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Trust schools and the politics of persuasion and the mobilisation of interest

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Introduction

For the past 30 years UK governments have pursued education reform agendas that sought to introduce forms of quasi-market competition between schools and open up school governance to the voluntary and private sectors. The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government (Coalition) elected in 2010 continues with this line of reform. The first piece of legislation enacted by the government concerned the further promotion of Academy schools as the preferred model of school governance, and we see in the government's 'localism' agenda a continuation of the ideological drive to shift the governance of public services to a more dispersed network of policy actors. It is this new mode of governance that forms the focus of the research discussed in this article. Temporally research was located in the context of the previous Labour administration, though, as we argue, the themes that animated the research are wholly contemporary. Our concern in this article is to outline the theoretical and methodological foundations of a research project that sought to inquire into the nature of legitimate democratic space in the empirical context of mobilisation of support for and opposition to one moment in the emergence of this new mode of governance – Trust schools.

The article begins by situating Trust schools within both the debates surrounding Academies (of which Trusts schools are typically seen as an extension) and those concerned more broadly with modernisation, the shift from government to governance, and the rhetoric of the 'post-political' society. The Trust schools initiative is presented as one policy move within the wider reconfiguration of the field of politics, and the level of contestation that accompanied its introduction provides us

with a case study in the 'politics of persuasion' and the 'mobilisation of interests'. Attention then turns to the theoretical frame of the research, which sought to deploy the concepts of 'hegemony' and 'articulation' as developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau & Mouffe 2001) within the kind of policy sociology approach familiar to educational research (Ball 1994; Ball 1998; Gale 2001). Finally, the object of study and the theoretical framework are translated into an empirical investigation of the 'politics of persuasion' and the 'mobilisation of interests'.

Trust schools as a critical case study in the reconfiguration of political space

Academies, Trust schools and the competition state

The Trust schools initiative was introduced in the 2005 White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools For All* (DfES, 2005). 28 Trust school pathfinder projects were announced in 2006 and the first wave of Trust schools became operational in September 2007¹. There were approximately 400 established schools at the start of the 2010-11 school year. As a policy move, the promotion of Trust schools can be seen as 'an extension of the Academies policy' (Hatcher, 2006a, p.618), a national 'rolling out' of a system of independent non-fee-paying schools (Chitty, 2006; Dainton, 2006). One of a number of policy moves reforming the institutional architecture of the state (Ball, 2009), Trust schools symbolised a naturalisation of the key features of the Academies programme, greatly increasing the range of

¹ The Department of Children Schools and Families announced the establishment of 28 Pathfinder Trust school projects involving nearly 50 schools in September 2006. The Pathfinder process was advertised by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, acting on behalf of the DCSF, as a mechanism for exploring the potential for different kinds of partnership model (DCSF 2006 *Trust Schools Toolkit* (Nottingham, DCSF) .

educational spaces being 'carved out' for enhanced private sector influence (Woods, Woods and Gunter, 2007, p.254).

This is one of the key factors underpinning the significance of the initiative. For as with the more recent Coalition promotion of Academies, every school, everywhere, secondary and primary, was being encouraged by the Labour government to consider Trust status (DfES, 2005, 2.5). In the original White Paper, it was stated that no new community schools would be established and that all new schools would be either Academies or Trust schools (DfES, 2005, 9.11). Although this was watered down in the Education and Inspections Act, it was envisaged that over time *most* schools would adopt Trust status. While it is true, therefore, that Academies constituted the 'advance guard' of radical structural change (Woods, Woods and Gunter, 2007, p.252), it was in the form of Trust schools that the model became generalised and extended across the whole primary and secondary sector of England (Hatcher, 2006a; 2006b). It was precisely because of its envisaged extension across the entire sector that Tony Blair could say that the Trust schools policy lay at the heart of 'one of the most radical...school reform programmes in the developed world' (DfES, 2005, Foreword).

