system of education in England [36]. Gove went on to develop further types of state-maintained schools in England, free schools (government-funded, independent, community run schools) and studio schools (small, vocationally focused, government-funded schools), to function alongside the existing grant-maintained local authority and faith schools and the new academies [37]. The new school types were given powers by The Education (Specified Work) (England) Regulations 2012 [39] to regulate their own teaching supply, including the appointment of unqualified teachers as teachers, effectively deregulating the teaching profession in England. At this time, small primary schools were predominantly grant-maintained in local authorities [4] and, therefore, lacked the freedoms of academies, free schools, and studio schools to look at alternative workforce supply options [40]. Small schools, with a “lack of churn” [5] of their mid-career teachers, typically have a long-serving workforce [3], which is expensive and can limit options for the employment of more affordable staff, such as teaching assistants [10]. Small primary schools were not able to participate in the reforms that were transforming the structure of the education system in England because of their size [4].

3.2. *The Importance of Teaching White Paper 2010*

The Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, issued his first White Paper in 2010 “The Importance of Teaching” [41], which clearly stated the policy context of the coalition government for the structure/type, funding, and curriculum for primary (and secondary) schools in England. Academies were identified as the most desirable status for all schools. The White Paper also demonstrated the commitment of the government to a schools-led system that was thought to remove any “constraint and improve their professional status and authority” [41] page 8. The variation in school funding between schools was acknowledged, and the White Paper put forward that this would be addressed by a “national funding formula” (NFF), under which, money would go directly from the government to schools, rather than through the local authorities [41] page 82. At this time, funding for small primary schools was a concern [34], but, as will be discussed in Section 3.6, funding continued to be an issue within a revised NFF because of the reliance on pupil numbers for the funding allocation [4].

“The Importance of Teaching” (2010) [41] also proposed radical changes to the curriculum in primary and secondary schools, starting with the “English Baccalaureate” (EBacc) that was written into policy later that year. The EBacc brought the return to testing for primary-school-aged children. The policy context was the move to an “academic”, knowledge-based curriculum, away from a history of curricula that were embedded with transferable skills development.

Small primary schools, through this policy, were expected to engage with the Standard Assessment Tests (SATs), a national mandatory maths and English examination of key stage 3 pupils (age 10–11), in the same way as other primary schools. Data from a small primary school’s SATs results may not accurately reflect the school’s performance. This is because only a small number of pupils may take part in the tests, which Ofsted uses to inspect schools. This presented a school context issue of policy equity for small schools. The SATs are based on the government percentage measures against a national standard benchmark (floor) figure. In other words, a small primary school with 10 pupils taking the SATs would present a skewed statistical average based on the small data set and, therefore, function as an unreliable indicator of the school’s effectiveness against quality standards. The policy consequence of SATs for small schools is one of significant concern. Ofsted judgements

on performance use school attainment data. Parents review school performance based on Ofsted judgements. The perception of small primary schools' effectiveness for pupil progression and attainment has the potential to be easily undermined by SATs [4,42].

3.3. *Training Our Next Generation of Outstanding Teachers 2011*

Training Our Next Generation of Outstanding Teachers [43] was the first in a series of reforms of initial teacher training (ITT) provision in England in the last decade that demonstrated policy context drivers for a schools-led system made up of more autonomous academies [43]. For small schools, delivering ITT would not typically be possible, based on the small staffing complement and teachers/leaders working at full capacity. The additional resources needed for a small school to deliver ITT was not considered in this policy. The policy text was clear: small schools were excluded because of their size. The policy reform on ITT established an inequitable access to potential opportunities for small primary schools [4]. The policy consequence for small schools was diminished access to trainee teachers and the benefit trainees have for an improved professional practice within a school [44].

