

## **Scenarios of London local authorities' engagement with evidence bases for education policies**

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This paper examines the use of research and evidence in the formation of education policy within London local authorities. In particular it explores the policy processes in three local authorities, and observes the role of research and the interplay between research and policy within each. We begin the paper with a general overview of policy process literature, before analysing the policy formation stage in detail. We then explore the findings of in-depth semi-structured interviews held with cabinet members who were responsible for children's and education services at three different local authorities. The paper concludes by presenting three scenarios of London local authority (LA) engagement with evidence and illustrates how such engagement varies, both according to the ideological leanings of authorities and the relationship such authorities have with central government.

### **Introduction**

England's education policy is currently subsumed within an overall discursive strategy that combines a requirement for public service reform (Ball, 2008); 'austerity' (and the need to reduce the nation's budget deficit); and ideologically driven perspectives regarding school freedoms, autonomy and the idea of a 'self-improving' school system (Hargreaves, 2010; 2012). Whilst there have been moves to enable schools and stakeholders (such as parents) to take on more responsibility with regard to how schools might operate (e.g. see Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010), the power to create education policy is still very much centralised, with policies made at a national level (by England's Department for Education) before being disseminated to schools. As a result, much research attention has been centred either on the (national) policy development process, or on how policies have been implemented by Lipsky's (1980) 'street level bureaucrat' (e.g. by those working within schools).

Whilst micro and macro levels are important, an over-focus on these two areas tends to come at the expense of the meso level, namely those policy actors who reside at the level of local government authorities and who act as a policy gateway, or as an interpretative buffer, between schools and state. Local authorities are also important policy actors in their own right: for example, the exploration of their policy processes in a number of studies has revealed that certain amounts of power still reside within them (Al Hallami, 2013; Trowler, 2003; Dale, 1989; Simon, 1988). Local authorities continue to play a major role in how policies are formed and rolled out (Gilbert, Husbands, Wigdortz & Francis, 2013) in despite of the potential risk of being marginalised by the autonomy that has been afforded to schools via new forms of governance, the freedoms now provided to Academies and Free Schools, the drastic expansion of the academy program (from 203 schools in 2010 to 2456 in 2012), and the influx of organisations seeking to operate

clusters of Academies. Further explanations on the roles and structures of local authorities will be discussed in the 'Policy formation in local authorities' section.

This paper, which stems from a recent study (Al Hallami, 2013), attempts to shed light on the policy process in a number of local government authorities in England - specifically, how such entities develop policy and the role of evidence within this process.

## **Defining education policy**

The field of policy studies is relatively recent, emerging during the 1950s in democratic countries as governments sought to employ social sciences to develop public policies in a number of domains including education (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The simplest definition of 'policy' as a concept is provided by Dye (1992: 2) who suggested that it represents merely "whatever governments choose to do or not to do". Other definitions, however, refer to policy as the change and reform of educational systems (Weimer & Vining, 2004), or the production of text and processes of implementation into practice (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997). It is suggested by Luke and Hogan (2006: 171), meanwhile, that education policy represents the "perspective regulation of flows of human resources, discourse and capital across educational systems towards normative social, economic and cultural ends". Trowler (2003: 95) augments this definition by suggesting that education policy is the "specification of principles and actions, related to educational issues, which are followed or which should be followed, and which are designed to bring about desired goals. In this sense, policy is a piece of paper, a statement of intentions or of practice as policy-makers perceive it or as they would like it to be". Both definitions of policy as suggested by Dye (1992) and Taylor et al. (1997) have close relevancy to the following case study. In particular, the notion of policy being the government's form of decision-making, as Dye (1992) suggests, has direct application to the case studied.

## **Policy as text**

Creating a distinction between those who make policy and those who apply it is vital in education policy-making. Hill (2003) argues that policies do not always provide instructions for potential implementers in terms of how they should be enacted. Ball's (2006) notion of 'policy as text', meanwhile, argues that those who read and interpret policy create an individual influence on the policy itself:

We can see policies as representations, which are encoded in complex ways (via struggles, compromises, authoritative public interpretations and reinterpretation) and decoded in complex ways (via actor's interpretation and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context) (Ball, 1994: 16).

