The forced march of the National Literacy Strategy: violence, resistance and personal consequences for those within local education authorities

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Abstract

This paper is presented as part of the findings of a doctoral study that has been undertaken as a policy trajectory study into processes of the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) throughout England in 1998. The conceptualisation of policy as texts, processes and outcomes follows that of Bowe et al (1992). The focus in this paper is upon people who worked to bring about a ‘revolution’, a ‘sea-change’ in the English education system at the meso level, between national policy making and schools.

The English education system was originally created by the 1944 Education Act as a ‘national system, locally administered’ (Whitty et al, 1998:17). Since then, most education in England has been provided by the state in schools which have been maintained and overseen by locally democratically accountable bodies. These Local Education Authorities (LEAs) were redesignated Local Authorities following the Children Act of 2004. The work of LEAs was radically altered as a result of NLS implementation, and the national strategies that followed it. LEA structures were forced to accommodate teams of consultants, funded centrally through the strategy, and trained by national directors.

A small team of directors took the strategy to each LEA, using their powers of negotiation alongside the ‘lubrication’ of funding. Refusal was countered with violence, forcing strategy requirements into LEA systems. The consequences were profound and long term, highly visible in local authority structures and service priorities today.

In 1998, Consultant teams were newly appointed. They were insurgents, inserted into the different and differing systems of LEAs. Alongside strategy directors, they were resisted and marginalised, divorced and separated from the mainstream work of LEAs. Silos were reinforced, with service leaders resisting attempts to align the work of LEAs in supporting schools. There were examples of extreme turbulence and accounts from individuals who worked within this challenging space to align powerful, potentially violent forces, to engage schools in a new and untried experiment, bringing a panacea of school
improvement and the promise of raised attainment to every classroom within each primary school throughout England.

Introduction

This paper is presented as part of the findings of a doctoral study that has been undertaken as a policy trajectory study into processes of the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) throughout England in 1998. The conceptualisation of policy as texts, processes and outcomes follows that of Bowe et al (1992). The focus in this paper is upon people who worked to bring about a ‘revolution’, a ‘sea-change’ in the English education system at the meso level, between national policy making and schools.

The English education system was originally created by the 1944 Education Act as a ‘national system, locally administered’ (Whitty et al, 1998:17). Since then, most education in England has been provided by the state in schools which have been maintained and overseen by locally democratically accountable bodies. Throughout, I will refer to these as Local Education Authorities (LEAs), whilst acknowledging their redesignation as Local Authorities following the Children Act of 2004.

The work of LEAs was radically altered as a result of NLS implementation, and the national strategies that followed it. LEA structures were forced to accommodate teams of consultants, funded centrally through the strategy, and trained by national directors. The focus here is on those changes, particularly the work of a small team of directors who took the strategy to each LEA in 1998, using their powers of negotiation alongside the ‘lubrication’ of funding. Refusal was countered with violence, forcing strategy requirements into LEA systems. The consequences were profound and long term, highly visible in local authority structures and service priorities today.

Overview of the study

This study focused on the cases of three contrasting LEAs. The first is a geographically large county characterised by its rural nature with many market towns which I refer to as ‘Eastshire’ to which I had the greatest access. Another is a large city authority, ‘Normanfield’, characterised by lower attainment in 1996 and consequently became an authority which was invited, and agreed, to run the Literacy Project in 1996, the eventual fore-runner of the NLS. ‘Barchester’ is the third authority, much smaller that the first two; a unitary authority within a larger shire county, serving a small city.

My research explored how the NLS was implemented and developed and how policy was mediated and reinterpreted in specific, local contexts. Policy is always contested and contestable and it is the
renegotiation of national policy, envisaged in the general, applied to the local, that interests me here. But beyond that, the effects of policy on local structures and on people are considered in this paper.

**Data generation, analysis and presentation**

Semi-structured interviews (Wengraf 2001) took place with three strategic managers, one from each authority, six literacy consultants, two regional directors and four national directors who had been responsible for strategy implementation in 1998. I also interviewed a small number of teachers; the account of one of whom contributes to understandings here.