3.4. *Education Act 2011*

The policy context of The Education Act 2011 [45] was to establish the schools-led system of education that was set out in the Academies Bill 2010. The Education Act 2011 removed the education bodies/agencies that supported schools in the broadest sense, such as the General Teaching Council ([45] Sections 10–12); the Training and Development Agency for Schools ([45] Sections 14–17); and the School Support Staff Negotiating Body (Section 18), and reformed broad areas of education, including academies ([45] Sections 52–65), and the school workforce, such as the newly qualified teacher induction period ([45] Sections 7–9). The new schools-led system appeared very much under central government control, and the policy text demonstrated an urban, metrocentric understanding of school size and performance [4].

In the Commons Education Select Committee's (CESC) report of 2012, the intent of the policy context was explicit in its support of school-based and -led teacher training, with the CESC recommending that the government introduce "a formal and flexible career structure for teachers, with different pathways for those who wish to remain classroom teachers or become teaching specialists" [46] page 44. These two areas in the report demonstrate a lack of awareness of the small primary school workforce and of the specific school context challenges they experience. The influence of small school leaders on education policy can be seen to be minimal, even isolated [47], with the reforms being focused on creating large, efficient, effective schools with leaders that work directly with the government (rather than a local authority). The policy reforms from 2010 onwards can be seen to have sealed the precarious future of small primary schools in England.

3.5. *The Blunkett Review 2014, Regional Schools Commissioners & Educational Excellence Everywhere 2016*

The former Labour education secretary, David Blunkett, challenged the efficacy of academies through The Blunkett Review [48]. The report stated that it was "undemocratic" to have individual schools "contractually bound to the Secretary of State and free-floating from the communities they serve" [48] page 5. It called for all state schools to be coordinated under local control and proposed the appointment of local "Directors of School Standards" to monitor schools. The government's response was to introduce regional school commissioners (RSCs) to monitor the performance of academies, demonstrating no movement from the schools-led policy context.

The development of RSCs was an important step in reinforcing academies as the preferred school structure and paved the way for the White Paper, "Educational Excellence Everywhere", in 2016 [35], which demonstrated a clear policy context and text that groups

of schools/academies working together (multi academy trusts, or MATs) would be the future of school structures in England:

“The growth of multi-academy trusts (MATs) expands the reach and influence of the most successful leaders so more children can benefit from their expertise.” [35] page 14.

Small primary schools in the evolving academised system in England appeared to have little choice from a policy consequence perspective but to enter formal collaborations with MATs in order to survive [3] due to their size (and place) being out of line with the neo-liberal ideology that was driving education policy and being applied to all schools as national policy [33].

After 2016, the education policy focus in England changed from the structures/types of school to funding and a commitment to deliver a national funding formula (NFF) that would address what were seen as disparities of resourcing in the system. These disparities recognised place-based contextual challenges for policymaking through the concentration of funds in cities and large schools, such as in London, and not in rural areas and small primary schools [3]. The refocus of the policy had the potential to create a more equitable system of funding for small schools, but this was not the policy consequence [4,40].

3.6. The National Funding Formula

Introduced for all state schools in England in September 2018, the national funding formula (NFF) [7], with sustained annual updates, has not offered the anticipated significant increases in funding for small primary schools, despite government promises [7]. In the 2020–2021 iteration of the NFF, small schools appeared to receive more funds per child than larger schools. However, this was not the actual policy consequence, regardless of what may have been proffered as the policy context or text. The small primary school’s “lump sum” (a sum given in recognition of the school’s fixed costs that is applied in the same way for all schools) was included in the per-pupil calculation, rather than separately, as had been the case before in the previous two iterations of the NFF [4], creating an illusion of additional funding that was soon realised by small primary school leaders.

Small primary schools in England did not receive a per-pupil funding increase from the NFF because, with the lump sum included, their per-pupil funding appeared to be over the funding threshold that would trigger additional funding [4]. The NFF resulted in small primary schools receiving the minimum possible uplift in funding [4]. Larger schools conversely received an increase in funding [49]. A policy context that was apparent in the analysis of this reform is that large schools are more desirable in a schools-led, self-regulating education system [35,36]. In addition to this, the “mobility factor”, which was additional funding for small and rural schools, was absorbed through the minimum funding guarantee (MFG) protection calculation that was undertaken for schools at the funding floor level [4]. Therefore, any additional funds that the Department for Education believed small schools were gaining because of the NFF were lost through complicated calculations and readjustments [49].

