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Education policy and governance in England under the Coalition Government (2010–15): Academies, the pupil premium, and free early education

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This paper explores the governance of school-based and early education in England under the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government (2010–15). It draws on three prominent Coalition policy areas – the academies programme, the pupil premium, and free part-time early education – and focuses on changes to the role played by central government in governance; in so doing, it also makes contrasts with Wales and Scotland. An analysis of the funding and regulatory framework reveals that the role of central government in England increased under the Coalition Government and that of local government declined. These changes to governance have served to centralize power on the one hand, and to facilitate and sustain markets in school-based and free early education on the other; the same cannot be said of governance in either Scotland or Wales, where democratically elected local government continues to play a highly significant role.

Key words: academies, pupil premium, early education, governance, funding, regulation

Introduction

During the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government's term of office (2010–15), the number of academies – independent, publicly-funded schools owned by non-profit making trusts – increased significantly; a new funding stream, targeted explicitly at children from disadvantaged backgrounds, was introduced and across the UK, free part-time early education was extended to disadvantaged 2-year-old children. These policy developments – and those that preceded them – provide insights into the governance of school-based and early education. This paper analyses changes to governance in England under the Coalition – in particular the roles played by central and local government – and makes contrasts with Wales and Scotland. Northern Ireland is not included because a government agency (the Education Authority) – rather than elected local authorities – administers education (Northern Ireland Direct, 2015a).[1]

The paper argues that governance varies between countries; the degree of control exerted by central government via funding and regulation is unique to England. Furthermore, the mix of policies implemented with respect to school-based education – but not to early education – sets England apart from the rest of the UK. Although the changes to the English school system began before 2010, they were consolidated and extended by the Coalition Government and have resulted in a paradigmatic change (see Béland, 2007; Hall, 1993).

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Contemporary theorizing about the notion of governance has focused on the government 'steering' from a distance (Rhodes, 1996). Jakobi *et al.* (2009) see governance as a 'multitude of formal and informal steering and co-ordination mechanisms' to pursue particular policies, while Windzio *et al.* (2005: 2) view it as 'a specific form of coordination of social actions characterized by institutionalized, binding regulations and enduring patterns of interaction'. In contrast to traditional forms of governance such as hierarchies, more recent forms of governance involve networks of different actors, partnerships, public–private ventures, and the voluntary sector in service delivery (Peters and Pierre, 1998; see also Stoker, 1998). However, a focus on networks can neglect the directive role that the government and the machinery of the state may perform 'in restructuring itself as a neo-liberal polity', de-regulating some powers while centralizing others; it also 'neglects the continuing power of the state over the system frame, and the regulation of resources' (Ranson, 2008: 208). Indeed, Davies (2002) provides strong evidence to support the influential role of central government in the local policy arena.

This paper explores the ways in which the state has restructured its role in England, in terms of centralizing power, regulating the role of different actors, and distributing resources in a marketized and increasingly 'privatized' education system. While education policy rests at a national level in each country of the UK, the role played by the central government varies between jurisdictions – although political devolution is relatively recent, there has been longer-standing administrative devolution with school systems varying across the constituent countries of the UK (see Phillips, 2003; Raffe, 1999; 2005).[2] Drawing on three high profile Coalition policy areas – the academies programme, the pupil premium, and free part-time early education – this paper seeks to establish how the role of central government in the governance of school-based and free early education in England changed during the period of the Coalition Government, and contrasts this with governance (and policies) in Wales and Scotland.

The next section provides a brief outline of the policy legacy of previous Conservative and Labour Governments (1979–1997 and 1997–2010 respectively). The following section then focuses on education policy and associated governance arrangements under the Coalition Government between 2010 and 2015; this explores the expansion of the academies programme, the introduction of free schools, funding changes (including the pupil premium), and free early education policy. It also analyses these policies with respect to what they reveal about the role of central government in governance. The penultimate section discusses the governance of school-based and free early education policy in England, and contrasts it with that in other jurisdictions of the UK, stressing in particular the role played by central government with respect to both regulation and funding. The conclusion suggests that there is a distinctively English form of governance, particularly in regard to the role the state has played in facilitating, enforcing, and sustaining markets in school-based and free early education, and in reducing the role of local government.

