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School restructuring in England: New school configurations and new challenges
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Introduction

The changes to educational policy in England instituted by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition Government which took office in 2010 have presented major challenges for schools. The Government's aim is to establish a system of 'independent publicly-funded schools' (DfE 2010). The large majority of these schools are 'academies' – schools which transfer from local authority funding and accountability to direct funding by the Secretary of State. In addition, there are provisions for new 'free schools' to be created in response to proposals by community and religious groups and other organisations. The corollary of direct responsibility for schools being passed to the Secretary of State is the 'hollowing out' (Rhodes, 1997) of the local authority's responsibilities for ensuring the quality of schooling locally and its replacement with a vision of a 'self-improving school system' (Hargreaves, 2010, 2011) through which responsibility for school improvement is passed down to school level with school-to-school collaboration seen as the primary vehicle of change. This view is embodied in the policy of establishing Teaching Schools (Matthews and Berwick, 2013; Husbands, 2014). Since 2010 these processes have proceeded apace (Woods and Simkins, 2014). By September 2013 9% of primary and 52% of secondary schools had converted to academy status (a total of 3304) and a further 99 new 'free schools' had been created.

Schools are faced with the need to develop responses to this environment. The ways in which they do this and the outcomes that result will be critical in determining the nature of the schooling 'landscape' going forward. Two key questions face schools. First, should the school seek academy status, and, secondly, should it seek to work collaboratively with other schools in some form of partnership? In principle these are independent decisions: many schools that have not chosen to become academies have, nevertheless, formed partnerships (typically 'federations') with other schools for a variety of reasons; and schools can also choose to become 'stand-alone' academies. However, schools' freedom of choice will be constrained by various factors, the most important of which is the way in which their performance is judged. All schools are being encouraged to become academies, but where schools are deemed to be underperforming on the basis of criteria relating to their student outcomes and inspection judgements they may be required to become academies under a sponsor, which might be, for example, a not-for-profit school chain or another successful school. Such arrangements need to be approved by the Secretary of State and, in many cases the DfE will be a key actor in determining the 'solution' that emerges. As a result of these processes, the choices that are made about schools' futures are leading to increasingly fragmented local landscapes of schooling with different patterns emerging in different parts of the country. This article considers some the implications of this fragmentation by exploring the patterns of schooling that are emerging in three local areas.

New patterns of school organisation

It is not easy to find ways of analysing the new patterns of schooling that are emerging. Hill et al (2012) in their pioneering study suggest a 'loose-tight' spectrum of organisational forms from situations where schools collaborate loosely over areas of common interest through to situations where groups of schools have a joint model of governance and may even have a shared model of pedagogy. They identify three key positions along this spectrum – collaborative partnerships, umbrella trusts (where schools work together under a trust but retain their own governance) and multi-academy trusts with fully shared governance.

This position is too simple, however. In fact the relationships made between schools are complex and take diverse forms some of which may not function as Hill et al envisage. Schools may be involved in loose '*collaboratives*', where they come together merely to gain advantages of scale in such areas as

professional development or business management support, or to enable shared activities concerned with school improvement. Some schools establish more formal relationships through federations. Federations, which were encouraged under the previous Labour government, are typically small groups locally constructed from schools that choose, or are encouraged by the local authority, to come together in partnerships which are institutionalised through some reconfiguration of their governance arrangements. The reasons for the greater formality may include school improvement concerns – especially where higher and lower performing schools are brought together – or more pragmatic considerations such as the difficulty of recruiting a headteacher, or the advantages, as with collaboratives, of pooling key resources (Chapman, et al, 2011; Ofsted, 2011; Howarth, 2013). Federation arrangements may be relatively loose, such as the establishment of a joint committee to address particular issues, or tighter such as the appointment of an executive headteacher over the federation or the creation of a joint governing body.