Using some of Fairclough’s techniques of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) and a Foucauldian approach to the analysis of data (Foucault 1977), I present an explanation of some of the consequences for my participants in the early years of NLS implementation from 1998. Tensions and resistances are explored as the strategy was implemented into a marketised education system (Ball, 2007) with a strong legacy in one LEA of schools opting out of LEA control to attain Grant Maintained status (Fitz et al., 1993). Privatisation of some services, alongside the changes in expectations laid down by the Primary National Strategy in 2003, added to this complexity in the case of one of the LEAs that I examined.

Throughout this paper, my participants’ words are used as part of the analysis. Short excerpts are indicated by the use of full speech marks and longer contributions are indented and attributed to their speaker.

**Launching the strategy: negotiation, violence and lubrication**

The National Literacy Strategy was launched in 1998 as a panacea of school improvement with the promise that by 2002, attainment would be so significantly raised throughout all primary schools in England that 80% of children would attain ‘level 4’, the descriptors of attainment stated within the National Curriculum for England. It was the flagship policy of a New Labour government which had won the electorate’s mandate in 1997 after eighteen years of Conservative administrations. This government employed a problematising approach, a call to action (Graham and Neu, 2004:309), together with saviour discourse (Ball, 2007). Thus the establishment of a national policy agenda was justified. For the first time, teachers were guided in both what and how they should teach. The Standards and Effectiveness Unit was rapidly formed within the government department (DfEE), headed by Professor Michael Barber. Barber’s other role in co-chairing the Literacy Task Force (1997) was instrumental in selecting the Literacy Project of 1996-1997, directed by John Stannard, (Stannard and Huxford, 2007), as the template for the first national strategy.
Stannard recruited a small team who wrote the NLS framework and initial training materials consisting of a heavy pack, sent directly to every primary school throughout the country. This team of ten directors took NLS policy directions and expectations to each of the 150 LEAs in England, requiring them to appoint a senior officer as liaison early in 1998. In referring to LEAs in general, one national director commented:

But there was every level of recalcitrance in those early days, to be quite honest, in the sense that they didn’t see why they should do what (we were advising) .. just because someone said it was a good idea

This director was talking about the response to strategy implementation from LEAs compared to the earlier literacy project, which was reported as welcomed within the small number of lower attaining authorities that had been willing and pro-active in developing that project. In contrast, the NLS roll-out was greeted very differently.

At that time, most directors in the national team took responsibility for specific regions. All four national directors and both regional directors gave examples of significant resistance and struggles when introducing the strategy to LEA officers. They recalled using persuasive devices, using data from ‘successful’ literacy project schools in authorities such as Normanfield to highlight improvements in results, appealing to the rights of all pupils to achieve high attainment through, it was assumed, higher quality teaching as a result of the strategy model:

I just had to be completely honest and say is it right?... why should the children in one school have a less good opportunity for what is now called ‘life chances’ than those in another school? And I would quote a school (in a ).. situation where one school is only getting 14% of its children into a level 4 in year 6 and the adjacent school was considerably higher than that. And there was absolutely no earthly reason why they should be different because the sort of pupils …were drawn from very similar catchment areas

The background of these national directors was important, as one of them explained:

The people that LEAs had the most to do with were without exception drawn from immediate LEA work

so in talking to LEAs about issues of implementation, they knew they were talking to colleagues who understood their context

They understood that we didn’t have to have things explained to us - we knew many of the people but we also knew the issues. It wasn’t as if this was being implemented by
civil servants - it was being introduced by colleagues, fellow professionals, who were very committed…- to make this work for the benefit of children

national director

The reference to civil servants is important here. From the perspective of this national director, credibility and trusted relationships were formed quickly through successful negotiation with others. Central directives were being articulated in LEAs where, unlike civil servants, this director had previously worked.

Some directors denied the significance of any tensions when negotiating within LEAs: “there had always been a discussion, a dialogue and an exchange”. One suggested it was a “partnership” in all cases and “therefore it was not a big deal to sign off”. This was a reference to the director’s signature which was required to release the significant funding: the ‘standards fund’ announced by Blunkett as Secretary of State for Education. One national director referred to this as the “lubricant to implementation”. But these accounts were clearly the perspectives of the fund-holders in the ‘partnership’ rather than a partnership of equals. One director acknowledged their control of budget allocation explicitly: “because technically at that time we would say until we agree your plan you can’t have the money.” The use of the conditional ‘would’ instead of ‘could’ indicated the dominance held over the LEA by this director at that time.