Trowler (2003) clarifies that policy as a process is dynamic, and that this dynamism is a result of conflict between those involved in the process. These conflicts arise in specific ways when deciding which issues or problems the policy addresses, and what its desired goals are. Much of the conflict is apparent at the national level between policy-makers and those who actually implement these policies. For example, Lipsky's (1980) "street-level bureaucracy" model argues that policy outcomes will always, in the end, depend on who

actually implements them. According to Lipsky (1980), implementers tend to shape policy according to their understanding and socio-historical backgrounds, adding personal aspects to the delivery of policy on the ground. As such, it is clear that education policy is very much a complex multi-dimensional notion, and interpreting its implementation requires an understanding of the diverse influences it faces.

### The policy process

Literature suggests that the public policy process generally consists of a set of four major functional stages: (i) agenda setting; (ii) policy formulation; (iii) implementation; and (iv) evaluation (Jones, 1970; Anderson, 1990; Palumbo, 1988; Dye, 1992; Rosenbaum, 1991; Burstein, 1991). In each of these policy cycle stages, sub processes have been identified as serving to achieve the goals of the system (Jones, 1970): these recognise the complexity, the understanding of decision making/political environment, scope, range of choices, and decision criteria involved in different aspects of policy making (Hadad & Demsky, 1995). These are depicted by Jones (1970) in the following way. Of the four components, it is policy formation that will be considered in more detail.



Figure 1: The public policy process (Jones, 1970)

### Policy formulation

Policy formulation according to Ball (2012) is a “product of compromise, negotiations, dispute and struggle as those with competing, sometimes conflicting, values seek to secure specific objectives” (p.19). The policy formation and development process within education, as Ball (2012) states, is a complex matter where policy-makers should be capable of recognising the different levels at which policy development takes place, and the vast range of educational institutions involved (Ball, 2012). Policy options are an essential part of the policy formation process whereby multiple systematic methods and frameworks are applied to analyse and research multiple policy options prior to the formulation stage: for instance, Hadad and Demsky (1995) suggest that, when considering which policy option is most suited to the policy issue, three dimensions will be conjoined into an evaluation framework: desirability, affordability, and feasibility. Desirability involves measuring the impact and benefit of the options on various stakeholders, the compatibility of the policy within the context, and the impact of the policy on development and stability. Affordability involves an understanding of economic, social and political cost of a policy. Feasibility, meanwhile, involves evaluating if the policy can be undertaken in a sustainable convenient manner (Hadad & Demsky, 1995)

### Research in policy formation

The increasing availability of information about educational performance and the determinants of that performance have shifted the politics of education towards research

and data-driven decisions (Hannaway & Mittleman, 2011). Simultaneously, the argument that policy-makers should attempt to engage more readily with evidence has begun to grow in stature in recent times; particularly in relation to education (Campbell, Benita, Coates, Davies & Penn, 2007). The Commission of the European Communities, for example, suggested that: "it would be helpful for the education sector to learn some valuable lessons from other policy domains, which are more successful in using research and other evidence to improve their practices" (OECD/CERI, 2007: 13). Nutley, Davies and Walter (2002: 2) noted that, increasingly; "a major concern for policy-makers and managers is how to ensure that research evidence has greater impact on the policy-making process". Gough (2004: 45), meanwhile, defended education, contending that: "the importance of research to policy-making has become increasingly overt recently, with knowledge being seen to be given a higher profile".