The Trust schools initiative can be located within the emergence of what has been termed 'the competition state' (Ball 2007; Jessop 2002). Here, education policy is increasingly framed in terms of securing the conditions necessary for economic growth and competitive success. As with Academies—and as with City Technology Colleges and Specialist schools before them—Trust schools were to transform the school system by virtue of the 'innovation and dynamism' injected by external

sponsors in all their diversity (DfES, 2005, 1.33). In the competition state, the school system becomes increasingly fragmented as innovation, experimentation and human capital formation become the goals of educational reform (Ball, 2007). For one commentator, the Trust schools policy signalled the beginning of the end of a national *system* of state education (Chitty, 2006).

In introducing the policy, Tony Blair declared that 'every school will be able to acquire a self-governing Trust similar to those supporting Academies, which will give them the freedom to work with new partners to help develop their ethos and raise standards' (DfES 2005: 8). An explicit link was thus made between the involvement of external partners and achieving higher standards, with the implicit argument being that this had 'worked' in the case of Academies. Even those sympathetic towards, or at least uncritical of, the Academy programme have concluded that there is insufficient evidence to support the claim that Academies offer a model for enhancing pupil performance (Armstrong, Bunting and Larsen, 2009; Sammons, 2008). For some, the Trust schools policy could be introduced only by ignoring the wealth of evidence suggesting that attainment is highest in countries with integrated comprehensive systems of education (Dainton, 2006).

Conveying Trust schools as an attractive option by linking together Academies with the raising of educational standards said more about ideological intent than it did about the empirical evidence. As early as 2005, Stephen Gorard challenged the claim made by Government and Academy sponsors alike that the Academies programme was producing improved results (Gorard 2005). Using a much larger dataset Gorard (2009) later confirmed that there was little evidence to claim that

Academies were producing substantially better results than the schools they replaced. As the White Paper introducing Trust schools went through Parliament, Academies were surrounded in controversy because of suggestions that they were selecting pupils by social class and prior educational performance. The rhetoric of a positive correlation between freeing schools from local government control, the involvement of external partners, raising standards and social equity can be further questioned when one considers the situation of Specialist schools, the preferred partnership model that preceded Academies and Trust schools. Similar claims were made about the benefits brought about by Specialist school status, although the claims hid a much more troubling picture. Not only were the highest performing schools ones that were performing well before Specialist school status was conferred on them, but black and minority ethnic pupils appeared to be overrepresented in the poorer performing schools with the least prestigious subject specialisms (Warren 2006).

Trust schools and the post-political age

There is not space here, nor is it the purpose of this paper, to review educational reform, and its impact on academic attainment, over the past 30 years. Of more importance to our study is the emergence of a 'post-ideological' rhetoric – what Chantal Mouffe calls a 'politics without adversaries' or politics in a post-political age (Mouffe 1993; 2007). Mouffe argues that New Labour's 'third way' politics of the 'radical centre' epitomised this new political hegemony, while Stephen Ball contextualises contemporary education policy in terms of the demands of a (supposed) post-political society (Ball, 2005).

One of the defining features of the third way theory of Anthony Giddens is a sociological claim about the novelty of the modern moment (Finlayson, 1999). Class identities are said to have lost their salience and it is claimed that the terrain of politics has been reconfigured by the process of globalisation so that the key issues now lie beyond 'left' and 'right' (Giddens, 1994; 1998). In the post-political society, the primary concerns of innovation, competitiveness and economic development require a new form of (post-)politics. A key rhetorical term in this post-political stance is that of 'modernisation'. Through the discourse of modernisation key binaries that have organised the political field are reframed. Consequently the central social democratic programme of confronting inequality and the instabilities of capitalism are replaced with 'social inclusion', acceptance of the market, even advancing deregulation (see Levitas 1998 for a discussion of the shift in political discourse and how this impacts upon the framing of policy). The dispersal of decision-making and influence has seen an increasing number of people from outside government being involved in the policy formation process as well as in the delivery of policy objectives (Ball, 2007).

