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THE CHANGING ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN EDUCATION: THE CASE OF BIRMINGHAM

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Introduction

In May 2012 Labour took control of Birmingham city council from a Conservative-led coalition with the Liberal Democrats. The landscape of the school system in which the new council finds itself is changing rapidly and radically. Birmingham has 299 primary schools and 77 secondary schools. Around a half of the secondary schools have become academies, and about a quarter of primary schools are academies or are in the process of converting, many as the result of the forced conversion of lower-performing schools by the DfE. Academies are of course no longer part of the local authority and it has virtually no power over them. It has few powers over its maintained schools and its capacity to support schools has been reduced by the government's unprecedentedly large and ongoing cuts in council budgets.

My research is a study of the development and implementation of the education policies of the new Labour council in this challenging policy environment, and the responses of the schools to them, over an 18 month period commencing in autumn 2011. It is based on interviews with key councillors, officers, headteachers and other key informants, observation at Labour Party and local authority meetings, and documentary analysis. The research is complemented by a parallel study of Birmingham education support services in a period of transition to independent 'social enterprise' status, which is supported by a British Academy research grant.

The research falls into two phases, before and after the election in May 2012. The first phase comprised the internal policy process within the local Labour Party, led by a group of councillors and local MPs, to which I had some access, and during which I interviewed a number of headteachers about the emerging themes as they became public. The second phase, which this paper focuses on, It is still in progress. It comprises a continuing external process of policy elaboration and dissemination by the local authority, comprising policy documents and consultation meetings, mainly with headteachers. I shall be seeking the responses of headteachers in early 2013 once the new policy agenda has achieved a more finalised form.

The internal Labour Party policy process began with an open meeting for members on all the policy areas, including education, which would be in the election manifesto. It was followed by a series of meetings of an education policy commission between October and December 2011, comprising mainly a small group of councillors and an MP. The most salient themes were a new partnership with schools, admissions and 'employability'. Notable were the absence of involvement of ordinary LP members, and of headteachers and chairs of governors; the lack of research and evidence base for discussion; the tension between the shadow cabinet member for education, who chaired the meetings, and the MP; and the lack of discussion of strategies for 'school improvement'. The meetings led to the production of numerous drafts of an education manifesto and finally the education section of Labour's local election manifesto.

The Labour manifesto had three priorities which were subsequently elaborated in a statement by the Leader to Council on 12 June:

- Economic growth. 'Our vision is to make Birmingham the enterprise capital of Britain.'
- Improved social services (but in the context of massive ongoing cuts in Council spending).
- Devolution and localisation: 'to involve local people and communities in the future of their local area and their public services…' (BCC, 2012a)

In that context the Council proposes three key education policies:

- A new partnership between the local authority and the schools
- A curriculum for employability
- 'a fresh partnership with schools, families, governors and residents.' (BCC, 2012a)

1. A new local authority-schools partnership

Headteachers I interviewed before and shortly after the May election were critical of the lack of a vision and a dialogue with schools of the Conservative-led Council which had been in office since 2004, often contrasted with the period when Tim Brighouse was CEO, from 1993 to 2002. 'I'm baffled by the failure of the politicians to engage with the professionals.' (Head, LA secondary). Heads spoke of two priorities. One was to renew that dialogue:

> I just think it is amazingly simple what an incoming administration should do in Birmingham, listen to the professionals and get in touch and if it is about policy formation it would be nice to think that the professionals have role in that process. (Head, LA secondary).

The other was to be supportive of Birmingham schools at a time when they were subject to government criticism:

> I think the new Labour council needs to be more involved with what's going on and more aware. To become more of a critical friend to balance between the critique and the friendship rather than just be critical. I think they need to be actively supporting the positive things that are happening […] because actually there's masses of stuff that is happening that's really fantastic. (Head, LA primary).

But there was scepticism about what capacity the LA had to act, given the dominance of central government over education policy and the drastic decline in the powers and resources of the LA. What could and should it do?

> I am tempted to say nothing and nothing. What can it do? Very little because I think the balance of power is irreversible. I think it comes from the centre. (Head, LA secondary).

> Well I think the local authorities have all but gone really, I'm afraid. (Head, secondary academy)

In July the new Cabinet Member for Children and Family Services sent a letter to all Birmingham schools with the proposal to create a 'Co-operative Partnership', an umbrella Trust open to all state-funded schools, including academies, in Birmingham, in which the schools would be the principal partners, along with the local authority. The purpose of the Trust is to provide a new framework for collaboration between the local authority and its schools which, crucially, is

acceptable to academies. Its principal aim is to construct a system for higher-performing schools to support lower-performing schools, building on existing but patchy collaborative arrangements which have grown in the past year, in order to raise standards of attainment in the authority, which have been strongly criticised by Michael Gove. A secondary purpose of the Co-operative Partnership is to provide a framework for the provision of the LA's traded services to schools.