At the same time it is also acknowledged that the rhetoric of evidence-based policy often differs from the reality of how policy is developed, and how research findings are utilised as part of the policy making process. For instance, Campbell et al. (2007) noted from their study of 42 policy-makers within government that the majority felt, as a process, policy making was more 'messy' than 'linear' and that evidence was just one factor to be taken into consideration. Thus, Campbell et al. surmised that, amongst the policy-makers they interviewed, few would be likely to propose that a literal approach to evidence-based policy making should actually be undertaken. This conclusion is compounded by the suggestion that, in the short term, policy-makers' 'use' of evidence is more likely to be 'conceptual' rather than 'instrumental' in nature: that is, evidence is more likely to lead to changes in individual policy-makers' overall levels of knowledge or understanding ('conceptual' use) than to changes in their actual behaviour or practice ('instrumental' use), unless a significant and overwhelmingly accepted weight of evidence, has built up over time (Weiss, 1982; Huberman, 1993; Gladwell, 2000; Landry, Lamari & Amara, 2003; Levin, 2008). As a consequence, the development of policy is unlikely to be either immediately related to the findings of a study that has been relayed to policy-makers, or based solely on the findings of just one study. As a result, Duncan (2005) suggested that the idea of 'evidence-inspired' policy might be seen as more appropriate than a strict interpretation of the term 'evidence-based'. A similar view was held also by Davies, Nutley and Smith (2000) and Sebba (2007) who, in the main, refer to 'evidence-informed' policy. For the purposes of this paper, whilst the terms 'evidence-based' and 'evidence-informed' may be used interchangeably, the underlying meaning behind them will be that proposed by Davies (2004):

An approach that helps people make well informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy development and implementation. (p.5)

Given that evidence does not simply exist, but must also be created, we also, however, consider that the act of collecting and disseminating data for research purposes should be considered a key aspect of the process of 'putting' as per Davies' definition above.

### Policy formation in local authorities

The development and formation of policy is the central role of England's city and borough legislative bodies and most influential to the local community in terms of setting the policy framework by which the boroughs' education systems operate. As noted above, however, there is an inclination towards centralisation of policy development (Simon, 1988) and the role and power that local authorities have held historically with relation to education policy making has faced major changes across the past several decades. For example, many interest groups such as local authorities and teachers, who have been formally involved in policymaking, have been progressively disregarded (Trowler, 2003). For instance, Trowler noted that: "Policy-making is always a political process; competing groups, interests and ideologies [continue] to fight over the shape of education policy. In education policy there [is] a clear tension between those who [want] central control and those who [are] more concerned with de-regulation" (2003: 35). As such, the role of local authorities, as Dale (1989) illustrated, have shifted from active partners in the 1944-74 period, to a very constrained role in the 1974-88 period, and finally to a limited and minimal role in the post-1988 period. This created a shift in the power of local authorities to inform education policy. Ball (2008: 96) argued that sidelining of local authorities may signal the break up of the "national system of education locally, and [an] increase in powers held and used centrally" (p. 96).

The policy formation process in UK's local authorities is conducted by policy and scrutiny committees, council members and the cabinet. Figure 2 is the authors' summary of the decision making processes described in the City of Westminster's website (City of Westminster, 2014). The policy and scrutiny committees provide insight on major issues for policy formation by conducting research and making recommendations. The policy and scrutiny committees are considered the main informative avenue in the policy formation processes of local authorities. The council members and cabinet then typically agree upon and approve policy frameworks.



Figure 2: Public policy process at local authorities (City of Westminster, 2014)

### Academies

The introduction of academies is one of the main factors behind the shift and decline of power within English local authorities (Gilbert et al., 2013). David Blunkett, the then Secretary of State for Education, introduced the academies program on March 2000 initially targeting failing schools (Gunter, 2011), noting that: "for too long, too many children have been failed by poorly-performing schools which have served to reinforce inequity of opportunity and disadvantage. City academies will create new opportunities for business, the voluntary sector and central and local government to work together to break

this cycle and improve the life change of inner city children” (*BBC News*, 2000). Academies are state-maintained, non-fee paying schools that are independent of local authorities, and are funded directly from the centre (Gunter, 2011). They are also controlled by sponsors, who are responsible for the curriculum and workforce: “[the] Academy sponsors have integral control of, and responsibility for, the management of their academies. They appoint a majority of the governors; they control the school estate; they have unambiguous responsibility for management and appointments. By the standards of state-funded schools at home and abroad, this is a high degree of independence” (Adonis, 2007, p.14).

As such, as more and more schools have become academised, so the role of local authorities in the policy process has been reduced to mostly involved in planning academies and co-sponsoring them (Ball, 2007); “significantly, local authorities are now involved in planning, and recently established academies must now follow core aspects of the national curriculum. However, academies still remain independent of local authorities and there is a more diverse range of academies in terms of sponsors” (Gunter, 2011, p.5). As Al Hallami (2013) noted, the Conservative Party has mainly supported the academies program, being the ideological leader behind its introduction. As a result, academisation has been more accepted by boroughs where the Conservative political party is the winning majority, compared with boroughs that are led by other political parties (this point is explored in further detail below).

