

AUTONOMY IN EDUCATION

Innovation and autonomy at a time of rapid reform: an English case study

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This paper sets out to report upon the findings of a case study of an ‘innovative’ school in England. Specifically, the research focusses upon the way in which the school has engaged with the neoliberal policy context in which increased autonomy and diversification of provision is promoted in England as a driver of standards. Using Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of *symbolic capital*, the findings suggest that within this autonomous system, ‘innovative’ localised policy-making can arguably *misrecognise* the role such ‘innovation’ plays in helping to maintain structures, which may contribute to ensuring the field, and its competitive nature, is protected rather than challenged.

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In England there is an on-going drive for educational change that demonstrates innovative approaches to both policy and practice in order to deliver on a centrally framed standards agenda, developed in tandem within a ‘neoliberal imaginary’ of public education (Ball, 2012). In England such a drive has been dominated by those in government committed to diversification and autonomy as a means of enabling the change process, often through structural re-organisation of educational provision (Caldwell & Spinks, 2008; Harris & Ranson, 2005; Simkins, 2000; Wright, 2012).

Within such an approach, the term ‘innovation’ gives rise as a desirable catalyst for such change processes to be successfully enacted within particular socio-economic and political contexts. *Inter-alia*, innovation is regularly conceptualised as a necessary condition for effecting efficacious change at the local level, which is often associated with structural, rather than pedagogic, re-organisation contributing to a diverse and autonomous educational landscape (Gewirtz, 1997, 2002; Goodson, 2010; Lubienski, 2003).

This paper intends to think critically about the way in which ‘innovation’ is conceptualised and framed as a strategic process, by using a case study of a secondary school in England undergoing significant re-organisation. The school’s approaches to this change process have been described as innovative, by those working within the school as well as by powerful policy players at the national level. In particular the school leadership team and the school’s governing body are fully committed to ‘thinking

and doing things differently’ in order to develop the educational provision on offer to the young people they serve. In doing so, the paper will argue that the conceptualisation of innovation witnessed throughout this research project is less about radically different ways of perceiving and delivering public education and more about innovation as a strategy of improvement for the effective delivery of centrally derived neoliberal policy goals, with a particular focus on the codification of autonomy in order to develop human capital approaches to educational re-structuring.¹

As such the paper deploys Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of *misrecognition* as a theoretical lens through which to think about how innovation may indeed contribute to the (re)production of inequality in an education system explicitly and implicitly wedded to autonomous and hierarchical notions of schooling processes and outcomes, which as is well documented, are persistently differentiated on the basis of class, race and gender (Araújo, 2007; Ball et al., 1996, Gillborn & Mirza, 2000; Reay, 2006, 2008; Thrupp & Lupton, 2006).

¹It is important to note that the term neoliberal is used to great effect in much policy scholarship in the field of education, and that there is still work to be done with regards to the application of this concept in a range of contexts. For the purpose of clarity neoliberalism is defined here by a commitment to pro-market governance and thus what is of interest is how the increased marketisation of education, particularly through the codification of autonomy, diversity and competition, impacts upon the way schools develop and enact localised policy-making in specific sites

The processes of educational change in England over the last three decades in particular have focussed upon reforms and codified legislative interventions which privilege neoliberal discourses pertaining to choice, competition and autonomy. The speed at which the English system of education is being transformed into a patchwork of autonomous schools (or groups of schools) operating in a quasi-market place is significant; as England fast becomes the most diverse system in the world, such processes are of significant interest for an international audience, as attempts to introduce market-based reforms into education systems across the globe are becoming more commonplace (Marginson, 1999).

The paper starts by providing a socio-historical critique of the development of the English education system since 1944, following on from this the next section outlines the context and specific policy trajectory of the case-study school, taking into account how the school has framed 'innovative' re-structuring of the educational provision on offer through the lens of autonomy. The research design is then explicated and following this the analysis identifies ways in which innovation and autonomy are conceptualised as providing an approach to school improvement as a means of developing distinctive and competitive educational provision during a period of rapid, neoliberal reform.

