

Structural Reform Research Programme Final Reports December 2013

A GEOGRAPHICAL APPROACH TO STUDYING THE RESTRUCTURING OF SCHOOLING

Author(s), Megan Crawford, University of Cambridge; John Coldron, Steve Jones and Tim Simkins, Sheffield Hallam University

Email(s): mpc52@cam.ac.uk ; j.h.coldron@shu.ac.uk; s.c.jones@shu.ac.uk; t.j.simkins@shu.ac.uk .

1. Background and Theoretical Framework (max 500 words)

Most large school systems have intermediate administrative structures between central government and schools. These can play one or both of two key roles: an administrative role in ensuring that the provision of schooling operates effectively, efficiently and equitably at the local level and that the system as a whole is manageable; and a democratic role in giving people the opportunity for voice and influence in relation to the way schooling operates locally. In the English system historically the local authority (LA) has played both these roles. However, they have been challenged and modified over recent years with administrative functions once delegated to school level; and LA powers bypassed as schools have been increasingly subject to centralised regimes of testing, inspection and intervention for perceived school underperformance. Policies instituted since the 2010 General Election have accelerated this trend.

The space previously occupied by LAs, therefore, is being ‘hollowed out’, leading to what has been termed the problem of the future of the ‘middle tier’ (Hill, 2012; House of Commons, 2013; Aston et al, 2013). Ball has argued that such developments are creating ‘heterarchies’ - ‘a new mix of hierarchy, market and network which is replete with overlap, multiplicity, mixed ascendancy, and/or divergent but co-existent patterns of relations’ (Ball, 2009: 100); these ideas have clear resonance at the local level (Woods and Simkins, 2014). In this context, we are interested in two aspects of these changes. First, an increasing emphasis on a ‘self-improving school system’ (Hargreaves, 2010, 2011) is leading to new forms of collaborative partnership such as chains, federations and teaching school alliances. Some writers argue that no middle tier is necessary beyond these forms of collaboration, with schools, either individually or as part of chains, competing in a market place although subject to accountability for performance from the centre (O’Shaughnessy 2012). However, others have argued that such arrangements cannot ensure joint responsibility for, and equity among, all children in a locality (Chapman and Salokangas 2013; Parish et al 2012).

It is how these two aspects – the continuing role of LAs and the emergence of new patterns of school organisation - evolve into new local schooling ‘landscapes’ that is the focus of this second stage of our study. Our contention is that, with the concept of a ‘system’ being increasingly redundant, the consequences need to be explored in detail at local level. Accordingly, we draw on research in three very different local authority areas to consider two questions. First, what patterns of schooling are emerging in these local contexts? Second, what factors are driving the changes in each locality? The second question leads us on to consider the role of key players in influencing the changes that are taking place.

2. Objectives and Research Questions (max 300 words)

This is the second phase of the project. The objectives are:

- a) How do key actors, especially those at the level of the school, conceive of the choices available to them, how do they respond to these and what are the consequences of these responses?
- b) How are local authorities constructing their own responses and what are the consequences of these?

- c) How do these two factors interact to influence the emerging patterns of provision and governance at the ‘micro’ and ‘meso’ levels within the geographical area of the local authority?

3. Methodology (max 300 words)

The project aimed to gather evidence as to what new order is emerging at the local level and the factors affecting this. To do this we sought information and perspectives on local developments in three LAs chosen to provide a variety of geographical, historical and policy contexts: a large metropolitan authority, a large rural authority with a dispersed population, and a smaller unitary authority centred on a town. Within each we interviewed people in senior posts in the LA and in schools, especially those likely to have an LA-wide perspective, or at least (in the case of the headteachers we interviewed) one well beyond their own school. Between 2011 and 2013 we conducted 23 hour long semi-structured interviews (7 LA executives, 15 headteachers and one chair of governors). For one primary informant in each LA, after initial interviews late 2011/early 2012, we conducted second interviews in mid-2013. This enabled us to trace the ways in which key themes and issues played out in each of our three LAs over the first three years following the General Election of 2010. The second stage of our study drew primarily on the interviews with the senior officers from each LA. A framework of questions was used which explored respondents’ perceptions of what was happening in their area, the LA’s responses to the changing policy environment, the values and purposes that underlay these, their judgments about the key issues that would need to be addressed in the future, and (in the second interviews) the changes that had taken place over the intervening period. All the interviews were transcribed and analysed, using a combination of deductive analysis deriving from our initial questionnaire and inductive analysis which sought other, unexpected themes from the transcripts.

