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ARTICLE

The 'Big Society', education and power

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Biography

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Abstract

The UK Conservative Party's adoption of The Big Society idea with its advocacy of less centralised and more distributed power has provoked discussion about power in education. Most of these discussions have focused on generalities without pinning down either how the power of particular groups of educational stakeholders might change under the reforms proposed or what they mean by power. Accordingly, a detailed examination was carried out of proposed changes for stakeholders' power in the Conservative Party's major policy documents and speeches. A complex set of changes in power was noted. In contrast to the claims that power will be more distributed and less centralized as a result of 'Big Society' policies, it is argued that educational reforms may lead to increasing centralisation of particular sorts of power. This may be of relevance to other countries experimenting with new types of politicised education reform.

Introduction

The UK Conservative Party's adoption of The *Big Society* idea has provoked discussion and debate about power in education. Its advocacy of less centralised and more distributed power has encouraged the questioning of who currently holds power, whether this has changed, and who should hold power in education. Cunningham (2012) argued that there has been a re-ordering of power and influence within the educational landscape. Avis (2011), Alderwick (2012), and Ball and Junemann (2012) on the other hand have argued that there is much continuity with the policies of the preceding New Labour administration. Most of these existing discussions have focused on generalities without pinning down how the power of particular groups of educational stakeholders might change under the reforms proposed, or what they meant by power. This paper describes a detailed examination of the Conservative Party's major policy documents and speeches from 2007-2012. The focus, on the written proposals and on how the power of different stakeholders might change under the reforms, will enable us to see more clearly whether the proposed changes constitute genuine reforms and changes in power or merely continuities in power distribution. First it is necessary to clarify and elaborate the different meanings of power being used or implied. The paper then examines how power is intended to change for education's main stakeholders, and what form this might take. A complex set of changes in power is noted from the documentary analysis undertaken. In contrast to the claims that power will be more

distributed and less centralized under the Conservatives' 'Big Society' policies, it is argued that educational reforms may lead to increasing centralisation of particular sorts of power. This may cause problems for the delivery of educational targets and high standards if stakeholders close to the day to day experience of education, such as pupils, teachers and parents, are effectively marginalized as a consequence of reform. As an example of highly politicised educational reforms this English case study may have significance for other countries seeking new ways of restructuring their education systems.

The paper first considers, from documentary evidence, the meaning and intentions of the Big Society framework and the ensuing debates with special reference to the situation of England; education in the UK being devolved to the constituent nations of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This is in contrast to other complementary studies of the Big Society idea that focus on its rhetoric or its motivation and aims (Corbett and Walker, 2013; Albrow, 2012; Woolvin and Hardill, 2013). A typology of power is then suggested, to clarify the meanings of power that are implicit in the documents and discussions. Following the typology, each of the main educational stakeholders is considered to see what sort of power they have been holding and whether and how this is intended to change under Big Society policies. Finally the conclusions are presented about where and how far power and influence may be expected to change under Big Society proposals.

Education and power in the age of the 'Big Society'

Recent discussions of power in education and other spheres of government have been linked to the Conservative Party's adoption of the Big Society, as its new big idea. This advocates less centralised and more devolved power, as stated clearly in *Mending Our Broken Society* (Conservative Party, 2010: 1).

We will distribute power and control from the central state to individuals, families and local communities.

The 2010 Conservative-led Coalition Government speaks about empowering citizens and has argued that greater involvement by these grass roots communities and voluntary associations is the only mechanism by which educational improvement and social reform can be sustained. In the run up to the 2010 election, the Conservative Party described this as a 'supply side revolution' (Conservative Party, 2007: 9). To put this into an historical and political context, this notion of power has strong echoes of the Burkean idea of power being situated within the 'little platoon' (Burke, 1914: para 75), as follows:

To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections ... The interest of that portion of social arrangement is a trust in the hands of all those who compose it.