Various terms have been deployed in order to capture the way in which this re-framing of the political field has impacted on policy formation. For Richard Hatcher, New Labour's deployment of multiple new agents (quangos, entrepreneurs, philanthropists) as instruments for implementing, and even formulating, education policy, amounts to a 're-agenting' of the school system (Hatcher, 2006a). Stephen Ball, on the other hand, prefers 'destatisation' (Ball, 2009), a phrase that neatly summarises Michael Freeden's suggestion that, under New Labour, 'businesses, families, communities, voluntary associations - preferably anyone but the state -

[were] entreated to set examples, take a lead, and stamp their authority on social conduct' (Freedon, 1999, p.42). Ball (2009) characterises this more generally in terms of a shift from government to governance; from hierarchy of command to 'polycentric hierarchy' involving a multiplicity of public, private and voluntary sector agents. Academies and Trust schools are part and parcel of this destatisation or re-agenting of education. Significantly, also, they highlight and are indicative of the tensions and contradictions at the heart of this process. As Gamarnikow and Green (2007) powerfully argue, education policy in the 'post-political' world is caught between an idealised process of bottom-up participation for collective benefit and the top-down imposition of institutional forms to tackle putative social capital deficits. Academies and Trust schools are interpreted in this light as a post-democratic (as opposed to post-political) policy intervention—the authoritarian 'parachuting in' of commercialised and philanthropic networks to support social capital formation (Gamarnikow and Green, 2007, p.380).

Interestingly, Nikolas Rose (2000) characterises the Third Way as an 'ethopolitics', a way of conceiving politics and the relation between the individual and society in terms of individual ethical commitments to small polities - community, neighbourhood, network – framed by relations of trust, rights and responsibilities. In this context, the state is transformed from a redistributive (in the social democratic sense) to a 'facilitating' or 'enabling' state concerned with the rejuvenation of civil society conceived less in terms of traditional collectivities - trade unions, political parties, social movements, etc. – and more in terms of politics (and policy) being conducted through the agency of loose networks.

A real tension exists, however, between the ethopolitics of partnership networks and the demands of economic competitiveness. Ball and Exley (2010) suggest that the emergence of 'polycentric governance' has been accompanied by an increasing centralisation of policy formation. Critiquing directly the discourse of the 'New Localism', Ball (2005) argues that bottom-up decision-making is in conflict with the framing of education in terms of innovation, entrepreneurialism, human capital formation and competitiveness. Just as the 'New Regionalism' was always a project *of the state in the regions* (Webb and Collis, 2000), so too the New Localism. Ball (2005) and Hatcher (2009) thus characterise the Academies programme as a state-driven project providing little opportunity for local participation in decision-making. In this context, Janet Newman (2003) notes of New Labour that while influence and decision-making was dispersed across a range of agencies and networks, there was a concentration of power whereby central government sought to control the delivery of its reform agenda through systems of performance management, auditing and targeted funding. This led to the marginalisation of traditional democratic or bureaucratic processes in policy formation (Rubenstein, 2000). For Stuart Hall, rather than leading to a renewal of politics the Third Way led to a demotion of politics and the closing down of democratic space (Hall, 1998). Our focus on Trust schools is a means of inquiring into this reconfiguration of the political field, this closing down of democratic space, and of hopefully contributing to the analysis of the 'post-democratic turn' in education policy.

Trust schools: a contested policy terrain

Another factor that makes the Trust schools initiative especially interesting was its unpopularity and the level of contestation. During the course of its three readings, a

total of 192 Labour Party MPs voted against the Education and Inspection Bill, and the Bill only passed with Conservative Party support. Over 90 Labour MPs subscribed to an alternative White Paper—*Shaping the Education Bill: Reaching for Consensus*—drafted by former Secretary of State for Education Estelle Morris (Morris et al. 2005). In 2006, Neil Kinnock broke ranks with the Labour leadership for the first time since 1992 and became one of the most vocal critics of the Trust schools initiative (Wintour 2006). In a public lecture Roy Hattersley described Trust schools as a betrayal of everything the Labour Party had ever stood for. The teachers' unions unanimously opposed the Trust schools initiative, many publishing extensive critiques of the White Paper and subsequent Education and Inspections Bill (ATL 2005; NUT 2005). A national campaign opposing Trust schools was co-ordinated by a number of organisations such as the Campaign for State Education, Comprehensive Futures, and the Labour Party-affiliated Socialist Educational Association. Compass, the centre-left Labour Party reform group, published a detailed, scathing and much-lauded critique of the White Paper (Benn & Millar 2006).