The attraction for lower-performing schools to participate is enhanced support. The incentive for higher-performing schools including converter academies to participate is posed by the local authority in terms of 'moral purpose', a discourse which is central to current 'school improvement' discourse and which resonates with a tradition of education as a collective public good. The Co-operative Partnership builds on existing collaborative arrangements among Birmingham schools, which have developed significantly over the past year or two, and most notably the Primary School Improvement Group.

> Since I've been a head there's a shift in mentality from battening down the hatches and just sticking to your own school and don't really care what goes on elsewhere more to opening up and saying actually I can learn from other schools and they can learn from me. (Head, LA primary)

The strategy of setting up authority-wide partnership bodies with schools is of course not peculiar to Birmingham. On the contrary, it is the principal response of local authorities across the country to the new situation they face, as two empirical research studies published this year demonstrate (Parish et al, 2012; ADCS, 2012). The ADCS (Association of Directors of Children's Services) report *The future role of the local authority in education* identifies three models of the role of local authorities, of which 'Model 3 - Where local authorities have handed the commissioning role to an overarching partnership body' corresponds most closely to what Birmingham LA is proposing (Crossley-Holland 2012: 18).

A series of three Partnership Meetings to develop the proposal took place during the summer, involving the Cabinet Member for education, senior officers, a number of headteachers and some external advisers. Since then the Co-operative Partnership model has been presented and consulted on at a number of headteacher meetings, including secondary and primary heads' forums and local school network meetings. At the same time the Education and Vulnerable Children Overview and Scrutiny Committee launched a public Inquiry during September and October into 'Strengthening the Birmingham Family of Schools – the Role of the City Council in the context of academies', asking 'In the light of schools in Birmingham becoming academies what role should the council play to support all schools and children?'. The Inquiry report is due to be published at the end of December.

The viability of the Co-operative Partnership policy remains unclear at present. The presentation and consultation process is still in progress. The response of headteachers ranges from supportive to sceptical. There is widespread support for the principle of inter-school collaboration to raise standards but the LA has not yet made clear the nature of the Co-operative Partnership.

> I was at a strategic forum meeting recently and what was very apparent from that group of heads was that we've signed up to the principles of it but what we need is something concrete in terms of structure, outcomes, costs and so on and so forth, so 'what will it look like?' is what they were all saying. (LA officer)

Nor is it clear what the local authority can contribute that cannot be accomplished by networks of schools themselves. This is also the position of David Hargreaves who is acting as an adviser to the local authority in its discussions with heads.

I think for many schools now they probably think...and they know the authority can't necessarily can't make a difference for them, they certainly can't protect them in terms of whether or not they are going to become a forced academy so yes I think schools are looking to see how they can work together and support each other in groups and use the authority and the trading services if they think it is necessary for their schools if they think it would benefit their schools. (LA officer)

In interviews with heads three roles for the local authority emerge. First, the role of identifying at an early stage schools needing support, as a leading member of the Primary School Improvement Group explained:

You asked me before about dealing with schools and about the capacity we have and I talked about those 83 schools but actually what concerns me are the 200 others that aren't in that category. What the local authority needs to do is to catch these schools before they fall into that net with some kind of local intelligence, which they haven't got and haven't got access to apart from data because there are now no people visiting schools to be able to say... The only indicator that the school is having difficulty is when the data is showing to be not as positive as it could be, or the OFSTED inspection. There's got to be some other way. And actually they could probably carve a niche for themselves in developing some really effective way of doing that. (Head, LA infant school)

The second role is to coordinate the developing school improvement market economy, which at present is patchy and lacks any authority-wide coordination.

They've got to develop a role that isn't just about identifying who needs support and then brokering how much it costs and commissioning who goes in there. They need to develop I think for their own survival a market, a way of supporting all schools because at the moment there are so few of us. We've got the teaching schools as well, there are seven teaching schools, and they are dealing with different sets of people, but there's not enough yet to join all of that up so that it all meshes together, which is why the school improvement groups have got so much work. Once there are more teaching schools that will take the slack for quite a few, but we just need to have probably a bit more formalised -- through the local authority or through the City Council -- ways of saying who would you join up with? If you had to join up with a really good school in your area who would it be? Which is your really good secondary school? Which other good primary schools? And then let's adopt some schools that don't think...that aren't doing quite so well that you can then start to do something for, and you could build your own alliance with them so that if they ever needed support through OFSTED or through their falling standards then you'd got something in place already, you wouldn't need some external company who had never set foot in this country going and taking them on just for profit. (Head, LA infant school)

The third role goes beyond the immediate task of addressing school improvement in terms of test scores and Ofsted grades. It is about developing and promoting, in dialogue with schools, a vision of the values, aims and purposes of education. A number of interviewees referred positively to the role of Tim Brighouse as Birmingham CEO a decade and more earlier in developing a shared vision of education with schools, in contrast to its absence in the thinking of the current Labour LA.