Big Society policies aimed at redistributing power are also expected to increase social responsibility, break down dependence on the state and tackle some of the intractable social problems, such as social exclusion, as we see in this example:

So we need a new approach: social responsibility, not state control; the Big Society, not big Government. Only in this way will we tackle the causes of poverty and inequality, rather than just the symptoms. Only in this way will we transform the quality of our public services. And only in this way will we rebuild shattered communities and repair the torn fabric of society. (Conservative Party, 2010: 46)

As part of this new approach to 'repairing' public administration and management, the idea is to open up the running of what were previously public services to new providers:

[The Big Society] combines three clear methods to bring people together to improve their lives and the lives of others: devolving power to the lowest level so neighbourhoods take control of their destiny; opening up our public services, putting trust in professionals and power in the hands of the people they serve; and encouraging volunteering and social action so people can contribute more to their community. (Cameron, 2011b)

The desire to empower citizens, disempower the central state, and involve new providers, in relation to the specific case of education, had to be negotiated and agreed by the parties in the coalition government (the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) formed following the 2010 election (Cabinet Office, 2010). The Conservatives were determined to expand the Academy sector (Conservative Party, 2007: 53), whereas the Liberal Democrats sought to expand the number of schools monitored by local councils, via their 'Sponsor-Managed Schools' scheme (Liberal Democrats, 2010: 37). In the case of most positions, it was the Conservative policy on education that was adopted. Conservatives have also successfully introduced a scheme to start not for profit Free Schools¹. However these reforms and the motivating overarching power frameworks that underpin them have not gone unquestioned.

Cunningham (2012) is one commentator who agrees that in some regards, there has indeed been some reordering of power structures within the educational landscape since the 2010 election. He argues that in name at least, the Coalition Government has promised a 'fresh approach' as its primary motivation for the redistribution of power. However, others have disagreed. In assessing recent education reforms, Avis (2011) has argued that in the intentions of the Coalition Government there is much continuity with New Labour, suggesting that any apparent devolution of power can only happen on strictly prescribed terms. As he states:

At best the new localism of Labour and the Coalition provides sites of contestation, and at worst a technology of control that devolves accountability and responsibility. Local providers are to operate on a terrain determined by the state and where scope for innovation rests with that particular context. (Avis, 2011: 432)

Avis is implying, therefore, that the power redistributed away from the centre may not be the same sort of power as that held by the central state, a concern also expressed by others (see Nelson, 2013). Nor may it be practically possible to achieve in such a way as to be recognised by parents, sustainable in the medium to long term, and be more than abstract rhetoric, if it needs to be completed within one parliament.

Other commentators have also attempted to determine how much can be regarded as new about the actual reforms. Alderwick (2012) argues that Prime Minister David Cameron's policies selectively resemble the 'Third Way' politics of Giddens and by extension New Labour, although there has been an attempt to move away from this, by incorporating an anti-statist position. However, Ball and Junemann (2012) suggest that there are indeed significant continuities. Although, as the Big Society project uses an infrastructure developed by New Labour, they argue that the size of the state and the allocation of individual responsibility would look different in a New Labour/Third Way influenced Government, compared to a Cameron/Big Society one.

Additionally, the Parliamentary Select Committee on Public Administration raised a number of critical points that highlight policy confusion surrounding the Big Society:

There is little clear understanding of the Big Society project among the public, and there is confusion about the Government's proposals to reform public services. In particular, the ambition to open up public services to new providers has prompted concerns about the role of private companies which have not been adequately

addressed by Ministers. (House of Commons Public Administration Committee, 2011:3)

In summary, therefore, the Big Society vision of how a reformed education sector might look is one in which there will be a redistribution of power between some of the stakeholders, with new stakeholders entering the sector. Commentators discussing these so-called reforms have argued over how far they are new, how far they are a continuation of older policies and arrangements, and how far they are coherent. With its focus on community involvement, the concept of the Big Society may, in the end, be only a useful presentational device for modernisation. It may serve to distance Prime Minister Cameron and the Conservatives from Thatcherism, whilst moving closer to achieving other aspects of Conservative Party policy such as a strong central state, and declining involvement of Local Authorities and Trade Unions in education (Kisby, 2010; Bale, 2010)². Whether it can usefully be applied in practice is less clear, particularly in times of severe financial cutbacks (Hetherington, 2013; Bale, 2010). Judgements about these debates can only be supported by a detailed consideration of each of the main education stakeholders, old and new, asking how far their power is intended and likely to change under Big Society policies.

However, in order to carry out this detailed consideration of each stakeholder and their power, we also need to be more specific about what is meant by 'power'. Is government's power intrinsically the same as the power which teachers exercise over their pupils in the classroom, or Head Teachers use in running a school? If power is to be redistributed, what sort of power will be given away or acquired, and by whom? If voluntary organisations or parents are to get more power, are these the same or different powers that governments have, or may choose to give up? Before being able to answer questions about whether the Big Society's vision is new or a continuation of earlier policies, in the next section we first consider the various types of power that are implicit in policy documents and commentators' responses.