The limited participatory nature of these early negotiations was endorsed by the Normanfield strategy manager, who had been in a senior role in an adjacent LEA in 1998:

If I can argue that what we are doing is better or more effective, then I’m happy to do that; so the money has never been wasted, but it’s never always been used quite as it was prescribed by the national strategy.

Jack, strategy manager, Normanfield

Jack was constraining and monitoring his own decisions on the effective allocation of the funding. He was never wholly compliant with national direction and the form of resistance suggested here was positive. Ultimately, however, Jack’s choices were limited. As the following quote demonstrates, there was no possibility of refusal by an LEA officer; all were required to engage with the strategy:

The Line Manager said, the first day I rang her and I said ‘look I’m XXXX I’m your new director’ and she said ‘yes I’ve heard who you are, I don’t want you to come into XXXXX ‘. I said ‘it’s not about what you want, it’s about children and schools’ and she said ‘well I’m not letting you in’. So I immediately rang the CEO (Chief Education Officer) and I never had a problem getting past the CEOs

(JB) So what was her attitude towards you after that?
She went, she left, she got another job. She moved across. We couldn’t allow that, we couldn’t possibly allow that.

**JB** And you had that authority?

Yes. Michael would ring if you wanted him to. Michael Barber would ring the CEO direct and say ‘what’s going on?’ Especially if the results in the LEA weren’t good.

In this account, the LEA officer had been removed from her post, thus denying her any opportunity for further resistance, negotiation or refusal. This is an example of what Foucault (1981) defined as violence and was the only, very honest account in my data of such levels of brutality. But Barber’s readiness to intervene in any LEA where there was reluctance to engage with strategy requirements was confirmed by other directors. He “cleared the barriers”, which included any resistant, strategically placed officers within LEAs. Whilst most accounts from national and regional directors emphasised the negotiation and mediation that took place, the threats of Barber’s interventions were given as a significant factor in ensuring LEA compliance with a national strategy that lacked the status of actually being statutory.

Another threat, forcing through implementation, was OfSTED. Described as a ‘lever’ to implementation by national directors, schools throughout England were faced with an expectation that the NLS would be seen in place from September 1998, unless they could demonstrate that they were delivering a curriculum that was of equivalence or better:

> What was critical was that Ofsted came on side with us and said ‘look we think is the right way to go, here’s the evidence’ and critically we started getting people moving in our direction quickly….

> We were offering you some security against your inspection, improvement in your results and accountability framework.

This “security” was demanded by schools and as LEAs also became subject to OfSTED inspection, so OfSTED’s endorsement of the NLS, led by its chief inspector, became an effective coercive mechanism. Inspection was used here as an explicit threat, designed to ensure compliance within schools and LEAs. LEAs were thereby forced to engage with the first national strategy in 1998. These data give some detail of how LEA agency was limited and largely denied (Hannon 1999) and how the greater strength of the national state silenced opposition from local states (Troyna, 1994). Thus the strategy, despite being non-statutory, was launched through all LEAs. Here it entered complex arenas of existing policy contexts, one of which was a legacy from the previous Conservative government’s legislation allowing schools to opt out of LEA control.
A legacy of Grant Maintained status

In 1998, every LEA in England was required to hold highly significant launch meetings, attended by all schools with primary aged children on roll. This was the first time meetings on such a scale had ever been held in the English education system. From each school, the head teacher, a teacher designated as the literacy co-ordinator and one school governor were expected to attend. When asked to analyse differences between LEAs, one national director promptly identified the history of Grant Maintained (GM) status as significant at these meetings:

(Differences were) because of the political nature of the LEAs - it was to do with, in 1998, some LEAs had a GM legacy, and schools separated themselves from the LEA and the LEA was kind of pulling them back in. Schools that saw themselves as entirely separate, this wasn’t an initiative that should involve them, they had good standards, so why had they been invited to this?

national director

Eastshire was a county council under local Conservative leadership, identified by Fitz et al (1993), as one of those which epitomised an irony of the grant maintained initiative. This policy was designed by a Conservative government to address perceived deficits within Labour administrations. Eastshire’s control over its schools had diminished as a result of a significant number of schools, both secondary and primary, opting out and acquiring GM status. The LEA’s summons to primary GM schools to send representatives to a launch meeting signified a point where the new NLS policy directly confronted existing policy contexts.