Educationally Isolated, rural, small primary schools were expected to benefit from the NFF, but the policy was situated in complex calculations that failed to account for school context by place and size [4]. The main policy consequence of the NFF was to make small schools financially insecure [40]. Small primary schools have had to reduce resources, including teachers, to offset funding reductions [3]. The NFF has consequentially affected the long-term viability of small primary schools in England and contributed to their reduction in number over the last few years [4].

3.7. Multi Academy Trusts (MATs)

The education policy since 2010 appears (in context and text) to have driven forward an education system of large urban schools that run autonomously through direct funding from the government (an academy school) and, more latterly, as groups of academies run by a single organisation (MAT) [35]. The size of a school, or group of schools, supports the government’s drive for efficiency in, and the control of, public services; bigger is better:

“The rationale for this growth [of MAT size] put forward by the government has been largely economic—for example, that larger MATs will secure economies of scale, more efficient use of resources, more effective management, and clearer oversight of academies. . . . In 2017, Lord Agnew, the minister responsible for academies, said that small MATs should merge together in order to achieve financial viability.” [30] page 21.

It could be assumed from the policy text, as well as the policy context, that MATs work to the detriment of small primary schools and have expedited the increase in small school closures that was identified in the introduction [25]. Small primary school leaders have struggled to maintain their schools financially outside of a MAT [25]. Therefore, becoming part of a MAT for a small primary school becomes a means of survival in the new academised education system. The policy driver for all schools to become academies, and for academies to become part of a MAT, and for these MATs to increase their school number, has been relentless in both policy context and deed [36]. MATs have been championed as the purveyor of best practice by the government:

“Multi-academy trusts (MATs) and teaching school alliances have spread collaboration across the country, with the best school leaders providing challenge and support for underperforming schools.” [35] page 6.

In 2024, 43.6 per cent of primary schools in England were academies (82.4% secondary schools), with nearly 90 per cent being part of a MAT [50]. These figures show the march of the academies agenda in England, with an increase from almost three quarters of all academies being part of a MAT in 2017 [7].

There is also a challenge for small primary schools wanting to join a MAT, in that the MAT may consider them financially unviable. The continued underfunding of small primary schools [25] has made them unattractive to MATs, particularly as MATs have to run on a zero budget (no financial deficits are allowed). The preferred government MAT size consists of 10 to 15 academies [35] to support the development of efficient centralised systems and functions to deliver benefits, such as to offer career opportunities. In 2024, 27.8 percent of MATs had between 6 and 41+ schools [50]. The sustainability of the MAT is associated with the total pupil numbers, not the number of schools, making the addition of a small primary school without financial concerns as equally undesirable as one with financial challenges. The increase in central administrative and capital costs in relation to per-pupil funding in taking on a small primary school does not make sense for a MAT [4]. This said, many “local” MATs that serve a specific area in England have welcomed small primary schools into their Trust to sustain, typically, rural communities [4].

3.8. National Standards

Schools in England are part of a performativity agenda with a “regulatory gaze” [51] that is focused on a national standard with target data. Small primary schools have been perceived as having “an uncomfortable and sometimes adversarial relationship” with accountability and performativity measures [52] page 169, due to the inevitable unreliability of small pupil numbers on the statistics that are applied. National performance targets are skewed by small pupil numbers for per cent outcomes, e.g., an attendance target of 95 per cent for all schools nationally [4].

It could be argued that the multiple responsibilities of a small teaching workforce and less funding (compared to larger schools) to implement regulatory body expectations, such as to have subject leads in primary schools [13], results in huge challenges when that workforce is held accountable for their failure to meet performance targets. These performativity and accountability challenges, effected by policy, should not be underestimated for the consequences on small primary schools’ sustainability, such as the perception of school success during MAT-joining processes [4].

