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'Critical friends': exploring arm's length actor relationships to local government in education

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Abstract

Discussions charting the changing role of local government in education have often focused extensively on 'concrete' policy changes over time, but have provided less detail on the contribution to changing power relations of less tangible shifts. Drawing on Foucauldian notions of discourse and governmentality, in this paper, detailed rationalities of local third sector and other 'arm's length' actors in English education are explored, with a focus on their relationship to local authority (LA) school admissions teams. The paper aims to provide deeper understanding of tactical struggles for authority which happen within competitive local socio-political spaces. Data is utilised from a study of 'Choice Advice' (CA) in ten LAs, within a background context where arm's length agents deployed to deliver CA have been co-opted into central government marketization regimes, but local state planning of schooling is arguably more equitable for vulnerable families than are logics advancing a marketization of education. The research reveals: 1) discourses valorising 'independence' and 'distance' from local state 'agendas'; 2) discourses separating the interests of 'parents' and 'schools', with LAs positioned as representing the latter; 3) dehumanising representations of LA officers as 'faceless', obstructive and requiring regulation from 'critical friends'.

Introduction

Literature in a time of advanced liberalism emphasising 'state failure' globally typically also espouses the value of deploying decentralised agents, operating either outside government altogether or on its borders and at 'arm's length' – part of wider shifts 'from government to governance' (Ball, 2009; Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). Discourses reinforcing the notion that non-state solutions to social problems are superior circulate powerfully both inside and outside modern capitalist states. Within education across both the Global North and the Global South, 'third sector' actors in particular, operating in spaces outside both state and market, for example in the non-profit voluntary and community sectors (see e.g. Goodin, 2003), have in recent decades been celebrated as having strong capacity to focus on the needs of societies' most vulnerable groups.

Troubling the above picture, however, is, first, the simple notion that 'the state' and its actors are not monolithic. At its most abstract, the state is simply 'an aggregate descriptive term for a vast array of meaningful actions that coalesce into contingent, shifting and contested practices' (Bevir, 2011, 463). Given this, it is initially posited here that different aspects of government may work to greater degrees than do others in the interests of vulnerable groups. The case considered in this paper is that of local authority (LA) school admissions teams in England, rooted in once-powerful but now-denigrated public administration planning traditions and concerned with minimising problems of under-subscription in 'undesirable' local schools in a wider marketised context of parental choice. Policy landscapes of choice and consumerism in education may work well for families able to access 'aspirational' schools; however, they are also known to reinforce problems for socially disadvantaged families left behind. Second, just as state institutions cannot be characterised as being all of a piece, nor too can non-state or arm's length agents. While some will represent well the interests of vulnerable groups, others, it is argued here, do so less well, for example those in education co-opted into and reinforcing the legitimacy of market reforms.

In this paper, I begin with a review of existing literature on the changing role and structure of the local state in English education vis a vis the market and third sectors over time (and indeed the desirability or otherwise of such change). An attempt is then made not simply to build on studies which have explored 'concrete' change in local education politics, but alternatively to build on critical policy sociology work which has explored the importance of anti-state 'discourses of derision' in education (Ball, 1990), adding new detail on the operation of these discourses locally. Discourse here is conceived as referring to systems of thought within complex structures of power relations (see Foucault, 1972) – rules and regulations organising and constraining what we believe to be true, creating and positioning subjects. The article aims to unpack the nature of multiple contemporary discourses forming part of a 'will to govern' (Foucault, 1991) among actors operating at distance to the local state. In their work on governmentality, Miller and Rose (2008, 53) highlight that 'most individuals are not merely the subjects of power but play a part in its operations'. In this vein, arm's length actors on the borders of the local state can be viewed as struggling tactically for legitimacy and authority within competitive local socio-political spaces. 'Anti local state' rationalities – primarily espoused by local actors here but also by central government authorities heavily directing those actors – are considered worthy of reporting because they not only *reflect* but also *produce* shifting power relations in a time of increasingly privatised education governance.

Findings are reported from a study of Choice Advisers (CAs) in English education.¹ In 2006, LAs across England were mandated by the (then) Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to set up local Choice Advice (CA) services which would target vulnerable parents, offering one-to-one support during these parents' choosing of secondary schools for their children. Socially disadvantaged parents have been found in school choice contexts to be less assertive consumers than are other parents; however even with additional support, it is argued that market reform agendas in education do not empower disadvantaged groups. Guidance for LAs written by central government on the setting up of CA services stressed likely conflicting objectives between school admissions planning teams and locally-appointed CAs advising parents as individual consumers. 'Ideal' service delivery was defined centrally as being that where services would be contracted out to the third sector, but there was also a basic stipulation that local services should 'at least' operate at arm's length from LA admissions teams. Choice Advisers, when subsequently recruited by arm's length agencies and third sector organisations, were drawn from a highly diverse range of public and private sector backgrounds.

