Primary school literacy for sale: investigating new assemblages and influences in policy formation and enactment.

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‘The changing of the locus of power in symbolic control may cause discomfort to those of us involved in the academic study of literacy or in teacher education, but if we recognize what is happening, and engage with the changes rather than retreating, there is still time to reassess our potential contribution to the raising of attainment of all children, and to re-position’ (Bourne, 2000: 44)
**Context:**

This paper draws on research I have been undertaking on the work of a group of eight individuals who work (in various forms) as consultants specialising in the area of primary school literacy, as individuals or as leaders of companies. I have been working to map, describe, conceptualise and analyse their roles and their work. In this paper, I draw on this currently-ongoing work to illustrate the kinds of roles they play in the formation and the enactment of policies about reading and writing in primary schools; and make some propositions to contribute to debates within the field of literacy policy. I also seek to add to conversations and work in the wider field of critical policy scholarship, from which I draw several tools, concepts and influences.

**From policy scholarship to literacy policy scholarship?**

Critical work in primary school literacy policy scholarship has been re-invigorated lately, and that is refreshing. For despite the centralising of the primary school literacy curriculum since 1997, and the ongoing contestation about methods, approaches, materials and teaching strategies, “the long tradition of socially critical work in English Education”, that Ellis and his colleagues (2007) referred to had gone quiet. Now, scholars such as Moss (2007a; 2007b 2009), Lefstein (2008) and Lambirth (2011) are re-invigorating debates about primary school literacy policies and their formation, articulation and dissemination. I acknowledge the influence that their work has had on the research underpinning this paper. I am trying to contribute to their in a field of “literacy policy scholarship” by asking questions about the ownership, and the buying and selling of knowledge about reading and writing. The debts to the wider field of policy scholarship are obvious. For key workers in that field have analysed the rapid growth of private sector participation in public service provision in education (Ball, 2007) and I have drawn on that work, and Ball’s analysis of networks, and of the activities of influential actors, their configurations and influences, in the research that underpins this paper.

**Selling literacy?**

There has been important study of the ways that the “marketisation” of education can impact on the work of primary teachers in the UK (e.g. Menter et al, 1997) in the USA (Burch, 2009) and in Australia (Davis, 2009). Yet there has been no systematic investigation of the work of the burgeoning number of consultants within the UK primary literacy arena (and the longest standing of them has been active for 25 years). Neither has there been critical study of these consultants’ (from Government quangos, local authorities, private companies) interplay with practitioners in an English context that would complement the more extensive
literacy policy scholarship from the USA (e.g. Coburn, et al, 2008). Cameron’s (2010a; 2010b) “insider” accounts of local authority “external” agents, working in London schools during the implementation of the major Government literacy strategies, are a very recent addition to our knowledge. Moreover, these consultants’ influences on policy formulation, some of their positioning in what Schutz and von Stein (2207:3) have defined as “the intermediate areas between state, market and community” is unexamined in the “insider” accounts by policy makers (Stannard and Huxford, 2007) and overlooked in critical accounts of wider policy shifts in primary schools and their effects on the lived experiences of practitioners (e.g. Jones, et al, 2008).

Research questions:
Seeking to investigate this under-explored topic, these are the questions I have been addressing:-

- What is a consultant and how do they perceive their roles and their work?
- What is the role of consultants, and the nature of their networks, in educational policymaking?
- How do consultants undertake their work?
- What is the nature of the interplay between consultants and those involved in implementing policy change (heads; teachers)?

In this paper, I draw on some of the preliminary, answers to these questions in order to make some proposals about the relationships between consultants, consultancy and the wider issues of public policymaking and professional practice. In doing this, I am particularly attentive to, ongoing and emerging policy debates and initiatives that are in play.