### **Research questions**

This paper reports on a project examining policy practices and research use within three local authorities in London. Specifically, it sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the current policy practices of the three local educational authorities?
2. What motivates these practices?
3. What is the role of research and evidence in informing policy development?

### **Research design: Case study**

Case studies were undertaken within three local educational authorities in London’s boroughs, selected in accord with the accessibility and time constraints of the principal researcher. For this research, cabinet members representing children and family at London local authorities were randomly selected and approached personally for an interview. The three participating authorities were Camden, Kensington and Chelsea, and Hackney. The Labour Party was the leading group for both the Camden and Hackney authorities, whereas the Conservative Party was leading at the Kensington and Chelsea authority. Interviews were based on semi-structured and recorded meetings (one of which occurred face-to-face, and two interviews were undertaken via phone). The interviews were held with cabinet members who were responsible for children’s and education services at the three local authorities. All dialogue was recorded and transcribed, including answering direct questions and further discussions. Following the transcription, narrative

analysis was used to analyse the data collected from the research. After viewing the three cases, common ‘headlines’ were formed inductively in order to provide a structure to the narration. Narrative was then broken into themes to assist in creating a framework of main variables to build upon and augment this initial theoretical understanding.

## Findings

The findings of this research project are based mainly upon interviews conducted with the cabinet members of Children and Family Services at three London local authorities (‘LAs’). While both Stake (1995) and Yin (1994) stress the importance of cases being based on multiple sources, the lack of documents relevant to the research found within the authorities resulted in interviews being the major source of information. However, context-related data from each authority was retrieved from their websites.

### Findings analysis

During the analysis of our findings, we have adapted multiple analytical approaches to allow us to better understand the raw data we have gathered. The two main approaches used were direct verbatim comments, and the use of the data analysis software *NVivo*. Verbatim comments were utilised when addressing the main research questions as supporting evidence and a tool for theory building. *NVivo* is one of the most familiar data analysis and theory-building software tools and provides techniques for coding, categorising, relationship creation, and numerical counting of verbal data (Briggs, Coleman & Morrison, 2012). *NVivo* was used in particular to identify nouns commonly used by the interviewees when addressing the research questions through what is known as a “word frequency query”. Correspondingly this approach has enabled us to identify possible themes, analyse the most frequently used words during an interview, and as a result find most frequently occurring concepts (QSR International, 2013). The resultant analysis is presented through the following thematic subheadings.

### Trends of policy process practices

The role of local authorities within policy making locally is an integral part of their current practices. As such, to better understand the current role of local authorities within policy a word frequency query was used to allow us to observe what concepts and wording members of each authority used when describing their current practices, and to support further understanding of the current processes.

Table 1: *NVivo* word frequency query for Question 1\*

Noun	Count	Weighted %
Work	40	2.22%
Group	45	2.20%
Community	40	2.08%

\* Describe the current policy making process in your local authority in general?

According to the word frequency query, the most frequently mentioned words and their synonyms used to describe current policy practices at each authority were 'work', 'group', and 'community'. Once these words were observed, the software allowed us to see these concepts in context, to make sense out of the observation, and, correspondingly, conclusions could be drawn from the analysis results. Each of the three terms set out above provided concepts that guided the following observations.

Firstly, in relation to the work local authorities do, it could be seen within the data that their perception regarding their main role is to: (i) bring stakeholders together through "involving different groups together", and "working towards a partnership approach" when it comes to education policy; and (ii) commission "collective decisions" by devising "strategies and policies" as a group. Hence, the authorities play a directive role within the local community that directs, monitors, and implements decisions related to schools and education.