The idea that part of the New Labour project was the re-configuration of the field of politics around ideas of consensus government is interesting in this respect. This re-configuration of the political field, especially in terms of a post-political stance has been noted as a feature of European and American politics (see Mouffe 2007; Reisigl & Wodak 2000). Chantal Mouffe argues that this consensual approach constructs policy interventions as neutral and technical solutions to the challenges of late modernity and globalisation. One effect of this is to restrict the scope of legitimate debate around the logics of centralised power. For instance, in Tony Blair's speech the day before the launch of the White Paper introducing Trust

schools, the space for legitimate debate was carefully outlined. Specialist schools and Academies, and the involvement of external sponsors, were conveyed as self-evidently positive contributions to redressing the inequalities associated with previous Conservative administrations, and the long history of social distinction of English education. Therefore, to be against the proposed reforms was, by implication, to be for inequality (Blair 2005: 4). He noted that 'The reforms will naturally come under sustained attack' from left and right, both of which will 'lead to inequity'. The alternative was a vision of either an anarchic market 'free for all' or the kind of left wing ideology that 'kept us in opposition for so long'.

If the space for legitimate democratic debate is so severely constrained then how does a democratic government deal with the kind of opposition that Labour faced in relation to Trust schools? How do governments persuade dissident citizens to support unpopular policies? How are citizens mobilised to support such policies? This also raises questions about how, in such a restricted political space, those questioning or resisting such policies engage in the politics of persuasion and the mobilisation of interests.

As Richard Hatcher (2009) rightly suggests, policy needs to be conceptualised as a contested field. Although constructed in a way that seeks to minimise opposition, by placing it beyond politics and thus 'beyond contestation' (Ball, 2005, p.217), opposition is nonetheless a constituent element of the policy field. Persuasion and discursive regulation therefore become necessary. Hatcher's own studies (e.g. 2006b; 2008) have provided valuable insights into, on the one hand, the discursive and coercive strategies used to marginalise opposition to the Academies programme

and, on the other, the strategies adopted by campaigners trying to carve out counterpublic spaces within the dominant public sphere. In taking as the object of our study the reconfiguration of the field of politics and what this means for the constitution of legitimate democratic debate, we seek to contribute to this developing field of research.

Travelling policy and Policy Ensembles

We have argued above that the focus on the policy process surrounding Trust schools enabled us to examine the way the field of politics is being reconfigured. In particular we suggest that we wanted to examine how the field of politics was being reconfigured by a dominant post-political stance and what this means for the constitution of legitimate political space. We suggest that this space may be severely limited and consequently raises questions about how contestation of policy is managed. As such, we argue, a normative policy evaluation is unsuitable for such an object of study. But, how the field of politics is being reconfigured, how legitimate political space is constituted, and how contestation is managed are matters for empirical investigation and cannot be simply read off from what Bourdieu calls the 'scholastic point of view' (Bourdieu 1990). If we are looking at the Trust schools initiative as a critical case study in the reconfiguration of the field of politics then we need, methodologically, a mode of inquiry that enables us to define the field of politics in relation to the Trust schools initiative, identify the elements that make up this field, the social and institutional actors, the forms of political agency that are made possible, and the resources drawn upon in the reconfiguration of the field of politics.

Trust schools as articulated policy formations

The research strove to combine a conceptual approach drawn from political science with a methodological approach familiar to educational research. The first of these we have termed 'policy formations', drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001). Here, policy is viewed as an ensemble of 'discursive elements' or 'articulated moments'. The Trust schools policy can be viewed as a complex structured whole that is constituted through the articulation of different discursive elements. To give some examples, the discursive elements that constituted the Trust schools policy included: choice, equity, innovation and tackling disadvantage. If one asks what the Trust schools policy was, then one finds that it was, variously:

- the creation of a spectrum of schools, realising real diversity of provision, thus enabling and promoting parental *choice*;
- it was the removal of all those factors that hinder change and shield poor performance, thus promoting *equity* and ensuring that good schools were available to the many, not the few;
- it was harnessing the energy, talent and expertise of the business community and faith groups as a means of generating *innovation* and dynamism within the education system;
- it was a system of education that would once and for all break the link between a child's educational achievement and their parent's socio-economic background.