Finally, schools may be grouped into chains. While this is sometimes used (as do Hill et al, 2012) as a collective term for many forms of school collaboration, we prefer to use it specifically for groupings which are relatively tight, centrally controlled and led by an organisation which might be a non-profit/charitable organisation or a school. In many ways such chains are similar to Charter Management Organisations in the United States on which some of them are modelled (Farrell et al, 2012; Wohlstetter et al, 2013). However, it is important to note that chains vary considerably, in their ‘ownership’, in their size, in their geographical reach and in their governance – for example in the degree to which member schools collaborate closely or are granted autonomy from central controls and policies (Papanastasiou 2013; Salokangas and Chapman 2014). In particular it is important to distinguish between those that are led and managed under the auspices of a national or regional non-profit organisation and those that are led by schools. The former have received much of the publicity – good and bad – in the national press, but the latter are becoming very significant players in the emerging landscape.

Sources of data

This article draws on a research project which seeks to gather evidence as to what new order is emerging at the local level and the factors affecting this. To do this we have sought information and perspectives on local developments in three local authorities (LAs) chosen to provide a variety of geographical, historical and policy contexts: a large metropolitan authority (City), a large rural authority with a dispersed population (County), and a smaller unitary authority centred on a town (Town). Within each we interviewed people in senior posts in the LA and in schools, especially those likely to have an LA-wide perspective. We also obtained data concerning the changing status of schools from key officers in each LA and from the DfES website. Between 2011 and 2013 we conducted 26 semi-structured hour long semi-structured interviews. This paper largely draws on interviews with 7 senior LA staff (3 of which we interviewed twice) and the data they provided.

The academisation process in three local authority areas

Describing the emerging relationships between schools is difficult. In all three areas mixed and fragmented patterns were emerging in a highly dynamic process. The policy of ‘academisation’ continued as additional schools chose, or were forced, to seek academy status and take fateful decisions about how best to position themselves in the emerging local schools landscape. Furthermore, knowing the proportions of academies in each LA says little about the diversity of forms of leadership and governance that underpin those surface structures. Nevertheless, basic data on the schooling landscape may still be instructive: mapping emerging surface patterns is a first step in understanding how the local landscape is being reconfigured.

The number of schools by phase and status in each of our LAs in September 2013 was as given in Table 1. This shows two main trends: the rate of ‘academisation’ varied considerably between the LAs; and in all the LAs the rate of primary conversion lagged considerably behind that of secondary schools. Burrowing below these percentages we find a complex picture.

Table 1: Number of schools by academy status September 2013

Local authority area	Primary		Secondary		Special	
	Academy	Not academy	Academy	Not academy	Academy	Not academy
City	16 (12%)	118 (88%)	15 (62%)	9 (38%)	0 (0%)	10 (100%)
County	59 (21%)	217 (79%)	44 (81%)	10 (19%)	1 (5%)	21 (95%)
Town	9 (11%)	73 (89%)	9 (75%)	3 (25%)	1 (17%)	5 (83%)

National chains were first introduced into each of the authorities through New Labour’s academies programme. In City three schools became such academies under the sponsorship of large national chains; in County two did; and in Town one did. All were secondary schools in challenging circumstances or with issues around performance. Since 2010 further penetration by such chains into the three LAs has been limited. In City no further schools had joined national chains by September 2013; in County 12 had and in Town two had. The figure for County, however, is somewhat misleading: 9 primary and secondary converter academies in that LA were sponsored – and loosely controlled - by a subsidiary of a large non-profit organisation which has a contract with that LA for the provision of services to schools. Apart from this, the relatively small purchase of these large national chains across all three LAs in September 2013 is notable. One chain with 59 schools nationally has a total of 6 schools in all three LAs; another is working in two of the LAs, with just one school in each out of 31 nationally.

In addition to the national chains, some schools in County are members of one of two chains that are regionally focused. Both have their ‘headquarters’ in the geographical region of County, although not in the County administrative area, and sponsor schools across the region. These chains sponsor 13 and 15 academies respectively of which, between them, nine are in County. In each case the schools are a mixture of primary and secondary schools (and one special school) and of sponsored and converter academies, and the majority are located within one local area of the authority.