Secondly, both the words 'group' and 'community' have appeared alongside one another as concepts that relate, and are also used frequently when it comes to describing current policy processes. Further analysis revealed that 'group' and 'community' referred to multiple stakeholders, including families, schools, parents, and teachers. These various groups function under the umbrella of the local authority and the multiple boroughs. They are an integral part of the local system that works together as part of their regular practice. As a result, we are able to use the data to define the role of local authorities as: 'a directive body that plans, monitors, and facilitates local education policy whilst also being an executive body that maintains a certain role in policy making locally'. Local authorities involve and work alongside multiple stakeholder groups when making policy related decisions, and act as a communal entity that forms policies that aim to enhance its performance nationally (Al Hallami, 2013).

### **The influence of academies on local authority**

It has already been noted above that the academies act has shifted the way local authorities and schools interact. This was reflected in a number of quotes from respondents:

Local authorities have much less freedom than they used to, but still we have a certain level of freedom to decide how we want to work with a school. (Camden representative, 2013)

If a school that is an academy is failing, I am afraid, no, we can't actually intervene. It is the state's responsibility. (Kensington and Chelsea representative, 2013)

As a local authority, government is specific; you don't have the formal power as the maintained sector. (Hackney representative, 2013)

At all three boroughs investigated, it is clear that the academies have created a fragmented local school structure and a concomitant decrease in formal power at the meso level. As stated by the Camden representative, there is much less freedom in how the authority

works with schools today. Currently, local authorities have no formal power over academies as they are located outside the local borough's jurisdiction. Consequently, concerns related to underperforming academies and the ability of local authorities to intervene emerged. With the shifts of power that academisation has created, little can be done to regain that power, even when needed. However, this change in power relations has also acted as a catalyst for authorities to develop close relationships with academies within their boroughs:

We want to retain the partnership between local education and what we call the family of schools. Instead of schools going on their own and competing against each other our idea is we will cooperate with each other to achieve the best for children. (Camden representative, 2013)

We have very close relations with our school, we are not called local authorities because now we are communities. (Kensington and Chelsea representative, 2013)

We have elected representatives and the moral authority. Our approach is to have moral responsibility to make sure that academies are performing well enough and are serving well. (Hackney representative, 2013)

The approach that all three authorities undertook in the face of their shifting powers towards academy schools centres upon a strong foundation of partnership. Retaining partnerships within local academies creates an informal relationship wherein local authorities are able to intervene and monitor schools indirectly. However, each of the boroughs explored has developed certain approaches with regard to how they partner with schools. For instance, both Camden and Kensington and Chelsea's approach is to retain partnerships between local education and schools through a communal relationship. Hackney, on the other hand, builds upon the community approach to include moral authority. This moral authority creates responsibility where everyone is held accountable for his or her actions.

While authorities are adjusting to the shifting powers that the academies act has created, it is important to keep in mind that for all authorities student education is stated as being of the utmost importance. Yet, some authorities more than others are supportive of the witnessed change. For instance, a Kensington and Chelsea respondent stressed that the structure or type of school does not matter: "we want high standards [but] we don't care who delivers the high standards". In other words, the authority believed that academies have the potential to drive performance positively and, as such, are supportive of them. The converse was represented by Camden's comments which noted that academies were "not the way we are going in Camden". This is because Camden attributed the success of its schools to the communal relationship that the authority has with their schools: "we think it does show the way we work can achieve very good results". It would seem, therefore, that academies' influence on local authorities has introduced changes to the local policy process. Yet, each authority is creating approaches to deal with these changes and sustain good performance across their schools.

## **The use of research in local authorities**

All three authorities investigated were involved with research to a certain extent; with case studies illustrating multiple levels or degrees where authorities decide how they engage with research within their practices. These levels can be summarised in the following way: (i) authorities using research methods solely for collecting nationally required data; (ii) authorities undertaking (i), but also conducting research with regard to improving school performance; (iii) authorities undertaking (i) and (ii), but also promoting and facilitating the use of data and research tools among schools. These are now explained in more detail below.

