



## **Structural Reform Research Programme Final Reports December 2012**

### **A GEOGRAPHICAL APPROACH TO STUDYING THE RESTRUCTURING OF SCHOOLING**

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#### **Research Objectives**

The English Coalition government has embarked upon a major and fast paced restructuring of the school system, beyond such efforts in the past. So, the initial aim of the research project was to explore the impact of the Coalition's restructuring of schooling within the defined geographical area of the local authority (LA). The local authority area is an important arena of contestation and discussion in the changes that are taking place; the local authority's future role being decidedly ambiguous, particular in terms of its strategic role. As well as these factors, the LA provides a convenient framework for exploring structural change in a systemic way. The study was multi-level, exploring the interaction between policies and decisions taken at national level, local authority level, institutional level and an emerging 'fourth' level of governance through which schools work together through a variety of new arrangements. The study was built around the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of Government policy on the structure and governance of the school system viewed from a local geographical perspective?
2. How is this impact influenced by local conditions and policies?
3. What are debates and decisions underpin and inform the changes in structure and governance that take place?
4. What are the dynamics of changes of structure and governance over time?

A partnership was built with Sheffield Hallam, whereby two extra authorities were added to the research (financed by Hallam). So far the research suggests a 'congested state' where the number of organisational actors, especially non-governmental actors, has multiplied producing increasingly complex patterns of interaction (Skelcher, 2000). The choices facing schools, therefore, are both complex and multi-faceted.

#### **Methodology**

The study utilised a qualitative approach, initially using one local authority area as a frame for data collection and analysis. The project was then extended to three local authorities, which enabled contrasts to be made. The three local authorities (LAs) were selected to provide a variety of geographical, historical and policy contexts. The areas chosen were: a large metropolitan authority; a smaller unitary authority centred on a town; and a large rural authority with a dispersed population. In addition to these contextual differences the work to date has established that they also differ in their responses to the challenges of structural reform. This year the focus has been on respondents' perceptions about how schools and their heads are responding to the policy environment. In the first year of the study 20 semi-structured interviews have been carried out across the 3 LAs (6 LA officers, 13 heads and one

chair of governors), with the sample chosen to provide perspectives on local developments at a number of levels. Interviews have focused on senior LA officers who are engaged with the policy of restructuring, heads who can give a wider picture (such as chairs of local heads groups), and heads who are actively engaged in processes relevant to restructuring such as collaborations, federations, the creation of academies and Teaching Schools. The interviews have discussed:

- The choices Heads face and what factors drive these choices
- The actions that have been taken by actors;
- The motivation and intention of that action;
- The actual or possible effects of such actions on relationships relevant to the governance of schools.

This study is underpinned by aspects of the theory of governance using the definition, following March and Olsen (1995, quoted in Kjaer, 2004) as:

‘the framework within which citizens and officials act and policy occurs and which shape identities and institutions of society’.

Hadfield and Jopling (2012 p. 112) suggest that ‘network theorists have tended to place greater emphasis on the consequences and outcomes of networks as social structures than on agent-based models of how networks emerge and change’. Even those agent-based models, they argue, take either an instrumental or constructivist perspective, and are not nuanced enough to take account of either leaders’ agency or the relationship of structure to collective agency. This qualitative research, focused on the local, aimed to adopt a more nuanced approach to governance structures and the work of agents within the local arena.

## **Key findings**

The initial project has been extremely interesting, especially as it has revealed the ambiguity that is occurring systemically around emerging structures, partially because of the nonstop pace of change. In each local authority, relationships between schools are being brokered and managed in different ways, sometimes depending on the local history of relationship with the authority. The governance structures, which existed at the advent of the current government, placed particular actors in particular positions, which are now changing. There are underlying tensions being revealed as the complex interactions evolve. The rhetoric of the government systemically calls for building relationships, and becoming families of schools (Teaching Schools, Federations), but at the same time, Heads have to protect their own school from forces beyond their control which arise from the overarching accountability mechanisms that are in place nationally. There is concern from school leaders about their own role and changing identity as they seek to respond to new issues being raised by this rapidly changing policy environment. The changes seem to be gradually altering the Heads idea of their professional identity, and these changes are not gradual, but sudden and reactive. At the same time, individual institutions will need to react to these individual changes, and perhaps even group redefinitions of identity. It would be a project aim for the next phase to begin to theorise some of these more complex questions concerning identity, as Heads are now seeing themselves as located favourably or unfavourably in relation to the opportunities and threats presented by the new policy environment. New policies are adjusting these structures, privileging or de-privileging existing decision arenas and creating new ones.