This national director recalled some difficult negotiations with school leaders who argued that the NLS was designed to address low attainment in schools serving disadvantaged communities. The leaders of GM schools influenced other head teachers who were highly autonomous in outlook. These were said to be head teachers leading larger, high attaining schools, who questioned the relevance of the strategy for them. Such arguments were witnessed by a senior teacher who attended a particularly tense launch meeting in Eastshire for large schools, some of which held GM status at that time:

And I went to the initial meeting... and (the literacy consultant) went through the mill that day. I was just cringing because a lot of the quite senior heads were out for her blood, I think, that day.

I found it all quite frightening in a way because I knew there was this great big initiative, my head (teacher) was there with me and I knew I was going to have to deliver the material

Priscilla (senior teacher, Eastshire)

Priscilla recalled anger at this conference she attended, the argument consistently being that he NLS would not serve the interests of high attaining schools. Also, GM school leaders appeared incensed at
being expected to attend a conference run through an LEA from which they had distanced themselves in terms of control. These launch meeting were therefore particularly turbulent events within some local authorities.

**Consultants: an insurgent force, inserted into LEAs**

From the perspective of one national director, consultants were “one of the greatest success stories” of the strategy. They were recruited as successful, talented teachers who had undergone significant professional development, who also had the expertise to model good practice and coach teachers in classrooms. All directors reported a good working relationship with consultants; the strategy was seen as worked “through” consultants, “inside” local authorities, working for “us”.

Consultants were appointed to a new post, funded through the standards fund, therefore controlled by the strategy, yet employed by each LEA. As this national director confided:

> We didn’t have the confidence in the existing LEA advisory services... because they were the people that had very much been in charge in terms of defining pedagogical support.... so we thought we would create our own resource, our own team

**national director**

In this account, consultants were positioned as insurgents, promoted directly from schools, who came to replace those local authority advisers that were being derided for past failures. In the explanation of the resulting tensions (below), the positioning of consultants and their line managers was analysed by a National Director, with further evidence of the significance of the funding stream:

> We did the classic thing where you identified someone. LEA works - interesting - as soon as you create a role and you give some funding to it, you give a little bit of money to that role, LEA structures inevitably turn towards you.

> So literacy line managers, unknown job, actually suddenly became a key job. Had a little empire! Consultant, resources, those people were with us because we’d given them a kind of authority and status and increasingly they came, well many of them started like Secondary English Inspectors but moved quickly and we got some primary people in and basically by, I’d say by 1999, they were a group who were completely with us. They were on the inside really.

**national director**

Funding was the mechanism by which the literacy team and its line manager were given increased structural authority within hierarchical LEAs. The insertion of consultant teams was complete by 1999, and literacy teams had become the embodiment of national policy, located within each local authority structure, with literacy line managers located in a key role. Their presence was reinforced by the
national rollout of the National Numeracy Strategy in September of 1999 with a parallel team of consultants and a line manager within each LEA.

The first literacy consultant force was recruited and trained nationally in 1998. Some had worked on the literacy project, as Debbie had in Normanfield. She contrasted the national strategy with her increased ownership and her own agency when working previously as a literacy project consultant:

> We ended up in two working parties to look at what we were trying to implement, because it was a pilot and pilots have that right, and it was wonderful because you got to be so innovative. Trial lots of things and then bring it back and talk
> 
> Debbie, former project and literacy consultant, Normanfield

The literacy project consultant force was expanded rapidly and over a six week period, several hundred new Literacy Consultants were trained at residential events:

> It was so exciting. People were nervous, people were apprehensive, they were waiting to see what would come at them. They started to cherry pick bits of the programme, because they were basically taken through a long box, and some people obviously found that purple non-fiction brilliant, they loved it, they found the orange word level really difficult and the big job was to convince people that they had to see it as a whole and they had to sign up to it as a whole. We were quite robust about that and the structure of the literacy hour was critical there because you had to adopt that format as a consultant which meant you had to take the whole …
> 
> national director (Emphasis is participant’s)

In this excitement, there was a sense of adventure. Here, new professional identities were being formed as ‘learning trajectories’ (Wenger 1998:149). In this, Wenger’s definitions are rooted not only in past histories but in possible futures, which were being formed together. This was an example of ‘project identity’ Castells (1997:8), which is a form of professional identity building. Consultants were being redefined here, for the purpose of transforming the professional development opportunities for school staff in the image of that envisaged by the national strategy’s school improvement agendas. Structures and processes were changing, particularly within LEAs.