Background – the 'problem' of the local state in English education

Academic literature abounds regarding the extent to which modern capitalist states of all kinds are 'hollowing out' (Rhodes, 1997) following a breakdown of Keynesian national welfare regimes (Jessop, 2002) and the 1990s rise of new public management (NPM) (Clarke and Newman, 1997). Discussions of dispersed power, disaggregation, fragmentation, re-agenting, privatisation and ultimately a blurring of state/ non-state lines² are in the present day overlain by research, 'post-NPM', which suggests we may be witnessing some re-aggregation of processes *inside* government (Dunleavy et al., 2006). Nevertheless, scholars typically agree that shifts 'from government to governance' (Ball, 2009; Rizvi and Lingard, 2010), or at least towards vastly increased roles for non-state and arm's length agents in public services, have certainly taken place in a time of 'roll-out neoliberalism' (Peck and Tickell, 2002) and that such shifts have in many respects changed the global landscape of public services irreversibly.

In English education, at the heart of discussions on the extent to which traditional state bureaucratic structures have been forever changed, lies debate on the nature and future of local government. While once the masters of education as a public service domain, LAs in England have over several decades seen their functions and powers destabilised (Cochrane, 1993; Ainley, 2001; Bache, 2003; Chitty, 2002; Stewart, 2014; Waterman, 2014; Stoker, 2011; Jones and Stewart, 2012). Central government, not only in the form of (what is now) the Department for Education (DfE), but also in the form of national quangos, has wrestled power both upwards and outwards:

'...a path of marginalising the role of local government in terms of urban policy and the provision of local welfare state services relating to collective consumption ... with non-elected institutions and the private sector taking on increasing responsibilities' (Etherington and Jones, 2004, 138)

¹ See Exley, 2009; 2013.

² There are too many to detail here, but see for example: Ball, 2007; Ball and Junemann, 2012; Hatcher, 2006; Skelcher, 1998.

The LA role in English education has shifted gradually from being one of provider and planner of services to one of commissioner and enabler, contracting out functions while being subject to increasing central state surveillance. Under 1980s Conservative rule, local governments were mandated to engage in 'compulsory competitive tendering' of defined services. Under Labour after 1997, they were mandated to demonstrate 'Best Value' (Taylor, 2000), leading to further contracting of services. More recently in England, the 2011 Localism Act has driven yet further fragmented governance at the local level (Stewart, 2014; Ishkanian and Szreter, 2012). Forms of rule have been promoted which 'provide central government with alternative mechanisms of service provision and ways of avoiding political opposition from the localities' (Copus et al., 2013, 392).

Discussions about changing LA power in England often focus most on concrete 'whats' and 'whens' – agencies and contracts set up, legislation enacted, functions added and removed from the local state remit. Less extensively explored are detailed discourses which emerge in the midst of change, forming local 'operation codes and rationalities' (Olmedo, 2014, 575) among new and varied authorities seeking to govern. Governmentality (Foucault, 1991; Miller and Rose, 2008) is a term referring to tactical practices intended to 'direct categories of social agent' (Ball, 2013, 120). With this in mind, in this article there is an aim to highlight some detailed ways in which power, discourse and 'directive efforts' flow locally through individuals and organisations in the realm of education, 'embedded in mundane practices and in social relationships' (ibid, p.6).

Building on this and by way of broad context, here it must first be noted that, alongside concrete change, traditions of public administration inside English local government *generally* have for some decades now been subject to numerous overarching 'discourses of derision' (Ball, 1990). 'Loony left' LAs have been delegitimised as 'problems' – inflated in size, challenging central government authority (John, 2014; Travers, 1986; Loughlin, 2003), enjoying complacent 'producer capture' (Higham, 2014) and dominated by 'dogmatic municipal socialists' (Clarke and Newman, 1997, 16). Processes of depoliticisation have occurred, wherein the traditional local state, its democratic infrastructures and ideological underpinnings have increasingly been conceived as an outdated 'political' order in need of reinvention (Flinders and Wood, 2014; Hay, 2007; Crouch, 2004). Discourses have positioned the local state as being not *for* and *by*, but *against* 'the people' (Clarke and Newman, 1997). Classic Fordist bureaucratic practices have been attacked as paying insufficient attention to individuals as consumers requiring choice (Stoker, 1989).

In clear contrast with changing perspectives on the state, markets, management-speak and civil society governance have increasingly been viewed as constituting a new, neutralised and 'post-political' 'common-sense' (Mouffe, 2005; Clarke and Newman, 1997; Warren et al., 2011). 'Novel organisational forms' (Bridge et al., 2013, 306) have come to be celebrated in education and beyond, and writings on the third sector in particular have emphasised positively this sector's 'independence' from state practices (Smerdon and Deakin, 2010). Third sector actors have been positioned within discourses as being more trustworthy than are politicians or civil servants. They have been legitimised by their closeness to service users, their engagement with 'values issues' (Paton, 1996) and their being motivated by moral – rather than political – missions. Harnessing a 'shared set of purposes, values, norms and meanings' (Williamson, 2012, 777) and going 'beyond left and right' (Giddens; 1994; see also Rose, 2000) non-state, non-profit actors have been conceived in Third Way thinking – and most recently in 'Big Society' thinking (Ishkanian and Szreter, 2012) – as being ideally

placed to serve the needs of disenfranchised groups. Trustworthiness and fragile 'distinctiveness' associated with the third sector have been described as being compromised where organisations find themselves subject to excessive state regulation (Kendall and Knapp, 1996; Nevile, 2010).