Local change in relationships between primary and secondary schools are also making changes to the local dynamics with some primary heads feeling uncomfortable with outstanding secondary schools driving CPD activities. Primary Heads also seem to have less access to the information that might help them shape their responses more strategically, The relative fluidity of the policy environment offers actors, such as headteachers, opportunities of moulding, or at least influencing the new structures as they emerge. Initial findings suggest that Heads still

believe personal agency to be very important, as it is something that had worked for them in the past. These agency works within a wider context, yet reflects the essential pragmatism of leaders, and perhaps their own positive view of their role as agents in re-structuring, even if it is centrally driven. The interviews revealed a keen understanding of schools relationship to the centre, as well as the local and a variety of concerns, revealing the complex dynamic between personal and professional moral positioning. This has led to a variety of actions on the part of the headteachers:

- *Pre-emptive strikes:* 'Do it to yourself or get done to'; 'Going first rather than having it done to you'; 'Being ahead of the curve'.
- '*Keep your position: Strength*' is defined clearly by the policy environment in terms of a school's pupils' performance in external tests and examinations and the inspection grades the school receives from Ofsted.
- *Managing the fear ;* 'I mean, we all know we're being signed up to a very lonely position. However, when you start putting your head above the parapet it becomes quite dangerous as well, doesn't it?' (Primary Head 8, LA K). This is not fear of total failure if you are the head of an outstanding school. *It is instead fear of loss of agency and ability to steer change in the system.*

Even if their own school was in a strong position currently, Heads felt it was important to be part of a grouping, because individual school status could turn on the results of an OFSTED inspection. The teaching schools interviewed made sure they had at least two schools with 'outstanding' from OFSTED in their group, as this would mean that they could not be de-designated if one lost this outstanding badge:place.

'If you say to me where's education going, I say...it's Federations and it's Franchises and it's fraternities and that's where it's going and if you don't want to be part of one or two you'd better get yourself in a Fraternity and that's what I think we are.' (Secondary head, LA J)

This was expressed even more forcefully by another head:

'I think it's a question of prioritisation and I think the other thing is, [as] somebody said to me, "You know, ultimately you've got to decide which clubs you want to be in because you can only be in so many clubs"; and what is the right club for your school and its future development?' (Head 2, LA H)

These developing groupings need to be explored in more detail as the research continues. The reference to clubs raises again the issue of identity and how particular responses lead to categorisation. To be a Teaching School, for example, is the kind of currently available identity/category that seems to be the least threatening to other schools, at least on the surface, drawing as it does on professional identity.

There is strong awareness throughout the system that, despite the rhetoric of independence and autonomy, the severity of the high stakes policy environment is the key policy lever in driving structural change forward There is a sense of *active professional location*. These headteachers were attempting to maintain an identity as a 'good' headteacher and a 'good' school and in their interviews they referred to values and principles which revealed how they wished to define what this meant for them. A pervasive aim was to maintain optimum control over what happened to their school but they were also struggling to maintain some control over the definition of what a good school is, how a good headteacher behaves and of the criteria for judging what is good. These aims may be assumed to drive headteachers' practice in less turbulent times as well. Such active professional location is the way that professionals orient

and sensitise themselves within their context to be able to make judgements and take action. In a context of the kind of rapid and significant change in the relations of institutions and constituencies, the invocation of principles and values coupled with and influenced by pragmatic judgement, is the way that headteachers and their schools are negotiating the complex systemic change.

