

Commercial Actors and the Governing of Education: the case of academy school sponsors in England.

Natalie Papanastasiou, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh

European Educational Research Journal 12(4): 447-462

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ABSTRACT This article explores the ways in which commercial actors are operating in state education by focusing on the case study of England's academies policy. First of all the discussion outlines the development of academies over time and the way in which the policy has provided opportunities for private actors to become involved in the state schooling system. The second part of the article focuses on empirical findings from interviews with academy sponsors as a way of understanding the nature of the role commercial actors play in academies. Commercial sponsor involvement in academies demonstrates a blurring of the boundaries between 'public' and 'private', and the article suggests that commercial actors need to be understood not merely as participants in this process, but as being active in the reconstruction of 'public—private' categories. Also, it is underlined that the commercial sponsors in this study cannot be disconnected from the locality in which they operate. In light of this, the article calls for greater attention to be devoted to understanding local assemblages of policy when attempting to explore the role played by commercial actors in the governance of education.

Introduction

It has long been established that education in Europe cannot be understood at the level of individual state education systems. Instead, it is more appropriate to consider 'European educational space' as borderless and fluid (Lawn, 2002), being governed by a range of policy actors operating at local, national, European and global levels. Not only is this space being shaped by influences from multiple levels, it also increasingly involves a greater variety of actors. The commercial sector is emerging as a key area from which new actors, who have traditionally occupied spaces that are separate from state education, are emerging as key agents in the European education space. For example, the European Union's Open Method of Coordination is dominated by the notion of 'competitiveness', something which Jones et al (2008) and Dale (2004) argue has contributed to private sector principles being made legitimate in education spaces. Commercial actors have been provided with a variety of opportunities which have allowed them to enter the arena of education and as a result they can participate in negotiations around the governance and meanings of education. Literature on education has not yet established how the role of commercial actors should be conceptualised in the context of education governance and this article attempts to begin to address this gap.

The involvement of commercial actors in the field of education can be understood to be part of a broader shift from 'government' to 'governance' (Rhodes, 1996). This notion developed from the observation in the early 1990s that 'a wider range of actors may be participating [in areas of traditional state authority] and ... simplistic hierarchical models [were] ... being abandoned' (Hill & Hupe, 2002, p. 1). Authors, such as Kooiman (1993), became interested in how greater

institutional and participatory diversity accompanied the 'governance turn', and the development of networks and interdependencies between public and private sectors have become ever more important in

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this. Nóvoa and Lawn (2002, p. 7) argue that the European educational space is no exception to this, with governing activities being 'based more and more on the use of commercial and private actors'. This has had profound effects on our understanding of the role of 'the state'. Bob Jessop (1998, p. 32) has characterised this as a general shift towards the 'polycentric state' and 'a shift in the centre of gravity around which policy cycles move'. In other words, 'both the form and the modalities of the state' (Ball, 2008, p. 747) are in transit. Understanding the role commercial actors play in this new policy setting is a key part of the puzzle.

This article focuses on England's academies policy and uses it as a case study of a European space through which to gain insights into some of the ways commercial actors are operating in state education. The first part of the discussion gives an account of the development of the academies policy over time and how opportunities for commercial actors involvement in England's secondary schools have evolved during this process. The second part of the article discusses the findings of empirical research that focuses on interviews carried out with commercial sponsors of academies. The discussion reveals that commercial actors are not only present in the governance of education, but they are playing an active role in reconceptualising discourses of education that include questions over the very meaning of 'public' education. It also suggests that greater attention should be placed on the possibility of commercial actors being part of local policy assemblages instead of only associating these actors with national and transnational activities. Understanding the English context in greater depth is a step towards shedding greater light on how commercial actors operate within the European educational space; in the words of Doreen Massey (1984, p. 9) 'the whole mosaic of regional specificities ... can have an enormous impact' on shifts that take place in national and transnational spaces.

England's Academies Policy and the Role of Commercial Actors

Commercial actors have become involved in England's schooling system through a variety of educational activities over the last three decades. Stephen Ball's (2007) work has captured the wide range of ways in which commercial activities have infiltrated the work of the state in the field of education. These activities include local and national government employing private consultants for the development and evaluation of policy. Also, within schools, public—private partnerships involve private capital being injected into a range of public services 'in return for ... lucrative long-term service contracts' (Chitty, 2009, p. 96). Furthermore, commercial actors have become increasingly embedded in the 'policy communities' (Coleman & Skogstad, 1990) which contribute to shaping the future of education reforms in England. Ball (2007, p. 122) finds that these policy communities often consist of personal relationships 'and bring different members of the "power elite" into a very specific relation to state education and education policy'. This has

arguably resulted in a heterarchy of governance where ‘the range of actors involved in shaping and delivering policy’ (Newman, 2001, p. 125) is enlarged, involving traditional bureaucracies and administrative structures of the state being replaced by greater multiplicity and overlapping systems of policy organisation (Ball, 2009).

