Autonomy and governance in local authority provision for children and young people


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Abstract: The role of local government in addressing issues of social equity is undergoing significant reconstruction in the educational policy reforms of the United Kingdom’s coalition government. In this paper we suggest that the proliferation of discourses on autonomy within and around the reforms is indicative of global views of the individual that have emerged in the postmodern period, but also represents an important mid-level change in conceptualising the individual within the national context. While there are threads of consistency between recent reforms and previous initiatives of the New Labour government, the embedding of the concept of autonomy within national policy on social provision, including the work of local authorities, represents the ascendance of a particular viewpoint that affects the balance between social responsibility and individual rights. The current conceptualisation of social provision places individual rights at the centre of policy and social responsibility is conceived as the work of individuals. We suggest the “autonomy” of local authority workers is actually embedded within systems of governance including both traditional forms of centralised control, albeit obscured, and the new modality of networked governance.
Introduction

The role of local government in addressing issues of social equity is undergoing significant reconstruction in the educational policy reforms of the United Kingdom’s Coalition government. In this paper we suggest that the proliferation of discourses on autonomy within and around the reforms is indicative of global views of the individual that have emerged in the postmodern period, but also represents an important mid-level change in conceptualising the individual within the national context. While there are threads of consistency between recent reforms and previous initiatives of the New Labour government, the embedding of the concept of autonomy within national policy on social provision, including the work of local authorities, represents the ascendance of a particular viewpoint that affects the balance between social responsibility and individual rights. The current conceptualisation of social provision places individual rights at the centre of policy and social responsibility is conceived as the work of the individuals in relation to one another. The extent to which this semiotic change has ascendance within social practice is yet to be seen. However, there are elements within the existing practice of local authority workers that suggests this shift has less to do with autonomous professional practice than the rhetoric suggests. We suggest their “autonomy” is actually embedded within systems of governance including both traditional forms of centralised control, albeit obscured, and the new modality of networked governance.

In this paper we will explore the changing relationship between individual rights and social responsibility, and the implications this has for local authorities’ role in educational provision for children and young people. First, we will draw upon theorising on the nature of change in educational policy. According to Goodson (2005) educational change should be viewed in recognition of the relationships between reform efforts and wider social movements, and the location of these changes within a multi-layered historical frame. Goodson suggests that educational change occurs at different levels within society: short-term, medium-term and long-term. The temporal periods within each of these layers are delineated by related social discourses and practices. For example, the most recent medium-term period within the United Kingdom has seen educational policy following a “third way” approach whereas the phase of long-term educational reform since the mid-twentieth century is characterised by a dominant neoliberal conceptualisation of the individual and society promulgated across national boundaries through globalisation that is dominated by economic relationships (Olssen, Codd, O’Neill, 2004).

Goodson and Lindblad (2011) use the word refraction to describe the process by which long term, global movement impacts upon medium level restructuring, accounting for the variety of responses and types of reform. We draw upon the theoretical frame of refraction suggesting that change is a process of translating and diffusing reformist paradigms, such that reform efforts result in different kinds of outcomes. So that we might examine how policy reforms are enacted by local authority workers through a process of refraction, this investigation is situated within the specific case of a partnership project between Plymouth City Council and two universities in the South West of England where we together explored the potential for social provision of situating young people as expert informants on the variety of differences that impact upon schooling, as an alternative to making policy responses on the basis of generic social categories such as ethnicity, gender, class, disability for example (Boyask et al., 2009b). One outcome of this project was a reflection upon the agency of our local authority partner to enact policy initiatives informed by the young people’s responses (Boyask et al., 2010). Our investigation suggested that while some national policy advocated for social provision based upon individual needs in recognition of diversity, in practice this was difficult to enact. Most policy decisions were made on the basis of the needs of particular social groups as identified through centralised data gathering, such as attainment scores and numbers.
of children accessing free school meals, rather than provision that takes account of the full range of differences that might generate individual needs. The Coalition policy reforms suggest that local authority workers will have greater autonomy that will enable them to make decisions based upon local need. We suggest that changes indicate a discernible shift from one historical period within the medium-term to another. The issues we address in this paper include whether the new policy context will enable local authorities to exercise agency and distribute education more fairly amongst children and young people through localised and individualised social provision. If not, this suggests that underlying social discourses continue to be dominated by neoliberal conceptualisations of the individual, which is highly regulated yet apparently free. However, if it is the case that local authority workers are free to exert agency are we therefore witnessing a profound shift not just at the medium-term but also at a global level?