4. Key Findings and Implications for Theory and Policy (max 2000 words)

Our analysis of the position on academisation in the three LAs in September 2013 suggest a number of initial conclusions concerning emerging patterns:

- Rates of academisation vary between the LAs.
- In all the LAs a variety of forms of school group are emerging.
- National chains have not achieved significant purchase in any of the LAs, especially since 2010
- A significant development is the emergence of regional and local groupings. These vary widely in their initiation (top-down or mutually constructed), their ‘leadership’ (focused on a not-for-profit organisation or an individual lead school), their size and their composition.
- In large, dispersed County, particular groupings are emerging in dominant positions in various locations.
- A significant number of academies in all three LAs are free-standing.

These findings demonstrate the complexities that are emerging as national policy is translated into local patterns of implementation. Description and analysis of this dynamic is difficult. Apparently similar organisational forms - chains, for example, or federations – may have very different characteristics when their internal operations are examined in detail (Salokangas and Chapman, 2014). Understanding such characteristics requires in depth case study research at a number of organisational levels – research that has hardly begun. Our work suggests that, in order to understand the factors determining particular groupings and thereby contributing to the patterns in the local landscapes we need to take account of how groups differ across a wide range of dimensions. Not only do we need to map emerging forms of *group structure*; we also need to consider processes of *group formation* and types of *group organisation*. This raises fundamental questions about the politics of school restructuring: in particular around how *actors* exercise particular forms of power *and influence* in *arenas*. In his work on heterarchies at a national level,

Ball (2008; Ball and Junemann 2012) notes the emergence of new patterns of influence, of new kinds of actors - particularly those who occupy key nodal positions in the new networks and establish new kinds of careers - and new policy discourses and narratives that legitimise new forms of governance. These themes have a strong resonance at a local level and suggest a number of key questions. What new or reconfigured arenas are emerging as a result of the restructuring process? Who is being empowered and disempowered locally and regionally? Are new actors emerging because of the creation of new nodal positions or for other reasons? And what are the implications for the values and purposes that drive the local system?

The emerging school groupings and their leaders are key actors in terms of their potential to provide 'solutions' to inter-school collaboration and support. Which individuals and groups choose to put themselves forward (or are encouraged to do so) as 'solutions' in particular cases, and the degree to which their characteristics (values; performance; potential to contribute to improvement) match the hopes and expectations of the other actors (focal school, LA; DfE) is a major influencing factor in the evolution of local schooling landscapes, as is the rise of powerful individuals associated with such groups (Coldron et al, 2014).

Hodgson and Spours (2012) suggest that local governance arrangements can be analysed along two dimensions. One of these concerns the degree to which arrangements are centralised or decentralised. The other, concerns the purposes or underlying philosophy on which governance arrangements are based, distinguishing between public value, expressed through processes of democratic control, and marketisation expressed through consumer choice. This is a fertile framework for considering the implications of emerging local schooling landscapes. The model which has dominated policy for the last 30 years can most closely be matched to what Hodgson and Spours term Centrally Managed Localism. The market has been opened up to give parents greater choice while central control is retained over the specification of key outcomes supported by strong mechanisms of monitoring of performance. However, Democratic Localism, another of Hodgson and Spours' categories, has maintained a foothold through the continuing role of local authoritiesⁱ, although their role as independent actors has increasingly been compromised by the power of the central state.