Autonomy and innovation in context

Educational reform in England has undergone significant change in the 20th and early 21st centuries. As a result of the two world wars, the 1940s signalled the beginning of a sea change in a number of key areas of social life in England. In particular a political consensus was developed which prompted the parturition of social welfarism, of which the National Health Service is a, if not the most, significant exemplar (Clarke & Newman, 1997). Alongside the 'free at the point of access' principle in the provision and delivery of healthcare was the Butler (Education) Act of 1944, which was celebrated at the time for ensuring 'the development of equality of educational opportunity within a democratic welfare society' (McCulloch, 1994, p. 42). The Act was reported as 'revolutionary' by the Ministry of Education (1947, unpagged) and a later ministerial White Paper noted the Act 'provided that all children of secondary school age throughout England and Wales, not just the selected few, should have a secondary education in accordance with their age, ability and aptitude' (Ministry of Education, 1958, unpagged). The Act legislated compulsory education for all children up to the age of 15, and the preceding Norwood Report (1943, unpagged) laid the foundations for a tripartite approach to state provision for 'three broad types of secondary education' from the age of 11; the 'grammar' (selective, academic) and the 'technical' and 'modern' (non-selective models focussing on more

technicist or vocational approaches to education). The established fee paying independent school model from the late 14th and early 15th centuries, the proliferation of church schools throughout the latter 18th and 19th centuries, along with the development of grammar, technical and modern schools in the mid-20th century illustrate that hierarchised and diverse provision, often along class lines, was a foundational, indeed integral, aspect of the English educational landscape (McCulloch, 1994).

Acknowledgement of the negative impact of effectively siphoning children off at the age of 11 into academic or non-academic provision led to the comprehensive school ideal gaining traction in the late 1960s and 1970s, and as a result many grammar schools transferred to the independent sector, were abolished or became comprehensives (Benn, 1980; Benn & Chitty, 1996). Despite this change, there remain 164 state-run grammar schools in England today that select their intake according to ability (Bolton, 2013). The Education Reform Act of 1988 is often cited as the next significant legislative intervention in English educational policy, this time fostering the conditions to enable the strengthening of market forces into the running of state provision, in particular through the 'empowering' of parents to choose schools based on merit rather than proximity, through the introduction of standardised testing, a national curriculum and league tables (Barker, 2008; Hoskins, 2012). At this time autonomy as a stimulus for improvement was becoming embedded through the Conservative policy agenda, initially through Local Management of Schools (LMS) and Grant Maintained Schools (GMS) which subsequently enabled the establishment of City Technology Colleges; state funded, yet independent schools, run by business sponsors (Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998). In the 1990s the Conservative's also established 'Specialist Schools' (increased funding was given to schools to specialise in certain curriculum areas in order to further embed diversity of provision and the schools were able to select up to 10% of their intake based on student 'aptitude' for this specialism) and from 2002 New Labour introduced the City Academy programme, which saw 'failing' schools in urban areas of disadvantage closed down and reopened as state funded independent schools sponsored by a variety of providers (Adonis, 2012; Gunter, 2011; Sammons, 2008). In 2010 the Academies Act was passed by the coalition government, which enabled the conversion of successful schools to become autonomous from Local Authority control via sponsorship, as well as forced academisation for failing schools in any geographical location, and the opening of new schools (Free Schools) by a range of interested parties (parents, teachers, sponsors, church groups, etc.). This legislative intervention thus significantly contributed to the privatisation of state education in England (Gunter & McGinity, 2014). The Conservative party won a majority in the general election held in May 2015 and as such have

confirmed their intention to accelerate the reform process to increase the number of Academies in England and to open 500 Free Schools over the period of their government, despite the a lack of consistent evidence to support the success of this reform programme. However, these key twists and turns in the recent history of English educational reform serve to illustrate that change processes through diversity and latterly autonomy have formed the bedrock from which 'innovation' within the system is conditioned.

This story is mapped by a commitment to the fragmentation of traditional, and democratic mechanisms for overseeing state educational provision, with Local Authorities painted as unwieldy, bureaucratic stranglers of innovation, and in the more recent neoliberal imagination, autonomy and entrepreneurialism have been framed as not only desirable but necessary dimensions for successful leadership (Ball, 2011; Gunter & Forrester, 2010; Gunter & McGinity, 2014; Hatcher, 2008; Higham, 2013; Moore et al., 2002). It is within this context that the presentation of data and analysis that follows is sited.

The story of Kingswood

The school, the only secondary school within the seemingly affluent dormitory town of Kingswood, draws its intake from the middle classes of the town (although 20% of the towns young people attend independent schools), along with a significant minority of students from the social housing estate on the edge of Kingswood, a marginalised community with significant levels of deprivation. Students also travel some distance from the neighbouring metropolitan borough which is one of the 36 LAs (out of 433 in England) that operates the 11+ and as such a significant minority of students have either failed this examination and the parents have rejected the choices of the non-grammars closer to their homes, or have actively sought a comprehensive education away from the tiered system that the 11+ generates and supports. This aspect of Kingswood's identity is important because the data suggest that part of the ways in which policy processes play out in the school setting are related to the ways in which advantage and disadvantage are framed as a result of the school's context.