Types of power

For the current discussion, four main types of power were identified as implicit in recent discussions about Big Society policies in education based on Conservative policy documents published between 2007 and 2012. Power has been a central and disputed concept in a wide range of social and political theory, encompassing broader ideological debate, which lies beyond the scope of this paper; the approach adopted here is essentially practical and to an extent overlaps with the distinctions proposed by Lukes (1974)³. The typology of power offered below serves as a suitable lens for looking at the Government policy landscape and the position of stakeholders within it. The four types or meanings of power identified are as follows:

1. Direct power. Stakeholders exercise direct power when they have the authority to make decisions and have the ability to impose their decisions on others. Direct power is the ability, for example, of national Government to direct the behaviour of groups and individuals to further its own political aims.
2. Referred power. Referred power is the power to implement decisions others have made. So, for example, governors and head teachers are able to play a particularly significant role in terms of day to day power over schooling. This is referred power to implement the policies of central and local government. However, they are not able to steer education away from existing forms of provision that emphasise the individual school or Local Authority, at the expense of more extensive social welfare functions.
3. Influencing power. Influencing power is the attempt to change policy and affect the choices of those who hold direct power, for example, through lobbying. An example of this might be the role of employers in the development of educational settings, with regard to Further Education Colleges or Universities. Through lobbying and

sometimes at the invitation of direct power holders, they can gain some power over policy and over schooling. However, it can be difficult for this to be fully exercised.

4. Limited power. Limited power is experienced by groups that are more or less invisible in the policy documents under consideration, having little influence and being largely unrepresented in the dominant groups. An example of this might be the lack of consultation with teachers in relation to educational reform, leading the professional to experience limited power.

The paper now considers these different types of power in education, as experienced by the main educational stakeholders and agencies, and how they appear likely to change under Big Society policies. This provides a useful measure of the impact that the Big Society is likely to have on particular stakeholders, on their status as well as on their ability to influence policy.

The Stakeholders

Government (Local and National, including Local Authorities)

The Government historically has legislative powers, and can therefore exercise considerable control over schools and parents, whereas parents and teachers are more limited in their ability to influence Government. Therefore the Government is largely dominant in its relationship with schools and parents, and enjoys direct power, although it has given up some control over admissions and the National Curriculum by allowing Academies and Free Schools to set their own policies if they wish to. Any disapplication of the 2007 Admissions Code would represent an extension of New Labour policy, although otherwise there are continuities in this sphere of admissions policy. However the 2007 Conservative manifesto document describes a desire to shift the power relationship more extensively. What this means in practice is not yet clear.

This Green Paper outlines how we can begin to close the gap between the poorest and the wealthiest in the education system and tackle the scandal of educational under-achievement by decisively shifting power out of the hands of a failed establishment and giving more control to parents. (Conservative Party, 2007: 17)

Local Government is presented in a negative light in these policy documents. For example, Michael Gove, as shadow Secretary of State for Education, spoke of the 'stultifying monopoly control of the council' (Gove, 2009a) in relation to underperforming schools. This flagged the later determination of the Coalition to empower local actors at a grass roots level in a way that would more or less bypass the Local Authority's decision-making process. Consequently, parents and other groups (such as charities) have been empowered and answer directly to Government, representing an increase in the direct power of central Government and a decline in the referred power of Local Authorities. Vize (2013) argued this will allow schools to be associated with success whilst leaving Local Authorities left responsible for failure, and with the potential to be further disempowered.

Governors

Governors represent an existing stakeholder group that includes professional and voluntary members. Their powers are controlled to a large extent by Government legislation in terms of admissions policies (except in the case of City Technology Colleges, Academies, Free Schools and some Grammar Schools), curriculum issues, and testing. However governors can influence school policy at a community level in terms of staff appointments, budgeting, discipline issues, and the day to day implementation of the curriculum. On practically all governing bodies there is now parent and teacher representation, which goes some way towards ensuring local accountability, and which also has the effect of mediating Government policy. Governors seem relatively weak, therefore, in terms of their power in relation to local and national Government policies, holding referred power, but with some limitations. However, they are more influential in relation to selecting and managing

teachers, and determining the nature of schooling at the most local level. Here we see a degree of direct power but, again, with limitations. Whether this has changed from pre-2010 depends on the type of school. In the case of Free Schools and Academies, governors are able to exercise increasing degrees of power, for example deciding on the school's curriculum, whereas in Local Authority schools, governor power has been diminished since September 2012 when the School Governance (Constitution) (England) Regulation came into force (Her Majesty's Government, 2012).