The increasing presence of commercial actors in education could also be regarded to be reflecting the trend of ‘new public management’ (NPM). NPM is a conceptual device which seeks to make sense of changes in the organisation and management of governments and/or public services. While the precise nature of NPM is contested, it is often described as involving traditional public administration being reformed by entrepreneurial management (Clarke & Newman, 1993). There is an emphasis on the superiority of private sector styles of management (Willcocks & Harrow, 1992) and a focus on outputs, such as standards and performance measurements (Osborne et al, 1995). While the ‘governance turn’ may have given rise to the opportunity for NPM discourses to take hold in policy (due to the diversification of policy actors and networks) the two are not necessarily associated. Indeed, research by Pollitt et al (2007) and Peters and Pierre (1998, p. 236) argue that Britain is ‘the significant exception’ amongst western European states in that it has ‘embraced NPM wholeheartedly’. This is supported by Seddon’s (1997) work which identifies England’s ‘exceptionalism’ in the European context, whereby English education reforms are arguably disaggregated from the rest of Europe to a greater extent than other European countries.

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Thus, within the English context it is relevant to note that a strong NPM logic is interwoven within the governance turn.

England’s academies policy provides a fascinating case study through which to explore these new conditions of governance heterarchy. It involves the direct involvement of commercial sponsors in the running of schools, and therefore the policy has great potential to shed more light on how private actors are influencing the governance of education.

Conservative Government Reforms and City Technology Colleges

The major influences of the academies policy have been traced back to reforms that took place in England’s schooling system during the late 1980s. The Conservative government at that time promoted market principles in the education system and also sought to diminish the importance of local education authorities (Jones, 2003). Two particularly key reforms were the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) and the 1992 White Paper — both ‘extolled “choice and diversity” in schooling’ (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 6) and emphasised that market forces had a role to play in shaping the school system. The ERA included creating ‘more devolved management structures for schools, giving them greater autonomy’ (Walford, 2000, p. 145) and giving greater choice to parents regarding which state school their child attends, thus creating what Le Grand and Bartlett (1993) branded a ‘quasi market’ in education. This quasi market emphasised market forces and private choice within a context of the state maintaining a smaller but still significant role in the running of schools.

An important piece of legislation included in the ERA related to the setting-up of City Technology Colleges (CTCs). The latter scheme was launched in 1989 and involved commercial actors entering the governance space of schools to an unprecedented degree. CTCs were 'government-funded ... non-fee-paying, independent schools run by educational trusts, with private sector business sponsors' (Walford, 1991, p. 82). Sponsors from business, industrial or charitable organisations were expected to cover all or a substantial part of CTCs' capital costs and play an active role in the institutions' development. CTCs were targeted at inner-city, failing schools and 15 were opened between 1989 and 1993 (Walford, 1991, p. 82). In addition to their financial contributions, CTC sponsors were characterised as providing valuable links to the world of business and for connecting schools with certain kinds of knowledge that traditionally lay outside the school curriculum. This is exemplified by the 1992 White Paper in which it is argued that 'sponsors can play a very positive role in helping schools to specialise in their preferred areas' (Department for Education [DfE], 1992, p. 44). Thus, during this period the involvement of commercial actors in school education was promoted as introducing students to additional knowledge from the specialised knowledge areas of science and technology.

At the time, the Department of Education and Science (DES) highlighted the importance of CTCs as being able to 'challenge the LEA [local education authority] "monopoly" of provision' (Edwards et al, 1992, p. 80). Authors, such as Whitty and Edwards (1998, p. 218), have emphasised that despite its limited scope and scale the CTC initiative can 'be interpreted as providing a model for how autonomous schools might be funded, organised and operate in a market'. The latter principles proved to be of instrumental importance to the subsequent development of the academies policy.

New Labour and the Academies Policy

Following the landslide electoral victory of New Labour in 1997, the new government soon made it very clear that they had further plans for the involvement of commercial actors in state schools. The City Academies Programme was launched in 2000 and made use of existing legislation that had been used to create CTCs (Curtis et al, 2008). The policy proposed that failing, inner-city secondary schools should be closed down and reopened as City Academies and that these would be run by external sponsors who would provide an initial £2 million investment for the school (Cunter, 2011). City Academies would no longer be accountable to their local authority, but instead be directly accountable to central government. They would also receive funding directly from central government as opposed to being allocated the funds through their local authority. In 2002, the Education Act changed the name from 'City Academies' to 'academies' in order to include rural

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parts of the country; throughout this period the focus remained on targeting educational failure. During the New Labour years the role of academy sponsors emphasised that commercial actors were much more embedded in educational institutions as opposed to the separate entities or providers of additional knowledge they were described as being previously. For example, the 2007 White Paper argued that: 'Sponsors challenge traditional thinking on how schools are run and should be like for students. This helps to raise standards and foster innovation and best

practice, which can then benefit other schools' (Department for Education and Skills, 2007, p. 96).

Thus, the academies policy served to frame commercial actors as not simply providing knowledge to students, but also governing the way schools are actually run. Commercial actors involved themselves as stand-alone sponsors of single academies or as leaders of 'academy chains'. The latter are multiple schools which share the same external sponsor and represent cross-national alliances of school governance. The majority of CTCs have now converted to academy status (Gunter, 2011). When the New Labour government was replaced by a Conservative—Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010, 203 academies had been set up with a plan to open an additional 100 in 2010 (Gillie & Bolton, 2010).