Why is this important?
The work of consultants, and the ways in which policies travel and become embedded into primary schools, impact on my work at all levels. Those with whom I work are going into schools where the policies about literacy are constantly being debated; approaches to teaching are being “marketed”. My knowledge of the literacy arena, and my day to day work with schools and teachers, indicated that there are a number of “for profit” companies, and key individuals, that dominate the market in the purchasing by schools of consultancy, training and teaching programmes. Burch (2009:10) gives excellent models for the examination of companies and their procedures. Viewing education privatization as “nested in larger theories and economic thinking”, she demonstrates the ways profit-oriented firms do the work once performed by Government employees, whilst the state carries out other functions. Importantly, Burch also identifies clear links between what she terms “new privatizations” and “political networks”. Part of my task has been to discern the movement of consultants from public policy forums to private companies; from private companies to public
policy forums, part of a nexus of movements identified by Ball (2007) in his study. These kinds of moves are particularly timely to consider in the light of current policy changes and new formations. I return to them at the conclusion of this paper.

Research sample:
My sample which contains people who:-
1) have worked in the public and the private sectors;
2) own (and manage and/or work for) “for profit” companies;
3) have (to my knowledge) been involved in Governmental reform and policy agendas;
4) are still working with and for teachers and schools;
5) were willing to be interviewed;
6) were willing (if some of my questions were to be answered) to be observed/interviewed subject to scrutiny “in the field” of consultancy.

Mason (2002: 132-136) makes some significant points that guided me in my selections. First, not all of the above experiences need to be embodied in one person! I needed to bear in mind the variety of experiences, and the “messiness” of peoples’ lives and experiences, that Ball (2007) found. Second: the sample needed to be large enough – and varied enough – to be able to make meaningful comparisons. Third: I needed to be able to address the key research questions. Fourth: and most importantly, in an arena where roles and positions change, I need to be flexible and responsive (Fogelman and Comber, 2007: 135). So, my sample needed to be purposive: to be representative and typical.

I brought my personal knowledge of the literacy field and my contacts into play. Website searches; preliminary enquiries at registers of educational companies; scrutiny of the educational press and journals aimed at teachers, combined with telephone calls to former colleagues in the advisory services; to peers in initial teacher training and to local authority colleagues resulted in a group of names being repeated many times. From my investigations so far to be there appeared to be between thirty and forty “literacy consultants” who work either as or for companies; as freelance workers (full time or part time); as occasional workers; as local authority or higher education personnel who “moonlight”. At an early stage, I decided to limit my sample to England, excluding people who mainly (appeared to) work in Ireland, Wales and Scotland. This was to do with convenience of access (in terms of Ireland and Scotland) and the fact that those three countries have very different policymaking arenas and – in terms of literacy –different policy histories (Laugharne, 2007). That exclusion brought my number down to twenty.
Of that twenty, eight were known to me personally, either through having worked with them; or through conference circuits. I had no reasons for excluding any of them. One was a part time colleague at the University where I teach. I worked with a sample of eight, which included the managing directors of the two major companies, one of which I would hope to study in a school context. My sample made some allowance for withdrawal and non participation, - a range of people who included individuals who had experience as national policy makers; who made the move from the private to the public sector; who have made the move from the public to the private – and some of them have moved between the two. Newman and Clarke (2009: 107) call people who do that “boundary blurrers”.

Anonymity issues:
The issue of anonymity is a complicated topic in such research. Whereas it is my intention to make anonymous the views and experiences of participants, as expressed in interviews – and in my subsequent analyses, the websites that advertise the “for profit” companies’ aims (and costs!) are in the public domain. One interesting issue which I will needed to address was the possible diversity between views and aspirations expressed in the “public” presentations (in websites; in published newspaper interviews) and those expressed in interviews. This is a methodological issue discussed by Ozga and Gewirtz (1994) and by Moss, who had to address such concerns during her discussions with politicians (Moss, 2008; personal communication). The work of Neal (1995) and of Penney (2001) has been helpful in planning my interviews with, and interpretations of the viewpoints of, potentially powerful players in the field of policy. My position in relation to interviewing powerful policy players needed to be carefully thought through.

The selected sample is presented as Appendix One of the paper (page 5) below.