Patterns in educational policy reform

Social provision has generally been directed towards different social groups, in response to identified trends in social outcomes. Yet increasingly individuals are perceived as unique, recognised as experiencing group membership differently, and consequently having different outcomes. This is a discernible shift from recognising collective to individual need. Elsewhere we have written about this shift as encapsulated within the problematic discourse of diversity (Boyask et al, 2009a; Lawson et al, Under Review). Benjamin (2005) suggests that even while people ‘think they are reconceptualising difference’ as diversity, they are actually seeking to ‘do away with difference’ and thus become ‘complicit in the work of shoring up existing relations of inequality’ (p176). For us this presents a dilemma for social policy. If policy-makers respond only to group needs and redistribute social goods accordingly then individual needs often will be overlooked. Alternatively, emphasising the uniqueness of each and every individual and attending to needs on that basis homogenises difference and is likely to reproduce existing social inequalities within society. However, this dilemma should also be seen within its social and historical context. Each of these different approaches to social provision is underpinned by different views on the nature of individuals and society at a deeper, global level. Viewing changes in policy as processes of historical change shows up relationships between globalised ideation and change, mid-level educational reform and short-term initiatives and interventions (Goodson, 2005).

While the individual was inserted in the rhetoric in social policies of the New Labour government, implementation efforts continued to be centred upon social categorisation (Boyask et al, 2009a; Boyask et al., 2010). However, there is a new discourse emerging from the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, elected in May 2010. In their recent schools white paper (DfE, 2010) and green paper on special educational needs (SEN) and disability (DfE, 2011) they make the case that attending to every child’s needs is best done by people within their proximity. They advocate for parents, teachers and other local professionals to take control over decisions affecting children and young people, for example, “In England, what is needed most of all is decisive action to free our teachers from constraint and improve their professional status and authority…” (DfE, 2010, p.8). In the initial policy briefings of the new government, it was unclear what role local authorities would play in these reforms. The policies of establishing free schools and expanding the academies programme meant that more schools would be taken out of local authority control; there was a noticeable scepticism of bureaucrats and bureaucracy; and while professional autonomy was an idea that permeated a great many of the news releases from the Department for Education, it was discussed in relation to the work of teachers and headteachers and not local policy workers. More recent policy documents are developing the scope and function of local authorities within the new policy regime. The SEN and disability green paper (DfE, 2010) iterates a strong strategic role for
local authorities in planning and commissioning services. This role has emerged through expansion of a government discourse of localism. For example, the green paper states that “central government cannot achieve this ambitious programme of reform through directing and managing change itself” (p.6). It advocates for shifting responsibility for overseeing change to local communities, including but not exclusively local authorities. To understand how these emphases upon autonomy and community involvement might interact with one another, it is helpful to look at deeper and more general views of individuals and communities that permeate globalised society, and the processes by which these views influence or are influenced by other levels of educational change.

Writing on the nature of autonomy and its relationship with educational policy reform from their investigations into the radical neoliberal social reforms in New Zealand from 1984 onwards, which included devolution of educational administration to local communities and greater accountability for school principals and teachers, Michael Peters and James Marshall (1996) drew upon Foucault to claim that...

…the pursuit of personal autonomy involves the social construction of something which is destined to fail. From the very outset this liberal and Enlightenment conception involves falsehoods. The particular falsehood to which Foucault objects most is that such a conception implies the possibility of freedom. It doesn’t, because stripped of its political connotations, it masks the fact that the constitution of such persons is a major political act” (Peters & Marshall, 1996, p. 89).

For Peters and Marshall, autonomy is a liberal ideal that has critical flaws. Autonomy implies freedom for the self, yet historically there is a political dimension to the concept of autonomy, which means that the self is not entirely free but must act in relation to laws of state. This is certainly the case for modern professionals, who will continue to be bound to legislature within the new policy regime. However, there are problems when the political element of autonomy and associated regulation of the self is obscured, such as within the current policy discourse. The self who believes itself free to act yet is concurrently regulated by universal laws is subjected rather than free.