Local sites of struggle

Discourses outlined above can be thought of as flowing through power relations *between state and non-state locally* (with diktats on the importance of non-state imposed by central government), but also *between the core of the local state and local arm's length agencies*. Rationalities flowing among actors delivering services 'at distance' can be thought of as challenging 'old order' public administration, part of a wider struggling for new authorities' governing supremacy within local socio-political spaces (Shore and Wright, 1997). Borrowing from Bourdieu (1984), such spaces might also be conceptualised as 'fields' in which the state and those operating on its borders or outside are positioned as being distinct and in tension (*see also* Evers and Laville, 2004). MacMillan (2013) has highlighted in such fields a strategic construction in particular of third sector actors' 'specialness' and distinction. Actors engage in 'boundary work', defining themselves by what they are *not* (*see also* Alcock, 2010) and driving processes of classification and differentiation, or what Foucault (1974) termed 'dividing practices'.

In the midst of such struggles, John (2014) has argued that local government in England remains a 'great survivor', pragmatically re-imagining over time its role in the governing of public services despite repeated affronts to its legitimacy and autonomy. LAs have sought to co-ordinate community governance, though it can be argued that re-imagining inside LAs has nevertheless led to significant changes (Lowndes, 2005). Shifts away from traditional public administration have occurred as the local state has reorganised, sometimes resisting but sometimes embracing 'a complex range of diverse organisations to which self-management has been devolved' (Ainley, 2001, 474). Within sprawling networks thus created, the ongoing authority of the local state should not be downplayed. Nevertheless, 'promotional and one-sided' (MacMillan, 2013, 44) discourses asserting the superiority of actors operating at distance may contribute to LAs 'conspiring in their own subjectification' (Shore and Wright, 1997) and espousing post-political managerial norms. Highlighting discourse as both constitutive and relational (Clarke and Newman, 1997, xiii), local government subjects may decry their own 'publicness' (Stewart, 2005). While some will build 'co-operative councils', others will build 'competitive councils' (Stewart, 2014), 'forgetting prior habits' (Ball, 2013, 132).

Does this matter? In defence of local planning

In this context, it becomes an increasingly marginal stance to defend what Chandler (2010) has termed the 'moral case' for traditional local government and its 'politics'. However, Copus et al. (2013) highlight the *importance* of the political in democratically-elected local institutions, arguing that these must not simply commission services but also 'control, shape and direct the local political environment' (p.393). Stewart (2014) points to inadequacies of fragmented community governance (or what Hodgson and Spours (2012) term 'laissez-faire localism') where 'management for equity' is required (*see also* University of Birmingham Policy Commission, 2011).

Considering the ‘moral case’ for local government in education, historically one key role for LAs ‘in ensuring equity and fairness for pupils and parents’ (Waterman, 2014, 949) has been the planning of school admissions. Since the late-1960s, LAs have sought to organise children into common neighbourhood comprehensive schools, with the aim of promoting balanced social mixes of pupils across schools (Pring and Walford, 1997; Baron et al., 1981). Here it is not the intention to feed into what have rightly been highlighted as often uncritical, nostalgic rallying calls to a past ‘public’ education which was never without its own failings and inequities (Garrett, 2015). Indeed, local comprehensive schooling since its inception³ has always been beset with clear problems associated with segregating school pupils along lines of socially unequal neighbourhoods (Coldron et al., 2010). However, research has also shown that neighbourhood comprehensive schooling is associated with lower social stratification of pupils between schools and also lower social inequalities in attainment than are produced by school markets purporting to offer families ‘choice’ (Allen and Burgess, 2010; Dumay and Dupriez, 2014).

Since the 1980s, policies promoting parental choice of schools in England have constrained severely LAs’ capacity to engage in the overall planning of school admissions (Feintuck and Stevens, 2013). Responsibility for admissions has shifted away from LAs and towards schools themselves.⁴ Socially disadvantaged parents exercising choice and being able to secure places in previously inaccessible affluent schools may of course benefit from the marketization of schooling. However, given structural limits to choice in local education markets, numbers of these parents will always be limited. Meanwhile, LA powers to limit under-subscription problems in ‘unpopular’ schools in a marketised system – typically those educating disadvantaged pupils in less affluent areas and facing struggles associated with insufficient pupils and resources (Levacic and Hardman, 1998; Woods et al., 1998) – have been restricted in a context of increasing school autonomy.

Education agents operating at distance to the local state may find themselves sympathetic to LA planning traditions. However, they may also be co-opted by national logics advancing a marketization of education. Critical work on third sector ‘halo effects’ (Leat, 1996), for example, stresses that generalisations about this sector are difficult to make, and Billis and Glennerster (1998, 80) argue that *no sector* has a ‘monopoly of the virtues’. Third sector organisations are diverse; some are more subject than others to central government NPM agendas (Eikenberry, 2009), and in line with this, many can become ‘denuded of ethical or moral content and purpose’ (Carmel and Harlock, 2008, 155).