Coalition Government and Academies Today

The academies policy was further expanded by the coalition government. Within two months of being in power, the government passed the 2010 Academies Act which allowed all schools in the country to be eligible for academy status, including high-performing schools, primary and special schools. The conversion requirement for failing schools to have sponsors remained, yet successful schools (known as 'converters') did not require sponsorship. The 2010 White Paper marked a shift in government attitudes towards the role of commercial actors in education. There was a new emphasis on the 'common approach to professional development' and the 'sharing [of] effective practice' (DfE, 2010, p. 57) within academy chains spanning several geographical areas. The notion of what sponsors can offer schools has now become more rigid, with the DfE expressing a strong preference towards 'sponsors with a good track record of performance improvement' (DfE, 2013a). In this way, the expansion of academy chains is being promoted as they are more likely to satisfy current government preferences compared to a business with no previous sponsorship experience.

A substantial proportion of England's state schools have now become academies, particularly in the secondary school sector. One of the most recent surveys indicated that 1638 out of 3281 secondary schools are academies (DfE, 2013b). A total of 401 of these secondary academies are sponsor-led and 241 are run by the 8 largest national academy chains (Vaughan, 2013).

There is an important empirical gap regarding the role academy sponsors play in education governance. Stephen Ball (2007, 2009) has explored the nature of England's policy networks — which include academy sponsors and other commercial actors — to comment on the heterarchical nature of education governance. Woods et al (2007) have explored the entrepreneurial ethos of sponsored academies by closely examining their ethos and values through secondary sources. Most recently, Ball and Junemann (2012) have revealed the way in which the activities of academy chains are part of complex networks that span the public, private and third sectors. However, this kind of research remains the exception and research which engages with academy sponsors themselves is particularly limited. Indeed, Woods et al (2007, p. 254) underline the latter by arguing, '[m]ore needs to be known about the actual, developing relationships of sponsors to their academies and the nature and degree of their influence'. It is with this empirical gap in mind that the article now turns to introduce a study that involved research interviews with academy sponsors.

Empirical Research

The research project which will hereafter form the focus of the discussion used a Metropolitan authority as a local authority case study in the North West of England (henceforth referred to as the NW-LA). The data collection involved interviewing six sponsor representatives in the NW-LA between November 2012 and February 2013. The main research questions were: 'How have corporate sponsors come to be involved in the academies policy?' and 'What is the nature of commercial actors' role in the governance of education?'. Interviews followed a semi-structured

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format which focused on asking sponsors about the process of becoming involved in the academies policy, what they perceive to be the benefit of commercial sponsorship to schools, and how they would characterise their relationship with academy principals and teachers. A semi-structured format is sufficiently open to allow for interviewees' reflections to significantly shape the discussion Arksey & Knight, 1999).

Analysis of the interview transcripts was informed by ideas from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is based on the notion that 'texts' (for example, verbal speech or writing) 'can never be understood or analysed in isolation — they can only be understood in relation to webs of other texts and in relation to the social context' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 70). Importantly, CDA emphasises how discourse is a form of social practice which both creates the social world and is itself constituted by other social practices (Fairclough, 1992). Using this theoretical approach, the views of the policy actors expressed in the interviews were analysed by trying to understand how they are part of wider discourses and wider social practices that exist in the policy spaces in which they operate. A key strength of this approach is its ability to expose the socially constructed nature of the 'rationality' of policy actors and the way in which discourse is used tactically as a way of making certain ideas and relations seem more logical than others (Fulcher, 1989). In contrast to Foucault and Laclau and Mouffe's 'more abstract discourse analysis' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 92), a critical discourse analytical approach seeks to systematically examine empirical examples of language use when attempting to understand wider social practices.

The Academies Policy in the NW-LA

Within the NW-LA, educational performance and school attendance rates have a long history of being consistently lower than the national average and school improvement remains high on its policy agenda to the present day. The last two decades have seen a significant economic restructuring of the NW-LA, with investment being poured into a diversifying city economy that includes financial services, retail, real estate, and culture industries. However, a significant challenge to the local area is that its local communities lack the skills demanded by local employers; addressing this skill gap has become one of the city's main priorities.

During the early years when New Labour had launched the academies policy, the NW-LA City Council Council negotiated an agreement with central government to launch a group of sponsored academies. Academies were seen by the NW-LA as being a partial means by which to

address the educational disadvantage of local communities, particularly through the involvement of sponsors who were commercial organisations linked to the city economy. Simultaneously, the New Labour government was anxious for their new policy initiative to be taken up and so the fact that the NW-LA was offering to open several new academies had great appeal. In return for promoting the newly launched national policy, the NW-LA insisted on being a co-sponsor of academies as a way of ensuring that these institutions remained linked into the area's priorities, and that the NW-LA would be represented on the governing body of each academy. The NW-LA was also able to persuade central government that commercial sponsors of the new academies would not need to pay the usual sponsor requirement of a £2 million capital investment.

After reaching agreement on the local academies model, the NW-LA recruited key commercial actors who represented large employer organisations of the region and each of these became a lead sponsor of a new academy. These negotiations took place between 2004 and 2006. After three to four years of construction work on the new academy buildings, the academies opened in 2010. Six representatives of the NW-LA academy sponsors were approached for interview and all agreed to participate.

The discussion will now focus on what the interviews reveal about the role of commercial actors in the governance of education. Any information that may have compromised the anonymity of sponsors has been removed from the quotations used in the discussion which follows. In addition, all points of emphasis in the quotations (unless stated otherwise) are in the original interview transcripts as opposed to having been added by the author.

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Why Become an Academy Sponsor?