All three LAs have school-led groupings of academies. In City one secondary school has sponsored another secondary school in another part of the city as well as two of that school’s feeder primary schools. All three schools were vulnerable in terms of their performance and the development of this grouping was facilitated by the LA. In addition, the LA has facilitated two primary school groupings, comprising a total of five schools, again with a strong school acting as a sponsor to weaker ones. In County local school-led groupings have arisen for different reasons. A grouping of four secondary schools was established under a lead school in response to New Labour’s academies policy. A more recent example in County is a grouping of five primary schools (including converter and sponsored academies and one free school) under a joint Academy Trust centred around a town. In County, too, there are six federations of academies which combine schools in a variety of ways: for example, a secondary school and some of its feeder primaries; two grammar schools; a pair of primary schools; and an infant-junior federation. In Town there is one local chain comprising one secondary school as the lead school and two primaries. Finally, in two of the LAs the local Catholic diocese is building groupings of schools comprising currently two secondary and six primaries in City, and one secondary and four primaries in County.

Finally, it needs to be re-emphasised that a large proportion of academies in all three LA areas are free-standing. The vast majority of these are converter academies, although a small number have sponsors such as local universities or regional educational consultancy organisations.

Discussion

These brief summaries of the position in the three local authorities in September 2013 are incomplete in that they only relate school groups which emerged as part of the academisation process; they do not include other groups, especially federations and collaboratives that did not include academies. Nevertheless they suggest a number of initial conclusions concerning emerging patterns.

First, rates of academisation vary between LA areas. A major explanation for this can be found in the conditions in each LA area. County had been traditionally a low interventionist administration and had attempted to minimise the activity and impact of the local state by giving as much autonomy to schools as possible; while Town was emerging from a period of difficult relationships with its schools. In contrast, City had traditionally been a relatively interventionist administration and placed strong emphasis on nurturing families of schools that were embedded in their local communities. Consequently, prior to 2010, a much higher proportion of schools in County and Town than in City had taken on and become used to the enhanced responsibilities and freedom associated with foundation status (45% of secondary schools in County and 75% in Town, compared with 23% in City), whereas in City there were stronger cultural and political pressures within the schooling community towards the maintenance of a coherent local system despite the pressures of national policy. A second factor concerned school performance. County and Town had a higher proportion of 'outstanding' schools than did City, providing greater opportunities for early conversion and school sponsorship.

Second, academisation has been slow to establish itself among primary schools in all three LA areas, although moving rather faster in County than the other two areas.

Third, national chains have not achieved significant purchase in any of the LAs, especially since 2010. The preference for key actors in each LA seems to have been to establish school groups with more local roots. 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. This was most noticeable in City where the LA actively attempted to influence patterns emerging locally towards groupings led by high performing local schools (for a fuller discussion see Simkins et al, 2014). In contrast, in County where the LA's position was less assertive about solutions a wide variety of groups was emerging including both those led by local schools and by regionally-based non-profit organisations. One of the consequences in County was that particular groupings were emerging in dominant positions in various localities.

Finally, the largest group of academies in all three authorities comprised those that were free-standing (45% of academies across the three areas). It does not follow that many of these did not have various informal collaborative relationships in place, but it does mean that they did not see a necessity in establishing formal groups with other schools as part of the academisation process.

The experience in these three LA areas demonstrates the complexities that are emerging as national policy is translated into local patterns of implementation. Description and analysis of this dynamic is difficult. The number of organisational forms that are emerging is increasing, and the balance between them varies from area to area. Indeed, in large LAs such as County emerging patterns may well differ between quite small sub-areas. 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. Table 2 suggests the kinds of dimensions that need to be explored.

Table 2 Variables influencing the character of emerging school groups

Variables	Parameters of each variable	
	Group structure	
Scale	Large number of schools	Small number of schools
Scope	Locally based	Widely spread
Status differentiation	Homogeneous: Schools with similar levels of material and symbolic capital (e.g. all high performing schools)	Heterogeneous: Schools with differing levels of material and symbolic capital (e.g. mix of well/poorly performing schools)
Phase composition	Mixed phase	Single phase
	Group formation	
Initiation	Created from the centre	Built from below
Membership	Forced	Voluntary
	Group organisation	
Management and governance	Centralised management (executive heads or leadership team)	Decentralised management (separate heads; no overarching executive)
Governance	Centralised governance structure (single governing body)	Decentralised governance structure (separate governing bodies)
Orientation	Primary focus on group objectives and outcomes	Primary focus on community and parental engagement

This kind of analysis suggests that 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 key actors exercise particular forms of power and influence in various 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. 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; school 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, and one which will need further research as local landscapes continue to evolve.

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