Importantly, for Laclau and Mouffe, policy ensembles are inherently unstable. Each of the elements can be contested, philosophically and practically, and there is no *necessary* link between the various discursive elements. In the case of the Trust schools ensemble, the value of choice was philosophically contested, as was the question of whether Trust schools would, in practice, enable and promote it. Similarly, the relation between the discursive elements—between choice and equity, innovation and tackling disadvantage, choice and innovation, innovation and equity—is inherently unstable and constantly under threat of collapse. Policy ensembles, therefore, are unstable formations.

Not only does policy reflect the joining together of different discursive elements, but will also reflect the struggles inherent in their production. This relates to another aspect of the theoretical approach taken by Laclau and Mouffe. The field of politics can be conceived as a field of meaning on which different agents seek to impose particular kinds of order, to establish certain truth claims, and even deny the legitimacy of others. But this is not conceived as a site of rational discourse, a simple competition of ideas. It is a site structured around divisions of political labour, for instance between those who represent others and those represented by others, and a field structured by the differentiated production of political resources. Bourdieu (2007) helpfully describes these resources in terms of issues, political programmes, and forms of analysis, media commentaries, deployment of concepts and the organisation of events. These resources are the means by which different agents seek to impose order on a field of meaning, working to 'limit the universe of political discourse' (Bourdieu 2007: 172), limiting what is thinkable, what is legitimate. We saw how Tony Blair sought to limit the scope for legitimate political debate around

Trust schools in the form of a speech reported in the national media. Similarly, we noted above how Parliamentary opposition to Trust schools was mobilised around the production of an alternative White Paper authored by a former Secretary of State for Education. In the context of policy production the White Paper (and its alternative) is likely to be a product of a struggle by different agents to impose their own kinds of order on a field of meaning. The initial policy can be viewed as an unstable ensemble of ideological stances, articulated interests and pragmatic rationales. Our interest in the politics of persuasion and the mobilisation of interests necessarily concerns us with the political resources available to different agents as they seek to impose their own order on the field of meaning concerning Trust schools

For policies to work, however, they require a necessary degree of stability in order to produce policy effects. Therefore, as unstable formations they require discursive work to maintain a 'temporary fixity'. This suggests a range of questions: how is the totality of a policy ensemble maintained in this relative fixity; what are the articulated elements that make up the ensemble; are there other possible combinations of articulated elements? Importantly, for our research, this theoretical approach places emphasis on the articulatory practices that constitute the Trust schools initiative as a particular policy ensemble. That is, it requires a focus on the material practices involved in the formation of policy at different institutional levels.

Fixing policy across the field of politics

The second component of our approach is policy trajectory analysis. This is familiar within educational research and has been used to study, for example, Education

Action Zones (see Power et al. 2004; Power and Gewirtz 2001). In order to investigate the politics of persuasion and the mobilisation of interests we saw it as necessary to examine the policy process from policy formation through its translation at different institutional levels and in different institutional contexts. In examining how the policy ensemble was *translated*, we were at the same time seeking to examine how it was constructed, driven, held together, stabilised and *sustained* over the course of its trajectory. Going back to Bourdieu's discussion of the division of political labour and the differential production of political resources, he argues that struggles to control a field of meaning do not involve a simple linear exercise of power from a dominant political group over all others. The production, implementation and resistance to Trust schools policy can be seen to involve a number of overlapping fields of social practice. Not only did it involve politicians at national and local level, but also the bureaucratic field of civil servants, quasi-governmental agencies, and local authorities, and the journalistic field of national and local media. Rather than assume a single underlying logic of practice, Bourdieu suggests that each field of social practice operates in a semi-autonomous fashion, structured by its own internal logic of practice (though there will be many similarities and cross-overs with other fields). Consequently, different social agents, located in different fields of practice, may seek to impose different kinds of order on a field of meaning determined by the logic of practice of that field. A policy ensemble, such as the Trust schools initiative, was constantly in danger of dissolving. It therefore required constant political work in order to maintain its coherence. In other words, processes of persuasion and mobilisation worked to maintain or disrupt this coherence.

