The Guardian/21st October 2016/Francis Gilbert

Super-heads

This [week’s Newsnight investigation](http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b07zvq6y/newsnight-20102016) into greedy ‘super-heads’ of academies coupled with headlines about other [heads involved in money-grabbing](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-36446144)  and [cronyism](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/10042421/Headteacher-under-investigation-by-DfE-over-cronyism-claims.html) has thrown the public spot-light sharply onto the role of headteachers in our schools. Is it right that the pushy ones are paid a great deal more than the Prime Minister? Do they have too much power to hire their favourites and sack whistle-blowers?

As a teacher for a quarter of a century, a former governor and now a teacher-educator at the University of London, I have seen my fair share of headteachers. When I first started teaching in the late 1980s, all the state-school headteachers I encountered had risen through the ranks and had a crumpled, careworn air: they wore dusty suits and crinkled skirts, and were all middle-aged or nearing retirement and, while not without their psychological quirks, mostly cared about their staff and students. They were adept at navigating through the local authority bureaucracy that then ran our schools. This species of ‘head’ is dying breed now; you might find a smattering in the outer reaches of rural counties, but I would hazard that in all our major urban areas an ‘upgraded’ model has appeared. This new type of headteacher is not even given that sobriquet but is usually dubbed a ‘Principal’ – an import from the Charter School system in America – and has a distinctly corporate air about him/herself; this creature usually wafts about in designer clothes and is often quite young: many are not yet 40 years old. He/she has not risen through the ranks, but has usually been trained through a programme like [Teach First](https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/) (which aims to catapult ‘talent’ to the top quickly) and have proved themselves not by having years of experience under their belt, but have often devised a high-profile scheme which they have shown or ‘spun’ (depending upon charitable you feel towards them) as being hugely successful. They are all obsessed by data, spreadsheets, ‘raising levels of attainment’ and are brilliant networkers: they are usually great at schmoozing with the right people and may well be very well connected, either developing a high profile social media profile or through their contacts: most, though not all, are from socially advantaged backgrounds.

These fresh-faced, suited and booted principals are wily political operators who are hideously impressive when you meet them: they have sorted out the issues of our country’s educational ills with their mastery of the data and implemented [‘evidence-based interventions’](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/) (they like to use medical jargon) to ensure ‘all the needs of students’ are met. They jump on whatever bandwagon is currently going; at the moment it is making sure your school has a [‘mastery curriculum’](https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2015/oct/01/mastery-differentiation-new-classroom-buzzword) and is [‘knowledge-based’](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nicky-morgan-why-knowledge-matters) -- we need to teach children more facts! There is also an obsession with imparting [British Values](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/380595/SMSC_Guidance_Maintained_Schools.pdf) to ‘hard-to-reach’ children and there is much talk of the need for both students and staff to [‘disclose’ any information which suggests radicalisation](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/550499/Keeping_children_safe_in_education_Part_1.pdf).

I worry though that this type of Principal is, at best, self-serving and, at worst, corrupt. They have been from the [academisation of schools](http://www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk/2016/03/the-white-paper-justification-for-academy-conversion-is-pathetic) which effectively has posited enormous [power in their hands with very little genuine accountability](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/21/schools-academies-democracy-educational-standards-accountability): for example, in a 2014 National Audit Office (NAO) report noted that Durand Academy was paying a business owned by the executive headteacher, [Sir Greg Martin, £250k a year to run the school’s leisure facilities.](http://www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk/2016/07/how-the-mighty-fall)

A little known fact is that once a school joins a [Multi-Academy Trust (MAT)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/458632/governance-in-multi-academy-trusts_Sept2015.pdf), a chain of academies, the trustees of the MAT, which normally includes the headteacher, have the power to disband the governing body of the existing school and replace it with a ‘local governing body’ which is essentially a rubber-stamp for whatever the trustees decide. This means that the very structures of the MAT lend themselves to power-hungry, greedy heads.

School league tables also promote a culture where you get headteachers behaving like football managers, demanding good results no matter what methods are used -- as long as you don’t get caught! As a result, I’ve observed that 11-year-olds being drilled to do mock exam papers, five years before they actually take their GCSEs. It’s so depressing to see this happening but in my experience, drilling for the test has become the norm for most lessons in our schools. Many children lose their love of acquiring knowledge and [learn less effectively because they become fixated upon their grades](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2010/aug/13/exam-test-results-teaching-style) rather than enjoying the processes of learning new things. In our test-obsessed times, it’s no surprise that [depression is sky-rocketing in our young people](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/may/14/calls-to-childline-over-exam-stress-break-records).

To make our schools joyful arenas of learning, we need to turn down the heat on our schools, which are reaching boiling point: we need to radically reform the academy system, jettison school league tables and take steps to stop the scum rising to the top.

Francis Gilbert’s [*Last Day of Term*](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Last-Day-Term-Francis-Gilbert-ebook/dp/B005N7D94O/ref=tmm_kin_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1477054055&sr=8-1) is a novel about a dodgy headteacher who runs an academy. [www.francisgilbert.co.uk](http://www.francisgilbert.co.uk)