A key question is, how will the current situation now evolve? There is clearly room for increased marketisation and competition. Many academies in our LAs are free standing and strong reservations have been expressed about the degree of motivation towards collaboration among many such schools (House of Commons, 2013). Further, the wide variety of groupings that *are* emerging – many of which have geographical reach beyond the LA area or are weakening the attachment to the 'family' of neighbouring schools – are creating local landscapes with little coherence. In addition, competition is no longer only between individual schools, but between a variety of different players, from individual schools to large chains with different kinds of loyalties and drivers. Certainly, the patterns emerging in our three LAs do not – at least in the short term – give much hope that these groupings can provide the basis, on their own, for a robust middle tier. Those who argue that this does not matter – that such variety will generate competition which drives up standards – must deal with the emergent evidence that the group to which a school belongs – if it does belong to a group – is often a matter of serendipity, a response to very local circumstances that may or may not relate to the wider locality in which the school is located. There is also the likelihood that rates and characteristics of marketisation will vary between LA areas and between sub-areas of larger LAs.

A key question concerns how far commitment to local democratic principles and practices will survive. Much will depend on the relative power of the key local actors, especially those who are being empowered by policy change, and the values they espouse and demonstrate through their actions. This is clearly true of LAs, as we have seen; but in a fragmented system, in which LA power is limited, it applies even more to the emerging organisational forms through which schooling will increasingly be managed. On the basis of the evidence from our three LAs we would join those who argue that an effective middle tier requires more than a series of uncoordinated school groups and free standing schools and that a robust LA remains the best hope for addressing both the quality of local provision and meeting the need

for some form of democratic participation not just from the parents of a particular school but the wider population of an area (Parish et al, 2007).

Our findings have implications for debates concerning the potential future role for LAs in these landscapes. In this context, the Academies Commission (2013) has argued that ‘local authorities should embrace a new role in education, not as providers of schools or school improvement services, but as champions for children.’ (p 11). All our interviewees explicitly shared that aspiration. However, it meant significantly different things to the participants in each of the LAs. At one extreme, it meant ensuring the best deal for pupils in each school while also acting as a champion for individual pupils, especially vulnerable groups. At the other, while encompassing these, it also meant trying, so far as is possible to maintain a school ‘system’ at local level which addresses issues of shared vision and community. In both cases issues arise about accountability in the context of the kinds of multi-party negotiations described in this paper.

Hatcher (2014) notes this potential difference in interpretation of LAs’ strategic role and distinguishes three possible types of ‘strategic vision’. A ‘preventative/remedial’ vision would focus on addressing issues of school improvement and the ways in which the needs of parents and pupils are addressed, but ‘restrict themselves to being local relays of the government’s performance agenda’. A ‘developmental’ strategic vision would go beyond this, placing preventative/remedial concerns within a broader framework that attempts to embody locally determined shared assumptions about how schooling should meet local needs. A critical vision is one that puts into question neo-liberal education policy. Like the LAs which Hatcher studied, the vision of our three LAs can best be described as remedial/preventative or developmental. The responses we received from the officers whom we interviewed, showed no strong inclination to adopt a critical stance, but they did differ in the degree to which they were attempting to embody developmental considerations in their strategies.

The LAs were very clear, however, about the limitations on their ability to mould the emerging system. They were aware that schools engaged with decisions about restructuring with differing degrees of influence. Those with less influence tended to welcome LA involvement while the more powerful were wary. They were also aware that the influence wielded by LAs on a particular school depends on the symbolic capital of that school. The LA’s greatest leverage is on schools which were neither so well endowed with prestige through exemplary performance and high Ofsted grades that they could embark on the academisation process alone, nor so weak in the same criteria that the DfE would be likely to intervene. The DfE emerges as a key player with the capacity not only to engage actively in local negotiations where schools are deemed to be failing, but also to be able to change the ‘rules of the game’ in terms of which negotiations take place through, for example, redefining the criteria on which schools are judged by Ofsted and the performance thresholds that define failure and trigger intervention. As a result, the power of LAs to prevent fragmentation of the local school system is limited and the potential for an effective middle tier to emerge remains problematic.