I'm afraid there's a void at the moment.

Where the local authority is?
Yes.
In terms of a vision?
A vision. [...] you need that leadership and you need that understanding of schools. [...]
You do need somebody to communicate the vision, to have a collective, to pull them
together, because I think that what's happening is that lots of headteachers in
Birmingham who desperately do want to do the right thing -- I think the majority do
want to do the right thing -- feel that they are on their own. (Head, secondary academy)

2. A curriculum for employability

Economic growth is the dominant priority of the Labour Council. The relatively low skill level of
the Birmingham population is regarded as a major obstacle. Young people leaving Birmingham
schools now have qualifications at or above the national and core city averages but this will take
time to significantly alter the qualifications profile of the workforce. However, for the school
system to contribute more effectively to the economy academic qualifications are regarded as
not enough. In its written evidence to the City Council's 'Closing the Skills Gap' Inquiry in
autumn 2012, the Birmingham Employment and Skills Board, a representative employers' body,
stated that it has set up two task groups to progress its aim of taking 'a joint employer and
provider led approach to planning courses, qualifications, employability skills and the wider
school curriculum.' (BCC, 2012b: 60). It defines employability skills as:

> 1. Understanding a work ethic, a good attitude, the importance of appearance and
> manner.
> 2. At least level 1 competency in literacy and Numeracy skills' (17)

The Council's principal new education initiative to address this perceived employability deficit
is the Birmingham Baccalaureate. The Cabinet member's letter to schools in June 2012
proposed an

> offer to all our young people which will truly prepare them for the world of work – a
> Birmingham Baccalaureate, a school leavers qualification which will be shaped by
> employers, schools and the third sector to give our young people the skills they need to
> thrive in our local economy.

The 'BBacc' is presented as a counterweight to Gove's focus on a narrowly academic curriculum,
exemplified by the EBacc and the devaluing of pre-vocational qualifications. It can be seen as
representing a vision of education which goes beyond a narrowly defined 'school improvement'.
The initial response of heads varies. There is a recognition of the limitations of a narrow
academic curriculum:

> Most schools would say we are preparing them for life but actually we are not, we are
> preparing them to sit exams and jump through hoops, which may or may not be of use to
> them later on in life. And the simple basic skills which really should be there at the
> primary level in terms of employers looking for enthusiasm, commitment, loyalty,
> communication skills in a broader sense of the word, are being overlooked and yet we
> are driving through an agenda that is so narrow that it's not going to meet the needs of
> those children in the future when they then leave school and want to get a job and the
> employer says well your people skills are sadly lacking, or your work ethic is not as it
> should be. But then one would say well when have they ever been taught it or exposed
> to it? If the local authority was able to develop those links between local industry and
> business and schools, and I'm not just talking the secondary because it's always the

secondaries and yet children are forming an opinion of what they want to do when they are grown up when they are in primary school. (head LA primary school)

But there is also a recognition that the BBacc may be marginalised by the dominance of the performance agenda.

> I think it is worthy and I'd be naturally sympathetic to what I think is driving it but I think it comes down to currency.[...] that's the power the Secretary of State has. So up against that raw power I don't the Birmingham baccalaureate will be given the time of day. [...] Schools are absolutely driven by surviving and the league tables are immensely, immensely influential. (Head, LA secondary school)

A number of practical queries were also raised. How will the BBacc be assessed and accredited? What will the criteria be? Is the guarantee of an interview with an employer for everyone who passes feasible?

3. 'A fresh partnership with schools, families, governors and residents.' (BCC, 2012a)

The Children, Young People and Families Directorate Organisational Development Plan 2012-13: *Towards excellence* (BCC, 2012c: 4) stated that priorities include:

> 'Participation
> - involving children and young people, parents and carers in the development, review and delivery of services and acting upon what they tell us.'

The current diagrammatic model of the small clusters of schools within the Co-operative Partnership includes an item called 'Forum' labelled 'Membership including Parents Staff Learners Community Organisations', although there is no similar item in the diagram of the participants in the city-wide Partnership.