An interesting issue to open the discussion with is to focus on how sponsors made sense of their choice to get involved in education. The following quotations reflect sponsors' general reasoning about their involvement:

[initially] academies ... jarred with [our values) ... Because it felt like they were being taken out of local authority control. And we ... said 'no' in the first instance ... we were then approached by xxxx [NW-LA]. Now, we're one of the largest employers in the city and they'd come up with this model ... And at the time it felt very much like they'd unpicked some of the reasons we'd said 'no', and that having, sort of getting xxxx [NW-LA City Council] involved, I think pretty much swayed it for us.

They [NW-LA] came along and said to us, 'we'd like you to be a sponsor'. We said, 'no thanks [smiles] — it's not where we want to go, it's not in our interest'. At that time academy sponsors, there was a particular type, you put your £2 million in and you get a new name on the building and all those sorts of things — that wasn't us. Okay. So they came back to see us a couple of times, and explained to us that it wasn't about the money, it was *commitment* ... It was using major employers and bringing our expertise in to helping them to raise the standards of education in xxxx [NW-LA]. And it just felt a *natural progression*.

Well, there are two reasons why xxxx [sponsor] got involved in the academy programme. The first was to, erm, cement relationships between the xxxx [sponsor] and the community so that we could have a very meaningful role within xxxx [area within NW-LA], which is the community in which xxxx academy is and to create a really sustainable community. The second was to connect young people with the world of work and to make it very real for young people ... and to hopefully encourage people to work in the local area.

All sponsors explain their reasoning for getting involved in the NW-LA academies by underlining how the initiative is locally embedded. Two sponsors in the above quotations describe how they initially rejected the idea of academy sponsors in the form in which it had been presented by national policy. One sponsor argued that the way in which the academies policy was framed as taking schools out of local authority control 'jarred' with their organisational values of localism and community participation. The other sponsor describes the national model of 'you put your £2 million in and you get a new name on the building and all those sorts of things' as unappealing. Yet both of these businesses reconsidered the NV/-LA City Council's proposal when the local nature of the initiative was underlined to them. Therefore, the policy made sense to these sponsors — who identify themselves as having a local presence — by the fact that it specifically demanded commercial actors who were both important to and familiar with the local context.

Being a major employer in the local area is a reason that is cited by all sponsors when they explain their involvement with academies. Indeed, this is a key part of why these commercial actors strongly identify themselves in relation to the local area. Sponsors also describe the creation of local partnerships formed by collaborating with the NW-LA City Council and local communities as making sense and indeed sometimes being a 'natural progression' for the future aspirations of their business. Interestingly, this local partnership is understood by sponsors to make sense for both themselves as well as the NV/-LA City Council. Indeed, they see the issue of local communities lacking the skills demanded by local employers as not only being an issue of concern to the NW-LA City Council, but also of great relevance to themselves and the community.

The emphasis commercial actors place on having a locally embedded interest in academies was not reflected in all interviews. One sponsor explained their involvement with academies in the following way:

At the time xxxx [sponsor], through its corporate responsibility program, had a significant strand of its activity in education. Providing resources, erm, encouraging xxxx people [sponsor employees] to be governors of schools etc, etc. ... So, it fitted nicely within something that our policy and our intent as an organisation was.

The above sponsor explains their involvement in the NV/-LA academies by placing less emphasis on the identity of the business being linked to the local area and instead focuses on national agendas and discourses of corporate care and responsibility. This is actually consistent with the fact

that this particular business has relatively looser links with the local area — its organisational history and its commercial activities are not associated specifically with the NW-LA area in contrast to the other commercial sponsors.

How Do Academies Benefit from Commercial Sponsors?

Good Governance

The biggest contribution sponsors consider themselves offering academies is that of an improvement in ‘governance’. The interviewees perceive ‘good governance’ being inextricably linked to the way in which their academy’s governing body is steered. Indeed, this is unsurprising as all lead academy sponsors have a representative who is the Chair of the Board of Governors and some also have additional governor representatives within the governing body. Interviewees described the process of running governor meetings as being an integral part of achieving ‘governance success’:

So I have my governing body meetings, they’re disciplined, they’re into our frames, and, erm ... and it works ... I try and help with the social stuff as well but all the business is done in a very orderly [way], very ... And that’s the difference in governance, erm, and papers are all provided for.

Well you’ve got to be [organised]. This [governors] meeting starts at 4 o’clock and will end at six. And everybody will attend, who’s in the country or otherwise, I have a high attendance rate ... the papers are very organised.

I’m very keen on, you know, good structure, good process round the governing body. Papers have to be, erm, circulated a week before, you know, agendas — we’re very clear on what we’re trying to agree or not agree ... I think a lot of the business-sponsored academies do take that side very seriously.

Attention to the procedural details of meetings demonstrates the importance sponsors give to academies being run with a style of professionalism that is emphasised in corporate environments. In this way, sponsors suggest that meetings would be run less efficiently and effectively if they did not follow the protocols of a commercial environment. This links to the wider discourse of NPM which frames private sector reforms as being necessary to introduce to the ‘inefficient’ public sector.

The way in which sponsors emphasise the structured and disciplined nature of governor meetings is also reflected in how they approach and discuss ‘problems’ and issues. What commercial actors demonstrate is a strong focus on targets, measurement and time frames:

At the board [of governors] ... we will be, erm, *pushing* in relation to the 2013-2014 development plan, erm, for the xxxx academy, will be pushing for the financial xxxx plan to be completed on time, to budget, et cetera, et cetera.