In April 2012 the school converted to an Academy. In line with the coalition government's shift in policy, under the Academies Act 2010, schools that were deemed to be 'successful' as determined through the accountability framework of Ofsted (the regulated inspectorate in England) were invited to apply for a fast track conversion to academy status as part of the drive to increase localised autonomy in the running of schools (Wrigley, 2012). Kingswood Academy's Ofsted from November 2011 had measured the school as 'Good with outstanding features' and as such the school met the criteria for a rapid change in status. By the end of the following term, the school

had become autonomous from the maintaining Local Authority. The conversion indicated that the school had accumulated enough symbolic capital within the field of educational policy in order to be legitimated within the new 'regime of social practice' (Gunter & Forrester, 2010, p. 56). Kingswood Academy had responded to the shifting nature of the field of educational policy by 'playing the game' by legitimating the schools position within the field through conversion. As Gunter and Forrester (2010, p. 57) argue, 'the game is defined by, and entry controlled through, the doxa or self-evident truths located in values and discourses' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 11). Thus, what was evident was that the neoliberal doxa has worked to re-articulate the values and discourses within the field of educational policy in order to strengthen the position of the 'self-evident truth' for a centralised (autonomous), and market driven (diverse) system of educational provision.

Although the school had badged itself accordingly within this regime of practice, it was revealed that there were further and significant reforms planned as a result of the conversion, as using the autonomy granted to the school as a result of academisation they had more freedom to play with their organisational structures. This position put lead to the development of the 'Multi Academy Trust' (MAT) that was established in 2013. Within this model Kingswood would be split into two discrete yet interconnected provisions, both of which were to be tailored to embody an employability agenda within the curriculum. The 'Professional School' which would focus upon a more traditionally academic pathway with input from companies such as an international bank, a global consultancy firm and a law school, and the Studio School, which would be designed to offer a curriculum which whilst retaining the core academic disciplines, would focus on vocational-based choices such as a performance pathway, a digital pathway, a design or a sport and leisure pathway, with partnerships of representative companies in these industries. The students would make choices, which would see them designated into one of these 'schools' from the age of 13. Whilst the Studio School is still currently being developed in a separate building on the school's site, the curriculum at Kingswood Academy has already been re-structured in order to accommodate input from a range of influential businesses in response to the development of an explicit 'employability' agenda. It is an analysis of this re-structuring that forms the basis for this paper.

Research design

The research that forms the basis of this paper is drawn from a case study of a secondary school (Kingswood – anonymised name) in the north west of England between 2010 and 2013. The purpose of the research was to provide a 'particular, descriptive, inductive and ultimately heuristic' portrait of how one school is constructing a future during a period of intense and neoliberal educational

reform (Chadderton & Torrance, 2011, p. 54). In this sense, I developed a case study which set out to demonstrate how Kingswood engaged with the policy context at a specific period of reform, and how, through the enactment of autonomy, the school engaged with processes of capital exchange to achieve legitimation and distinction in a competitive field environment. The study took a qualitative approach, in which a total of 21 teachers, 18 students, five parents and seven school leaders (including the Principal and the Deputy Principle) were interviewed multiple times, alongside observations of 35 lessons and 10 meetings as well as documentary analysis of a wide range of school policies; in total 100 days were spent at the school between 2010 and 2012.

The analysis in this paper draws on data collected during the academic year 2010–2011 and 2011–2012, and predominately draws on data produced through two interviews with the Principal, one interview with the Deputy Principle, two interviews with senior members of the school leadership team (referred to as Senior Leader 1 and Senior Leader 2), one interview with a Middle Leader as well as one interview with the Chair of Governors. This data is supplemented where appropriate by the knowledge produced as a result of the range of research activities outlined above and this is clarified throughout the paper, where necessary. Each transcript from the eight interviews (2 from the Principle) forming the main basis of analysis for this paper were re-visited in order to identify conceptualisations of innovation within the schools development trajectory, of increased autonomy. Thematic coding was developed in which I identified emergent patterns which illustrated the position that these staff members took, firstly in relation to the claim that the schools localised policy trajectory was in itself innovative, and secondly the extent to which the participants linked such innovation with the autonomy granted to the school as a result of conversion to an Academy. As such the results theorise that the logics of leadership practice is structured by the necessity of school leaders to accumulate symbolic capital as offered through legitimate action defined by an increasingly centralised and regulating bureaucracy (Blackmore, 2010; Gewirtz, 2002; Thomson, 2005).