This wave of national training focused on familiarising new consultants on the content and use of the literacy training materials that was being sent to every primary school (the “long box”). Some consultants showed resistance, selective of the materials. These consultants were denied agency; no negotiation was permitted and there was no option of refusal. Through this domination, consultants were subjected to a transmission form of briefing, required absolutely to adhere to each component of the training.
In an analysis provided by another national director, this treatment of consultants at this crucial point of implementation was a critical mistake. Ultimately, the format of this national training for consultants became mirrored in the way they, in turn, conducted strategy training sessions with teachers and school leaders. Transmission and domination begat transmission and domination, derided by some audiences at launch meetings and within schools. This, at worst, resulted in simple compliance. Teachers were passive in the face of reform where there was no agency, no buy-in, as Datnow et al (2002) have found.

Consultants, then, were in a new role within LEAs, with two allegiances – that of the new national strategy and their own Local Education Authority. Their initial training was undertaken at national level, led by national directors, one of whom had the specific role of national training director. Consultants personified national requirements and were the agents of change within primary education policy contexts, regularly briefed on the use of new support materials which had been written and compiled by the national team. These briefings were held regionally, in hotel conference centres, led by the regional director for several adjacent authorities. In addition, there was an annual meeting, held in London, for all consultants. These consultants were privileged in hearing ongoing policy statements and adjustments to those statements from regional and national directors, with their direct access to national thinking, including politicians’ concerns.

Within their own, separate LEAs, consultants’ roles were in tension with the work of others who were already providing advice and support services to schools. Some of these tensions were illustrated in my data within the largest LEA that I examined, and that which I had the greatest access to – that of Eastshire.

**The case of the Eastshire English team: consultants and advisers**

In Eastshire, three literacy consultants were appointed in 1998, one of whom was Faith. They became part of a wider team of people referred to as the English team or the Literacy team, those titles being used interchangeably. By 2000, there were ten members of this team, led by Faith. This team consisted of five consultants and five English curriculum advisers, not to be confused with the more senior link advisers.

The responsibilities of consultants and the curriculum advisers overlapped. It was the source of funding that was different, with consultants on higher salaries but temporary contracts. Consultants undertook work which was almost exclusively related to strategy priorities whilst English advisers worked both on delivering strategy training and on projects within schools which were at schools’ requests. They also ran courses for teachers to attend which were funded through schools’ budgets. Schools ‘bought in’ English advisers and dictated the agenda for this form of continuing professional development.
whose career path was that of a curriculum adviser before being seconded to work as a consultant, described the consultant’s role as being “a very grown-up job”:

Being a curriculum adviser, schools requested support - they paid for it, so you aimed to please.

The consultancy was helping to deliver a National Strategy and deliver those messages, and therefore the schools were identified for various reasons and some of the schools were very challenging, some of the schools were not good, but you would go and work in a school and you did not let on necessarily what you thought of them, and you found yourself observing teachers which, in your curriculum advisers role, you didn’t - you were doing staff meetings, this kind of work.

(Fiona, Eastshire consultant)

Consultants were not only insurgents within LEAs, they were, in turn, inserted into schools. They were sent to locate perceived weaknesses within schools and worked to remediate those weaknesses. Access to schools was not by invitation from the schools, nor from teachers, but through LEA identification. Unlike the advisory role from which she came, Fiona recognised that consultants were not simply aiming to please schools. Her reference to a “grown up job” was a marker of the higher esteem she felt the consultant role held in Eastshire over that of the curriculum adviser. Consultants had greater authority. They personified national priorities, taking and articulating policy expectations right into schools.