### **Local authority approaches towards research**

The mandate to collect nationally required data is one of the main reasons for local authorities to engage with research. Each authority has an officer responsible for the collection of these data within their borough, and schools across London boroughs are expected to provide this information. The data collected are mainly concerned with student performance at various stages, as well as information on other student indicators. As a result of the statutory requirement to provide certain data, local authorities engage directly, collecting and analysing data as part of their regular practices. For example:

All schools require national league table for SAT and Key Stage. The borough does a lot of work on getting evidence of how children are performing at the different stages. (Camden representative, 2013)

Some authorities more than others go beyond this statutory duty for data, and use research as a method to enhance performance. In Camden, for instance, the initial data collected from schools is extended to include as much information as possible on individual student groups' performance. This type of information is then used to compare and analyse performances to help the authority address the issue more accurately.

I think providing that data for schools is important. What the data shows are the groups that are not doing so well, and increasingly the group that is not doing well is not the ones we assumed will underperform. (Camden representative, 2013)

However, in addition both Camden and Hackney promoted the use of research, and facilitated it amongst their schools. In Camden, the data collected as part of the authorities' statutory duties was distributed to each individual school for the purpose of encouraging schools to engage with it and compare performances. As a result, schools are becoming more engaged with data and indicators as a method to monitor improve their overall performance. Camden believed that they are in the best position to provide these data, and have specialised people who work with the information. In addition, above and beyond this, Hackney also promoted the use of research tools within their schools. Nonetheless, while these authorities were playing a further role in engaging with research, school engagements with their efforts are voluntary:

Another element of our process is recognising that schools are themselves independent institutions and all our schools are independent. We don't direct them to do anything in

particular, so we see our role as kind off encouraging them to understand that these particular research practices we know to have high impact and relatively low cost. (Hackney representative, 2013)

While research plays various roles within the local authorities explored, it may be seen as limited when it comes to its role in policy making. However, the authorities seen to encourage the use of research, and be further engaged with it, do use research in policy shaping. Camden, for example, believed that its use of research in the development of its policies was becoming better than it previously might have been. Hackney, on the other hand, believed that it is building a tradition where the authority is keeping a close eye on research to inform policy.

To further understand the role that research plays in informing policy within local boroughs, a word frequency query was undertaken to analyse and define this role according to the interview data. This approach can suggests terms with which the role we are exploring can be better explained.

Table 2: *NVivo* word frequency query for Question 3\*

Noun	Count	Weighted %
Schools	28	3.58%
Group	48	3.25%
Change	87	3.10%

\* What is the role of research and evidence in informing policy development?

Another word frequency query was undertaken to allow us to develop further observations of connecting concepts to explain the role of research in informing policy development. Amongst the most frequent words used to express the role of research in informing policy development, words related to change occurred most frequently. Words such as 'implementation', 'inform', and 'improve' were all associated under the umbrella of change. This allows us to suggest that while research might inform policy, authorities that use extensive research connect it to notions of 'change', and so present it as a method that promotes positive changes in the local community, schools, and boroughs.

### **Ideologies as a factor of research use**

The previous analysis on the use of research in local authorities has suggested the relationship between LA policy-makers, their ideologies (or overarching ethos), and the use of evidence in policymaking. Hence, the use of further research and evidence in certain authorities such as Camden and Hackney was a result of the policy-makers' beliefs (i) that a continued relationship is required between LAs and schools, even if those schools are no longer formally within the remit and under the control of the LA; and (ii) that research is important in facilitating this relationship. As such, observations made from the quotations in the previous section support the concept of the 'policy agora' (Brown, 2011; 2013), whereby the use of research use has been shown to depend upon the creation of knowledge that conforms to existing and dominant ideologies.

In particular, it should be noted that the case studies presented two contrasting scenarios that illustrated the influence of these ideologies on each authority's engagement with evidence. Two of the three authorities explored are led by the Labour Party, and one by the Conservative Party. The perspectives of the parties in each case act as the base of the ideological grounds that the policy-makers act upon. For both Camden and Hackney which are led by the Labour Party, engagement and advocacy of research and evidence within their boroughs and schools were prominent. The two scenarios that local authorities face when engaging with evidence are illustrated in Figure 3.