³ Notwithstanding additionally clear prior injustices associated with post-war tripartite secondary education (Simon, 1991).

⁴ See for example recent government policy on Academies and Free Schools – Gunter, 2011; West and Bailey, 2013; Higham, 2014.

Choice advisers in English LAs

The 2006 Education and Inspections Act in England required LAs to set up 'Choice Advice' (CA) services, targeted towards supporting vulnerable parents in the choosing of secondary schools. Socially disadvantaged parents have been shown in education markets to be disempowered (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Woods et al., 1998) and policy makers asserted that greater information and advice would help 'place these families on a level playing field with other families' (DCSF, 2009). CA policy fits within libertarian paternalist trends towards a 'nudging' of citizens into 'rational' behaviour (Bradbury et al., 2013). Structural constraints within education markets are known, however (as indicated above), to constrain choice severely for disadvantaged families, even where they receive advice (Exley, 2013; Coldron et al., 2009), and CA might also be considered as reinforcing problems faced by less 'desirable' schools.

Guidance notes were produced by central government for LAs in 2006 detailing ways in which CA might be implemented (DfES, 2006). Concern was highlighted regarding likely conflicts between a CA need to advise parents 'as individuals' and LA traditions of school admission planning. Emphasis was therefore placed on ensuring CA 'independence', with permissible service delivery models (Stiell et al., 2008) including:

- contracting out to the voluntary sector;
- contracting out to independent consultants;
- Services being run by LAs but as part of existing arm's length Parent Partnership Services or Family Information Services
- Services being run inside LA school admissions teams; here authorities were required to ensure CAs answered to line managers *outside* of admissions.

In order to oversee CA services, a national-level Choice Advisers Support and Quality Assurance Network (CAS&QAN)⁵ was created, run by private company A4E in partnership with education charity Centra.

Considering relations between LA admissions teams and local arm's length CAs, then – with some additional examination of national discourses directing CAs – here I aim to uncover 'subconscious and conscious beliefs ... embedded in variegated and complex patterns of rule' (Bevir, 2011: 458). What sorts of discourses emerged among arm's length local CA actors regarding their perceptions of/ positioning relative to LA admissions teams? How far might we consider discourses emerging locally as constituting part of struggles for legitimacy and governing authority challenging the local state? Were actors from LA admissions teams themselves directed by the same discourses?

Semi-structured interviews were carried out in 2010/11 with:

- 4 current and former DfE civil servants involved in CA policy
- 14 CAs in 10 LAs across England;
- 5 CA managers (across 5 LAs);

⁵ In 2011 CAS&QAN was abolished; CA services in LAs nevertheless continue.

- 4 representatives from LA admissions teams (in 3 LAs);
- 1 interview with 3 CAS&QAN representatives.

Observations of meetings between parents and CAs were also carried out in 2 LAs, and interview transcripts and fieldnotes were triangulated against documents provided by interviewees. All CA delivery models outlined above have been captured in this research and, where relevant, differences emerging between those operating as part of different models have been reported. In this research it is not the intention to deny differences which exist between non-state actors and those operating inside the state but at arm's length. Rather, throughout the paper a position is taken – in line with literature on 'blurred boundaries' (e.g. Ball, 2007; Lewis, 2008) – which assumes a) that both state and non-state distinctive structures do exist, but also b) that there is some fluidity in what we might call 'state'/'non-state', and that c) the generic and unifying notion of being 'at distance' from state structures is something which can helpfully be examined. Such a position is helpful for exploring the case of CAs, where (as will be seen) common discursive themes emerge among actors operating 'at distance', albeit in different organisational forms (i.e. those both technically still 'inside' and those 'outside' the local state).

Celebrating 'independence'

Taking as a starting point national discourses on the early setting up of local CA services, it can be noted, first, that DfE civil servants when interviewed emphasised heavily the importance of CA 'independence' from LAs. Taking a 'non-negotiable' stance on this was asserted as having been necessary, echoing discourses introduced above wherein local government is conceived as problematic – failing to appreciate its own limits within local spaces of service delivery and seeking to challenge central government direction:

'We set out some sort of non-negotiable about the service being independent as well as it could' (DfE 1)

'We gave them a menu [of service delivery models] they could pick from' (DfE 2)

'Distance' from LA admissions teams was described not merely as something to be 'ensured', but also a matter of degree and something which ought to be measured, monitored and maximised. CA/LA relationships were ordered into a hierarchy of legitimacy, with contracting out being 'ideal', but CAs working internally to LA admissions teams 'unfortunate' and preferably also temporary:

"What ministers wanted, ideally, was a fieldforce of CAs, probably from the voluntary sector, originally, who were *very very* clearly not part of the LA admissions team. So in the very early days we did some exploratory work with a range of voluntary organisations [but] our money [wasn't] going to be sufficient to set something up that was outwith the LA ... So we then had to think, how can we use our existing means of getting at parents, and the obvious thing was *unfortunately* LA admissions teams. So we worked from that point ... having a series of exchanges with ministers about ... how we could ensure independence. And visible independence, so they wanted to put *as much distance as possible* between the CA and the LA' (DfE 2, emphasis added)