What are we about?’ Strong governance, targets. What are we doing?’ What are we doing about it?’ *Success* [pause] is all that we’re looking for.

We have a balanced scorecard which we [use] ... and that’s because businesses quite often use a balanced scorecard ... So we set [the targets for] this at the beginning of the year and then we have different targets.

The xxxx [sponsor], erm, want the academy to be, erm, world-leading, world-class education, as part of the world-class education system for the city, so we are challenging those performance targets up and up and up. And, erm, by understanding through the chairman [sponsor] the performance targets [of] the xxxx [*sponsor*] have.

Private practices of target-setting and NPM discourses around ‘what works’ are a dominant force behind how governing body meetings are run by sponsors. Indeed, if the first two statements were taken out of context they could very easily be discussing any kind of business organisation, underlining how sponsors often equate the running of a school to the running of a business organisation. The last two quotations in particular indicate sponsors transferring practices directly

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from business to education. A ‘balanced scorecard’ is a tool used in strategy performance management which ‘provides executives with a comprehensive framework that translates a company’s strategic objectives into a coherent set of performance measures’ (Kaplan & Norton, 1995, p. 66): one of the sponsors has used the same principles to achieve their academy’s strategic objectives. The final quotation demonstrates a sponsor arguing that a greater understanding of how to improve academy performance can be gained by considering the way in which a business organisation approaches performance targets. By making such direct connections between academies and the organisations they work for, sponsors reveal how a key part of the way they manage governance is to draw on ‘what works’ in business and apply it to governing education.

Challenge

An additional key contribution sponsors argue that they make to the governance of their academy is the provision of a strong ‘challenging’ role:

The other key pans of the business that I think ... we’re very good at doing is challenging. And I’ve seen our business people on, working with our educationalists going, ‘why do you do *that?*’ [pause] ‘we’ve always done it’ — well that’s not really a very good reason.

The principal runs the education business day-to-day and, erm, we provide support and challenge to that through governance ... At the board, the same sort of, erm, challenge and support — but it is very much *challenge*, it isn’t just support, it’s challenge and support, challenge and support.

The school is run by the principal. Our task, and we see this, is to support them. Support him and them in doing the job but to *challenge*. And those two are very closely linked, we use support and challenge and talk *often* about it — so we're *constantly* questioning, *constantly* looking at that.

So everything, everything that's helped us run a successful business ... we just *ask* and *ask* and *ask*. And the questions, they bring out the challenges: how are we going to improve *that* then? What are we going to do *there* then? So it's constantly challenging.

The above quotations can all be linked to wider discourses of innovation which are not traditionally associated with public sector discourse, but indicate how the logic of NPM is becoming increasingly acceptable (Newman, 2000) in England's public education. The way in which a sponsor refers to 'the education business' in the second quotation underlines the previous arguments made about how sponsors make direct comparisons between running a business organisation and an educational organisation. Commercial actors talk about how they question the traditional ways educationalists operate and how, unlike educationalists, they do not take the status quo for granted. Sponsors argue that being 'challenging' yet supportive is something unique that business can bring to the way the governing body is run. However, interestingly, this language is mirrored in the requirements of being a governor for any school in England. For example, the National Governors' Association (2013) describes one of the key functions of a governing body to be, 'a source of challenge and support to the headteacher (a critical friend)'. Therefore, despite 'challenge' being the role of any governing body, it is meaningful that commercial actors assert that they are more capable of this than a non-commercial governing body. By doing so, there is the suggestion that commercial environments have a culture of being able to ask the 'tough questions' and be more confrontational compared to a more risk-averse, stagnant public sector culture.

Knowledge of the 'World of Work'

Sponsors also identify themselves as being in a unique position to offer their academies both insights into and experiences of the 'world of work'. They identify themselves as having the astute perspectives of students' future employers, which is a kind of knowledge that educationalists are unable to offer:

Where we're trying to work now, really push the boundaries, push things along is to say [pause] we know what a world of work looks like. And we know what you need to prepare your kids.

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for. Now some of your kids, some of our students might go on to be Oxford graduates and that's great. But that's not going to be everyone's route.

It's important that they, those that want to continue with learning can be appropriately positioned on courses that are relevant for work — big, bold letters because the big ticket item here for sponsors, for learning is all, all this is great to hear but if it doesn't result in jobs for

the students it's, erm [pause] it's a storyboard without a happy ending. So it's, it's the route to work so, so important — academy sponsors help.

There's also an opportunity to introduce them to a far wider network of potential employers in — and we do regularly have — erm, work shadowing, work experience, apprenticeships, erm, et cetera et cetera, and the young people spend a lot of time at, at xxxx [the sponsor].

Once again, these quotations are driven by discourses of innovation — sponsors talk about introducing students to the world of work in terms of 'pushing boundaries' and introducing new and essential knowledge and skills into education. Indeed, the second comment suggests that learning which does not include this knowledge or links to employment is almost without value — 'a storyboard without a happy ending'. The public sector approach to education is therefore suggested to be out of touch with what is important for students once they leave school.

