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## **The Organisational Steering Processes of Two UK Education Departments**

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## **The Organisational Steering Processes of Two UK Education Departments**

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**ABSTRACT** *Within the accounting literature, management control has been studied from an intra-organisational focus. The emphasis has been on formal control processes that compare actual performance with planned performance within a single organisation. This study considers the control processes between Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and Schools and seeks to extend our knowledge about inter-organisational control processes.*

*Through the Local Management of School (The Education Reform Act 1988) and the more recent Fair Funding Initiative (The School Standards and Framework Act 1998) that devolved funds to schools, a boundary has been created between schools and the Local Education Authorities. Because of school autonomy, it is not possible for the LEAs to use the more formal methods of control to direct school performance. Different mechanisms of control processes are used to reflect the new relationships between schools and LEAs.*

*This paper reports on empirical findings from two education authorities. It highlights the use of informal control mechanisms by the education departments as they attempt to steer schools.*

**KEYWORDS:** Steering, Inter-Organisational Control, Local Education Authorities, Management Control Systems, Performance Management

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## Introduction

Much has been written about New Public Management (NPM) in the UK public sector. In particular the decentralisation of resources to front line service providers away from bureaucratic organisations is well researched. Within the UK schools sector the decentralising effects of NPM on the management of schools was achieved through the Education Reform Act 1988 and entered into the accounting literature through the work of Edwards et al. (1995, 1997, 2005) and the work of Broadbent et al. (1993, 1994, 1997, 1998, 1999). The Education Reform Act 1988 led to the financial devolution of school budgets from LEAs to schools through the Local Management of Schools scheme. Management control roles that had previously belonged to Local Education Authorities diverted to schools as they became self managing and assumed the responsibility for taking all their financial and managerial decisions (Broadbent, Laughlin, Shearn and Dandy, 1993; Broadbent, 1995; Edwards, Ezzamel, Robson and Taylor, 1995, 1997; Edwards, Ezzamel and Robson, 2005). Arguably Local Management of Schools was an accounting led reform that through the technology of funding and budgetary reform, redefined the roles of LEAs and schools and their relationships with each other (Broadbent et al., 1993, 1994, 1997, 1998, 1999).

However with the exception of the work of Edwards et al. (1995, 1997, and 2005) there is not much work in the accounting literature that considers the effects of the NPM changes on the roles of local education authorities (LEAs) and their relationship with schools that ensued from Local Management of Schools. Edwards et al. (1997) concluded that the relationship between LEAs and schools changed such that:

A new style of relationship between LEAs and school is emerging, a style that is presented by the LEAs in such terms as 'partnership', 'family-ties', 'tight-knit community', etc., where the emphasis is on 'working together' with the LEA using the skill of persuading rather than directing school (Edwards et al., 1997, page 46).

The Edwards et al. (1997) work therefore suggested that the relationship between the LEAs and schools had started to change as a result of school self management. In a more recent work Edwards et al. (2005), argue that LEAs have sought to retain their status as dominant players in the education organisational field with relationships between LEAs and schools remaining strong. They conclude that by 1997 the LEAs appeared to have maintained their dominant position by reconstructing new roles for themselves.

This paper studies the management relationships between LEAs and schools by reporting on an empirical study that considered the effects of more recent reforms introduced by the New Labour Government during its first term of office between 1997 and 2002. In so doing it aims to add to the literature of management control and respond to the Otley, Broadbent and Berry (1995) request for more work on broadening our understanding of management control especially where institutional arrangements may affect the legitimacy of different methods of control within and between organisations. It is argued that through legislation and government regulation there has developed a situation whereby more formal and direct management controls have become stunted such that alternative ways of achieving the LEA organisational goals with schools are pursued. The paper analyses the methods used by two LEAs as they attempt to direct schools within the regulatory framework of the UK Department for Education and Skills.

While Edwards et al. (1995, 1997 and 2005) studied the LEA–school relationship during the early years of school local management between 1990 and 1995, this work considers a later period and adds to their work. The LEA situation is worthy of critical study since their position within education management continues to be contested as evidenced by the furore surrounding the recent 2005 education white paper “Higher Standards: Better Schools for all”. Whilst the Edwards et al. work used the lens of new institutional sociology to study LEAs this paper adopts Broadbent, Laughlin and Read’s (1991) theory of steering to analyse the LEA situation. This theory provides a discursive framework with which to analyse the impact of the societal requirements on organisational practices.

The paper does not consider technical accounting specifically but rather illustrates the effects that accounting led reforms contained in School Standards and Framework Act 1998 have on the management control of the local education authority organisation. In this respect the paper forms part of “alternative accounting research” as described by Broadbent and Guthrie (1992) which tends to argue that accounting led changes may not achieve their stated goals.

The paper proceeds in the next section with a review that considers the effects of the NPM changes introduced by the New Labour Government on the control roles of LEAs in education management. The second section then introduces the underlying theoretical framework, the notion of steering based on Habermas’ Theory of Steering Media (Habermas, 1987) as developed by Broadbent, Laughlin and Read (1991). The third section explains the research approach adopted and provides details of the two case studies that formed the empirical work. The next section describes the two case studies and reports on the findings from them. The penultimate section analyses and discusses the findings whilst the final section concludes.