Education policy and legacy 1979–2010

Given the significance of path dependence in policy making (e.g. Pierson, 2000), it is important to understand the legacy of previous administrations prior to exploring policy developments under the Coalition Government. This section outlines the origins of market-oriented reforms under the Conservatives and the introduction of the academies programme in England under Labour. It then addresses the development of early education across the UK under both Conservative and Labour Governments. The focus is on policy in England, but contrasts are made with other countries of the UK.

Introduction of market-oriented reforms

The Conservative administrations between 1979 and 1997 introduced a raft of new education policies heavily influenced by the neo-liberal ideas of the 'New Right' (Chitty, 2004). In England and Wales, the 1980 Education Act (National Archives, 1980) gave an increased emphasis to parental choice of school. The 1988 Education Reform Act (National Archives, 1988) introduced a national curriculum and testing programme. In addition, schools were required to admit pupils up to their physical capacity; funding was predominantly on the basis of the number of pupils on roll, with schools themselves managing delegated budgets. These policy instruments resulted in the creation of a 'quasi-market' (Le Grand, 1991) and, together with the publication of national test scores and public examination results, promoted a competitive market in school-based education (see Glatter, 2012). The publication of results also served to increase the power of central government as did the introduction of a new school inspection body – Ofsted – a non-ministerial department that reports directly to Parliament (Roberts, 2015). The legislation also allowed for City Technology Colleges (CTCs) to be established; these were outside local authority control and funded via a contract with central government (West and Bailey, 2013). Local authority schools could also 'opt out' of local authority control and become grant-maintained, funded by central government. In so doing they gained more autonomy – becoming employers of staff and gaining control over admissions (if they did not already have these responsibilities – see West *et al*., 2011). Similar changes took place in Northern Ireland following the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (National Archives, 1989a), but grant-maintained status was used to create religiously integrated schools (Phillips, 2003). In England, by the end of the Conservative Government's final term of office in 1997, 15 CTCs had been established, and 19 per cent of secondary schools and 3 per cent of primary schools had opted out of local authority control (Department for Education and Employment, 1998). Only 17 schools opted out in Wales (Hansard, 1998).

In Scotland, the Education (Scotland) Act 1981 gave parents the right to nominate a school (via a 'placing request') if they wanted their child to attend a school other than the local catchment area school (National Archives, 1981), and following the 1989 Self-Governing Schools etc. (Scotland) Act (National Archives, 1989b), schools could opt out of local authority control. Only two did so (Arnott, 2014). Devolved school management was introduced in 1993, but in contrast to England and Wales, the local authority paid for the school's normal complement of staff (Accounts Commission for Scotland and Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools, 1999).

Following the 1997 General Election, the Labour Government enacted the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act in England and Wales; this resulted in grant-maintained schools being brought back under local authority control. In England, structural changes to the school system were implemented in the early 2000s with the Government setting up independent, publicly-funded sponsored academies, initially to replace secondary schools deemed to be failing. These were akin to CTCs, being outside local authority control, owned by private non-profit making trusts, and funded by central government via a legal contract ('funding agreement') (see Curtis *et al*., 2008; Glatter, 2012; West and Bailey, 2013).