The staking for such symbolic capital reveals how there are field ‘interests’ that have been developed as a result for the need to engage with and play the game. Within the neoliberal conditions developed as a result of successive government’s reform processes embedding choice, diversity and competition into the system, the game involves protecting the interests of the individual student and the field of the school by playing the game ‘effectively’, that is, by accumulating capital that both legitimates and advances positions within the competitive market place.

Such an analysis allows a mapping of the ‘objective structures of the relations between the positions occupied by the agents [and the] institutions who compete for the

legitimate form of specific authority of which this field is the site’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 230). In so doing it is possible to offer a theorising of how ‘innovative’ localised policy-making, developed as a direct result of the codification of autonomy granted through the Academies Act 2010, can arguably ‘misrecognise’ the role of autonomy in producing versions of ‘innovation’ that may help to maintain structures, which serve to disadvantage members of the school community as well as contribute to ensuring the field, and its competitive nature is protected, rather than challenged (Thomson, 2010).

The position shared by the seven interviews underpinning the analysis for this paper was that business leaders maligned the fact that not enough students left school with ‘employability’ skills and the use of the autonomy granted through the Academies Act to re-structure the provision in order to embed an employability agenda was an ‘innovative’ approach at addressing this perceived failure within state education. Interestingly research undertaken between 1987 and 1991 revealed similar positions by ‘leading industrialists’ who argued that comprehensive education ‘simply wasn’t delivering the skills that they needed. And it was also their view that the poor outcomes was what was creating high unemployment, high youth employment. It wasn’t necessarily the lack of jobs; it was the lack of skills’ (Whitty, Edwards & Gewirtz, 1993, p. 20). This point will be returned to, but it is of interest to note here that the discourses in the intervening 25 years regarding maintained schools (in)ability to prepare children for the world of work remain remarkably similar and that such an argument was used in the development of the autonomous, ‘independent state-funded’ City Technology Colleges. The school’s development trajectory also spoke to the commitment within the English system to diversity of provision, as offering a range of models of educational provision to meet a variety of needs, for parents and students to choose from.

Symbolic capital and misrecognition: how innovation can be conceptualised in a centrally regulated, autonomous, and hierarchical school system

It is possible to theorise that the re-structuring along academic and vocational pathways taking place at Kingswood shored up by the input of established businesses and consultancy firms is associated with populist neoliberal rhetoric in which educational provision is deemed to require external influences from sources outside of traditional educational administrative networks in order to address the apparent failure of schools in preparing young people for the competitive global marketplace they will enter at the end of their formal schooling (Ball, 2012). Such a position is supported by an analysis of the approach taken by the current Department for Education, which, under the previous Secretary of State for Education,

Michael Gove, commissioned two reviews since 2010 into 14–19 education, both of which have found the state of current vocational education to be severely lacking (Husbands, 2014; Wolf, 2011). The Husband's Review stated:

The last Labour Government's target to get 50% of young people into university expanded opportunity and increased the skills of the workforce. But not enough attention was paid to the options available to those who do not go to university. This 'forgotten 50%' of young people are faced by a complex mix of vocational courses, too many of which do not offer any progression to good jobs or further study. The failure to tap into the talent of these young people caps aspiration and holds back businesses that can't get the skills they need to succeed. Other countries do better. We can too. (Husbands, 2014, p. 1)

Within this position is embodied a human capital approach to educational provision, additionally it is apparent that within the neoliberal, competitive framework, 'tapping into talent' requires innovation and entrepreneurialism at every level. Hodgson (2012) argues that the policy discourses emanating from both Europe and the UK Government identify such a need as essential, which underpins the neoliberal commitment to empowering the individual in order to take responsibility to achieve such a vision, with the state taking on the role of facilitator and performance monitor:

Europe must find innovative ways to remain competitive. This entails bridging the gap between ideas and the market, ensuring that education at all levels provides citizens with entrepreneurial and innovation skills, and encouraging actors at all levels in all sectors to take responsibility for the need to innovate. (Hodgson, 2012, p. 532)