5. Future Plans

We hope to continue studying the process of change in our three LAs. As the policy unfolds it is clear that there is more to be learnt as things play out in very different ways in particular local contexts. We wish to follow these studies up with further work, drawing further on our data and perhaps on further interviews. Possible areas for further work include:

- Continuing to map the emerging patterns of provision in our three LAs
- Further exploring the views of headteachers who are differentially positioned in relation to the changes.
- Exploring differing LA responses to the changing landscape
- Studying specific responses, such as locally-emergent chains of schools.

6. Related Papers and Presentations

- Crawford, M., Simkins, T., Coldron, J. and Jones, S. (2012) 'The restructuring of schooling In England: exploring the "local"'. Paper presented at European Conference of Educational Research, Cadiz, September.
- Simkins, T. (2013) 'A "local" approach to studying the restructuring of schooling'. Presentation as part of BELMAS symposium "It's a revolution!" Researching structural reform in England', AERA, San Francisco, May.
- Coldron, J., Simkins, T., Crawford, M. and Jones, S. (2013) 'The response of well positioned headteachers to innovations in the Governance of English schools', Paper presented at European Conference of Educational Research, Istanbul, September.
- Coldron, J., Crawford, M. Simkins, T., and Jones, S. (2013) 'The responses of well-positioned headteachers in England to innovations in governance of schools', European School Leadership Symposium, Zug Switzerland, September.
- Coldron, J., Crawford, M., Jones, S. and Simkins, T. (2014) 'The response of well positioned headteachers to innovations in the Governance of English schools', *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 42(3), forthcoming

7. References

- Aston, H., C. Easton, D. Sims, R. Smith, F. Walker, D. Crossley and J. Crossley-Holland (2013) *What Works in Enabling School Improvement? The Role of the Middle Tier*. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research.
- Ball, S. (2009) "Academies in Context: Politics, Business and Philanthropy and Heterarchical Governance". *Management in Education* 23(3): 100-103.
- Ball, S. and C. Junemann (2012) *Networks, New Governance and Education*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Chapman, C. and M. Salokangas (2013) "Independent State-Funded Schools: Some Reflections on Recent Developments." *School Leadership and Management* 32(5): 473-486.
- Chapman, C., G. Lindsay, D. Muijs, A. Harris, E. Arweck and J. Goodall (2010) "Governance, Leadership and Management in Federations of Schools". *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 21(1): 53-74.
- Coldron, J., Crawford, M., Jones, S. and Simkins, T. (2014) 'The response of well positioned headteachers to innovations in the Governance of English schools', *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 42(3), forthcoming
- Hargreaves, D.H. (2010). *Creating a Self-Improving School System*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.
- Hargreaves, D.H. (2011) *Leading a Self-Improving School System*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.
- Hatcher, R. (2014) "Local Authorities and the School System: The New Local Authority Wide Partnerships". *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* 42(3) Forthcoming.
- Hill, R. (2012) *The Missing Middle: The Case for School Commissioners*. London: Royal Society of Arts.
- Hodgson, A. and K. Spours (2012) "Three Versions of 'Localism': Implications for Upper Secondary Education and Lifelong Learning in the UK." *Journal of Education Policy* 27(2): 193-210.
- House of Commons Education Committee (2013) *School Partnerships and Cooperation: Fourth Report of Session 2013-14*. London: Stationery Office.
- O'Shaughnessy, J. (2012) *Competition Meets Collaboration: Helping School Chains address England's Long Tail of Educational Failure*. London: Policy Exchange.
- Parish, N., A. Baxter, and L. Sandals (2012) *Action Research into the Evolving Role of the Local Authority in Education: The Final Report for the Ministerial Advisory Group, ISOS Partnership, Research Report DFE-RR224*. London: DfE.
- Salokangas, M. and C. Chapman (2014) "Understanding Governance in Two Chains of Academy Schools: A Comparative Case Study." *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* 42(3) Forthcoming.
- Woods, P. and T. Simkins (2014) "Understanding the Local: Themes and Issues in the Experience of Structural Reform in England." *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* 42(3) Forthcoming.