Significantly, the Labour Government also made local authorities commissioners of schools (Department for Education and Skills, 2005). Under the 2006 Education and Inspections Act, central government required competitions for new schools to be held, so reducing the role of local authorities as providers of schools. Changes to the funding of school-based education also took place, which further reduced the power of local authorities. In 2006, the Government introduced a new hypothecated grant, known as the Dedicated Schools Grant, to fund schools. This replaced the schools element of the Revenue Support Grant, which since 1990 had provided the bulk of funds for schools and other local services; the Revenue Support Grant,

being unhypothecated, allowed local authorities discretion to spend more or less on services than the Government deemed appropriate (West, 2009).[3]

Introduction of free part-time early education

Nursery education became a policy priority for the Conservative Government in 1996. The chosen policy instrument was a voucher scheme for all 4-year-olds, and involved free part-time education being offered by different types of providers: schools (nursery schools, primary school nursery classes, reception classes in primary schools), providers in the private and voluntary sectors, and providers in independent schools (PVI sector), where previously fees would have been charged. The scheme was piloted across four local authorities in England and four in Scotland (Sparkes and West, 1998; Pearson and Riddell, 2003).

The Labour Government, when elected in May 1997, swiftly abolished the nursery voucher scheme and replaced it, from 1998, with an entitlement to free part-time early education for 4-year-olds. This policy was implemented across the UK with early education being provided by the maintained and PVI sectors. In England, the entitlement to free part-time education for 4-year-olds was introduced in 1998; as with the voucher scheme this was for five part-time (i.e. around 2.5 hours) sessions (12.5 hours a week) of early education for 33 weeks a year (West, 2006). This was subsequently extended to 3-year-olds and the number of hours increased, so that by 2010, all 3- and 4-year-olds were entitled to 570 hours of free early education a year, normally taken as 15 hours each week for 38 weeks of the year (HC CSF Committee, 2010; West *et al*., 2010). In addition, between 2006 and 2008, the Labour Government piloted provision of free early education for disadvantaged 2-year-olds (see Smith *et al*., 2009). It also piloted a new funding formula for free early education: the 'early years single funding formula' (HC CSF Committee, 2010).

Education policy under the Coalition Government 2010–15

During the period of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Government, there were large cuts to many areas of public expenditure. However, in England, spending per pupil was protected in real terms (Sibieta, 2015). The Coalition Government also introduced and developed a raft of education policies. Soon after the 2010 General Election, the new Government enacted legislation allowing for maintained schools in England that were performing well to convert to academy status, and for the creation of new 'free schools'. Regulatory changes to the distribution of funds to schools were also made, with a considerable tightening of central government control in England. In England and Wales, a new grant providing funding to schools on the basis of the number of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds was also introduced. With regard to early education, changes were made to the entitlement to free early education across the UK, and in England, new regulations relating to the funding of early education resulted in central government gaining more control over the provision of early education and the distribution of resources.

In the following sections, policies relating to school-based education and funding – in particular, the academies programme and the pupil premium grant – and free early education are analysed in order to shed light on the role played by central government in governance. In addition, contrasts are made with Wales and Scotland with respect to both policies and governance.

School-based education and funding

Academies and free schools

In England, the Coalition Government expanded the academies programme and in so doing increased its control over school-based education. The 2010 Academies Act (National Archives, 2010a) enabled schools to apply to the Department for Education (DfE) to convert to academy status under the control of central as opposed to local government. Other types of academies were also created, in particular, all-ability publicly-funded 'free schools', set up by groups of parents, teachers or faith groups (DfE, 2015a; Hatcher, 2011). In addition, university technical colleges and studio schools for 14- to 19-year-olds combining academic and practical learning were introduced (the former backed by university and employer sponsors and the latter by local businesses and employers) (DfE, 2014a).

Free schools, according to the White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010: 59), were to be 'demand-led', with their geographical distribution depending on 'individuals and organisations coming forward to play a role in improving provision in their community'. Teachers and parents were to be supported in setting up these schools to meet parental demand, particularly in deprived areas. A further stated aim was to meet the needs of disadvantaged children.

The White Paper also made clear that when a new school was needed the 'first choice' would be for it to be an academy or free school (DfE, 2010: 62; see also DfE, 2013a). This presumption of an academy is important, as it signalled that a key function of the local authority – as the main provider of schools – was being curtailed, while the power of central government increased. Moreover, for those maintained (non-academy) schools identified as underperforming, or deemed by Ofsted to have serious weaknesses, or to require special measures, the expectation was that they would convert to become an academy with a sponsor (DfE, 2015c); this also served to reduce the role of local government.