Therefore, as policy travelled through different contexts the original formulation may have been diverted, re-interpreted, or derailed. We drew on the work of Richard Bowe and colleagues (Bowe et al. 1992), further developed by Stephen Ball (Ball 1994), on policy trajectory. This approach to policy analysis emphasises policy production as a process rather than deed, and concerns the production of meaning and the socio-economic conditions of production. The particular field of meaning about the 'problem' of schools carried by the Trust schools initiative faced possible disruption by the persuasive strategies deployed by those mobilising opposition around the alternative White Paper. Meanings may also have been re-articulated in terms of the particular logics of practice in other fields. For instance, civil servants and local authority officers could have re-interpreted policy in relation to other bureaucratic, institutional or professional interests; politicians at a local level may have been driven by different concerns to those of their party political colleagues in Westminster; different branches may construe 'news' in different ways, reflecting different ideological stances; and local campaigners may have been required to link immediate, pragmatic concerns of parents with philosophical critiques of Trust schools in order to mobilise support.

The discussion above were condensed into three key organising questions that gave focus to the empirical work:

- The first was problem definition –how was the policy 'problem' defined to justify Trust schools as the appropriate policy response; what kinds of policy narratives were produced and deployed in the process of problem definition; and what competing policy problems were considered or occluded?

- The second area was solution definition – how was the Trust schools initiative defined as a solution to the policy ‘problem’; how was the policy solution constructed and legitimated; what kinds of policy narratives were produced and deployed in the process of solution definition and legitimation; what other possible solutions were considered or occluded?
- The third area was argumentation/persuasion – what discursive and material technologies of persuasion were deployed to mobilise people in support of, or opposition to, Trust schools, i.e., how and by what methods were populations persuaded/dissuaded of the *truthfulness* of the policy problem as defined in policy narratives; and the *necessity* of the policy solution presented as addressing this problem?

In asking how policy problems and solutions were defined we wanted to explore the different logics of practice, the different ideological stances taken, the articulated interests, and pragmatic rationales. We wanted to explore how agents sought to impose particular kinds of order on the field of meaning around Trust schools, and to explore what kinds of interests were served by this. In asking how agents articulated the different perspectives or interests and sought to persuade others of the legitimacy of their truth claims we wanted to identify the political resources that were accessed and mobilised.

Exploring persuasion and mobilisation in practice

The empirical work was organised in terms of three institutional contexts – the national level of policy formation and contestation; the role of mediating agencies;

and policy generation and contestation in two case study sites. The three key organising questions gave focus to our inquiry in each of these institutional contexts.

The national level of policy formation and contestation

Empirical work in this institutional context involved an exploration of the discursive formation of policy through an analysis of policy texts; gaining an insight into policy formation through an analysis of Parliamentary debate, interviews with key policy actors and an analysis of media coverage; understanding how support for and opposition to Trust schools was sought through interviews with relevant politicians as well as extra-Parliamentary campaigners, and arguments presented in the public domain. Examples included representatives of the office of the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, The Conservative and Liberal Democratic opposition, as well as Labour back-bench MPs representing different sides of the argument. These policy actors represented a range of opinion within the policy community around the Trust schools initiative, giving insight into policy formation. Given the highly contested nature of the policy in Parliament this also offered an opportunity to explore the logics of practice involved in constructing different positions in relation to the Government's proposal. It allowed us to explore the political resources available to different policy actors at this level and how these enabled different kinds of mobilisation of interest. The production of the alternative White Paper also provided an example of a technology that is both aimed at persuasion and mobilisation, and cuts across parliamentary and extra-parliamentary domains.

The National Union of Teachers, the Anti-Academies Alliance, and other campaigning groups such as CASE and COMPASS, as well as journalists represented a different kind of policy network, developing a counter-hegemonic discourse. As well as examining the content of the arguments against Trust schools, we were interested in understanding who the constituencies were that these policy actors sought to mobilise. Indeed, we were interested in understanding to what extent these oppositional constituencies already existed or had to be constituted through argumentation and mobilisation. Work at this level was also important in terms of identifying the core discourses mobilised to build opposition. This allowed us to identify how these discourses changed over time and whether they circulated through various networks, emerging again in the context of local campaigns.