Yet the message conveyed by the educational reforms of the late 20th century in New Zealand, United Kingdom and many other western-style democracies was that the educated individual was a free and autonomous chooser. Within the discourse of choice is hidden its political dimensions, and what forces constrain or enable choice. This erasure became more significant in the postmodern era, emerging within the mid-twentieth century, as the frame of reference for liberalism shifted from humanism to economics (see Lyotard, 1979/1984). Since 1996 and as a result of New Labour government policy, aspects of English society adhere quite closely to Peters & Marshall’s description of a postmodern busnocratic culture where knowledge “…reflects business values of efficiency, enterprise and competition” (p.70). This culture privileges individual self-interest at the expense of communal good, yet aspects of the current policy discourse such as localism and social responsibility contradict this message. The post-modern autonomous chooser will not be free because “…what can be called busnocratic rationality and busno-power will shape them as particular kinds of subjects so that they will choose in certain general ways” (Peters & Marshall, 1996, p. 89). Within a busnocratic culture freedom is constrained by economics, which is the main political driver. In spite of the Coalition’s current austerity measures, there is little mention in the current educational reforms of economic restraint affecting professional autonomy. What do the erasures of politics and economics in the educational policy discourse mean?

Goodson (2004) suggests that educational change occurs in cycles “…not unlike that of the economy….Indeed, we begin to see how, just as Kondratiev (1984) argued, economic change often
went in long as well as short wave cycles - so too does educational change” (¶23). Conceptualised in temporal terms, a multi-levelled historical periodisation can be used to analyse educational reform through the identification of short-term, medium-term and long-term cycles of change (Goodson, 2005). The neoliberal turn of the last quarter of the 20th century can be seen as the start of a long-term cycle that pervades global movements in educational change and brings education into close alignment with global economic change. While at a global level there are aspects of consistency in educational change, particularly at the level of concept and discourse, in policy and practice their realization differs considerably between contexts. Differences occur as deep level, long-term change is transmitted and diffused within medium and short-term reform efforts through a process of refraction (Goodson and Lindblad, 2011). At the medium-term level Goodson and Lindblad claim that England has witnessed three periods of change related to the “neo-liberal breakthrough as an organizing principle” (p.102). From 1945-1979 there was a progressive narrative on welfare state expansion; 1979-1997 a marketisation narrative; and 1997 – 2007 narrative of a middle way (Ibid.). The first, second and then third of these periods are each new yet related expressions of the neoliberal discourse within education policy. Viewing the recent reforms through this analysis of periodisation raises three important questions. Is the new discourse around autonomy and community involvement a further expression of the third way and therefore represents short-term change? Does it rather represent a new expression of neo-liberalism and therefore a change at the medium-level? Or can we discern transformation at a deeper level, reconceptualising the nature of individuals, their relationship with society and how both of these are expressed through education?

To place these questions within a specific context we turn to our partnership project. In the next section we make use of a recorded conversation between one of the university researchers [Ruth] and our local authority partner [Arnet] in January 2010. In this conversation Ruth asks Arnet about how he might make use of the work we have done together. Occurring prior to the change of government in May 2010, the conversation shows up both similarities and differences between policy discourses of the prior and current government, suggesting a transitional phase. Of particular interest to us for the purposes of this paper is the way the conversation turns to autonomy and accountability in the work of the local authority policy-workers, and how these impact upon their role in social provision.

**Negotiating individual rights and social responsibilities in the work of Local Authorities**

Our project team consists of three university researchers (from two universities in the South West of England) and a senior advisor to a local authority within the South West region, in the urban centre of Plymouth. We regard the South West of England as a particularly important place to examine difference. It is accountable to national strategies regarding diversity, yet demographically there are fewer apparent differences than in other regions in England. While Plymouth is distinctively more diverse in its ethnic and religious communities than other smaller areas and centres in the South West, compared with other English cities it is relatively culturally homogenous. Plymouth differs quite markedly from multi-cultural, multi-faith London, whose problems are normalised within most national policy (Ball, 2008b). We are interested in how difference is experienced within our particular social context, and whether these experiences of difference might be served better by policies which resonate with the nature and characteristics of the population within this particular locality, more than has previously been the case. We are exploring the relations between social and individual differences, undertaking empirical research on young people’s specific experiences of difference and identifying within our data discourses or narratives of social and individual difference. We are also considering the usefulness of such knowledge for social provision.