Given this situation, it is odd that the role of Governors is not mentioned more often throughout the manifesto and policy documents. After all, the involvement of local people in local schools is at the heart of what the Coalition intended for greater grass roots involvement in education and policy. However, policy in this regard has evolved over time. In the 2007 manifesto document, for example, there is only one reference to governors. The one reference is in relation to the resignation of a governing body *en masse* in response to an excluded pupil winning an appeal (Conservative Party, 2007: 24). However, by 2011, the role of governors had been addressed in a significant Parliamentary debate, in which we find considerably more detail regarding the Coalition's view of school governors and their comparatively weak position in terms of Local Authorities, in the words of the Conservative MP Andrew Percy:

Another criticism concerns the links between the LEA (Local Education Authorities) and governing bodies. LEA governors often work in the LEA or as teachers themselves, and they sometimes serve as community governors or parent governors. However, governing bodies can sometimes become a little too LEA-centric. I have sat at many governing body meetings where we considered a paper from the LEA that included a recommendation. In such cases, people around the table often conclude that, because the recommendation has come from the LEA, they should, of course, approve it. Their reasoning is, "Why would the LEA suggest it if it wasn't anything other than in the interests of the school?" That process is sometimes reinforced by clerking services being brought in from the LEA, which further builds the link between the governing body and the LEA. In one sense, that link is important, but there needs to be a clear separation of power. (Hansard Vol 522 Col 204WH)

We see an indication above that there is some confusion about the role of the Local Authority in working in partnership and guiding governors and their schools. The model being criticised was that promoted by New Labour, as well as the subsequent Coalition administration, with increasing levels of school autonomy.

There has been further conflict in relation to the composition of governing bodies, with Secretary of State Michael Gove seeking to reduce elected parental representation and increase the number of governors with particular skills, such as law and accountancy. In this way governing bodies would more closely resemble the board of a company. This approach to the role of governors, and the composition of governing bodies, is also in conflict with the Big Society idea of extending volunteer or community participation in schools. Gove's desire is to remove so-called 'glory-seeking local worthies', just the sort of people others might describe as important (volunteer) actors (Woolcock, 2012).

Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED)

Although school inspection has existed since the 1800s in the form of HMI (His or Her Majesty's Inspectorate), the current name for this government department is OFSTED, established in its current form in 1988. OFSTED exercises considerable influence over teaching staff, head teachers, and schools, but before coming into office the Conservatives considered it to have insufficient powers. Documents suggest a desire for change:

We are concerned, however, that the powers of inspection that Ofsted wield have been reduced in recent years. (Conservative Party, 2007: 33)

To most teachers and parents who have experienced an OFSTED inspection, the idea that OFSTED's powers had been in any way diminished will probably come as something of a surprise. Indeed, in a House of Commons Education Committee report from March 2011, it states:

Ofsted has been described as “the mergers and acquisitions giant of the education sector”, and it is difficult to argue with that verdict. Originally designed in the early 1990s as an inspectorate of schools and colleges, Ofsted has grown extensively and its remit now extends to inspection or regulation of, inter alia, child minders, children's services and social care, children's centres, adoption and fostering agencies, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS), further education, initial teacher training, adult skills, and prison learning. (House of Commons Select Committee on Education, 2011:8)

Over time, OFSTED has been given an increasing brief and has become a gargantuan inspection system. In terms of our classification of power, we see OFSTED enjoying increased direct power (as a Government department), as well as in influencing power (in terms of its size and ability to lobby in its own interests). However this increase in centralised and direct powers over school inspection does not commit OFSTED to considering wider community needs, which would be expected and important in terms of the Big Society agenda. While OFSTED has increased the scope of its power in some dimensions, its degree of involvement with the community has not advanced (OFSTED, 2013).

Teaching Staff

Teachers are controlled via the direct power of Head Teachers, and inspected by OFSTED. Their main area of exercising power is in relation to pupils, but while this gives them a significant degree of direct power over pupils and schooling, it gives them only limited power with regard to education policy in a wider context. Teachers have been in an increasingly weak position since the introduction of the 1988 Education Reform Act which required them to teach according to the National Curriculum's mandate in terms of content and standards (although Free Schools and Academies are not obliged to adopt the National Curriculum). In policy documents, we see that the Conservative Party is also concerned about discipline, considering that teachers need to regain mastery over their own classroom situations, as this representative statement typifies: 'The balance has to shift back in the classroom, in favour of the teacher' (Conservative Party, 2007: 20). Teachers are described repeatedly in policy documents as lacking referred or direct power even in their own classrooms. Teachers are positioned as comparatively passive participants in the educational process. The Coalition seeks to remedy this, but through questionable and relatively trivial means (such as allowing teachers to ban mobile phones, for example). Currently, teachers as professionals do not seem destined to play a particularly important role in any grass roots education revolution. We could say that teachers have some direct power but more limited power. Teachers, through their unions, have expressed opposition to various dimensions of the educational reforms discussed here, as referred to below.