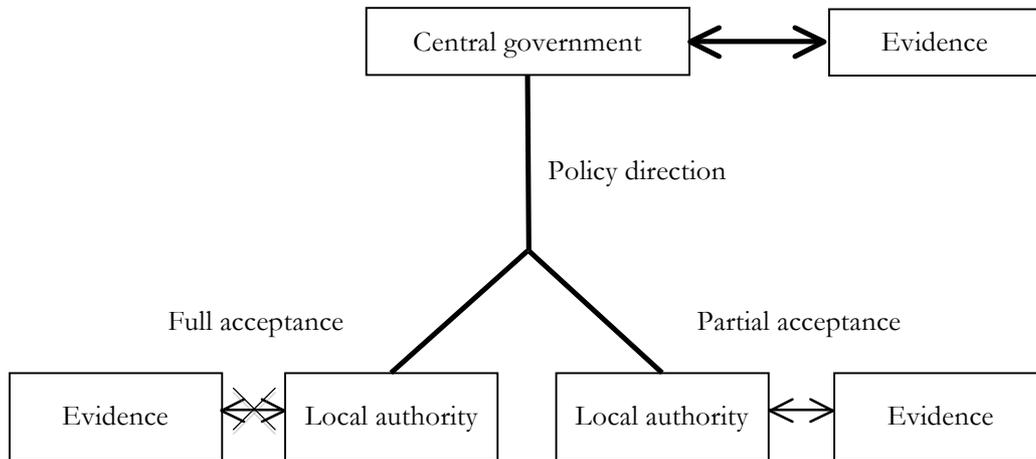


Figure 3: Scenarios of local authority engagement with evidence

We explain Figure 3 as follows. Our research has shown that the central government is involved in engaging with evidence at the national level through its statutory requirement of data collection that it imposes on local authorities. The statutory information collected by local authorities for the central government presents a form of interaction between authorities and evidence. However, local authorities also decide how to interact with the evidence (and related evidence-informed 'solutions') that central government presents and pushes down to them; which may or may not relate to their context and/or the evidence they have passed up to central government (e.g. see Moss, 2013 in relation to the national strategies). Hence, authorities have two options when dealing with evidence: accept all the evidence as it is, or accept partial evidence and engage in further research and data locally. The full acceptance of existing evidence that is supplied by the central government restricts the engagement of authorities with further evidence. These authorities use the evidence provided to them, and do not seek further research and investigation. On the other hand, authorities that partially accept central government evidence, are seen to engage thoroughly with research.

In the case of the three authorities explored, Camden and Hackney could be identified under the partial acceptance scenario of evidence. They engage with research and data on a local level, and promote evidence usage across their boroughs. However, the

Kensington and Chelsea authority is identified under the full acceptance of evidence scenario. Its engagement with further evidence and research locally could be described as less intense compared to the other two boroughs. An explanation of that may be linked to the ideological beliefs of the central government that are similar to Kensington and Chelsea authority as both are led with the Conservative Party ideology. Hence, we suggest that authorities with similar ideologies to that of central government are more likely to fully accept evidence (or evidence-informed solutions) pushed down by the government, and engage in less local research. As such we argue that (at least in relation to the enactment of the academy act) the influence of ideology on the use of research in local policymaking is apparent.

## Discussion and conclusion

Since education policy happens mainly at the national level, the role of local authorities in policy formation has to date not been as fully explored as that which occurs at the micro or macro level. The national government's changes to the role of local authorities have resulted in not only a shift of power, but also a shift of relationships. Today, local authorities' participation in education depends on how they decide to work with schools, and the relationship they build among their families of schools. The academy act has been observed as one of the main reasons behind the shift of power. The ability of state-schools to be independent from local jurisdiction has displaced or de-centred local authorities from their previously integral part of local education. Yet, it has also driven local authorities to work on strategies and methods where they can still inform and monitor those schools through relationship building.

The issue with frequent changes is that once a change or policy is implemented, it is hard for it to be reversed. If local authorities give up their role in local education, it will likely be a challenging prospect for them to again become formally involved. Currently, authorities are practising what they refer to as 'soft power' to make sure they are still involved in ensuring that schools are not failing their students. Informing education policy remains a matter of immense complexity as many ideologies, groups, people, and other stakeholders attempt to shape it. Yet, while the role of evidence and research in informing local policies may not be great, it presents a method by which authorities may seek to subvert (or not) the national policy agenda, whilst also seeking to positively influence school performance.

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