There are suggestions here, though undefined, of an intention to involve parents, learners and local communities in education policy-making. It appears to echo the national Labour Party's Policy Review Consultation paper entitled *Devolving Power in Education: School Freedom and Accountability* published in March 2012 (Labour Party, 2012). In its Foreword Stephen Twigg insisted on 'involving parents, communities, and local government in ensuring that schools play a positive role in local areas, delivering high standards and innovation.' It would represent a significant change in the LA's policy process in education from that of the previous administration. It would be in keeping with the Council's policy on devolution, which has already begun to be implemented with the devolution of a range of services to constituency bodies. However, there is no explicit connection between the Council's education policy and its policy on devolution. There is no mention of the devolution policy in the Council's education documents, and there is no mention at all of the school system in the Council's devolution documents. When I questioned the councillor responsible for the devolution agenda about the relevance to the school system he admitted that it had not been thought about. There would seem to be two reasons. One was explained by an LA officer, speaking of her previous experience when a primary school head:

> What I very rapidly came to realise is that local councillors weren't very interested in schools because the power of budgets was devolved to governing bodies and there was no direct control by councillors of those budgets, so that in fact they didn't really need to engage and couldn't demonstrate through schools their impact on the local community so it was not engaged. (LA officer)

The consequence is that the Constituency and Ward Committees don't discuss education and the schools have their own individual governance networks - the governing body - but don't participate in local community governance. The view of headteachers interviewed was that they would welcome more involvement by elected members at school level. For example, one primary head suggested that councillors should attend school consortia meetings and the Primary Heads Forum to listen and share local information.

The second reason is a wariness on the part of the LA about extending popular participation because it might challenge professional values, policies and practices, as the Cabinet member for education's reference to 'religion' indicates:

> The clear themes that we have emerging are trying to foster strong partnerships between schools, between local community groups, between other schools, so you have a more cohesive community type of schooling going on so I think that's going to be one of the themes we are definitely sticking with. [...]In terms of having an actual governance structure, I don't know how that would work at this stage. We've talked about having neighbourhood input but exactly how that would work, again it's not fleshed out. It's a double edged sword really, local community involvement - e.g. religion, ward committees, constituency committees, area forums - we've been looking very much at principles and ideas not really the nitty gritty of how it's going to work. (Cabinet member for education)

Discussion

The three principal education policies of the local authority embody a common strategic concept: partnership in networks. The role of the local authority is to be the initiator of and a participant in three city-wide education networks:
- a network of all Birmingham schools
- a network of schools and employers
- a network of schools, families and local communities.

We can situate this in the wider context of urban governance. During the period of the New Labour government a new paradigm became dominant in urban politics, centred on the notion of a shift from government to governance. The thesis was that local networks of participative governance were replacing bureaucratic hierarchical power. Consent was displacing coercion as the dominant mode of coordination. But research evidence did not support the governance thesis. It underestimated the soft power available to local government and the extent to which networks were subject to forms of hierarchical control (Stoker, 2011; Davies, 2011). This critique can be applied to Birmingham council's proposed education networks.

The Co-operative Partnership network is not vulnerable to hierarchical control by the local authority because the local authority has no power to coerce the schools. It is dependent on securing consent through influence. But the Partnership is subject to external hierarchical control because its school improvement agenda, and that of each school, is driven by the performativity agenda of the DfE. This has consequences for all three of the LA's education aims. It may deter some schools from participating in the Partnership, privileging competing, or simply surviving, over collaborating. It tends to marginalise the BBacc proposal because schools are focused on test and examination scores, especially the EBacc, on which they are evaluated. Similarly, the pressure on schools from performance measures and Ofsted tends to deter schools from engaging with new forms of popular participation for reasons of both priority and risk.

The Birmingham Baccalaureate is intended to be the product of a partnership between a network of local business leaders and the local authority, based on a perceived common interest. The LA is, as with the Co-operative Partnership, dependent on using its influence to win the consent of schools and of individual employers to participate. There is no external coercion from the government to pursue this policy: on the contrary, the Birmingham Baccalaureate is presented as meeting the needs of business in contrast to the government's lack of a viable employability policy for schools, exemplified by the narrowly academic EBacc and the devaluing of pre-vocational qualifications. The extent to which schools will adopt the BBacc, if at all, remains to be seen. But insofar as they do, and do so without offering a critical educational perspective on the values, policies and practices of business, the network will be dominated by a business agenda for the curriculum, representing
 'the increasingly pervasive embedding of rhetoric and practices of 'enterprising education' as 'an aspect of a 'neoliberal pedagogy' (McCafferty, 2010: 541).

Finally, any proposal , albeit currently undefined, by the local authority to extend popular participation in the school system, if it goes beyond a modest consultative initiative, is politically risky because it is likely to provoke opposition from headteachers if they see it as an infringement of their professional autonomy, or at least a diversion from the pressure of performativity. It remains to be seen to what extent, if at all, the LA pursues it. At stake here are fundamental and contested issues of democratic rights in local education policy-making, revolving around the politics of knowledge: whose knowledge and what kinds of knowledge count in educational governance? (Wainwright, 2003). Yet it can be argued that the emergence of local clusters of schools and increasing collaboration among them, promoted by the local authority, would provide a fertile potential basis for network governance in the school system at the cluster level and for community participation in it, and that these enhanced local partnerships between schools and communities would contribute to improving standards and reducing educational inequality (Ranson, 2010; Hatcher, 2012).

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