'There are five models of delivery *allowed* ... and one of them is the admissions team model, and about 20 authorities *still* use that, where the CA is kind of in the admissions team but has line management from someone else in case there's a conflict of interest. But that's been a bit tricky in some parts. Most do it through Parent Partnership Services or Family Information Services' (DfE 3, emphasis added)

Required to make sense and meaning of their position locally, and required also to fill in CAS&QAN-produced self-assessment exercises testing the extent of their local independence, CAs and their managers in individual LAs quite unsurprisingly espoused similar discourses challenging LA legitimacy. Independence was understood as carrying importance, implying 'impartiality' and 'neutrality', contrasting with LA political 'agendas'. Discourses were reinforced locally through 'taken-for granted ways of acting, speaking and thinking' (Thomson et al., 2010, 641). CAs and their managers conceived themselves as possessing 'freedom' from the constraints of LA agendas and so a powerful capacity to build trust with and 'reassure' vulnerable families.

'We are constituted as an arm's length service, so we're independent, or we can be as independent as we wish to be. We don't have to follow LA agendas, so that enables all of our work to reassure parents and everyone we work with that we are genuinely impartial at every level' (CA manager, LA 1)

'I think there have been times in the work we do, where you know [we've said] 'that not what we do'. We've been able to stress that we're arm's length, we're neutral, we're [charity]. 'That's not how we operate', and I think that got through to the admissions team' (CA manager, LA 2)

Here strains can be noted of what Miller and Rose (2008) have described as discourses constructing a 'non-political sphere' and separating this from a mythical 'malign' state codified as 'political'. 'Agendas' have been marginalised as part of a post-political turn (Mouffe, 2005). In line again with national discourses, independence was described by CAs as having to be 'stressed' in negotiations with LA actors, echoing aforementioned conceptions of 'problematic' local government overstepping its appropriate domain. CA managers furthermore viewed 'independence' as enabling them to constitute 'critical friends' offering 'harsh' advice (with critique conceived as being a one-way process), indicating tension between actors and a perceived sense of perspective afforded by standing outside the political realm. LAs were described as having 'healthy respect' for CAs in this regard:

'We're absolutely arm's length ... we don't say three bags full sir, but most who work in Education are pretty good. We do give them harsh advice, and it is seen to be independent ... we're a critical friend' (CA manager, LA 3)

Independence was conceptualised as pertaining not only to formal organisational structures such as line management, but also to *symbolic* and *physical* distance from LA admissions teams. Building on the notion of 'visible' independence mentioned by one interviewee above, national policy guidance emphasised the message that branding and logos for CAs should be distinct from LAs' 'corporate

image'. Here we see an asserting of boundaries and a tactical assertion of power and legitimacy via processes of differentiation (MacMillan, 2013), or the constructing of 'domains of validity' (Foucault, 1974). CAs when interviewed emphasised that 'best practice' included being located in different buildings from LA admissions teams wherever possible.

Varying positions could also be noted, however, between CAs operating 'most' and 'least' at arm's length locally. Although stressing separate line management and the relative positioning of desks and offices, CAs working within admissions teams tended more towards describing themselves as 'supporting' rather than working separately from (or in tension with) those teams, referring to the LA as 'we'. Others, by comparison, stated that too much proximity would 'jar':

'I can't work out how [CAs] who sit in admissions actually work, cos I would have difficulty. 'I would be saying 'if you've sent your form in already, you could ask for it to be changed'. Whereas admissions' line is 'no, once you've sent it in, that's it'. See, that's the difference. I think even on that little thing it would jar' (CA, LA 4)

Representatives from LA admissions seemed to some extent directed by discourses on independence, accepting and emphasising the limits of their own relative positioning and stressing post-political (Mouffe, 2005) consensus regarding the value of CA 'distance'. Here there is evidence of subjectification on the part of LA actors, perhaps indicating limited capacity for struggle against 'neoliberal imperialism' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001):

'I think having somebody who's independent from the admissions team, who is seen as not part of the LA, is really really helpful' (LA admissions, LA 1)

'We are from the authority. We cannot be independent as such, but since CAs came into force, they are seen to be independent' (LA admissions 1, LA 3)

'Independence' is portrayed above as possessing intrinsic virtue (Clarke, 2004). The entity *from* which independence is deemed necessary is the LA in line with a wider distrust of local 'political' infrastructures. CAs' independence or otherwise from domains or agendas *beyond* those represented by LA admissions teams (and indeed the idea that said domains too would be 'political') seems beyond imagination. Although one interviewee, as shown above, did notably describe CAs as merely being 'seen to be' independent, this quote referred more to CAs' ultimate (albeit arm's length) linkage to LAs, rather than their lack of independence from other actors or agendas.