Head Teachers

Head teachers have historically experienced all four types of power in the course of their work, and this remained fairly constant from New Labour. They are able to instruct and direct teaching staff and pupils, so have considerable impact on schooling. Head teachers also have a substantial say in the allocation and management of the school's budget. This represents direct power. However they are accountable to the school governing body; thus to some extent their power is referred. They may be able to express views informally, allowing for a degree of influencing power, but it is more difficult for them to have a

significant degree of influence over policy, suggesting they have only limited power in this area.

In terms of the Conservative manifesto document, it is surprising that they are mentioned only once, given their centrality. This sole reference is almost an aside, in relation to schemes of work being inspected by OFSTED before 2005 (Conservative Party, 2007: 33). In the document *Mending Our Broken Society* (Conservative Party, 2010: 5) as well as Michael Gove's speech to the Royal Society of Arts (Gove, 2009b: 16-17), there are references to Head Teachers being involved in discipline, measures as well as being empowered to pay good teachers more. The concern with discipline measures is reiterated in the written statement of Coalition policy announced in July 2010:

I would like to announce to the House new measures to be introduced to tackle behaviour and discipline in schools. All pupils should show respect and courtesy towards teachers, towards other staff and towards each other. Head teachers help to create that culture of respect by supporting their staff's authority to discipline pupils. (HC Hansard Vol 513 Col WS14 July 7, 2010)

Other than references of this type, as a distinct category, Head Teachers currently seem to be absent from Coalition debate. It may be that their influence on schooling is intended to be reduced within a more extensively marketised sector. Once again, Head Teachers may be seen as having limited power, which is not earmarked for change under the Big Society policies. A perception that their power may be intended to decline may have been one of the underpinning motivations behind the recent vote of no confidence at the National Association of Head Teachers' 2013 conference (Rankin, 2013).

Pupils

Pupils are closely directed and instructed by teachers, head teachers and parents, but have little power or influence over the educational structures that surround them. Within policy documents, pupils are predominantly discussed in relation to disciplinary problems, social deprivation, failed literacy initiatives, and poor educational outcomes. This line of argument is exemplified in a 2009 speech to the children's charity Barnardos, made by Michael Gove as Conservative's education spokesman while in opposition (Gove, 2009a), when he spoke of 'overcoming entrenched disadvantage' in a discussion of pupils who have problems.

There is an interesting contrast to be drawn here with statements from Parliamentary debates in the late 1980s and 1990s, when Labour was in opposition (and briefly afterwards). In such debates, pupils are often seen as 'the future' and 'a national asset'. For example, Jack Straw (later a senior minister in New Labour governments) argued:

There are serious teacher shortages ... that crisis can and will only get worse until we have a Government who are committed to our state education service and who are willing properly to invest in this nation's children – our future. (HC Debate, 1988-89 Vol. 152 Col 87)

By 2011, admittedly after the riots in cities, Coalition government spokesmen were articulating its attitude towards young people in more positive terms. As Michael Gove wrote in his ministerial foreword to the *Positive for Youth* cross-Government policy document, published a few months after rioting had taken place:

I reject negative stereotypes of teenagers and believe that 99% of our young people are already responsible and hard working and want to make the most of their lives and make the world a better place. This policy document is not a knee jerk reaction to the summer 2011 disturbances but a sustainable long term strategy from a Government that is unashamedly positive about our young people. Our vision is that

all young people enjoy their teenage years and realise their potential through positive relationships, strong ambitions, and good opportunities. Our focus is on helping young people succeed, not just on preventing them from failing. We will measure success accordingly. (Her Majesty's Government, 2011)

There does seem to have been a shift in the basis on which pupils are perceived. This quotation implies there was a new emphasis on empowering pupils rather than simply bringing them into line. For example, there has been a growth of Schools Councils, but no significant increase in pupils' power as a result (Whitty and Wisby, 2007). This accords more closely with the approach taken by New Labour. In terms of our typology of power, pupils appear to be maintaining a position of limited power.