Goodson and Lindblad (2011) have developed a framework for analysing the relationships between what they term the “systems narratives” and “work life narratives” of professionals. Policy and
associated restructuring occurs at the systemic level, and the discourses within these changes can be discerned through systems narratives. Whereas analysis of work life narratives, or the ways professionals represent their experiences (Lindblad and Goodson, 2011), suggest that there are a range of responses to systems narratives. In the conversation between Ruth and Arnet on what our partnership project might contribute to Arnet’s work and that of his colleagues at the Local Authority (Arnet’s contributions constituting a work life narrative), firstly we look for evidence of systems narratives. We then look at how he represents his professional work, and at the kind of responses he is making to systems narratives in respect of furthering social equity amongst children and young people.

Under Labour government policy Arnet said that “we can only work within those established categories that are handed down to us” (Arnet, conversation 25 January 2010). In this environment Arnet found his capacity to define and act upon difference limited by centrally determined and normative categories of social difference. When enacting policy from the top down he said that…

… it’s easy to forget that what we are working with are human beings who have a complex multiplicity of identities and that the way any individual will experience life will not be as a black person or as a looked after child but actually they will experience life through the interactions that they have with a whole range of different people and each of those people that they interact with will actually create their identity in a slightly different way.

Within Coalition government policy there is not just a fragmentation of categorisation, nor a combination of social category and individual difference, but the authority to define difference is being displaced from the centre. For example, in the SEN and disability green paper (DfE, 2011) the funding from centralised Every Child programmes like Every Child a Reader and Every Child Counts, which had been targeted on the basis of early reading and mathematics, is now to be made available directly to local authorities through the Dedicated Schools Grant and therefore used according to the Local Authority’s own strategic planning. There is also expansion in the usage of personalised budgets and individual planning, reviewing and tracking the progress of pupils, and the expectation that Local Authorities will commission services based upon aggregated intelligence from individual plans, thereby creating local policy from local needs. Our empirical work to date has started from a premise that young people themselves are a valuable source for insights on difference, to the extent that they can inform us about the kinds of difference significant for policy and practice. In some respects the liberalisation of centralised control appears to map onto our project team interests on how young people experience difference through their schooling. In a study funded by Plymouth City Council (Boyask et al., 2009b) we found that some young people recalled difference as a personal and nuanced phenomenon, often closely associated with times, places and people who had been significant to their life experience. For example, one young woman suggested there are differences between primary and secondary school. “In primary school they keep you repressed; they don’t tell you about the world” (audio-recording, 19th February 2009). She suggested that growing up happens in secondary school when you are forced to confront real-life challenges like taking national qualifications. Even when experience of difference did accord with official categories, our data suggested that young people’s identification with social group categories had been structured by the categorization and labelling that occurred through their engagement with social policies and institutional practices. For example, a young man, Tom, who had a clear class consciousness, had attended a fee-paying special school where other students were privately funded, yet his fees were paid by the local authority. Moreover, identification with a social category (either one’s own or how one is identified by others) may act as a limit upon individual potential and agency rather than open opportunities and new possibilities as intended by reformist policies. This same young man
complained about the class disjuncture he experienced at school and its impact on his relationships with his peers (Boyask et al, 2010).

We found within the transcribed conversation between Ruth and Arnet evidence of two different types of systems narratives related to the distribution of power: generally speaking, one exerts centralised control through defining categories of difference centrally; whereas the second is where control is diffuse. Each impacts differently upon how Arnet feels he can conceptualise and respond to difference through his professional practice. First, Arnet explains how he conceives of individual difference when working within a culture of centralised targets and socially defined categories of difference, showing the difficulties of attending to individual need when his responsibility is to centralised policy:

Arnet: Ethnicity, how do we define that? It’s not so straight forward really. The danger is if we just talk about people by those constructs we then start to define who those people are. This morning I was in a school talking about how that school could develop more positive attitudes towards pupils from different ethnicities and backgrounds and we specifically started talking about gypsy travellers and Romany groups because the area that the school is in currently has, well they haven’t had anybody from that group for the last four years. So it has sort of become an unknown, however, the area is also an area that has been, one of two areas in the city that has been designated as a potential area for a new site, travellers’ site, and so their attentions, if that planning permission goes through, then the likelihood is that that school will start to receive more travellers, so my question to the school was “What could you be doing to help people better and understand something of that culture”, and then we started talking about who we are talking about when we are talking about gypsy and travellers….