'Parents' versus 'schools'

What was espoused as making up LA political 'agendas'? Beginning again with discourses circulating nationally, central government policy actors when interviewed presented independence for CAs within localities as being important primarily because LA admissions teams seek problematically to 'fill places' in undersubscribed schools. Such produces 'conflicts of interest' (see quote above) with the work of CAs:

'There was a feeling that LAs weren't necessarily always working within the interests of parents, for example where a school was half empty and was going to go down the pan, they wouldn't necessarily be telling parents that that's not the best choice, because that would hasten its demise and would make the planning of funding and issues much harder' (DfE 2)

'[In some LAs, families] were just going into a melting pot, the LA would just allocate them a school ... and it could be wherever there were low numbers, and you know what low numbers means ... you know ... unpopular schools.' (DfE 1)

'There was obviously a concern that councils would have particular quotas they would want to get in particular schools, so they would be trying to influence parents to go for the schools that mightn't be as full up ... and of course these are quite often schools, you know, performing less well ... there's a very strong community sense ... 'well I want to go to the local school, because this is the school that belongs to this community', but on the other hand it may not be the school that's going to be the best one for their child and somebody needs to be able to have that conversation with them, while understanding the sort of community ties that will be dragging in the other direction. (DfE 4)

Guidance notes in 2006 for LAs (DfES, 2006) stated that: *'if it can be shown that a local authority infringed on CAs' impartiality or put undue pressure on them to fill undersubscribed schools, the authority may have its CA grant withdrawn'*. Later 2009 guidance stated that *'parents should be able to feel confident that the advice they receive will be focused on the best interests of their child and free from any conflict with the local authority's need to allocate places'* (DCSF, 2009).

Overall the interests of 'parents and children' are constructed here as *separate* and *in opposition* to those of 'schools', with LAs presented as representing the latter but not the former. Recognition is not present that 'schools cannot be treated as separate from the contexts in which they operate' (Power and Frandji, 2010, 389). Schools are conceived as being undesirable where 'half empty', though without acknowledgement that undersubscribed schools which LAs seek to protect comprise not only staff, but existing students. Admissions teams' concern with limiting school 'demise' ('natural' as part of logics of marketisation) is delegitimised as reflecting simple concern over 'the planning of funding and issues', but not service users. LA actors are positioned within local struggles as 'pressurising', 'infringing', concealing the whole truth, and at the same time, failing to appreciate individuality and diverse consumer needs. LAs are viewed as placing families into 'melting pots', 'just allocating' without empowering and 'dragging' in unhelpful directions.

At the level of local CA services, similar discourses could be found aligning LA interests with 'schools' as opposed to 'parents'. CAs spoke much less derisively and much more cautiously than did national policy actors about the possibility that there may exist in their localities any 'undesirable' schools. At the same time, however, 'school-filling' LA work was presented as being separate from CAs' distinct domain of being 'there for' or 'champions for' parents. Echoing national discourses, LA teams were 'working for schools' and unable to 'wear two hats', with risks they would 'sway' parents:

'Admissions are 'oh there's a space at the school down the road' and that's it for them.' (CA, LA 6)

'I think the reason I was placed with Parent Partnership is they're arm's length to the LA, so they're sort of more there for the parents' (CA, LA 5)

'[The CA] remit [is] for helping people who might be disadvantaged, who might need somebody sort of championing their corner ... parents need to know that they're getting independent and neutral advice and not somebody from the authority that's trying to sway them or influence them ... I'm not saying that there might not be the *will* to do that from the authority, but I'm not sure they would have the set up to be able to deliver on that, because they'd be trying to wear two different hats' (CA manager, LA 2)

CAs spoke directly about roles undertaken 'in opposition to' the LA wherein individual parents were helped to appeal LA school allocation decisions. Here again LA admissions actors are positioned as 'working for schools'. However, LA concern with ensuring certain schools do not become oversubscribed at the expense of others facing undersubscription is underpinned by a nuanced understanding of families' differing positions within education markets. 'Parents' were discussed quite generically by CAs, with references to 'disadvantage', though without clear distinctions drawn between: a) parents merely 'at risk of' choosing unpopular schools through poor information, and b) parents who have no choice but to send their children to - or whose children already attend - such schools. Findings here build on previous research by the author which explored the extent to which CAs were 'policy subjects' in their school choice work at the same time as they were policy 'actors' – co-opted into central government discourses treating parents in individualised terms and sidestepping issues of social class and inequality between schools and families (Exley, 2013). Findings are also reminiscent of those reported recently by Higham (2014) on the discourses of Free School proposers in England. Such proposers have expressed broad commitments to 'inclusion' but are relatively silent on what such inclusion might entail in practical terms, raising 'critical concern for who is being represented and served' (Higham, 2014, 137).