Academies and free schools – like their forebears, CTCs – are publicly-funded independent schools and as such, are required to adhere to regulations for independent schools (National Archives, 2012). They are owned by a non-profit making trust (the academy trust) which must also register as a company and provide audited accounts to the DfE (GOV.UK, 2015).

'Sponsored' academies are owned by an 'external' trust which is responsible for one or more academies (Hill *et al*., 2012). In 2013, the trusts sponsoring the largest number of academies were the Academies Enterprise Trust (AET) (29 academies), the Ormiston Academies Trust (19), United Learning (18), and E-ACT (18) (West, 2014). Most 'converter' academies are governed by stand-alone trusts, but groups of schools have converted to academy status as part of a formal arrangement (see Hill *et al*., 2012). Significantly, Ofsted can examine the work of groups running chains of academies, but the government does not permit it to make judgements as to whether or not a trust is *effective* (BBC News, 2015a).

Academies and free schools are not subject to the education legislation that regulates maintained schools (see West and Bailey, 2013; Wolfe, 2011). They do not need to follow the full national curriculum; instead, they must teach a broad and balanced curriculum including English, mathematics, science, and religious education. Nor do they need to adhere to the national statutory requirements for teachers' pay and conditions, and they can decide on the length of the teaching day and year (Academies Commission, 2013). Since 2012, the DfE's 'model funding agreement' for academies and free schools has allowed them to employ teachers who are not qualified (Wolfe, 2015a).

While funding agreements remain in force, unless varied with the agreement of both parties, statute has been used to override existing funding agreements to impose a change across all existing academies and free schools (Statutory Instrument No. 1033, 2012; Wolfe, 2015b),

bringing them in line with maintained schools. Central government is thus able to exert high levels of control if it so wishes. An academy trust can also be dissolved by central government if its test scores/exam results are deemed to be a cause for concern and following an inspection by Ofsted (see for example, BBC News, 2015b). Central government thus has a high degree of control over academies via its contract – the funding agreement – with the academy trust, and as a result of its ability to use statute to override the funding agreement.

By the end of 2014, there were 2,299 primary and 1,884 secondary academies in England: 13 per cent of primary schools and 60 per cent of secondary schools; there were also 252 free schools (House of Commons Education Committee, 2015). The fact that a very high proportion of secondary schools are now academies means that the role of local government is much reduced in regard to secondary education. However, as only a relatively small minority of primary schools have converted, its role vis-à-vis primary education remains significant.

Funding schools and the pupil premium

The funding of academies and free schools is inextricably related to that of the maintained schools in the local authority in which they are located (even though they are not part of local authorities). English local authorities must, by law, devise a formula to distribute funds to schools for which they are responsible. During the Coalition Government's term of office, government direction and control increased, with more prescriptive regulations being introduced in 2014 (cf. West, 2009). The new regulations require the local authority to allocate a single per pupil amount of at least £2,000 for each primary school pupil and £3,000 for each secondary school pupil, with at least 80 per cent of the funding being allocated through specified 'pupil-led factors': the single per pupil amount, social deprivation (which is mandatory), prior attainment, English as an additional language, pupil mobility, looked after children, and differential salaries of teachers near London (DfE, 2014b). Although academies (and free schools) receive the equivalent amount of revenue funding to other maintained schools in the local authority in which they are situated, they also receive funding – determined centrally – to cover services previously provided by the local authority via the Education Services Grant (DfE, 2015b; Education Funding Agency, 2015).