Research methods:
i) Library-based/archive work on texts; documents; records; literatures;

ii) Extensive interviews with between consultants representing the range of people currently working in the literacy field: independent consultants; representatives of “for profit” companies; people who have made a move from the public to the private; people who still work in the public sector.

iii) From the group represented in (ii) above, I selected four companies/individuals who were involved in effecting policy change within schools, two doing “external” events with larger groups of practitioners; two within individual schools. Ethnographic field work took place in each of these schools over the period of the
training events and was followed by interviews with the consultants and the heads/teachers; observations; document study and analysis.

For the purposes of this observation, a typology was constructed of consultants’ activities with practitioners, in and out of schools, represented as Table One (below)

**TYPOLOGY: consultants’ activities with practitioners**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>External (out of school) events</th>
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<td>Product as “process” (teaching approach)</td>
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<td>Product as “process” (teaching approach)</td>
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| Internal (in school) events |

**Conceptualising this work - networks, assemblages and recontextualisation:**

Two concepts from the wider field of scholarship were valuable in thinking about this work. The first concept of a ‘network’ underpins much of the discussion in this paper. Newman (2001:22) claims that networks are important for our understanding of “the processes of governing within and beyond the government”. She illustrates some ways in which networks were a central part of the “New Labour” strategy of reforming Government services, including, of course, education policy. Other commentators have identified the importance of networked “governance” in the context of, for example, the National College of School Leadership (Gunter and Forrester, 2009). What is a network? Again, Newman is helpful. A network is part of “the complexity of the patterns of relationship involved in both the policy process and in the delivery of service” (Newman, 2001: 22). Rhodes (1997:9) gets closer to the application of the concept I want to use, referring to networks as formed by “the several interdependent actors involved in delivering services……and made up of organizations which need to exchange resources (money, information, expertise) to achieve their objectives”. A
key feature Newman (2001) defines is that: “Networks are informal and fluid, with shifting membership and ambiguous relationships and accountabilities” (p.108) an idea developed by Ball:

They (networks) drastically blur the welfare state demarcations between state and market public and private, government and business, and they introduce new agents and new voices within policy itself. (2007: 171).

How is the concept helpful in framing the current study? The managing director of one of the largest, and most influential, “for profit” companies in the field of literacy was directly involved in the policy making circles of the early stages of “New Labour”. This is publically documented (Wilby, 2008). She is now prominent in policy making arenas in the Coalition Government – a matter of some concern to some teacher professional associations.

Another key conceptualisation from Newman and Clarke (2009) is that of “assemblages”. They claim these are central to the new kinds of communities and governance that have characterized the public sector in general and the formulation of education policy in particular (Ball, 2008b). The concept is important here. In their detailed studies, drawing on public sector reform in the health and education services, Newman and Clarke (2009) trace a number of themes:

One is the proliferation of new organizational forms with a complex mix of autonomy and control, part funded or sponsored by other organizations (businesses, Universities). They are largely positioned outside of the control of local education authorities with considerable new managerial and educational freedoms. A second is the complexity of partnership arrangements, producing a complex overlaying of “public” and “private” interests. A third is the shadow presence of new policy communities that mix elements of business and philanthropy with ‘public’ policy concerns and values” (Newman and Clarke, 2009: 94).

Using examples from health, social work, the library services in the UK, Newman and Clarke identify the creation of “organizational tensions” whereby “collaboration and competition, openness and boundary management, and notions of entrepreneurship and ‘good governance’ are brought into uneasy juxtaposition” (2009: 94). In seeking to conceptualise these processes more closely, they draw on Schulz and von Stein’s notion of “hybridity” between public and private sectors, a notion drawn on in the first page of this paper, and defined as:-

The intermediate area between state, market and community which is seen as a contested field, constantly influenced by the logic of markets, the impact of various communities and conceptions of the private life and, finally, by state policies (Schutz and von Stein, 2007: 3: cited in Newman and Clarke, 2009: 94).