LA admissions team actors here acknowledged (again) 'non-independent' elements of their 'school-focused' agenda. Self-governing in this regard led actors to stress the constraints of their own 'publicness' (Stewart, 2005), explaining that 'lines' unable to be crossed typically rendered them less able to be 'frank' with parents over school desirability. Among LA actors, however, understandings of their own positioning also in some instances involved *resistant defending* of concern over 'schools' as being part of 'fairness to everyone':

'What I *can't* say to parents is 'don't touch that school with a barge pole'. I *have* to maintain that line. I think CAs can be a little more frank in that sense. (LA admissions 2, LA 3, emphasis added)

'It's difficult isn't it, because you're working within the LA, and you're trying to give out information about your schools, and trying to be as fair as possible to everyone, knowing everyone's flaws, and glitches. It is quite difficult sometimes. (LA admissions, LA 1)

'Our main priority is to be inclusive to all children and promote a fair and equal admissions system' (LA admissions, LA 5)

'We've got commitments to the schools and to the authority as a whole, whereas the CAs are targeting the parents in a way that we're not' (LA admissions 2, LA 3)

Faceless bureaucracy

Building on depictions above of LA admissions teams as being concerned primarily with 'schools', representations of LA actors extended more broadly into delegitimizing discourses wherein 'bureaucrats' were faceless, against 'the people' and tainted by association to Council departments deemed unpopular such as Social Work. Admissions teams were described as being sometimes 'caring'. However, public administration traditions of dispassionate treatment of service users were conceived as 'impersonal'. Staff were also described as being concerned with 'piles of paper' and 'numbers on screens', so failing to know and understand – and inevitably producing inaccessible literature for – disadvantaged families.

'Some of the families that I work with possibly wouldn't entertain listening to me if they thought I was from the Council. (CA, LA 2)

'We were always like 'oh they're just paper shufflers and they're not really seeing the kids'. And they're quite bureaucratic and annoying. But actually you know, they are quite a caring department' (CA 2, LA 3)

'They don't go any further than 'yes there's a space' [in a school], 'cos to them it's numbers on a computer screen' (CA, LA 6)

'There are times where ... you are harassing the admissions team on behalf of a family. If you weren't there, they would just be one of ten or twenty in a pile' (CA, LA 7)

[Describing parents' appealing LA school allocations] 'In some cases, it's like feeding a lamb to the lions.' (CA 1, LA 8).

Discourses here echo wider literature on bureaucrats as being 'actively hostile to the public – hiding behind the impersonality of regulations and 'red tape' to deny choice' (Clarke and Newman, 1997). LA admission teams' being located in town halls constituted a particular focal point for CA critique, in line with well-documented attacks on state 'symbols, buildings, vocations and social relations' (Clarke and Newman, 1997, 17). Here LAs are being 'broken down' into component parts – enabling the knowing of those parts and their targeting for discipline and modification (Foucault, 2009):

'[The LA team] run information sessions for parents ... They're not as well attended partly because they're at the town hall, and which parent's going to really go to the town hall ... parents don't really want to see a twenty minute PowerPoint presentation, given only in English, when you're sitting in a glitzy office' (CA 2, LA 3)

By contrast, arm's length CAs constituted a 'human face' – personal and passionate, committed, frustrated by and struggling against dehumanised LA 'brick walls' while understanding better and relating more effectively to more vulnerable parents:

'They're all tremendously committed people. They're quite passionate about it ... You'll find they're very committed. Very committed to the client group. Very much so.' (DfE 3)

'I think it's important for parents, particularly vulnerable parents, that they see you as a human being, not somebody from an authority' (CA, LA 9)

Diversity in the backgrounds of CAs, 'drawn from communities' and frequently new to education services, was celebrated and contrasted against representations of local government 'cadres' and 'breeds' – professionals 'dispossessed of their expertise and judgement' (Ball, 2013, 135):

'One of the difficulties in government is that when it comes to delivery, the assumption always is that the way you're going to deliver [a service] is by creating a new breed of officers. Certainly we felt [CA] would be a lot stronger if there was a real effort made to recruit people from the communities who could relate to them, and weren't seen as someone from the Council. And preferably if they could be based near the schools rather than at the town halls ... I think the danger was always going to be ... that 'this is just another thing being done to us' rather than being done with us' (DfE 4)

Discourses of discipline and regulation

In an overall context, then, of CAs as 'critical friends' at distance directing LA admissions teams to reflect on the limitations of their 'publicness' and bureaucracy – discourses which it is argued here do reveal deep struggles for authority within local education landscapes – to what extent might we consider LA actors as being governed by these discourses? On the one hand, representatives from admissions teams have been shown in this paper to have emphasised the constraints of their own 'non-independence'. On the other hand, however, non-independence on the part of LAs does imply some ongoing political tension with those who are 'independent'.

LA admissions teams were challenged locally by CAs during interviews for this project regarding their having failed at the outset of CA services in 2006/7 to demonstrate sufficient 'enthusiasm'. LA actors were deemed in some instances to have failed to set up adequate infrastructures for supporting CAs and for ensuring CA independence. Representatives from CAS&QAN perceived their national role as being to maintain an overview on the extent to which local CA services were meeting with independence expectations. Emphasis was placed on CAs' feeling able to report to CAS&QAN instances in which they had experienced 'difficult conversations' with LA colleagues. Part of the CAS&QAN remit included a setting up of regular meetings for CAs and an online forum where CAs could share experiences. 'Light touch' regulation visits to LAs were intended to minimise difficulties, with DfE intervening to provide 'weight' where authorities proved uncooperative.

'[CAS&QAN] would, on our behalf, sort of if they had to, jump on a LA who you think isn't doing right things... so they are accountable for assuring a good quality service in that sense. They would take the initial approach ... only if the authority wasn't replying, or was proving very awkward, we'd get involved, just to add a bit of weight' (DfE 3).