Having a national standard of performance for schools does not take into account the school context: in this case, the place and size of small primary schools. The pressure on small primary schools to meet the expected standard for pupils in progress, attainment, and attendance is daunting, and targets are easily missed through small pupil numbers skewing

data (see Section 3.2 on SATs). In addition to this accountability for school performance is the Education Inspection Framework (EIF) (overseen by Ofsted as the regulatory body for school standards), which is, again, nationally standardised for all schools, regardless of their size or place [53].

In 2019, Ofsted introduced a new EIF [53], having developed a greater understanding of contextual issues for schools in the preceding years of inspection and through research [3,10]. Ofsted had been criticised for its previous EIF focussing too heavily on pupil data to inform judgements on school performance. The new Ofsted framework retained its consideration of pupil data, but with an understanding of the purpose and usefulness of those data to inform judgements on “intent, implementation and impact” [53] pages 9–10. For small primary schools, one of the biggest challenges of the new EIF, outside of data being reviewed against percentage national standards, was the requirement for subject leads to develop the curriculum [54]. In small primary schools, teachers teach a range of subjects, but having a specialist in each of the curriculum areas can be difficult, if not impossible to achieve (if not within a MAT) [54]. The staffing resources do not exist to cover the range of specialisms [4]. The outcome of the EIF for small schools is that they are more likely to be rated “inadequate” than a larger primary school:

“England’s smallest primary schools are five times more likely to be rated ‘inadequate’ by Ofsted than the largest ones, according to an analysis of graded inspections.” [55]

The policy context of a neo-liberal, self-regulating, schools-led system and the policy text of big schools being better are demonstrated in the policy consequences for small primary schools through the NFF, academies/MATs, and standards policy reforms from 2010.

4. Conclusions

The selected education policy reform that was enacted in England between 2010 and 2020 was evaluated for its potential consequences for small primary schools. This evaluation was undertaken using a document analysis with a PDAF to review the policy context, text, and consequences to answer the research question: ‘in what ways, if any, have education policy reforms since 2010 in England had consequences for small primary schools?’. It has been contended that the overarching impact of education policy on small primary schools in England since 2010 was to increase small primary school closures [25]. It has been suggested that the neo-liberal ideology embedded in education policy did not allow for the specific contextual needs of small primary schools—size and place—to be considered [5,33].

Since 2010, education policy in England has been underpinned by a neo-liberal discourse for a schools-led system [33]. The inference throughout the education policy reform’s policy text is for a self-regulating education system, with academies and MATs that bring economies of scale by increasing organizational size; national standards that create competition for “improvement”; and the NFF, which increases the funding per-pupil for large schools, is that ‘bigger is better’ when it comes to schools [3] For England’s small primary schools, particularly those experiencing Educational Isolation, the meaning, purpose, and consequences of education policy has been to challenge how they continue to operate in a self-regulating education system [33]. School self-regulation requires capacity within leadership and appropriate funding to operationalize reform, neither of which are forthcoming in small primary schools. The conceptual lens of Educational Isolation allowed the full context for small primary schools, regarding place as well as size, to be considered throughout the evaluation [5]. It was identified that small primary schools are typically located in rural locations that are more likely to experience Educational Isolation [5] and limited access to resources based on infrastructural challenges [11].

There has been a shift in the regulatory body’s (Ofsted) consideration of small primary schools, particularly those in Educationally Isolated locations, when making judgements under the EIF since 2019. Ofsted has recognised that context for small primary schools typically includes place and size and has adapted school judgements to school context. This shift has a minimal consequence when reviewed against the raft policies with neo-liberal

foundations that are pushing for larger schools in larger MATs for a more efficient education system [36] and the lack of place-based policies that could “level up” Educationally Isolated, small primary schools’ access to resources [11].

This evaluation of education policy since 2010 has demonstrated that as long as the government follows a marketized approach to education, the future of small primary schools remains at risk. Small primary schools could be best served in this situation by taking a pragmatic choice to join a local MAT that supports small primary schools for the perceived benefit they bring to their community. MATs that are prepared to take on the expense of a small primary school, however, are very rare [4]. The purpose of small primary schools has been argued to be in supporting the sustainability of their communities [3]. This purpose can only be fully realised if the market drivers of policy making are reappraised.