This difference was endorsed by Rebecca, who had joined Eastshire as an adviser having moved from another part of the country where she had been a Literacy Consultant and “there was a definite feeling of my being the lesser of two bodies.” In contrast to her previous work as a consultant in an LEA where she felt known and respected, Rebecca felt she had to build her reputation once more in a new authority, ignorant of her work in schools. Rebecca’s account gives further credence to Faith’s analysis, in recognising the significance of her own professional reputation, earned locally and over time.

**Struggles and tensions within LEAs: link advisers and (insurgent) consultants**

In all three LEAs, the struggle to align the work of strategy teams and the senior link advisers was evident in my data. A national director gave further detail and confirmation of the difficulties in inserting the national strategy into LEA structures from the very beginning of the national roll-out:

[T]he implementation wasn’t being blocked by the Authority, but it was not impinging on, not being embraced by, the mainstream structures.
Worse scenario case is you were supporting the consultants and line managers in a very tough context of them trying to implement something, but almost without the engagement of the main stream apparatus of the LEA, either in terms of Special Needs support, early years, link advisers, senior officers. They were told just to get on with it – to do it and we’ll get on with our business. That was the big challenge.

There was a struggle to influence senior colleagues within LEAs, which was the position that Faith, as the more senior consultant in 1998, faced in Eastshire. Again, the policy context and the context of practice into which the strategy was forcibly inserted were ones where there were already influential and powerful structures in place in LEAs and these were through the monitoring and inspectorial work of link advisers. In 2004, all three authorities were still struggling to align strategy insurgents (consultants) and the work of link advisers six years after the literacy strategy had rolled out.

In some accounts, geography is given as a factor. Eastshire consultants have offices that are many miles distant from those where link advisers are based, whilst in Normanfield they are separated by a long corridor. But in Barchester, the large open office space is shared, yet aligning the priorities of strategy consultants and link advisers were evident in all localities. In Normanfield, Debbie summarised the problem as: “a definite culture split between curriculum and link advisers and it’s not healthy”. To explore some possible reasons for this culture split, I look again to the case of Eastshire, where I had access to relevant data from Faith’s account.

**Resistance and realignment – the case of Eastshire**

Although Faith claimed she led a policy of positive engagement with the strategy in Eastshire, she also recalled significant resistance at many levels within the authority. The Director of Education held high profile meetings which were in her view “tokenistic”, whilst his deputy was a powerful and active resistor who publicly articulated her opinion in 1998 that the National Literacy Strategy would be short lived. At this time, senior leaders of this very large LEA were unaware of the longer term aspirations of government and strategy leaders, nor did they recognise that the NLS was intended to facilitate wider school improvement. The highly influential deputy director delegated, avoiding all contact with the NLS wherever possible and was a source of an underlife of subversion, of the kind noted by Ball (1994a). Whilst significant work of the authority was conducted through senior link advisers, the work of the consultant team was marginalised.

Faith confirmed the many tensions as she analysed the issues faced by her senior strategy manager who had to engage “very resistant” individuals who were heads of different services within Eastshire. Faith located the issue at the point of service leadership, rather than people working within difference
services provided by the LEA. These difficulties in aligning LEA services were endorsed by Barbara in Barchester and by Debbie in Normanfield, with references made to a “silo” effect.

In Eastshire the issues became even more complex in 2004 as a result of a move towards partial privatisation whereby some, but not all, services to schools were to be delivered by a private company. This led to further difficulties in delivering different national expectations when the Primary National Strategy was launched in 2003, with an expectation that LEAs would align their services to schools more effectively.

**Further complexities: Primary National Strategy and privatisation in tension**

Eastshire data gathering was completed in 2005, two years after the Primary National Strategy (PNS) was launched. In 2003, the literacy and numeracy strategies were incorporated into the PNS, which sought in its vision for ‘Excellence and Enjoyment’ (DfES, 2003) to support schools in delivering a broad, rich and balanced curriculum. In addition, some of Eastshire’s services had been “outsourced”, run by a private company, under a ten year contract which commenced in 2002. Within a year, therefore, there were two very significant strategic changes that took place within Eastshire.