An important point to make about sponsors' emphasis on linking academies to the 'world of work' is that it reflects the NW-LA's aim of closing the gap between the skills of the local community and the skills demanded by employers (which include the sponsors themselves) in the local area. Hence, the way in which these particular commercial actors are governing academies cannot be disconnected from the local context in which they operate. Indeed, in this case, the sponsors have been chosen by the local authority in order to enter a partnership to achieve the educational aims of the city. Consequently, when seeking to understand the role commercial actors play in the governance of education, the associated local context can be crucial to shaping how commercial actors operate in these public spaces.

Sponsors in Partnership with Educationalists

While the commercial actors in the NW-LA define the role they play in academies by highlighting what the sponsor organisation brings to education, they also convey their role by discussing their partnership with educationalists. All interviewees emphasise that they perceive a distinct boundary between the worlds of 'education' and 'business' and that this therefore makes necessary the need to work in partnership:

So, do I know what it looks like to be a teacher on a daily basis? No. Erm ... do I have an *idea*? Yes. Do I have an idea of how organisations can work and function? Yes. Can I work with educationalists to scrutinise what's going on and challenge? Yes.

So the sponsors aren't the teachers ... it's the sponsor *working with the* [academy] *leadership team* that change the culture ... it's *joined up*.

I'm not an educationalist, I don't have an education background, we work with educationalists so we work in partnership.

But we do understand the different roles between being an *educational* expert and being a sponsor ... My view is: we're in this together, and it's a partnership between myself, the board of governors, the Principal and the, the teaching staff.

These quotations illustrate how sponsors construct a clear boundary between the worlds of business and education. The first two comments argue that commercial actors lack experience of working in school environments and that sponsors are unable to involve themselves in the pedagogical aspects of the school. Sponsors therefore perceive educational expertise being embedded within (and limited to) school contexts. The third and fourth quotations highlight how commercial actors see themselves as having a knowledge gap when it comes to education by talking about how they ‘don’t have an education background’ and that they lack educational ‘expertise’. This ties in with what has previously been discussed regarding how they perceive the ‘sponsorship’ role to be based on bringing in professional business practices to the board of

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governors, innovating and challenging the norms of the state education sector, and linking academies with knowledge of the ‘world of work’. The role of sponsors therefore does not involve using specialised educational knowledge — indeed, commercial actors ‘add value’ to education precisely because they have experience of the private not the public sector, and have business, not educational, knowledge.

So looking at how sponsors discuss the nature of the partnership, it appears to be of a complementary nature which suggests that the boundaries between education and business can be maintained due to a lack of overlap between the two worlds. The way in which sponsors describe the nature of partnership — with education and business occupying distinct roles and knowledge worlds — makes it seem as though it is an entirely complementary alliance. However, at several points sponsor interviewees suggest that the way in which they, as commercial actors, define the boundaries around how business and education can and should work in partnership has sometimes been met with contestation or resistance on the part of educationalists:

Ok, well [I] definitely want this one confidential [laughs] [pause]. I’ve been quite *shocked* if I’m honest about ... the snobbery that goes on between teachers and non-teachers ... But there is still this overriding culture that if you are not a teacher you don’t add value. And I find that ... frustrating, but we will crack it.

Erm.[pause] It was *difficult* to, erm, integrate our business thoughts with, erm, the educationalist thoughts of teachers and by that I mean in the very early days some teachers thought: well what do we know about *education*?

Erm, so I think there’s a little bit of public — for our academy, because we’re a business sponsor — there’s a little bit of the culture of public sector versus a commercial culture, coming together.

These quotations expose how commercial actors have had to deal with scepticism over the process of them entering a discursive space that has traditionally been occupied by the public sector. What is striking about the comments is that commercial actors make no suggestion of renegotiating what their own role ought to be. In the first comment the sponsor’s reaction to resistance towards the role of business in education is that, ‘we will crack it’ and, similarly, in

the second quotation the sponsor describes how, despite resistance, they still worked hard to integrate business thoughts with those of teachers. It is therefore suggested by sponsors that educational problems need to be addressed by changing aspects of the public sector according to private sector assumptions. These particular sponsor attitudes closely reflect NPM discourses of the private sector being the solution to public sector failings. The final quotation characterises this issue as ‘the culture of public sector versus [emphasis added] a commercial culture’ and only serves to reinforce the previously discussed phenomenon of the discursive boundary between ‘public’ and ‘private’ being contested.

Discussion

Corporate Governance as a Localised Phenomenon

Perspectives of academy business sponsors in a local authority in the North West of England have demonstrated that understanding the role corporate actors play in the governance of education involves taking ‘the local’ seriously. It has been observed that corporate actors may not necessarily govern in ways that can always be explained by considering broader categories of ‘public and private’ or transnational discourses of ‘new public management’. This has been demonstrated in particular by the ways in which sponsors discussed how they came to be involved in the education sector. All the commercial actor interviewees described their decision to become academy sponsors as being related to the role their organisation plays in the local area. For example, being important local employers and having a long history of working closely with the NW-LA City Council were cited as key reasons for getting involved in the education initiative. Indeed, two sponsors initially rejected the NW-LA’s suggestion that they should consider becoming involved because they only knew of the national prescriptions for academy sponsors and could not see a reason for this to make sense for their organisations. Finally, the involvement of the NW-LA City Council as a co-sponsor was a crucial factor for convincing corporate actors to become involved with the local academies initiative. Sponsors found the prospect of working in partnership with the City Council

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to assist in raising educational standards in the area to be far more compelling than the idea of operating as a stand-alone sponsor. This can also be further explained by the existing close relationship between the City Council and the sponsor organisations as a result of collaborating in the context of regeneration schemes that have been taking place in the city over the past three decades.