In Wales, local authorities must also devise a formula to distribute funds to schools; however, the regulations are less prescriptive than in England and allow more discretion at a local level. Seventy per cent of funding for individual schools' budgets must be distributed via 'learner-led' factors, and local authorities have discretion to distribute the remaining 30 per cent on the basis of a range of factors to take account of individual school circumstances (Welsh Government, 2014c); thus, they have more power than local authorities in England. In Scotland, local authorities have even more discretion. Staff salary costs are paid by the local authority, and under devolved school management, control of the remaining education budget is passed to the head teachers through locally devised schemes, which set out spending requirements (Improvement Service, 2015). The allocation of funds to schools in Northern Ireland is, by contrast, prescribed by the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI, 2014).

In England and Wales, in addition to the main school budget, a new funding stream was introduced with the aim of raising the achievement of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In England, the Coalition Government introduced the 'pupil premium' grant, with money accompanying eligible pupils to the school they attend; this money is additional to the underlying schools budget (DfE, 2010). According to the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, the pupil premium would make it more likely that 'schools will want to admit less affluent children; and it

will make it more attractive to open new Free Schools in the most deprived parts of the country' (DfE, 2010: 81).[4] The pupil premium grant provides schools with a specific amount of money for each child registered as eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years (DfE, 2014c). In 2014/15, the rates were £1,300 per primary aged child and £935 per secondary aged pupil (Education Funding Agency, 2015). Central control of the pupil premium grant is not direct; rather, Ofsted reports on its use when it inspects schools. These changes resulted in higher levels of funds being targeted at more deprived schools between 2010 and 2013 (Sibieta, 2015). In Wales a similar grant for disadvantaged pupils, the pupil deprivation grant (PDG), was launched in 2012; this too was designed to help close the attainment gap (Welsh Government, 2014a).

Free early education and funding

Expanding free early education

Early education was expanded under the Coalition Government. In England, free early education was extended to include not only 3- and 4-year-olds but also disadvantaged 2-year-olds. Thus, from 2013/14, 20 per cent of the most disadvantaged 2-year-olds became eligible for 570 hours of free early education; this increased to 40 per cent in 2014 (in 2013, only 13 per cent of 2-year-olds took up the offer (DfE, 2014f). The Government also strengthened the statutory guidance on early education. The guidance for 2013 stated that local authorities *should* base decisions as to whether to fund a provider to deliver early education on the provider's Ofsted assessment (DfE, 2013b). But from 2014, the role of the local authority diminished with Ofsted being the 'sole arbiter of quality': the guidance stated that the local authority 'must not' undertake its own assessment of the quality of the provider, it must rely 'solely on the Ofsted inspection judgement of the provider…as the benchmark of quality' (DfE, 2014d: 4, 10).

Elsewhere in the UK early education was also expanded, although the details of the offer varied (see Table 1). In Scotland, following the 2014 Children and Young People (Scotland) Act (National Archives, 2014), the entitlement to free early education increased from 475 to 600 hours a year, the highest in the UK. As in England, disadvantaged 2-year-olds also became entitled to free early education. In Scotland, local authorities directly provide early education through nursery classes within primary schools and nursery schools. However – in marked contrast to England – to meet demand, local authorities commission private and voluntary centres (which must follow the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence) to provide early education places. The commissioning is via formal procurement processes, service level agreements, or grants. The guidance stresses that it is the 'responsibility of local authorities to determine fair and sustainable settlements locally with partner providers, while securing high quality provision' (Scottish Government, 2014a: 49). Local authorities should also be transparent about the rates for providers, bearing in mind commercial confidentiality.

In short – unlike in England – Scottish local authorities make the decisions about which providers should receive funds for the provision of free early education, and set up contracts with them to deliver provision, demonstrating clear local government control. In Wales, where there is also a mix of school and PVI settings, the provision and planning of places is the responsibility of the local authority (see Carmarthenshire County Council, 2014). As in school-based education, central government exerts a high level of control in England, while in Wales and Scotland there is more power vested with local government.