Innovation in these terms is conceptualised as an economic imperative, which taken with entrepreneurialism can and should be facilitated 'in all sectors' as a method of maintaining and securing a country's place in the global hierarchy of competition – whether it be, for example, in technology or in international educational leagues tables such as PISA. In the field of education it is apparent that, in England at least, a prerequisite for the capacity to develop innovatively and entrepreneurially is autonomy from the state (Ball, 2009). Such a position follows the axiom that together autonomy and innovation work to produce higher standards. This is one of the foundational ideas underpinning the Academies movement, and is apparent in the Charter School movement in the United States and the Free Schools movement in Sweden. Gove outlined this position in a speech in 2012:

Research from the OECD and others has shown that more autonomy for individual schools helps raise standards. In its most recent international survey of

education, the OECD found that 'in countries where schools have greater autonomy over what is taught and how students are assessed, students tend to perform better'. Two of the most successful countries in PISA international education league tables – Hong Kong and Singapore – are amongst those with the highest levels of school competition. And from autonomous schools in Alberta, to Sweden's Free Schools, to the Charter Schools of New York and Chicago, freedom is proving an unstoppable driver of excellence. (The Education Secretary's speech on academies at Haberdashers' Aske's Hatcham College, 4th January 2012)

Under Gove the DfE developed an initiative called 'The Power to Innovate' through which the 'Secretary of State for Education is able to temporarily suspend, or modify, education legislation that may be holding back – or even stopping – innovative approaches to raising standards' (DfE, web address). Thus there is in place powerful mechanisms, legislatively and rhetorically, which indicate the government's position on both autonomy and innovation and the relationship between them. Since the 2010 Academies Act, over half of English secondary schools have either voluntarily or been forced into conversion.² It has been noted that this 'serial, breathless restructuring' (Glatter, 2012, p. 566) has created conditions in which 'the government seems to have stopped noticing successful schools unless they're academies' (Morris, 2011: unpagged).

Within such a context it is possible to deploy Bourdieu's conceptualisation of *symbolic capital* as a means of understanding the pressure schools are under to convert to this agenda. Bourdieu explains *symbolic capital* as:

a species of capital is what is efficacious in a given field, both as a weapon and as a stake of struggle, that which allows its possessors to wield power, or influence, and thus *to exist*, in the field under consideration, instead of being considered a negligible quantity. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98)

In such a conception a school such as Kingswood, that has successfully converted to academy status and has used the attendant autonomy to re-structure aspects of their provision in such a way to meet the clarion calls of ministers and industry for the 'forgotten 50%' has efficaciously accumulated symbolic capital in the process. This was evident by the way in which the Principal was able to secure meetings in Westminster with high profile policy actors and policy networks during the development phase of the professional/studio school idea. The Principal at Kingswood explicitly identified the potential for schools

²As of January 2012 there were 3268 secondary schools in England, and by March 2013 2591 were either converted (1618) or in the process of converting (973) to academy status (Department for Education, 2014)

leaders within the current context to utilise the codification of autonomy in order to accumulate symbolic capital through innovative practice:

We've had contact with the department. We ran a big project with the innovation unit ... And we've had a lot of links with the specialist schools trust and done a lot with and through them. But the department as it currently is, following government policy obviously, is only interested in academies ... [but] to be fair, this government is currently more open to innovative thinking than any that's been around in the years I've been in school leadership. With all the views we may have of them, they are more open to things being done differently and the whole idea I think behind academies and free schools is to create this kind of very diverse landscape. Now there's problems round that, but there are also huge opportunities for schools if you are going to be innovative and different and creative. So I felt able to be pushing what we are doing and to delivering what I think is the missing piece of comprehensive education, around preparing kids for what lies beyond. Not just academically but also in terms of their wider employability skills, and wider social skills, that's what this is about. (Principal: interview, 2012)

The Professional School was presented throughout the process of the research, as a necessary innovation, which not only met the needs of a powerful and vocal business and industry sector which had been positioned as future employees of local children (and representatives of whom were being incorporated into the governing body), but also as a necessity in terms of operating as an autonomous institution in a competitive and diverse marketplace, where on several occasions staff discussed the need to maintain and ultimately boost numbers as a matter of survival:

As for becoming a Professional School as in that tag, I think it was what we have talked about – a marketing thing, try to give the school an edge – something that no other school has. I wouldn't ever say that [*the principal*] doesn't have the genuine interest of the students here and I think it was to generally give students an opportunity that they won't get anywhere else. Especially with the fact that university fees have rocketed and fewer students are going – so to give them a bit of a boost. (Middle Leader: interview, 2012)