Ruth: Because they are all different.

Arnet: They are all different. There are those that are really travelling and who will be here for a week or two weeks and then will move on, but then there are those that actually just buy a house and live in a house but are still gypsy, Romany people and are of that tradition and ethnic background. So it is very complex…the danger is, if we just go by that label then actually we perpetuate the stereotype. So somebody comes in, you are a gypsy traveller. Tick. That’s what you are, so that’s how we will respond to you, but actually that person may not fit that mould.

If gypsies and travellers had been commonplace within the school, then experience alone may have helped the school to negotiate between social group category and individual difference. However, developing nuanced understanding becomes more difficult in an unfamiliar culture and is more likely to be approached instrumentally. That is, the experiences of individuals become associated with social categories, whether they hold true or not, and provision is measured through ticking boxes. Inconsistencies such as these show up clearly within atypical cultures, like the South West in relation to cultural diversity. For Arnet, a more subtle negotiation between social and individual difference is desirable for just social provision within his locality. Through their new strategic role that is situated within a discourse of localism, Arnet and his Local Authority colleagues are now asked to attend to subjective experiences of children and young people such as these and draw upon them when making judgements about social provision. Whilst the government is still attending to overall categories of SEN and disability, there is little differentiation of these through sub-categories. The shift towards provision based upon individual differences represents a clear movement away from centralised provision. The next excerpt from the conversation shows how he might enact his responsibility for social provision through attending to local need within a much looser form of categorisation, more
akin to professional practice as it is represented in recent policy reform. We noted that this is a way of working that Arnet is more positive about than the previous example.

Arnet: I guess one of the things that we are trying to promote in the city is for schools to develop links with schools in other areas, whether it is abroad or whether it is in the UK. And because it is about actually meeting people and actually having relationships, dialogues with individual people. In a sense when you meet somebody you don’t put them into a box do you? You don’t sort of suddenly in your head go ‘tick’. You might categorise in a very broad sense. You might look at somebody and think that person is black or that person is Asian, but you wouldn’t go into that sort of fine detail that we go into, in that way of categorising ethnicity, through policy. What you are more interested in, what we notice with children is that they very quickly look for areas of similarity. So they very quickly start talking about music interests or sport interests and discover actually, you know, we both like the same rap music or actually they like Goth music and we like whatever. And that is the difference. It suddenly starts to emerge, we don’t like them not because they are Asian, but we don’t like them because they don’t like rap music and we like this music. And it is sometimes as simple as that. Or they like Arsenal and we like Tottenham. And that is what is on top for them as opposed to the ethnicity. Sometimes we as policy makers jump to the wrong conclusions about why people don’t get on because actually there is, if you like, street culture, which is transient and it’s those things that sometimes make more difference to young people than what we perceive to be categories of difference. We are talking about how we actually build relationships with and understanding of people from different cultures. It is not just as simple as saying we will try and expose you to Asian people socially - such a broad category.

Returning to our questions on the periodisation of educational reform, is shifting from central to local control of social provision a movement away or consolidation of the third way that negotiates between individual interests represented through a market and the public good (see Giddens, 2000)? We suggest that that the educational policy reforms are departing from third way politics because whilst they suggest democratic participation, there are hidden limits to who participates and the extent of their participation. There is some accord in the new reforms with third way values, articulated by Giddens (1998) as including the importance of “freedom as autonomy” and “no authority without democracy” (p. 66). However, there are some crucial points within the proposed educational reforms that suggest they have been constructed with a limited commitment to social democracy. First, autonomy does not appear to be granted to the children or young people themselves. The explanations of how their experience will be gathered suggest it will be through authorised stories generated about them, through the individual plans of local authorities for example. Second, autonomy is granted to those with a traditional role of authority: e.g. parents, teachers and local authority workers. While this indicates that power is being dispersed throughout a wider population, in respect of the children and young people the assumption appears to be that power will operate unidirectionally, that is, upon them.