### **Future plans**

The next stage of our analysis will focus on how we understand the ways in which policy hones professional identities whilst creating 'a nexus between resistance discourses, existing identities and hegemonic shifts in terms of understandings of identities within the public sector' (Baxter, 2011). We will seek to draw out not only the range of perspectives of local actors as they are influenced by, and seek to influence, developments in the locality, but also consider the theoretic implications of these changes. The research will seek to draw out not only the range of perspectives of local actors as they are influenced by, and seek to influence, developments in the locality, but also consider the theoretic implications of these changes, not just for the 'local', but for headteacher identity. The study will continue to utilise a qualitative approach, using local authority areas as a frame for data collection and analysis. The three local authority (LA) areas in which we have worked to date were selected to provide a variety of geographical, historical and policy contexts. In addition to these contextual differences our work to date has established that they also differ in their responses to the challenges of structural reform. Drawing on the larger team that has now been assembled, we would plan to add fourth LA to our sample - a small metropolitan authority with a differing response to the restructuring agenda.

The next stage will consist of a further series of semi-structured interviews with key informants. Key members of the sample from phase 1 will be re-interviewed in order to develop a longitudinal picture. In addition, a small number of additional interviews will be undertaken, in particular to explore the perspectives of those heads whose contexts are not represented in our initial sample and other named agents of local structural change, including Teaching Schools, NLEs, SLEs, and NLGs. As before, the composition of the sample of respondents will be emergent both in response to changing local circumstances, and to issues that arise from the respondents. When applicable interviews will be supported by documentation, including LA and school policy documents and press reports. Following on from the thematic analysis in part one, we will seek to draw out not only the range of perspectives of local actors as they are influenced by, and seek to influence, developments in the locality, but also further develop the theoretical implications of these changes.

The work will continue through 2012-13. Review towards the end of the period will determine whether it is desirable/feasible to use aspects of the work as a basis for a research grant bid to a national charity/agency.

### **Implications for theory and policy**

Through this project, the research team has begun to analyse the flows of influence and accountability in these emerging local systems, analysing how different solutions are being framed for local circumstances. Analysis of the data so far has revealed great complexity and an even great degree of ambiguity around emerging structures, coupled with a fast pace of change. Through these processes the 'local' is being reconstituted in a variety of ways, with school- and LA-level arenas evolving in distinctive ways in different locations. This redefining of what 'local' means for schools has major implications for school leaders, especially headteachers who are actively seeking solutions that both protect them from outcomes that they fear, and at the same time embody values that they wish to protect. As the system fragments, it is clear that the interaction of structure and agency plays out in very different ways in particular local contexts. This may be altering headteacher professional identity. In the three areas, relationships

between schools are being brokered and managed in different ways by diverse actors, but there are similar underlying tensions in each area, and in each arena the headteacher plays a crucial role. However, schools' – and in particular their heads' - opportunities for exercising agency are influenced strongly by many factors.- the history of relationships with their LA; their judgments about the other actors' motivations and possible responses; and the resources, both material and symbolic, that they can bring to bear.

Heads are conceiving and responding to new choices on the basis of their interpretations of this multifaceted game. This involves power play, making new relationships and alliances whilst balancing the benefits of new structures to their own school. In a sense, Headteachers have always done this. The difference now may be that the pace of change, coupled with entirely new structures, is changing the idea of 'headteacher' beyond recognition, and this has strong implications for the relevance of current leadership development programmes which may not be changing at a similar pace.

### **Conference papers or publications arising from the study**

1. LfL seminar University of Cambridge, July 2012
2. *The Restructuring of Schooling in England: Exploring the 'Local'*; paper presented at the ECER conference, Cadiz, September 2012
3. *A geographical approach to studying the restructuring of schooling; an overview* presented at BELMAS seminar, Birmingham, October 2012
4. *The Restructuring of Schooling in England: The redefinition of an educational landscape*, paper presented at the CCEAM Conference, Limassol 2012
5. Proposal accepted for AERA, April 2013
6. Proposal accepted for chapter in EMAL Special Edition, 2014

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