Recommendations are offered to the new 2024 Labour government that support the reinstatement of small primary schools as an integral part of the education system landscape in England. These recommendations for policymakers are drawn from the findings of this evaluation and are bound to the observation that “Small schools cannot flourish on the margins of the system: they need to be an integral part of it.” [56] page 51. The education policy since 2010 in England has been shown to be based on a neo-liberal political ideology that has put forward a schools-led, self-regulating education system in which small primary schools cannot compete. To level the playing field for small primary schools in the education system, the following recommendations are made:

1. Policymakers must evaluate the education policy for schools and identify the implications for all school contexts.
2. Policymakers must use the findings from the education policy evaluations to mitigate the negative and/or unintended consequences of policy for schools.
3. Policymakers must consider school context—place and size—when developing the education policy reform for schools.
4. Policymakers must represent the interests of all their constituents and sustain reasonable access to education for sparsely populated areas.

Small primary schools have a purpose in England, and in other countries with rural communities, which requires the realisation, review, and reform that will provide resources to schools according to their needs.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Plymouth Marjon University 05052020 EP100.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data are contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A. List of Selected Policy Documents (with Document Research Reference Number)

- HM Government. The coalition: Our programme of government [Online]; 2010 (2)
- HM Government. Academies Bill/ Act [online]; 2010 (1)
- House of Commons. House of Commons debates. Volume no. 514, part no. 34. Hansard [Online]; 2010 (4)
- HM Government. The Education (Specified Work) (England) Regulations 2012. (3)
- Department for Education. The importance of teaching: The Schools White Paper 2010 [Online]; 2010 (5)
- Department for Education. Training our next generation of outstanding teachers. [Online]; 2011 (6)
- HM Government. Education Act [Online]; 2011 (7)

Commons Education Select Committee. Attracting, training and retaining the best: Ninth Report of session 2010-12, Vol,1 (HC 1515-I, 2010-12) [Online]; 2012 (8)

Blunkett D. Review of education structures, functions and the raising of standards for all: Putting students and parents first [Online]; 2014. (10)

Department for Education. Educational Excellence Everywhere [Online]; 2016 (12)

Department for Education. The national funding formula for schools and high needs [Online]; 2017 (13)

Department for Education. Teacher retention and recruitment strategy [Online]; 2019 (15)

Ofsted. Education inspection framework. No. 190015 [Online]; 2019 (16)

Department for Education. Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Market Review Report. London; 2021(18)

Department for Education. Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child; 2022 (19)

Department for Education. Open academies, free schools, studio schools and UTCs [Online]; 2024 (1c)

Appendix B. Document Analysis—The Process for Developing a Policy Document Analysis Frame (ODAF)

Developing a PDAF for document analysis is supported by the following nine phases of data selection, collection, and analysis.

1. Define scope:
 - What are the research questions?
 - What types of policy documents will support answering the research question?
 - What levels of these types of policy documents (strategic, organisational, or procedural)?
2. Set the selection criteria:
 - Clearly define and document the criteria used for selecting policy documents.
 - What documents are appropriate for answering your research question? Why is this the case? Is there any researcher positionality/bias in your selection?
 - Ensure the criteria are applied consistently across all document types.
 - Policy document selection based on relevance, this being a policy reform that would effect change in a state-funded primary school.
 - Identify the author and intended audience for the documentation.
 - Who wrote the document?
 - Could it be biased?
 - Whom was written for?
3. Sifting and sorting:
 - Review the policy documents to remove documents that are unhelpful in answering the research questions.
4. Be comprehensive in document collection:
 - Include main policy documents as well as antecedent and subsidiary documents.
 - Consider both national level and organisational/institutional level documents (if appropriate to the research question).
 - Document what is available and what is not available, and why.
5. Create a standardised process:
 - Develop a consistent structure for documenting the selection criteria and steps.
 - Construct the Policy Document Analysis Frame. Pillars create the frame for the research question to be explored within the documents collected.