Mediating Agencies as sites of policy generation

Implementation of the Trust schools initiative was mediated through a range of quasi-Governmental agencies including the Partnership for Schools (PfS), the Schools Commissioner (SC), Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA); Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT). These agencies acted as policy networks mediating between policy formation and implementation, allowing us to look at how hegemonic policy discourse became embedded in institutional practice. *PfS* had a role in ensuring that local authority investment plans supported the Government's reform agenda. The *SC* was charged with being a champion of the Trust schools initiative, while the *SSAT* simultaneously advocated on behalf of Trust schools as well as providing guidance to local authorities on setting up Trust schools. The *OSA* mediated between local authorities and Trusts in the case of disputes. Let us take

two examples here, the *SSAT* and the *PfS*, in order to examine further what the empirical work sought to accomplish.

The *SSAT* was the primary agency supporting schools seeking to develop Trusts. Unlike the other mediating agencies the *SSAT* was a private sector, not-for-profit organisation that advocated on behalf of Specialist Schools, Academies and then Trusts. Its previous Chairman, Sir Cyril Taylor was a special advisor to every Secretary of State for Education from 1987 to 2007. The *SSAT* took over responsibility for supporting applications for Trust status from the School Commissioning and Supply Division of the *DCSF*. Their perspective on why the Trust schools initiative was formed could be illustrative of influential ideas informing policy, as well as giving insights into divisions of political labour between Government, the Civil Service and advocacy groups. The *PfS* was the Government's key agency delivering its capital building programme, providing both funding and project management for the building of new schools or the significant improvement to existing school buildings. Importantly, they were charged with linking this capital investment with the promotion of Academies and Trust schools. We were interested in understanding how *PfS* linked into wider Government education strategies, such as the provision of choice through the diversification of education provision, the development of local authorities as 'commissioners' and Trust arrangements. Similarly, we were interested in how *PfS* related to other agencies involved in the delivery of Trust schools, for instance the Schools Commissioner, the Commissioning and Supply Division of the *DCSF* and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. An important question explored with both the *SSAT* and the *PfS* was to what extent they act as persuaders, actively

encouraging schools and local authorities to seek Trust status. This set of relations between the particular agencies and other agencies and initiatives, and the balance between policy delivery and persuasion constituted the main line of questioning in relation to all mediating agencies.

Persuasion and mobilisation at the local level

The research was also being conducted in two case study local authorities². The case studies were selected using the following criteria:

- the Trust schools initiative had been contested locally and therefore involved an explicit politics of persuasion;
- there was contrasting political control of the local authority, providing insights into the possible deployment of different kinds of politics of persuasion.

Both case studies involved active campaigns against Trust schools and were therefore locations where the politics of persuasion and the mobilisation of interests were made visible. Case study 1 was a Labour controlled urban authority at the time when the Trust schools initiative was introduced and the campaign against Trust schools was most active. Political control over the authority subsequently changed, with Trust schools being one factor in the change of political control. The explicit rationale for introducing Trust status was provided by the authority's school reorganisation plans. Case study 2 was a Liberal Democrat controlled County

² The research funded by The British Academy and The University of Sheffield did not include work focussing on schools and their communities. Extension of the work into these areas was considered for later activity. However, political events have overtaken the research.

Council which was selected as a Trust Pathfinder authority. As a Pathfinder project location Case Study 2 provided us with an opportunity to examine the possible role of central government agencies, such as the DCSF Commissioning and Supply Division, or national and local politicians in ‘persuading’ the local authority to accept the invitation to host a Pathfinder project. The specific focus of the empirical work concerned the emergence of opposition to Trust status of a local community school in a small rural district. The differences between the two case studies allowed for the exploration of the variations in the politics of persuasion and the mobilisation of interests. Practically the research involved semi-structured interviews with a range of local policy actors with direct involvement in either the formation of policy locally, involvement in campaigns against Trust schools locally, or were officers in organisations involved in mediating the Trust schools initiative. Examples included the Chief Executive of Children’s Services, Chief officers for School Organisation and/or Capacity, the Cabinet member with responsibility for Education, the Chair of the relevant Scrutiny Committee, relevant Ward Councillors and MPs, and the political opposition to the Trust schools initiative within the Council, representatives of the main local education Trade Union, and key representatives of any opposition to the Trust schools initiative.