Parents

In the Conservative manifesto document, parents were repeatedly referred to as channels for child discipline measures, key potential partners in setting up new types of school (i.e. Free Schools), and central figures in promoting school improvement:

... we can begin to close the gap between the poorest and the wealthiest in the education system and tackle the scandal of educational under-achievement by decisively shifting power out of the hands of a failed establishment and giving more control to parents. (Conservative Party, 2007: 17)

This is repeated later in the document:

A Conservative Government will also institute a long-term programme to increase the number of good school places within the state system, decisively shifting the balance of power in education away from the establishment and in favour of parents. (Conservative Party, 2007: 18)

In relation to school admissions, a similar redistribution of power is described:

Too many parents have had their power to choose a better education for their children blocked. (Conservative Party, 2007: 5)

Thus the motivation of the Conservatives is clear: to bring parents into a more central and influential position, presumably conditioning the electorate to perceive parental power as a panacea for educational ills. Certainly it appears as though parents are meant to act as a supporting and mediating force behind the twin Coalition imperatives of ensuring overall improvement in educational standards while accelerating market competition between schools. This could be classified as referred power. However the control exercised by Government over resources is so tight that in reality this may be better expressed as parents having limited power.

Free Schools

The Coalition Government announced shortly after taking power in 2010 that it was going to provide central funding for Free Schools which could be set up by parents, teachers, and not for profit groups, as an alternative to Local Authority schools. These new schools receive state funding but they are independent and they cannot charge fees. They are rather like Free Schools in Sweden (Hultin, 2009) or in some respects, Charter Schools in the US (Toch, 2010), although the Swedish and US schools are allowed to be profit-making. Free Schools have freedom to select pupils according to the ethos of the school, and add to, rather than replace, the previously available number of school places. In this way, Free Schools represent a flagship Coalition education policy, as we see by their prominent position in the Conservatives' *Where we stand* document:

We are empowering teachers by: ... Allowing parents, teachers and charities to set up 'free schools', catering to the needs of local communities and free from bureaucratic control. (Conservative Party, 2012)

However one issue of concern is whether Free Schools are likely to be socially equitable and raise standards overall. This remains unclear, and Sweden has apparently struggled to achieve these two goals (Bunar, 2010). There is also the strong likelihood that such schools will need to be tightly controlled by Government's direct power in terms of their finances, in order to ensure adequate accountability. In terms of our classification, those setting up and running Free Schools can be seen as experiencing referred power.

Universities and Further Education Colleges

As a substantial proportion of their funding comes from Government, Universities and Further Education Colleges are subject to a significant degree of centralised political control. For example, home undergraduate numbers in universities in England are tightly regulated by HEFCE, the Higher Education Funding Council for England. In that sense these institutions of higher and further education have limited power. However this may be changing.

In the manifesto document (Conservative Party, 2007), universities were only mentioned in relation to widening participation initiatives, rather than as key players in a knowledge economy, of which schools are also a part. Therefore they appear to serve a social or employability based function for Conservative, and hence Coalition, education policy rather than an intellectual one. Later, in the document *Mending Our Broken Society* (2010: 6) universities are referred to in relation to being given more referred power over examinations. The Browne (2010) review, with the subsequent increase in university tuition fees, indicates increased marketisation of university courses, as does increasing profit-bearing private sector involvement in professional education and training. In addition, the prospect of introducing new Technical Universities backed by existing research institutions is one area where universities and colleges may be in a position to strengthen their power base, as this feeds directly into the Government's employability agenda. We therefore see early evidence of potential referred and influencing power, which may be expected to increase for these stakeholders.

Local and National Employers

In early policy documents, there are limited references to employers other than in relation to the design of vocational qualifications, mainly in the Further Education sector. For example:

We will remove the bureaucracy that is suffocating our colleges, put students and employers in the driving seat so training matches the needs of the market, and introduce real apprenticeships with true, on-the-job-training. (Conservative Party, 2007: 8)

This statement, at first glance, implies that engagement with employers is only relevant to Further Education contexts, and that learning in school and university (as opposed to 14-19 learning) is less linked to students' later careers and employability. At the Conservative Party conference in 2011, David Cameron chastised employers for their lack of engagement with policies on vocational education.

When a balanced economy needs workers with skills, we need to end the old snobbery about vocational education and training. We've provided funding for 250,000 extra apprenticeships – but not enough big companies are delivering. So here's a direct appeal: If you want skilled employees, we'll provide the funding, we'll cut the red tape. But you've got to show more leadership and give us the apprenticeships we need. (Cameron, 2011)

This represents something of a paradox, as surely employers would want a skilled work force? A possible explanation is that we are seeing the beginning of a rift between different categories of post-compulsory education, a development being extensively debated in the literature (Collini, 2012). This would appear to be something of an own goal for Coalition policy. Employers seem to have little ability to push their agenda forward in any useful sense here, so could be classified as having at best influencing power, and at worst, limited power.