Also, in light of the critique of autonomy by Peters and Marshall (1996), we feel concern at how autonomy is being conveyed within Coalition education policy as unproblematic and apolitical. There are problems for the children and young people whose needs will still be determined by others. And there are limits that are obscured in the policy discourse to the actions of the agents who have been granted autonomy. While the policies heavily reiterate the intention to decentralise decision-making, what is mentioned only cursorily is that there will continue to be numerous mechanisms in place for central accountability: for example, the schools white paper (DfE, 2010) stated that inspection agencies such as Ofsted and programmes of national testing will continue to surveil the
work of schools. There are also hints of centralised mechanisms of accountability for Local Authorities, such as the publication of their statutory duties and the SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2011). These centralised surveillance systems will impact upon the autonomy of Local Authority workers, suggesting some continuity with previous systems of centralised control. Yet in the policy discourse the centralised systems are downplayed. What is more visible are accountabilities at the micro-level. Local Authority accountabilities are currently less developed, but there are many examples from schooling that will work upon the proposed autonomy of teachers and headteachers. The schools white paper claims that “schools should, instead, be accountable to parents, pupils and communities for how well they perform” (DfE, 2010, p. 66), the free school policy puts parents in charge of school governance, and Ofsted have recently announced their intention to set up a website where parents can rate the performance of their children’s schools (Richardson, 2011). This places accountability for the work of education professionals within localised social relationships rather than accountability in reference to a wider consensus about the social good.

Social responsibility is part of the Coalition’s policy discourse; however, the nature of the social within their policy differs markedly from New Labour educational policy. In the Coalition’s policies, responsibility to a wider social good is much less apparent than responsibility, and in particular authority, within immediate social relationships or networks formulated through micro-level social interactions. In the second of the excerpts above Arnet is teasing out the subtleties of difference, revealing how bringing together people who have different experiences decentres stereotypical views of ethnicity. Through Arnet’s release from centrally defined targets, he feels able to create opportunities for schools to expand their knowledge of difference through the creation of networks. With the diminishment of centralised definitions of difference and reduction in the use of social group categories there may be more opportunities for Local Authorities to work in this way. Yet networks have limitations; networks are formed through relationships at interpersonal and experiential levels and dependent upon individual contributions, and there is considerable variation in the quality and commitments of the networks as entities (see Howes & Frankham, 2008; Ball, 2008a). They have no governing universal principles, yet still have macro-level effects. Arnet has a strong identification with principles of social justice that he brings to his social relationships and these may be diffused throughout his interactions; in a differentiated society without clear moral consensus we cannot be certain that others charged with social provision in Local Authorities will have similar commitments nor how their interventions will be taken up.

The networked local authority worker

We argue that current changes of policy represent more than just a short-term change that is reflective of third way politics. However, to what extent are the recent changes refracted currents of global change? Davies and Bansel (2007) outline the global characteristics of neoliberal reform. “Since the shift to neoliberal governance refigured relations between government, private enterprise and society, with the economic imperatives of the private sector situated as central to government economic and social policies, public institutions, such as schools and hospitals, previously supported as essential to collective well-being, were reconstituted under neoliberalism as part of the market” (p.254). The elision of collective well-being and centrality of individual well-being within educational policy and practice taps into the wider discourse of neoliberalism. The autonomous professional of the Coalition government’s educational reforms also bears a great deal of similarity to neoliberal subjects who are easily governable, yet believe themselves to be autonomous and free (Davies and Bansel, 2007). Walkerdine (2006) suggests that within neoliberal governance the fragmentation of communities and communitarian values has led to individuals becoming entirely dependent upon their own psychological resources. This suggests that the autonomous subject
promoted through educational policy is in a painful, lonely and isolating position. The professional who is embedded within and agentic through development of social networks, as Arnet proposed, is a more optimistic view of the neo-liberal individual. Arnet’s professional draws upon and forges relationships with others, albeit through immediate and interpersonal relations.

Whilst the autonomous neoliberal subject exists as a conceptualisation in policy discourse, the practice of governance has shifted from the state acting upon the individual, to governance that is diffuse and embodied within networks of relationships. Ball (2008a) has been exploring networked governance as “…a new modality of state power, agency and social action and indeed a new form of state” (p.748). For him this is not indicative of a “hollowed out” state, but is a state constructed at the macro-level, albeit less visible than traditional forms of centralised state intervention. The new form of governance is one that “…interweaves and interrelates markets and hierarchies – a kind of messy hinterland which supplements and sometimes subverts these other forms” (p.749). Ball (2010) describes the complex networks of governance as heterarchies, a term that captures the webs of relations and flow between interests and influences. The circulation of influence and ideas flows between individuals and organisations in both public and private spheres. The Coalition government is overt in its expectation for educational practices to emerge from multi-sector collaborations and partnerships between public, business and voluntary sector organisations. Governance through networking encapsulates the kinds of disparate relations that Arnet and his colleagues must negotiate to successfully enact social policy within the new regime. As Arnet suggests, success is dependent upon mobilising processes that will build social cohesion within an expanding network of individuals, in his case bringing into relation with one another people from different cultures. This is quite different from conceiving his role as enacting centralised policies, which focuses upon action in reference to a central idea.