In this extract the linking of the innovative approach to the schools re-structuring as a result of the autonomy embodied within the Academies Act with both the need to compete in a choice-based market system of educational provision and with the wider implications of funding changes in Higher Education in England (specifically the increase in student fees across all universities for

undergraduate admissions) illustrates the complex relationship between macro-, meso- and micro-conditions which may lead to certain decisions being made on a local level regarding the educational provision being developed and delivered. The Chair of Governors also spoke at length about how 'differentiation' in a diverse marketplace was essential in terms of how the school constructed its future:

So there was a pragmatic aspect as well in terms of we need to be differentiating ourselves in terms of what we are offering and the sorts of things that we think will continue to make it an attractive school both for the people of Kingswood as well as people outside of the catchment area ... so I suppose in a way what we have been slowly doing is waking up to that potential threat and building that into our thinking in terms of what do we need to do as a school here in order to be able to sustain it long term in that way that is viable. (Chair of Governors: interview, July 2012)

What these extracts do is to illustrate the centrality of the neoliberal framework of choice and competition in driving localised development plans. Within this framework innovation is conceptualised as doing something differently which will ultimately ensure that the school both survives and thrives, and such survival is about ensuring the school has accumulated the right type of capital, and is able to stave off *threat* from other 'providers' in the locality. This is not to say that innovation cannot be conceptualised differently within this paradigm, or that it is fair to present such an analysis in a negative light. However, due to the nature of the research project, in which accumulatively 3 years were spent in the school, undertaking a wide range of research activities with a broad spectrum of people, provides a persuasive account that whilst the intentions of the school leadership team were without a doubt honourable, there was an uncomfortable tension as to how innovation in this instance was being conceptualised as aligning the schools purpose and organisation with the desires and needs of big business and industry. This was positioned as the way forward for innovative thinking, to strike out alone as a beacon of opportunity that looked different to other provisions families had to choose from, shored up by powerful players in the private sector.

Despite some ideological reservations from some members of staff there was overwhelming support for the conversion into the academy and the attendant Professional School as being a preferable approach to re-structuring where the Principal was producing a model of change on his own terms. This is an important aspect of the narrative, as in England there have been a number of instances of high profile 'forced' academisation (Ratcliffe, 2014; Ward, 2014) and there is a general agreement that all schools will eventually become academies, so do you

‘jump before you are pushed?’ (Deputy Principal: interview 2011). In this sense it is possible to posit that the successful ‘buy in’ from the staff is linked to the explicit strategising of the Principal in terms of packaging and presenting the idea as turning something that was inevitable (conversion to an academy) into something exciting, different, and innovative. In this regards the participants in the research were committed to the development of a model of schooling that embraced autonomy and diversity in order to offer innovative provision that would ensure the survival of the school in the long term. However, as noted above, despite honourable intentions, it appeared that the commitment to the ‘neoliberal imaginary’ of schooling provision overshadowed any in-depth discussion as to the impact of such a re-structuring on the young people’s experience of schooling themselves (Ball, 2012). That only three members of staff (out of a total of 28 interviewed in the project as a whole) talked about this in their interviews was noteworthy, and these members of staff were keen to discuss their reservations regarding how the re-organisation of provision along more academic and professional and vocational pathways may effect students from low socio-economic backgrounds:

I’m just a bit unsure as to what kind of impact it’s going to have for the whole cohort of the school. So the kids I was talking about the kids from [the social housing estate] and the poorer areas of [metropolitan borough] – I don’t know that they will benefit from it. Especially if it means a reduction in B-Tech kind of qualifications, I don’t know if it will have a dramatic reduction in that, but not all kids that the school churns out are going to be working for banks or engineering companies or graphic design companies. As much as I see a huge benefit in having links with those kinds of companies, for some of the students ... (Senior Leader 1: interview, June 2012).

Outside of this concern the way in which the proposed model of splitting children into particular pathways depending on their ‘ability, aptitude or skill’ was not reflected upon by any of the research participants in anyway that indicated engagement with potential criticism that could be levelled at an ‘innovative’ idea that divided children in such a way. In particular there was no acknowledgement that the idea was reminiscent of the 1944 Education Act and its ‘failed’ tripartite system. In this sense what was being conceptualised as innovative was in some respects both distinctive (in the way that the school is the only school to their knowledge who is currently re-organising provision along such lines) and normative (in that the role of business and industry in the development and delivery of educational is not a wholly new phenomena and it speaks directly to what successive governments have been attempting to achieve with legislation which atomises a national system into independent units supported and run by networks outside of traditional, democratically

elected, educational networks). The innovation in this respect comes from the bold moves made by the Principal and the leadership team in their mobilisation of symbolic capital to develop and deliver a model of provision on their own terms, in collaboration with big business, whose involvement is positioned as essential in offering that uniqueness which is seen as such an imperative in differentiating the school from its competitors:

There is some very different thinking and if you can build the relationship between an employer and an individual student and that progresses well, the benefit to the employer is that they have the chance to almost run the selection process through their mentoring involvement in the 6th form and they might really want x as she leaves cos they know her – no money on an advertising campaign, they know and have worked with this individual for more than a year ... and yes its cheaper, but they can take x and can develop them. And that’s an amazing realisation, so we can say in any kind of 6th form prospectus, for each of these curriculum pathways there are 3 jobs at the end, 3 paid jobs, but to do that there are certain skills and attributes that you are going to need to demonstrate at all times an don’t forget that some of you will be fired! So you still get you’re A’ Levels but you are playing for big stakes. (Senior Leader 2: interview, June 2012)

Revealed through this extract is a professional *illusio* by this senior leader in how he conceptualise the necessity of the Professional School in the current context of marketisation of education. Bourdieu argues:

Illusio, in the sense of investment in the game, becomes an illusion, in the originary sense of an act whereby one deceives oneself ... only when one grasps the game from the outside, from the standpoint of an impartial spectator who invests nothing in the game or in its stakes. This strangers point of view, which ignores itself as such, leads one to overlook that fact that investments are well found illusions. Indeed, through the games it proposes, the social world procures for agents much more and something quite other than the apparent stake, manifest ends of action: the chase counts as much as the capture, if not more, and there is a profit of action that exceeds the profits explicitly pursued, wages, prizes, rewards, trophies, titles, and positions, and which consists in escaping indifference and in asserting oneself as an active agent, caught in and by the game, occupied, an inhabitant of the world inhabited by that world, projected towards ends and endowed – objectively and thus subjectively – with a social mission. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 195)

Such a professional shared *illusio* amongst school staff and leadership enables the theorisation of *misrecognition* with regards to how innovation has been conceptualised and used in the development and delivery of localised

educational provision as a means of privileging the students at Kingswood with opportunities for work preparedness. Positioning such preparedness as unique negates the possibility that the way in which such opportunity is organised privileges some students in the school over others. Drawing on previous research findings it would be unsurprising if those students who remain in the Professional School and have access to an academic curriculum with some input from ‘professional’ organisations such as the global consultancy firm, are likely to be children from the middle classes, whose parents are likely to actively engage with the choice agenda at the age of 13 which will decide whether the student continues in this vein or attends the Studio School aimed at offering a more vocational curriculum (Ball et al., 1996; Gewirtz, 2001; Gillies, 2005; Vincent & Ball, 2007). Whilst it is important to note that students having access to a range of experiences during their schooling is a good thing if done well, the categorisation of young people into routes which may reduce the full range of opportunities at the end of the formal process is to be treated with caution (Bol & Werfhost, 2013).

There was no indication from the data produced from these seven participants specifically, or the wider data set including the interviews from 21 other staff members more generally that time was being taken to carefully consider the potential implications of a system, which reproduced the hierarchical character of the more divisive element of the English system, which effectively splits children into academic (high) and non-academic (low) streams (Ball, 1981; Ball et al., 1996; Reay, 2012). That the model effectively did so was less of a concern than the fact that the school was, as Senior Leader 2 said to me, tapping into the current ‘zeitgeist’ of thinking regarding using autonomy to affect innovation. Such an approach, as argued, indicates alignment with a logic of practice structured by the tendencies of a centralised, regulatory and marketised education system, which is focussed more on ways in which schools should remodel themselves using entrepreneurial methods than on committed discussions around how an atomised, diverse and increasingly privatised system can continue to work hard to reduce the increasing gap between high and low attainment between the richest and the poorest students in order to tackle the (re)production of advantage and disadvantage (Exley & Suissa, 2013; Higham, 2013; McInerney, 2007; Thiem, 2008).

The doxa of *misrecognition* works in producing conditions in which agents work to compete for ‘what is at stake’ in the field rather than to look to ‘change the rules of the game’ which ‘constitute its winning formula and its contribution to the wider mission of the state and the field of power’ (Thomson, 2010, p. 16). The school has accumulated symbolic power through the leadership decision to convert to an academy on their own terms and to subsequently develop the Professional School idea, which

bears remarkable similarities in many respects to the ideas that underpinned the City Technology Colleges in the late 1980s, as well as shadows of the tripartite systems of education that was largely abandoned in the 1970s in favour of all in comprehensive education. The importance of acting with autonomy in this decision making process in order to maintain a successful position within the field of power reveals how the *doxa* of misrecognition works in providing ‘a teleological rationale through which failure is able to be attributed to poor playing, rather than the nature of the game itself’ (Thomson, 2005, p. 746). Thus, through playing the game successfully, on their own terms, the school also reveals alignment with the logics of practice as structured by the neoliberal imaginary in what the school is *for*, that is reflective of a human capital approach to the purposes of education.