Such denotes not only 'scepticism over the capacities of political authorities to govern for the best' but also 'vigilance over the attempts of political authorities to seek to govern' (Miller and Rose, 2008). LA actors were described by CAs as having 'come round' over time. However, they were also deemed at times to have been 'suspicious', sometimes outwardly resistant, sometimes 'misunderstanding':

'I think the initial reaction was 'well why give [funding] outside the authority ... give it to us, I can increase my staff' ... and [at] that point I don't think they had really got a handle on the independence and neutrality of the role and what that means. Arm's length.' (CA manager, LA 2)

'One officer, the concept, he couldn't grasp it. He basically told us that if your child lived in wherever, they shouldn't be applying to a school in a more leafy area' (CA, LA 9)

Admissions teams' gradual acceptance of CA arm's length services over time was attributed partly to LA 'commitment', but also to work put in by CAs in order to build relationships, avoiding 'treading on toes', sometimes 'agreeing to disagree'. Themes of resistance and an interruption of post-political discourses – political conflict between CAs embracing marketised agendas and admissions teams advancing 'oppositional programmes' (Miller and Rose, 2008) – can be noted here at the same time as can processes of LA actors' subjectification. Struggles are apparent – moments of tension between 'old order' and 'new order' – though so are productions of consensus:

There was a bit of resistance ... they couldn't quite work out how I would fit within the existing structure. [But] I actually had a referral from admissions last year, and I nearly fell over, cos there was so much resentment to start with (CA, LA 4)

'We've got a good relationship with admissions ... but again that's because of the work we've put in with the admissions team.' (CA manager, LA 5)

'They thought they were already doing the job, you know, so they didn't see the need ... but now they can see there's a massive need' (CA 2, LA 8)

Conclusion

In this paper, discourses and 'directive efforts' have been explored which circulate within new and ever-changing local fields of 'tension' (Evers and Laville, 2004) or local fields of struggle for governing authority (Miller and Rose, 2008) in education. What have been found in 'inter-sectoral landscapes' (Alcock and Scott, 2007) thus discussed are some specific, newly exposed rationalities on the part of actors operating 'at distance' to the local state.

Choice Advisers reported on in this paper have, first, engaged in ‘boundary work’ (MacMillan, 2013) or what Foucault (1974) has called ‘dividing practices’, classifying themselves as being distinct, far away and ‘independent’ from pejoratively described ‘agendas’ associated with democratic, ‘political’ local government. At the same time, however, they have been shown to be directed heavily by marketised central state logics, all in a wider context of what authors such as Ball and Junemann (2012) have described as being ever-increasing shifts towards networked ‘metagovernance’ in public services. Rationalities and discourses revealed in the paper have been shown to work specifically towards a delegitimizing of LA admissions teams in England. Beyond simple constructions of these teams as being problematically ‘political’ and ‘agenda-driven’, tactical references have additionally been made to admissions teams’ representing of *schools*, but not *parents*. Characterisations of local government bureaucrats as being faceless and even *inhuman* can furthermore be thought of as constituting weaponry deployed by arm’s length actors in a local battle for governing authority.

Findings in this paper echo, but also elaborate upon, earlier work exploring ‘discourses of derision’ (Ball, 1990) against the state in education and in particular work which has considered ‘anti-local state’ discourses in education (see e.g. Clarke and Newman, 1997). Celebrations of the ‘independence’ of CAs in England can be seen clearly as both reflecting and reinforcing wider ‘post-political’ (Mouffe, 2005) discursive shifts in contemporary society. Within such shifts, dominant discourses assert the superiority of diverse non-state and arm’s length solutions for serving the needs of vulnerable groups. However, they also go hand-in-hand with a broad deregulating and liberalising of education, and non-state or arm’s length actors co-opted into such logics can be seen in many senses as working to the detriment, rather than the benefit and protection, of vulnerable groups.

LA actors described throughout this paper have been found to some degree to have resisted against ‘anti-local state’ rationalities – rationalities which work towards marginalising their school admissions planning functions. Resistance matters, because while local state planning of school admissions – part of a longstanding effort to promote ‘common neighbourhood schools’ – has always been part of an ‘incomplete and contested project’, it has also been fought for historically by ‘highly influential movements for social change’ in view of its capacity to promote equity and social justice (Gerrard, 2015, 10-11; see also Reay, 2012). In such a context, it is disconcerting to reflect in particular on one final discovery made in this paper, which is that, alongside frequent resisting against their delegitimation, LA actors are at the same time finding themselves co-opted into subjectifying discourses critiquing their own ‘publicness’. Consensus on the ‘problems’ of local planning and bureaucracy is being both produced and reinforced in local political spaces. LA actors, where resistant (indeed even where not), are being positioned daily as obstructive – requiring of discipline and regulation – by new and diverse local and national actors ‘seeking to shape beliefs’ as part of a wider ‘will to govern’ (Miller and Rose, 2008; Foucault, 1991). Are these ‘critical friends’, or is this (un)friendly fire?

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