Table 1: Free part-time early education (2015)

Country	No of hours for 3- and 4-year-olds (38 weeks a year)	2-year-olds	Participation by age and provider type
England	570 (15 hours a week)	40% most disadvantaged (e.g. parent/carer in receipt of specified state benefits)	3-year-olds: 59% PVI providers, 35% maintained nursery schools/ classes; 4-year-olds: 20% PVI providers, 15% nursery schools/classes, and 62% infant classes (2014)
Wales	380 (10 hours a week)	Flying Start (39 weeks a year)[1]	3- and 4-year-olds: 85% maintained nursery schools/ classes, 1% independent (PV not available) (2012)
Northern Ireland	475[2]	If spaces – priority is given to children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds	3-year-olds: 53% PV providers; 47% maintained nursery schools/ classes (2015)
Scotland	600 (16 hours a week)	Disadvantaged (e.g. parent/carer in receipt of specified state benefits)	2- to 3-year-olds attending provision: 51% PV providers, 49% local authority services; 4- to 5-year-olds attending provision: 26% PV providers, 74% local authority services (2013)

Sources: Care Inspectorate, 2015; DENI, 2015a, 2015b; DfE, 2014f; NID, 2015b; Scottish Government, 2014b; Welsh Government, 2012, 2014b.

Notes:

[1] Flying Start is a targeted programme for families with children under 4 years of age in certain very disadvantaged areas of Wales; the core Flying Start childcare offer is made available to parents of all eligible 2- to 3-year-olds for 12.5 hours per week, 39 weeks of the year (Welsh Government, 2014b).

[2] 3-year-olds (compulsory education begins at the age of 4 years) (DENI, 2015b).

Funding early education

Funding arrangements for early education vary between countries, as in the case of school-based education. In England, the amount of money allocated to early education is decided by the local authority and funded via the Dedicated Schools Grant; local authorities can decide how much to allocate to early education. Since 2013, local authorities have distributed funds to providers via the demand-led 'early years single funding formula', which was piloted under the previous Labour administration. The formula, which is developed locally, must be composed of a single base rate for all early education providers (or a number of base rates differentiated by type of provider) according to cost differences that are deemed unavoidable. For 3- and 4-year-old children, the formula must include a supplement for deprivation (DfE, 2014d).

An 'early years pupil premium' was also introduced; this was piloted in January 2015 and, from April 2015, became payable to providers on the basis of the number of 3- or 4-year-olds from low income families who are in receipt of specified state benefits. Providers receive just

over £300 for each eligible 3- or 4-year-old child who takes up the full 570 hours of state-funded early education to which he or she is entitled (DfE 2014e).

In contrast to England, there is more discretion at a local level in Wales and Scotland with respect to the funding of free early education. In Wales, for children in the maintained sector, the distribution is determined by school funding regulations (National Archives, 2010b; see also Welsh Government, 2014c). For children in the PVI sector, the local authority funds providers via partnership arrangements. In Scotland, local authorities have discretion as to how much to spend on early education provision, both via devolved school management schemes and via their partnerships with private and voluntary providers.

In short, the governance of funding arrangements thus varies between countries of the UK. In England there is a high degree of central government control in terms of the distribution of resources to schools, whereas in Wales, and particularly Scotland, there is far more power vested with local government.

Variations in governance

This section draws on previous sections and discusses policy developments along with the governance of school-based and free early education in England, making comparisons where relevant with Scotland and Wales and the role played by central and local government. Over the past 25 years in England, there has been a commitment, by governments of different political complexions, to free market ideology (Glatter, 2012). At the same time, central government has taken a stronger and more active role, while giving schools more control over their resources (Woods and Simkins, 2014).

Two key features of school-based and early education governance in England are centralization of power, on the one hand, and the creation of enduring state-controlled markets, on the other. The policy developments demonstrate the control exerted by central government over other actors, in particular local authorities, but also schools. The role of local authorities as providers of education has diminished as a result of the conversion of the majority of secondary schools to academies, the introduction of free schools, and the presumption of an academy or free school if there is a need for a new school.