In light of these insights we suggest it is not the free local authority agent who will act upon policy under the new reforms, but an individual who in part is governed by and governs others through social networks and is also subject to centralised control. What is currently unclear is whether the practice of this individual is primarily structured by neoliberalism because centralised control is embodied within the individuality of local authority workers as docile bodies working towards the aims and aspirations of the disciplining institution (Foucault, 1975). We acknowledge Davies and Bansel’s (2007) view that the conceptualisation of a neoliberal subject continues to predominate within education policy at the level of discourse. We also acknowledge that the autonomy of professionals as it is expressed in the current policy reform is deceptive (Peters & Marshall, 1996), not least because centralised control will continue to be exerted upon them. However, governance by network does not exert the same kind of control upon individuals as a centralised state with strong consensual values, because “networks are informal and fluid, with shifting membership and ambiguous relationships and accountabilities” (Newman 2001 cited in Ball, 2008a, p. 749). We suggest that within networks a variety of subjectivities may develop and grow, and that within this regime for some individuals there may be cause for optimism. However, this is likely to be distributed unevenly and affected by political and economic forces. For example, Local Authorities are currently making decisions about who within their organisation will survive severe funding cuts. Released from central control, it is not necessary for Local Authorities to decide to keep those best equipped to negotiate between wider social good and local interests. Further empirical work is necessary to identify individual subjectivities as they emerge from the new policy reforms, but we anticipate that in practice there will be local authority workers who manifest different facets of subjectivity and enact social policy in quite different ways. Whether we are witnessing wholesale global change is too early to say, yet it may be that some of the changes we are witnessing will result in quite profound re-conceptualisations of society, education and the individual.
Conclusions

The educational policy reforms we are currently witnessing in England are reflective of wider social change. While we are yet to see the substantial impact of these reforms, we suggest that they are evidence of a new cycle of change in the education system at a national level. At the level of national policy there is movement away from provision for both collective and individual well-being that characterised the third way approach of the previous government. In relation to social provision, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government is shifting attention further towards individual needs. This discourse is made stronger through its policy rhetoric on positioning individuals as self-regulating, autonomous and free. In the initial policy releases, it was teachers, parents and headteachers who were granted freedom and autonomy within the new reforms. However, the recent SEN and disability green paper (DfE, 2011) extends this autonomy to the role of local authority workers, who previously had been regarded as obstructing bureaucrats. In the green paper local authorities are intended to have strong strategic roles, assessing local and individual needs and commissioning services based upon their assessments.

In this paper we have considered whether these changes should be seen as new. Viewing the current educational policy changes and how they impact upon the work of local authorities through a lens of periodisation shows that there are currents within the policy that map onto views of radical individualism that characterised the neoliberal turn of late capitalism. These currents are likely to continue to be expressed through the practice of local authority workers as they act in relation to centralised forms of control that emanate from the state. However, the state is also expanding the use and authority of new modalities of governance that diffuse state powers through networks of individuals and organisations. One view of the new form of governance is that individuals embedded within networks will be docile bodies enacting institutional interests that they have internalised to the point of appearing natural. Yet our local authority partner’s optimism about working without reference to centralised definitions of difference offers another perspective from the isolation and pain of the neoliberal subject. In this expression of neoliberalism, the Local Authority worker is connected to others and whilst micro-level social relationships hold potential pitfalls for social provision they also offer providers with opportunities to recognise a wider range of differences between children and young people through the development of localised solutions. However from our perspective, what is missing from the educational reforms so that fairness pervades localised and individualised responses to difference is twofold. First, education policies should make explicit the location of professionals and the networks of which they are part within political and economic relations, consisting of both possibility and constraint. And second, they should make clear the expectation that localised solutions are forged in dialogue with universal principles of what constitutes a social good.

References:


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