“Assemblage” is, however, a more nuanced concept than hybrids, in that it focuses on organizational forms which, in Newman and Clarke’s terms are “combining and condensing different forms of power and authority” (2009: 94). They are important to my analysis here as
they are “cross cut by multiple goals, forms of internal governance, and organizational practices and relationships” (2009: 95). I want to go on to demonstrate that they are valuable for my study in that they:

reveal multiple sources and resources, dragged into complex, uncomfortable and contradictory alignments that produce unstable formations and may have unpredictable consequences. (2009: 175)

Newman makes claims for the concepts in her inaugural lecture (Newman, 2005) when she argues that assemblages are an important part of the process “engaging and re-making citizens” They also play a part in “displacing the public; making up markets; blurring the boundaries between the public and the private” (Newman, 2005). I want to take this idea of assemblages as new and emergent formations, as spaces where public policy is worked out in particular contexts, in order to examine the consultants and their interactions with schools and teachers.

A third concept that is helpful in interpreting this work has been that of recontextualisation, drawn from Bernstein’s theory of the pedagogic device, a system of rules that regulate the production and reproduction of knowledge. Recontextualisation describes the movement of knowledge from one field to another, usually bringing about changes in power relations and control over what Bernstein called “pedagogic discourse”. The notion of recontextualisation (Bernstein, 1996, 2000) can help to make sense of consultants, their networks and their work.

Reading data: emerging ideas:

At this stage in the work, there are sets of ideas and propositions emerging that I would like to share and subject to critical scrutiny. Although in not too neat and tidy a way, they may relate to the three kinds of theoretical frameworks outlined above: networks; assemblages and recontextualisation. After airing these propositions, I will conclude the paper by putting up for discussion some areas that I would claim those interested in literacy policy scholarship might want to argue about, add to, develop, explore, dismiss, or join me in exploring! I will express these propositions as three questions, drawing on data from my study and shifts in policy and practice to illustrate what has led me to the questions.

a) Have changes in the work and the activities of consultants within the network mean that it is more likely that public policies about literacy are being sold as a retail commodity? Is there a blurring of the boundaries between Government
policy imperatives and marketed solutions to teachers’ and schools’ need for expertise/resources?

Ruth Miskin, has exercised considerable political influence (Wilby, 2008) being involved in Government policy formation bodies including the recent body reviewing the National Curriculum. The approach to early literacy on which her company (Read Write Inc) is based, systematic synthetic phonics, is being strongly endorsed by politicians as the preferred, recommended, mandated (?) approach. Will models of literacy learning promoted by influential companies dominate other understandings, those based on knowledge, research and practice? That trend is already clearly evident in a recent study of successful schools in the teaching of early reading, where, unusually, key “brands” and schemes are identified (OFSTED, 2010). The Read Write Inc website now advertises the fact that their approaches, systems and materials are used in seven of the schools commended by OFSTED as getting children “reading by six”. The website also highlights Miskin’s appointment to the national curriculum review advisory committee. There have been other interesting changes in the network of consultants that I chose to study. Two of them have actually merged to form a new company, joined by Kevin Jeffrey, whose links with the National Literacy Strategy as a senior leader are referred to on their website, as his is current role as a lead advisor for the Black Country Challenge (www.theplc.org.uk). Many former local authority and PNS consultants now work as commercial agents. My survey of websites reveals that there are at least three or four new consultants and/or companies per month advertising their services in the literacy arena. thereby, as critical writers on public policy describe such processes, “combining and condensing different forms of power and authority” (Newman and Clarke, 2009, p. 94). There is clear evidence of what Ball (2011:51) has termed “the emergence of new sorts of third-sector careers”. What is being recommended a worthwhile policies and practice? What is being sold and marketed? Certainly, some of the head teachers in my sample who had experienced training from consultants, whether in large scale events or in the smaller school-centered ones, was well able to bring critical faculties to those kinds of questions. Some of the less experienced teachers, and less assertive and “policy savvy” heads were less clear. Certainly, the activities of figures such as Miskin, Jeffrey, and Matthews, “mobile or hybrid actors or “boundary spanners”” (Ball, 2011: 51) make the divisions between policy advocacy and marketing activity flexible and shifting.