Moreover, central government also has control over schools that become academies and free schools as a result of the contract (funding agreement) it holds with the academy trust. At the same time, school autonomy – in theory at least – has increased as a result of the policy changes, as academies and free schools are not compelled to adhere to the full national curriculum, or to the national school teachers' pay and conditions document. Newer academies and free schools do not even need to employ qualified teachers (but see Cirin, 2014).

The introduction of the Dedicated Schools Grant in England is another indicator of central government control, ensuring that local authorities fund school-based education at the level set by the government. The Coalition introduced prescriptive regulations which modified the formula that local authorities must use to distribute funds to schools, including the minimum spend per pupil. In Scotland and Wales, there is less central control, although there are (less prescriptive) regulations underpinning formula funding in Wales.

Market principles have been a strong feature of the regulatory and funding arrangements in free early education in England. Statutory guidance determines how local authorities should fund early education providers and also enables local authorities to fund any provider registered (and not deemed 'inadequate') by Ofsted, the English inspection agency, and for Ofsted to be the 'sole arbiter of quality' (DfE, 2014: 4). This is in contrast to Scotland, where local authorities have

responsibility for contracting with providers of early education: free early education is restricted to those providers with which the local authority has an agreement.

Thus, in England, governments of different political complexions have constructed centrally-controlled, market-like environments in which schools and early education providers operate (cf. Ranson, 2008). In both schools and early education, governments have regulated how local authorities should fund providers, with regulations having been tightened under the Coalition.

The funding mechanisms can be seen to reflect different ideas about the role of the state with regard to education. In England, a policy goal under the Coalition – and indeed under Labour – was to diminish the role of local authorities as providers of education, bring in new providers, especially academies, and foster market-like environments in both early and school-based education. This is not the case in Scotland where, according to the Scottish Parliament's Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee (2011: para. 138):

> There appears to be little appetite in Scotland for any of the more radical alternatives to the current structure. The Committee found little enthusiasm in the written [or oral evidence] for any of the models that are currently available in England…

In Scotland, local government plays a critical role in the governance of schools and early years education (cf. Arnott, 2014). There is also strong trust in local authorities (Exley, 2007) in contrast to England (Davies, 2002). Moreover, different policy actors are in close physical proximity and there are close relationships between local authorities, civil servants, and politicians (McGarvey, 2002). In Wales, there are also close relationships between these key actors (Rees, 2007), with local authorities being regarded more favourably than they are in England and vested with more responsibility and power (Jones, 2002).

Conclusion

By drawing on an analysis of prominent Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government policies, it is clear that central government increased its control over school-based and free early education in England between 2010 and 2015. As a result of the development and expansion of the academies programme, central government became party to an increasing number of legal contracts (funding agreements) with academy trusts, private non-profit making bodies. The increase in central control – albeit indirectly (cf. Davies, 2002) via funding and regulation – was accompanied by a decrease in local government control. This system-wide transformation was, in turn, the result of incremental changes made over the past three decades (cf. Exley and Ball, 2011). In the 1980s, policies introduced by the Conservative Government resulted in the creation of a quasi-market, with schools competing for pupils and hence money. CTCs were created and schools could opt out of local authority control and be funded by central government. While a significant minority of secondary schools in England became grant-maintained, in Scotland and Wales – where there was antagonism toward the reforms – very few schools did so (Arnott, 2014; Farrell, 2014). Under the Labour Government elected in 1997, grant-maintained schools were brought back under local authority control. However, in England, sponsored academies – similar in terms of their legal status to CTCs – were established under the control of central government.

From 2010, the Coalition expanded the academies programme with legislation enabling schools to convert to academy status. The high rate of conversion of secondary schools to academies is notable and in marked contrast to the much lower proportion of schools that opted out of local authority control under the earlier Conservative administrations. This is likely to be, at least in part, due to financial factors and uncertainty over future school budgets

(see Cirin, 2014; Bassett *et al*., 2012) as a result of the UK Government's austerity programme following the 2007–09 financial crisis and economic recession.