Although we were using the three key organising questions to guide our empirical work, and therefore pose very similar questions to all participants, it was important to nuance the questioning so that it took account of the specific local context and the particular functional role different policy actors played. For instance, in relation to the local authority officers there were specific sets of relations and functions we wanted to explore, including:

- The relationship between the local authority and the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and its various agencies relevant to the Trust schools initiative, such as the *BfS*. In relation to the County Council we wanted to explore the role the DCFS played in persuading them to participate as a Pathfinder authority;
- The nature of discussions within the Council in relation to Officers' understanding of the Trust schools initiative and what this would mean for relations with local schools;
- How the Trust schools initiative was introduced to Councillors, schools and communities;
- What strategies were used to persuade people to support the initiative;
- The nature of the local authority's response to opposition to Trust schools.

These differ slightly to areas explored with local Councillors. As well as exploring the relationship between the local authority, the DCSF and the various agencies we were interested in matters particular to the role of Councillors, such as the nature of the debates both within the Council and the within the Party political groupings in the Council. For instance despite Trust schools being Labour Government policy what was the response of local Labour councillors; how were Councillors persuaded to support or oppose Trust schools; how did it affect their relations with local constituents? Therefore we were interested in exploring the nature of the discussions between the local Parties locally and their national representatives.

Again, with local campaigners the questioning was geared towards their location outside the formal structures of power and their need to construct constituencies of

support and create their own media. Legislation required that where Trust status was sought information on this had to be provided for the school communities affected and a consultation process organised. Therefore we explored the nature of the information received locally explaining Trust schools and advice on local implementation, and what sense was made of the different kinds of information. We also examined the form that the local consultation process took. Given that local campaign groups were involved in an explicit process of persuasion and mobilisation we were interested in how local groups communicated their objections to Trust schools and how they linked them to any immediate concerns that parents had, for instance around admissions or special needs.

Conclusion

Our concern in this paper has been to outline the theoretical and methodological approach taken to a small-scale research project examining the political formation of the Trust schools policy at different institutionally mediated levels, specifically in the domains of government (both nationally and locally), mediating agencies, and civil society (campaign groups and the media). Like others (Fischer 2003; Scheurich 1997) we were interested in how it was possible for particular policy problems to be defined and named, what the historical and social conditions were of the constitution of social phenomena as 'social problems' requiring policy solutions, and how only a certain range of policy solutions became legitimised. Our field questions were designed to explore not only how policy is translated and enacted in different contexts but also to understand the complex of rhetorical, discursive material practices that constitute problems in particular ways. We were concerned also to understand the means by which 'interests' are constituted, and how policy

entrepreneurs then seek to mobilise diverse social agents imagined in terms of these 'interests'. As stated above, and following on from Laclau and Mouffe, policy formations and the social conditions that constitute them are dynamic and can thus be viewed as 'temporary settlements' (Gale 2001; 2003). Part of the methodological process was to understand not only how social problems and policy solutions came to be defined as such, but also what enabled the policy formation to be held within a temporary settlement, for the policy formation to be stable enough to produce social regularities. The work of Laclau and Mouffe, and in particular Mouffe's critique of a 'politics without adversaries', enabled us to develop an appropriate theoretical and methodological approach; one that focused on the processes of policy ensemble formation and stabilisation as well as the political practices of mobilisation and persuasion.

The focus on Trust schools, as we have argued above, allowed us to explore how the field of politics is reconfigured and how space for legitimate political debate is regulated. Therefore, while a focus on the policy reforms that produced Trust schools are important in themselves, we believe it is crucially important to examine what kind of democratic politics is made available by the reconfiguration of the field of politics and what this means for the constitution of legitimate democratic debate.

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