Conclusion

Using data collected from an ‘innovative’ secondary school in the north west of England this paper has argued such a conception is limited to the structural re-organisation of the provision on offer at the school along three interconnected lines. Firstly innovation is linked with conceptions of autonomy, that is independence from traditional, democratic networks (in the case of England, Local Authorities). Secondly innovation is linked with entrepreneurialism within political rhetoric, and that private business is positioned as having a necessary role to play in the development and delivery of public education in order to raise standards specifically through an employability agenda, and thirdly that leadership innovation and entrepreneurialism is imbued with high levels of symbolic capital which schools, operating within a diverse and competitive marketplace must take seriously if they are to survive and thrive. Within this analysis, the ‘innovative’ division of the schooling provision at Kingswood along ‘professional’ and ‘vocational’ lines is reminiscent of the tripartite system that was developed as a result of the post-war social democratic settlement, and which was subsequently abandoned due to criticism that such a system was divisive (Power & Frandji, 2010; Thomson, 2005). The schools re-organisation speaks to the commitment within England’s long history to the development of a diverse, hierarchical and increasingly autonomous educational landscape, which has latterly been bolstered by the neoliberal principles of choice and competition between such provisions.

Kingswood’s successful accumulation of symbolic capital in the field of educational policy-making, in no small part down to the Principal’s entrepreneurialism in anticipating and strategising in response to the national picture that has been emerging since the 2010 Academies Act, illustrates the strength of the schools commitment to differentiation as a means of achieving distinction in a

competitive context. That this is a restrictive position that is in some part as a result of the pursuit of neoliberal policies by successive governments is not considered by the participants within the study, and as such leads to the theorising that such position taking actually *misrecognises* the role that ‘innovation’ as a strategic process plays in having the potential for (re)producing inequalities between schools as well as students within schools. In the data presented in this article the lack of engagement with the restrictions that a system designed to separate children at the age of 13 into either academic and professional or vocational pathways may witness such division along class lines is not verifiable yet, but experience indicates that such an outcome would not be surprising (Ball, 1981).

As such, the potential that studies such as this have for contributing to understanding of how individual schools and school leaders are interpreting and responding to a policy context that promotes diversification of provision and increased school autonomy from the state at a time when the gap in attainment between rich and poor is widening is significant. Whilst this study is a single case study, that in this instance has drawn predominately on data produced with seven middle-senior leaders it is a part of a bigger study in which 28 staff in total were interviewed, along with 18 students and five parents, and as such provides findings on how a successful school in England has engaged with rapid policy reforms which locate autonomy from the state at their centre. Through further research in which a range of case-study schools undergoing conversion to academy are investigated in-depth it will be possible to engage with school leaders on issues that this research has to date thrown light upon, as a means of both understanding how innovation within a development trajectory which locates autonomy at its heart, has been conceptualised but also how axiomatic position taking along neoliberal, human capital lines, may need to be challenged.

Furthermore, whilst a single case-study and the limitations that are implicit within this, the research offers some important contributions to the field in theorising how conceptions of autonomy, in both policy and practice, can be understood to be about how an individual school responded to top down, highly regulated conditions in their re-structuring of provision along autonomous lines. In this sense the knowledge produced highlights the centrality of the link between innovation and autonomy and the way in which these are used to deliver centrally derived, neoliberal policy aims. In such a context, autonomy and innovation are not about thinking freely to do things differently but instead are symptomatic of the tightly regulated and bureaucratic conditions developed by the UK government, particularly since the inception of the 2010 Academies Act. This position somewhat

paradoxically, undermines what is revered in the policies surrounding autonomy – freedom – and thus indicates that autonomy may be reducible to responding to the requirements of government policy, rather than exercising real innovative freedom to re-structure provision in ways which are less restrictive. As the policy of autonomy looks set to be accelerated further under the new Conservative government, the ‘laboratory’ of English education policy-making remains an important site of interest for those concerned with the study of the delivery and enactment of policies relating to autonomy in the schooling field (Finkelstein & Grubb, 2000).

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