Naturally, there was variation in the extent to which sponsors gave weighting to local factors when making the decision to become involved in education. One commercial actor, for example, placed most emphasis on the fact that academy sponsorship fitted into the national ‘corporate responsibility’ agenda of the organisation they were employed by. However, the organisation in question was less historically embedded in the NW-LA and its corporate persona was not especially linked to the local area. Therefore, this still reflects how the position commercial actors occupy locally can be a key consideration when trying to make sense of which discourses inform how they govern education and why they have come to be involved.

Commercial actors also demonstrated that their activities often reflected the policy priorities of the NW-LA City Council. All sponsors emphasised how one of their biggest roles was to link students to the ‘world of work’ by providing them with work experience and developing skills that are in demand by local employers. One of the most high profile agendas of the NW-LA City Council has been to address the skills gap between local communities and employment opportunities being provided in the area, and this has therefore been supported by academy sponsors. This is highlighted in particular by one sponsor describing how: ‘[we are] bringing our expertise in to helping them [the local authority] to raise the standards of education in NW-LA’. The primary focus is therefore on assisting the NW-LA achieve their agenda for the local area as opposed to the corporate aims of the sponsor.

Although it is striking how some of the incentives and strategies that the corporate sponsors in the research articulate a very local character, it is important to note that the local context may not necessarily be such an important consideration in the case of sponsors who have different characteristics to the ones in the NW-LA case study. Research by Chapman and Salokangas (2012) which describes the activities of national academy chains in England — where a single sponsor governs several academies covering multiple geographical locations across the country — serves to effectively demonstrate this point. The authors reveal:

Some [chains] are driven by prescriptive models of Federal improvement based on a philosophy of replication and fidelity of implementation with little regard for context specificity. For example, one Academy chain works on the basis of an 80:20 ratio, believing 80% of effective schooling is generalisable, leaving 20% specific to the particular context. (p. 483)

From this description it is clear that the incentives for academy chains becoming a sponsor are less likely to involve making links to social practices related to the local context of an academy. Also, rather than being part of a local partnership — as was the case with sponsors’ partnership with the NW-LA City Council — Chapman and Salokangas’ description suggests that academy chains are more likely to be in partnership with other academies in the chain (spread across the country). Thus, the vision and driving discourses for becoming a business sponsor may not always be linked to the local context in which commercial actors operate. Nonetheless, understanding commercial actors in relation to their locality proved to be a crucial consideration for the empirical case study presented here.

The Endurance of ‘Public—Private’ Dualisms

Despite a focus on local context being an important aspect of understanding the role sponsors play in the governance of academies, it would only seem to apply to the particular aspects of the sponsorship role that have already been highlighted. Analysis of other facets of sponsor governance indicates that these commercial actors operate in a way that closely reflects both transnational discourses of NPM and the process of making a-contextual distinctions between ‘public’ and ‘private’ discursive categories.

Indeed, it is clear that broad ‘public—private’ dualisms dominate sponsors’ world view and that this, in turn, affects the way they govern education. This distinctly comes across by the way in which sponsors talk about the benefits they bring to academies. For example, interviewees

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emphasised the importance of changing the process by which governor meetings are run in a way that reflects a style of professionalism associated with corporate environments. They directly argue that they place importance on this because they come from a business background; in this way a discourse of ‘private’ processes replacing ‘public’ practice is constructed and enacted. Sponsors adopt a similar manner to discuss how their governor meetings approach educational problems in a distinctive way, with a strong focus on targets and use of business evaluation tools. Here, commercial actors make sense of the role they play in the governance of education by drawing on a ‘public—private’ dichotomy — in this way attention is diverted away from the local character of sponsorship.

Sponsors also draw on a discourse which constructs generalised categories of ‘public’ and ‘private’ to explain their contribution to improving education governance by adopting a ‘challenging’ role. By arguing that they are able to challenge the status quo that exists in education through introducing a business culture of constant scrutiny and questioning, commercial actors demonstrate that they perceive critical advantages to running organisations according to private (as opposed to public) principles. The latter particularly relates to how sponsors perceive education culture lacking innovative ideas or an ability to be constructively confrontational.

Finally, sponsors base descriptions of their partnership with educationalists on the idea of boundaries existing between public and private sectors. All sponsors admit to lacking the experiential knowledge of education and working in schools, and in this way reflect a discourse where very distinct boundaries exist between ‘business’ and ‘educational’ expertise. These boundaries become most striking when the sponsors describe how educationalists contest the presence of commercial actors in education. They describe it as a ‘public sector versus a commercial culture’ which frames it as a universal issue, not a local one. This serves to demonstrate that commercial actors make sense of their role in education by drawing on general categories of ‘public’ and ‘private’; these arguments are presented in such a way so as to suggest that in the governance of education these overarching discourses of difference between business and education are given more emphasis than the contextual situation in which sponsors are operating.