- Pillar One: Policy context.
Example questions (align to the research question): What is the purpose of the policy? Are drivers or forces behind the policy evident? What values underpin and guide the policy, and are these linked to local or national strategic and quality issues? Are there multiple values that might create tensions?
 - Pillar Two: Policy text.
Example questions: How is the policy structured, and how does the text provide evidence of its construction or development? What are the key elements of the policy, and are they associated with local or national legal or regulatory requirements? Are there related procedures specified in the text that provide guidance for practice?
 - Pillar Three: Policy consequences.
Example questions: What is the intended overall implication of the policy? How is policy implementation intended to be monitored? How and when is the policy to be reviewed? How does the text draw attention to important aspects of practice related to the policy?
6. Review selection
 - Consult with topic experts and other stakeholders to ensure comprehensive document selection.
 7. Quality control:
 - Keep track of changes made to the selection process over time.
 - Maintain a modification history for future reference.
 - Establish a schedule for reviewing and updating the documented process.
- Method adapted from [1]

Appendix C. Example of a Policy Document Analysis Using the Policy Document Analysis Frame (See Section 2.2)

Documents 1: Academies Bill & Act 2010—"Academisation"

Additional documents: Document 2: The coalition: Our programme of government (HM Government, 2010). Document 12: Department for Education. Educational Excellence Everywhere (DfE, 2016). 19: Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child (DfE, 2022).

Conservative-led coalition government

Reform timeline:

26 May 2010: Academies Bill published. The Secretary of State writes to all schools inviting them to become academies.

29 July 2010: Academies Act 2010. All primary, secondary, and special schools eligible to become academies. April

| Pillar | Question 1 | Summary | Question 2 | Summary |
|--------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| Policy Context (history) | <i>What are the drivers (social/political values/history) behind the policy?</i> | New government—Conservative-led. Public sector self-regulation. Financial efficient and self-regulating services. | <i>How does this policy relate to other education policies?</i> | Academies emerged under Labour (failing schools provided with sponsors to improve outcome). Conservatives changed the focus from school improvement to self-regulated schools. Removed the power of the local authority, teachers, and parents to stop a school from becoming an academy. Allowed outstanding schools to fast-track the process. |

| | Question 1 | Summary | Question 2 | Summary | Question 3 |
|----------------------------------|---|---|--|---|---|
| Policy Text (content) | <i>Why is the policy structured/framed as it is?</i> | <p>Framed as a schools-led system. Suggests the empowerment of school leaders to run schools as they see fit.</p> <p>Framed as an opportunity for “outstanding” schools to be independent of local authority control. Structured to support public sector efficiencies. Set the position for education policies and reform to come, i.e., move of initial teacher training to schools from universities.</p> | <i>What inferences exist about the policy purpose and values? Where politically/socially/ideologically are these situated?</i> | <p>Responsibility and accountability given to school leadership for school financial stability and student outcomes. Local authority control of schools no longer wanted. All schools expected to become academies (regardless of size or place). Right wing. Laissez faire. Neo-liberal. School size and place inferred as urban and large (economies of scale, the capacity of school leadership to undertake transfer to academy with new processes and requirements).</p> | <p>Is expected content missing from the policy?</p> <p>No</p> |
| Policy Consequences (evaluation) | <i>What has been the outcome of implementing the policy reform for small primary schools?</i> | <p>Summary</p> <p>An academy has independent regulations and a self-regulating structure that must remain within a balanced budget (no deficits). Staff capacity is required to run an academy. Small schools do not have the student numbers to run efficiently (the proportion of student funding to school running costs). Small schools do not have the staff capacity to run an academy structure.</p> <p>The Academies Act put in jeopardy the future of small schools. Policy drive for bigger educational units that were self-managing and -regulating—academies working together as Multi Academies Trusts. Made small schools increasingly vulnerable. Financially unviable (refer also to NFF Document 13 PDAF), see evidence, e.g., Department for Education (2016). Educational Excellence Everywhere. DfE (2022) Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child.</p> | | | |

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