b) As the nature of the assemblages change, with new configurations of policy makers, consultants and practitioners, is professional practice being refashioned?
Some of the teachers and heads, especially those amongst the ones who attended the large scale, external events – and those that were events that were promoting “products” (rather than processes) – expressed frustration at the different perceptions and framings of policy priorities between themselves and the consultants. This is Dave, a primary head of a very challenging school in the North West, in interview:

*I respect what May and Lena (the trainers) are saying and I know what their priorities are. But their starting and finishing points were the test results. I want to talk about what gets boys writing…..what kinds of topics motivate them. I’ve done a lot of thinking about that over the years. And been on courses and things….. I’m a bit worried about who has the power here. We surely have got to base what we do on our experience, and what we know about our kids.*

Other heads (and teachers) took a much more constructively critical approach, especially those who had “bought in” specific consultants to their schools for “tailored” events. They tended to see them themselves as perceptive ‘consumers’, “buying in the best they could get” for their schools, colleagues and pupils. This stance is best exemplified in an extract from an interview with Brian, a primary head in the South-west, who had collaborated with a group of local heads in employing a consultant for an extended spell of staff training, observation, policy building on writing.

*I like this kind of work we are doing with Jim the consultant) ‘ cos you know he will listen clearly to what we think we need and want….where we are in terms of our policies. A lot of the local authority training, especially around the NLS, was “stand and deliver”. With Jim I know he will give us techniques, ways of working that are founded on good theories about writing. I also know, and this is really important to me, here, where I have a lot of inexperienced teachers, that he build up their leadership capacity. It’s not just what are you going to do with the kids, it is what are you going to do with your colleagues. And we will have long meetings after each day’s training when he gives us the lowdown on what he has observed in classrooms.*

Another head, Lucy, who had worked with the other consultant that I observed in a school context (working with staff on a two day course on raising achievement in writing, expressed a view that has come through in other interviews. The consultants play a role as “catalyst”:

*Dan (consultant) can say things and move people on in their thinking that I would find difficult sometimes. He’ll knock national policies, and OFSTED and the whole accountability thing…but I know he’ll guide us through all that*

This notion of consultant, as an “outside agent” who will fend off the world outside is an interesting one. Other teachers referred to it, and in the large scale events I observed, there was a “sending up” and a sense of “we are all in this together” about the threat posed by OFSTED and accountability. Yet, consultants, in their conversations with me, and on their websites, talk of “getting schools through” inspections. Several of the websites in the public domain publish extensive extracts from OFSTED reports, and many examples from heads
and teachers who have been through successful inspections. Alan Peat’s and Ros Wilson’s Andrell Education’s website make great play of schools’ increased scores in SATs. What kind of role, then, are they playing? Being catalysts for change? Keeping the external forces at bay? Helping them “get through” the accountability measures? Both Andrell Education and Alan Peat advertise aspects of their training as being “OFSTED-proof. In interviews, several of the consultants were very critical about SATs in writing, yet both give very clear explicit strategies to help children get through them with success.

It could be that some consultants are assisting heads and teachers in being more critical of policies and of accountability practices? Are they, following Ball (2010) both policy translators (decoders) and Interpreters (recoders) for teachers? Reading the literature on consultants and their work, one could fall in with a narrative of uncaring profiteering. Yet several of them have given up lucrative careers and the possibility of promotion and of senior jobs in order to make the risk of setting themselves up as change agents They themselves have been questioners and non-compliers with policy, a point that as made in several interviews. They are, in some cases, “selling their wares”. Some of them have made vast profits (though all spoke to me of depleting markets and changing patterns of employment). Yet, as a researcher trying to be reflexive, I was, in several cases, impressed by their integrity, energy and resilience. Those qualities were very strongly presented of course! And they nearly all spoke of the importance of strong self presentation! Is their work similar to that of cultural intermediaries, moving ideas around? (Negus, 2002; Nixon and Du Gay, 2002).

c) How are ideas about literacy changed in their (re) contextualization from one location to another?