The charitable and not-for-profit sector

The charitable and not-for-profit sector is part of what Prime Minister David Cameron terms the 'Big Society' (Cabinet Office, 2010), and a key part of the desired 'supply side revolution' (Conservative Party, 2007: 9). The manifesto said a Conservative Government would:

Allow educational charities, philanthropists, livery companies⁴, existing school federations, not for profit trusts, co operatives and groups of parents to set up new schools in the state sector and access equivalent public funding to existing state schools. (Conservative Party, 2007: 9)

It is clear from the reference to 'not for profit' that these ideas do not envisage private companies being allowed to set up state schools on a profit-making basis. In the context of the Coalition, this may indicate an uncomfortable tension between market ideals and a social welfare model emphasising greater inclusivity. As a goal, social inclusion suggests tensions since if not-for-profit organisations are able to engage in what the insurance industry would term 'adverse selection', namely refusing to accommodate the more difficult or challenging clients, it may be that a state safety net is ultimately required anyway.

Therefore although as a group we would expect the charitable and not-for-profit sector to have considerable referred and influencing power, it seems as though these have been limited by central Government as a means of ensuring policy gains. Combined with the heavy financial cutbacks that have taken place within the charitable and not-for-profit sector, this means that their scope for involvement is likely to be far more limited in practice than was suggested by Big Society documents (Kisby, 2010).

Teaching Unions

Teaching unions would seem to be an obvious group for the Conservatives to address in their policy documents, given historic tensions between the party and teaching professionals. However the documents under discussion make no specific references to teaching unions. The Big Society agenda is not advocating change in this respect. Therefore, in the policy context, unions could be classified as having limited power. Unions have tried to mobilise their membership, particularly in opposition to specific initiatives such as the introduction of Performance Related Pay, which teachers have argued is unlikely to work in practice (Sellgren, 2013; Tickle, 2013). Similarly, members of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, one of the more moderate unions, backed a motion calling for Gove to stand down on the grounds that he had failed to treat teachers with respect over the last three years, or raise educational standards (Paton, 2013). Whether these negative responses lead to a more positive professional mobilisation of teachers in the form of a Royal College of Teachers (for example) remains to be seen.

Overview

A summary of the changes which may realistically be expected from pursuing Big Society policies, for each of the main stakeholders, is presented in Table 1. In the case of direct power, we see this increasing for two stakeholders (central Government and OFSTED), and diminishing for one (Local Government). In the case of referred power, we see four stakeholders experience an increase in power (governors, free schools, universities and FE colleges, and charities). In the case of influencing power, we see five stakeholders with increases in power (OFSTED, pupils, parents, universities and FE colleges, and charities).

Finally in the case of limited power, we see this increasing for four stakeholders (teachers, head teachers, employers and charities), and decreasing for two others (pupils and universities/FE colleges).

Table I. Summary of changes envisaged in the power of stakeholders under Big Society policies

	Direct power	Referred power	Influencing power	Limited power
Central Government	More			
Local Government	Less			
Governors		More		Same
OFSTED	More		More	
Teachers	Same			More
Head teachers	Same	Same	Same	More
Pupils			More	Less
Parents			More	Same
Free Schools		More		
Universities and FE Colleges	Same	More	More	Less
Employers				More
Charities and not-for-profit		More	More	More
Teaching unions				Same

Conclusions

In current education reforms the entire power base of the existing education system is up for redistribution. If we pick out, carefully, the references to power for stakeholders embedded in Big Society and other Conservative Party policy documents, and their implications in practice, we see that the main beneficiaries of the new power structure are central Government and OFSTED, an arm of government. Local Authorities have had their position undermined, and have significantly less direct power under the new arrangements. Some power sharing is intended to take place; for example school governors, free schools, universities, colleges and charities are to experience a degree of referred power. At the same time, the reality for many key stakeholders, such as pupils, teachers and parents, is that they are only allowed limited power in terms of education policy. This diminishing of the role of those involved directly in the day to day experience of education is becoming increasingly apparent, the longer the Coalition administration continues. In fact, it would not be going too far to say that under Coalition policies the closer you are to the practice of education in England, the less power you are likely to have. Despite the initial promise of Cameron's Big Society policies, therefore, a situation has been developing in which there is an increasing gulf between the rhetoric of education reform, which often implies localism and collaboration, and the practical reality of education delivery on the ground, which is subject to strong central control.