By the end of the Coalition's term of office in 2015, a majority of secondary schools were owned by non-profit making trusts, bound by contract law, and subject to independent – not state maintained – school regulations, and under the control of central government. The fact that only a minority of primary schools converted to academies means, however, that local government still plays a significant role with regard to the governance of primary education. Academies were not introduced elsewhere in the UK, demonstrating divergence between the countries of the UK as a result of policy changes by Westminster (cf. Raffe, 2005).

The Coalition also introduced the pupil premium, which targets funding at disadvantaged children. The PDG, a similar grant, was introduced in Wales but not in either Scotland or Northern Ireland, indicating policy convergence between England and Wales. Other funding changes took place during the Coalition's term of office, in particular a tightening of the financial regulations regarding the distribution of funds by local authorities to schools in England. In Wales, the regulations allow more discretion by local authorities and in Scotland, there is considerable scope for local authorities to decide how resources are used at a local authority level; this is because the Revenue Support Grant is not hypothecated, and the fact that local authorities devise their own schemes for distributing funds to schools.

The provision of early education, unlike school-based education, is broadly similar across the UK. In each country, the duration of free early education was extended during the period of the Coalition Government to cover disadvantaged 2-year-olds. In England, there is a strong regulatory framework, both in terms of the role Ofsted plays as the 'sole arbiter of quality', and the distribution of funds to providers via the early years single funding formula. The role of local authorities in England has declined further under the Coalition Government, although this had begun under previous administrations. The result is that local authorities have a very different role from those in Wales or Scotland: central government has a much greater degree of control in relation to both the funding and regulation of free early education than in Wales or Scotland.

It seems reasonable to conclude that there is a distinctively English form of governance in terms of the role played by the state in facilitating, enforcing, and sustaining markets in school-based and early education. The role of local authorities has declined and, at the same time, the role of central government has increased. The mechanisms have included academization, with a massive increase in the number of schools owned by private but non-profit making trusts, and greater control over the distribution of funds to schools and early education.

Following the election of a Conservative Government in May 2015, the role of central government in the governance of school-based and free early education and care in England is set to expand. There is a commitment to open at least 500 new free schools with 270,000 new school places (Conservative Party, 2015), and the enactment of the Education and Adoption Bill will give central government new powers to take over failing and 'coasting' schools. In addition, the centrally determined pupil premium, protected at current rates, will be retained (ibid.). Regarding the early years, parents in work will be entitled to 30 hours a week of free childcare for 3- and 4-year-olds (compared with 15 hours of 'early education' for all 3- and 4-year-old children) following the enactment of the Childcare Bill; this will also require local authorities to publish information about the provision of childcare in their areas.

In conclusion, the governance arrangements under the Conservative Government in England look set to foster and sustain a state-controlled market in school-based education and early years provision, with central government's role increasing at the expense of local government. Contrasts with respect to governance across the countries of the UK are likely to become even more visible over the next five years.

Notes

1. In 1999 Scotland and Northern Ireland assumed executive and legislative responsibility for education. Wales assumed executive responsibility in 1999 and legislative responsibility in 2006.
2. A minority of pupils in the UK attend private fee-charging schools: 7 per cent in England (Independent Schools Council, 2014); 4 per cent in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2014b); 1.9 per cent in Wales (Welsh Government, 2011); and 0.2 per cent in Northern Ireland (DENI, 2014). In England, the publicly-funded school system is broadly comprehensive (5 per cent of schools are selective grammar schools); in Scotland and Wales the system is fully comprehensive; in Northern Ireland, there is a selective system (see Birrell and Heenan, 2013).
3. Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland receive a block grant from Westminster which is used to fund services. In Wales and Scotland, revenue support grant is distributed to local authorities; this alongside council and business taxes funds schools and early education. In Northern Ireland, education is funded by the block grant along with household and non-domestic rates and borrowing.
4. Free schools with a faith designation or an alternative/specialist curriculum tend to have proportionally fewer disadvantaged children than expected on the basis of their location (Morris, 2015).

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