In light of the above, it seems that there is an enduring discourse of ‘public—private’ dualisms that brings these ideas to the forefront when making sense of the role commercial actors play in the governance of education. While it may be essential to consider the local context in which commercial actors are operating, this is only one part of the dynamic. The way academy sponsors self-identify as private actors facing challenges related to the way public sector organisations are run highlights how generic discourses of NPM dominate the way commercial sponsors consider

the role they play in the governance of education. Within this, sponsors construct the ‘public’ and ‘private’ according to their distinctive ‘ways of being’ (Ribbens-McCarthy & Edwards, 2002, p. 201).

An issue which has arguably not been given enough emphasis in the literature is the way in which commercial actors are active participants in the process of reconceptualising and renegotiating the meanings of public education. The research findings presented here have highlighted how academy sponsors make strong assertions about what constitutes ‘educational expertise’, where the boundaries between ‘public’ and ‘private’ lie, and what areas are in need of reform within schools. By enacting these — sometimes openly contested — assertions in the education contexts in which they operate, commercial actors demonstrate how embedded they have become in the shaping of education policy and politics. It therefore seems reasonable to call for commercial actors to be understood not merely as participants in the heterarchical governance of education policy, but also as active (re-)constructors of discourses around what the role of the private sector ought to be in state education. This, in turn, affects the very notion of what ‘state education’ actually means.

The sponsors in the NW-LA case study in England would appear to be actively reconstructing these meanings both in partnership with and within boundaries set by the City Council they were recruited by. This arrangement therefore has greater potential for commercial actors to actively reconstruct meanings of education in a way that is integrated with what Woods et al (2007, pp. 252-253) argue is a public sector preoccupation with ‘the complexities of the social provision of education, including structural inequalities and the deep ethical and values questions bound up with it’. However, it seems reasonable to argue that these kinds of reflections about the future of education are in danger of being side-lined in cases where commercial actors — such as academy

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chains — are operating in a context where there is a loose or complete absence of partnership with a state institution. This argument is particularly pertinent in light of the current coalition government’s preference for academy chain sponsors who can demonstrate a track record of school improvement and yet who have no requirement to enter local partnerships.

It is important to note, however, that empirical studies which include the perspectives of academy sponsors and commercial actors in general are still very limited in number. While this article points to the perspectives and ways in which these actors describe their contribution to education governance in a particular case study, there is a need for more empirical research to be carried out in this area. Future studies could focus on different types of sponsors (such as academy chains), contrasting local contexts, as well as other European states which are also seeing commercial actors involve themselves directly in the governance of schools. For example, reforms during the 1990s have resulted in Sweden’s education system now involving ‘major business interests in upper secondary education and a dominance of profit-maximising companies’ (Arreman & Holm, 2011, p. 235). What is also missing from this analysis are the perspectives of the sponsors’ local partners. Having an insight into how the local authority or academy principals perceive the way in which sponsors govern education would provide a

broader understanding of how commercial actors operate and how they are perceived by their partners. This would also strengthen the way in which the ‘partnership’ between sponsors and educationalists is understood — this article only provides a partial insight into this partnership due to an absence of academy teacher and principal perspectives.

Conclusion

To conclude, the article has used the case study of England’s academies policy as a way of exploring the dynamics of commercial actor involvement in the governance of education. The discussion has revealed that when sponsors make sense of their role and the benefits they bring to academies they draw on a-contextual discourses of ‘public versus private’ dualisms and NPM. This underlines the enduring power of these traditional distinctions in education governance. But it is not to say that the ‘public’ and ‘private’ are remaining distinct as commercial actors enter the governing spaces of education. In fact, Ball (2009) argues that the infiltration of private actors into state education is increasingly blurring the traditional categories of ‘public’ and ‘private’. If one returns to Newman’s (2001) idea that education policy is increasingly becoming a heterarchy where the number of actors involved in policy is being multiplied, this also underlines how it has become increasingly difficult to carve out a space for the state without including private actors and the commercial sector.

However, this has only been part of the story. This article has also demonstrated that we need to go beyond understanding the governance of education as a bluffing between public and private. What has proved to be a critical dimension to the governance dynamics of corporate actor involvement in the empirical case study presented here is that these actors cannot be disconnected from the locality in which they are operating. The unique relationships and agreements they share with the NW-LA City Council, as well as the personal allegiance they feel towards addressing the challenges of the particular geographical area, mean that simply allocating them the label of ‘commercial actors’ is insufficient. They are not only independent ‘commercial actors’, but they are also part of and framed by local dynamics. In light of their locally embedded nature it has also been argued that commercial actors should not merely be conceptualised as policy participants, but instead be understood as active (re-)constructors of discourses around how education should be governed. Yet, crucially, their agency is limited by and dependent upon negotiating their position with local state actors and institutions.

So what are the implications therefore for the way in which we think about commercial actors in the governance of ‘public’ education? This article suggests that greater attention needs to be devoted to understanding local assemblages of policy which feed into the wider patchwork of education in national and European spaces. It is argued that this would allow us to move beyond the categories of ‘public’ and ‘private’ and — even though the latter remain important — shifting a conceptual focus in this way could allow for a more nuanced appreciation of the powerful role local contexts can play in shaping how commercial actors operate in education governance.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank Dr Sotiria Grek for her insightful comments on a number of aspects of this article. In addition, I am grateful for the helpful feedback from three anonymous reviewers. I am also appreciative to Karen Dearing for proof reading the article. The research would not have been possible without the sponsor representatives generously giving up their time to be interviewed. The work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number ESIO 1943X/ 1).

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