The big question is, of course, why this gulf has happened to such an extreme degree. One theory, relating to the individuals and personalities involved, is that the current Cabinet came to power unusually early in their political careers, resulting in a programme of rapid reform that arguably lacks proper forethought. This theory would certainly account for reported tensions between the Government at the centre and Conservative party activists on the periphery (Richards, 2013), not to mention the votes of no confidence that have been taking place amongst education professionals during 2013. Another key factor here may be Michael Gove's own political transformation, from Thatcherite to Tory modernizer, who only

came to Cameron's reform agenda rather later in his journey towards the Cabinet. Gove's critics often characterise him as fearing to be seen to occupy a central or consensual position of any kind, preferring instead a bold image (Duff, 2005).

The positioning of education reform as some kind of swashbuckling challenge is clearly a useful tactic for any politician seeking high office. Yet as we have seen, in the examples cited in this article, the mundane reality of implementation is much more complicated. Central to this is the problem of reconciling the desire for a privatised model for education with a more collaborative, Big Society one, as stated above, and it is this tension that lies at the heart of Coalition policy (Kisby, 2010). We are left with a sense of incoherence, as the two paths appear to diverge in terms of which stakeholders are privileged. Indeed, it may be that these tensions arise from different conceptions of conservatism, so that neoliberal politicians are really committed to protecting and increasing the liberal expression of individual rights (and thus like the idea of localism etc), but also want to control developments from a distance, to ensure that other policy goals are met (and thus increase central power).

These developments represent a break with the recent past, which may be instructive for other countries experimenting with different kinds of reform. In terms of education policy and educational administration, New Labour operated in a way that was fundamentally democratic in many ways. This involved negotiating with trade unions, teachers and service users, and allowing their attitudes to inform policy (albeit in a general sense). Power was shared, to some extent. However under the Coalition Government we appear to be moving towards a different model where control over education is essentially awarded to particular stakeholder groups with favourable political views. This is informed by a more business-orientated model, rather than a democratic one, and the associated rhetoric strongly emphasises preparation for the workplace. This new focus raises some questions about the wider implications of restructuring power. If the main priority of state education is to prepare pupils as workers, within a comparatively rigid and highly politicised conceptualisation of schooling and society, then it could be argued that we have failed to introduce a sufficient degree of resilience and flexibility into the schooling system. This is the case especially if we have ignored the experiential contributions of those most closely involved in education in a day to day sense. If we are to anticipate the inevitable societal challenges that will occur over the next generation, including the growth of new forms of capitalism, global warming, population growth, food security and commercial globalisation, then we need to reconsider the role of power within educational reform. This may well involve moving away from such a heavily politicised and nationally constrained model of state maintained schooling, towards a more mutual model, perhaps more in the spirit of what Prime Minister Cameron may have originally intended. Instead we are in a situation where change is happening extremely rapidly, and where the mutualism implicit in the Big Society has not had time to develop, which goes some way to explaining why a gulf between policy and practice has developed. This could be a consequence of the political parties responsible for the Government thinking it may only have one term in which to act. Nevertheless, this is contributing to a sense of confusion and inconsistency in Government policy, and for this reason we can only hope that lessons are learned and a more coherent path trodden in the near future.

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¹ Free Schools and Academies are classified as independent schools that do not charge fees (ie they are state funded). As a general rule, Free Schools in the UK differ from Academies in that Academies are conversions of existing schools, whereas Free Schools represent additional school places. Both types of school are currently

nonprofit making, although there has been some speculation that they may be fully privatised in the near future (Merrick, 2013)

² Trade unions continue to have a very important role in negotiating terms and conditions of work and pay for teachers, but this is outside the focus of this paper.

³ Lukes (1974) described 'three faces' of power; these were:

1. The ability of A to make B do something otherwise contrary to his or her interests.
2. The ability to set the agenda of political debate and to ostracise issues from this debate, and
3. The ability to set the broader ideological debate and to make individuals do things that are not in their best interests.

Lukes' first and third faces of power are similar to this paper's classification of 'direct power', firstly as relevant to individual or group behavior, and in the case of type 3, to the context of debate (or behaviours) that are allowed and prescribed in society or political discourse; his second face of power overlaps with the type classified as 'influencing power' in this paper, for example through its weaker form (lobbying power).

⁴ A livery company is an historic trade association, usually originating from the City of London.