In their interviews and in their presentations to teachers, consultants articulated the sources, the “reservoirs” of their practices. Research findings were shared with teachers on training events. Much of this related to studies of motivation, not to the literacy field; to brain science. There was little reference to research that assessed the impact of the practices and materials being promoted; though there was, in the events, and in the advertising publicity (including websites) much commendation from teachers and heads who had gained from the practices being promoted. There were many accounts of children the consultants and taught to read and write, and of schools they had taught in. There was much recounting of successes in schools they had worked with as consultants,
most of them in very challenging circumstances. There was a great deal of empathy “I understand”; “I know what it is like to be faced with….”: “I have seen this situation many times”. Many times when reading my data, I have asked the question “how has this changed, or is it changing, power relations between the consultant and the teacher; between teachers in the same school; between consultant and head?” Who is deciding here what the legitimate knowledge that underpins literacy teaching is, and forms is content?” Bernstein (1996, 2000) distinguishes between “everyday” thinkable knowledge and “specialist” knowledge and the different encodings of those two types of knowledge.

Here is one of the consultants in interview:

*I don’t think that teachers need to know where the knowledge and evidence comes from. They need to know what will bring success in their children’s reading and writing. University people like you (the researcher) need to explore where ideas come from, whose ideas and research this or that was….teachers need to know how to put things into practice*

And another one:

*I always like to give the sources of what I am saying. I read a lot of research and a lot of writers on writing and I need to digest the best research valuable so that teachers know why they are doing what they are doing*

I need to go on probing my data to see how those two consultants (might) appear to work in different ways and how that might appear to teachers on their courses. My next task is to look closely at the pedagogic discourse of the training events observed and recorded, as well as probing in depth the perceptions of consultants, teachers and heads.

**Discussion:**

Recent political and policy shifts could make it particularly timely and important to study and understand the ways in which assemblages may (or may not) do their work as “new policy communities that mix elements of business and philanthropy with public policy concerns and values” (Newman and Clarke, 2009: 94). A declared intention of recent political ambitions is that schools be given much more “freedom” to choose their policies and practices (DfE, 2010). At the same time, local authorities may have fewer resources to provide the help that they used to. These two features of current change make it far more likely that schools, including the new Free schools and Academies, will “buy in” the services of burgeoning private consultants and companies. These radical changes in governance may lead to shifts in schools that those studying literacy policies will need to scrutinise. If national accountability (including proposed testing of phonics) continues, will these private companies continue to market services in terms of their client schools’ successes in achievements in test results?

**An agenda for literacy policy research?**
To continue tracking the “crossings, blurrings, interweavings” (Ball, 2010: 16) influence of those in the literacy arena who sell/make policy; and work across disciplines (e.g. Sturdy et al 2009; Fincham et al 2008; Moor, 2008)

To track how the project of policy “lending” and the marketing of literacy policies is spreading overseas (n.b. Stephen Ball’s paper at this conference on policy entrepreneurs); the work of Jolly Phonics; the work of the Professional Learning Company;

To work more closely with partners in overseas, cross-national projects. The field is strongly established in the USA, Australia. Accounts of policy change have been generally more alert to the contentious nature of implementation (Honig, 2006; Openshaw and Soler, 2007);

We need more work into the decoding and recoding, the interpretations and translations of literacy policies;

We also need more work on transgression: what are the schools who do really well in national surveys and OFSTED inspections really up to? We need a research shift towards teachers and heads who transgress policies.

We need to understand, and challenge where necessary, the framings of those who gain considerable cultural and economic power through their policy work.

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Work in progress: comments and feedback welcome.
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[www.andrelleducation.co.uk](http://www.andrelleducation.co.uk)

[http://www.ruthmiskinliteracy.co.uk](http://www.ruthmiskinliteracy.co.uk)