The private company was awarded a contract to provide some LEA services including national strategy teams, whilst the LEA itself retained other services. These included support for Special Educational Needs, ICT and Early Years settings. Whilst this not been problematic in 2002, by 2003, it was clear that alignment of all services would become a feature of the new national strategy brief. This is evidence of the ongoing struggles where national strategy priorities compete in tension with the complexities at local sites. Decisions about service delivery therefore became particularly complex as the consultants recruited to deliver PNS agendas were expected to work across all services and all services were expected contribute towards the new national priorities.

There were further consequences for individuals. Faith was an example here. Having been promoted to Strategy Manager, she was now not considered senior enough:

> I think perhaps I was a bit of an embarrassment because what was happening was that nationally the message was coming through the primary strategy manager should be in a senior position….at the time I was the equivalent of a senior adviser, so there was a general assumption that I would take on that role because I had had the experience as the strategy had evolved and I was at a senior level in the authority. But there was no clarity given and ….it was a messy time and eventually it was clarified that (named individual), who was a principal inspector, took on the role of strategy manager, and that was (named person’s) decision, so he’s now the strategy manager, and I am the assistant strategy manager.

Faith, Assistant Strategy Manager, Eastshire
Although it was Faith who had the most intimate knowledge of national strategies, having held strategic overview and leadership throughout from 1998-2003, her position was not as senior as the principal inspector who was appointed. That appointment decision was taken by the leader of the private company contracted to deliver national strategy services within Eastshire, a signal of the influence of that private company and its response to national pressures. Faith’s title, meanwhile, became that of Assistant Strategy Manager. In effect, Faith was therefore demoted.

Conclusions

At all three very different LEA sites, the first national strategy entered complex communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) already in some turbulence after many years of Conservative government whose policies had amputated and reduced their powers (Fitz et al., 1993). Despite being non-statutory, the NLS was inserted into LEAs with a force derived from the direct influence and authority of Michael Barber, in his position as head of the government’s Standards and Effectiveness Unit within the government department (DfEE), and the threat of OfSTED inspection. Significant funding was used as a control on senior LEA officers, available only on their agreement with strategy directors on their plans for its use.

The NLS was introduced dishonestly. Few at LEA level knew that it heralded a longer term ambition of facilitating whole-scale school reform. It was viewed by influential, senior officers in Eastshire as no more than a short term project. As a consequence there was subversion and a lack of strategic realignment of services. Tensions were face by those inserting national strategy policy statements into an education marketplace with a history of autonomous, grant maintained schools, where a national strategy delivered through the LEA directly confronted conflicting allegiances.

Within all three LEAs, structural difficulties were evident; services to schools were already separate and fractured. The non-alignment of the mainstream work of an LEA, defined as that provided by link advisers as monitors of school performance, with the support mechanisms provided by insurgent strategy consultant teams, led to tensions in all three authorities. Whilst forced to face those who personified national policy as compliant, docile actors, strategy managers struggled to align services which operated separately, in ‘silos’, their service leaders resistant to alignment in protecting themselves from the domination of national policy agendas. Partial privatisation of some services increased complexities for strategy managers in Eastshire.
The barriers to promotion to the more senior strategic management in LEAs resonated here. Faith’s demotion signified a wider agenda: she was very unusual in having been appointed to a senior link advisory role as her career profile, like the majority of consultants and former consultants, had not included headship. The Barchester manager had a similar unusual career profile whilst in Normanfield, the culture split between the senior link advisers and consultant teams was absolute. This fact barred Debbie, a consultant who had worked nationally and articulating a very strong vision for the authority strategically, from promotion. These three LEAs remained fractured in 2005.

My speculation is that national strategy teams remain to some extent marginalised, unforgiven for the forceful manner in which national policy was inserted into LEAs during 1998 and through the continued requirement to implement the national strategies that followed. The legacy of senior refusers, strategically placed within local authorities, leaves a culture of suspicion and marginalisation. Whilst the faces of senior authority leaders are docile, turning compliantly to the national funding streams, there continues to be some resentment towards those who have served two masters. Consultants funded partly by national strategies, attending national meetings denied to other authority employees, articulating national policy, remain separated from the work of the more senior link advisers. It will be fascinating to find evidence of the effects of the demise of national strategies, with implications for individuals in post at that time, when, according to the secretary of state’s announcement (Balls, 2009), national strategy funding ceases in 2011.

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This document was added to the Education-line collection on 15 January 2010