### **New Labour, LEAs and the Management Control of Education**

When New Labour was elected into government in 1997 it changed aspects of NPM as it sought to improve the output performance of public sector organisations in the UK. Education, as other public services, was not left to market forces but became subject to the ideas of the “third way” (Giddens 1998) and “modernisation”. Both terms though unclear involved a balance between regulation and deregulation with government decentralising activities continuing but also more government involvement through target setting and directing (Giddens, 1998; Newman, 2001). The government seemed to signal a more active role for local government as compared to the previous Conservative Government but this was made conditional on local government being able to deliver the desired outcomes (Painter and Clarence, 2000). Whilst seemingly offering more opportunities for local authorities, the central government also started to intervene more directly in all the management processes of these organisations (Clarence and Painter 2000; Simkins, 2000, Newman, 2001). For example, the government introduced requirements on pedagogic processes of schools as with the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies aimed at raising the standards of performance in English and Mathematics (Power and Whitty, 1999).

Local education authorities seemed to be given a renewed opportunity to contribute towards the management of education. Unlike the previous Conservative government that had virtually marginalised the role of LEAs (Edwards et al., 2005), the new government offered the LEAs roles as agencies delivering the national agenda of educational improvement (Hannon, 1999;

Wilkins, 2000). Through the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 the government continued to utilise funding and the language of accounting to shift operational responsibilities away from LEAs to schools and to restructure the relationships between them. The School Standards and Framework Act maintained the LEA responsibilities for resource allocation, but the level of delegation to schools was increased in an initiative called Fair Funding which reformulated Local Management of Schools. For example, funds allocated for building repairs and maintenance; school meals; management support services, and curriculum and advisory services which had previously been centrally maintained by the LEA, were devolved to schools under the Fair Funding regulations (DfEE, 1998). Regulations specified four named functions for which LEAs could retain funding centrally and for which their performance would be measured. The four functions included strategic management, school improvement, and access to education, and special education needs.

- Strategic management included the strategic planning for the education service as a whole; allocating funding to schools by developing a funding formula; administering grants and monitoring and auditing expenditures.
- School improvement involved setting and meeting performance targets to encourage school performance. This requirement for performance target –setting showed the continued focus on output based management and an encouragement of planning to enable the targets to be met. LEAs were required by the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 to produce Education Development Plans for approval by the Secretary of State for Education that would emphasize the activities and action plans to ensure that the performance targets would be attained.
- Access to education described managing the supply of school places, administering an admissions system and the authority’s capital programme.
- Special education needs provision was concerned with assessing and securing education for children with special educational needs.

These LEA functions had to be undertaken for all schools within the local education geographical area and were not school specific but to effectively undertake the functions required the cooperation of all schools. 80% of the Local Schools Budgets had to be delegated to schools with only 20% to be kept for core LEA activities.

The Department for Education and Skills<sup>1</sup> (DfES) suggested that the increased delegation would offer schools the freedom to decide whether they wanted to purchase the services from LEAs or from other commercial providers. It also argued that the extra delegation of funds would help schools to raise standards as it offered both financial and educational opportunities (DfEE, 1998, paragraph 52). LEAs were allowed to offer these services if the number of schools interested in the services were sufficient and could enter into “buy-back” contracts with schools but the extra delegated funding was to be viewed as an opportunity for schools to be able to decide how to use the extra delegated funds. LEAs were expected to provide schools with information to allow them the choice of deciding where to purchase these services from.

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<sup>1</sup> Over time the name of the central government department responsible for schools has changed. Currently it is known as the Department for Education and Skills though at the start of the Labour Government it was known as the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). This paper uses the term DfES throughout.

Fair Funding therefore seemed to be aimed at maintaining school self management. But it also aimed at encouraging schools to look to the commercial private sector for educational services. The LEAs were expected to offer brokerage for private sector educational services providers and to promote the market for education services. Though the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 appeared to have given the LEAs definite roles it was obvious that their position within the management of education was still unclear.

The Conservative Government in their last Education Act in 1997 introduced the inspection of LEAs by the Office of Standards in Education. The inspections consisted of a review of the way LEAs were performing their functions relating to education. They became a tool used by the New Labour Government to evaluate the performance of the LEAs. Where the Secretary of State for Education found an LEA was:

“failing in any respect to perform ...he or she may require that the function be undertaken by a third party”(School Standards and Framework Act 1998, Section 8). During 1999 and 2000 the meaning of this statement became evident when Islington and Hackney LEAs had elements of their educational services contracted out to private sector organisations after critical Office for Standards in Education inspections.

Central government encouraged LEAs to work across all existing boundaries including between different departments within the local authority, with other LEAs and with other public, voluntary and private sector organisations (DfEE, 2000). Within the school sector therefore all the elements of modernisation were evident, increased regulation, interventions, target setting, the requirement for multi-agency and partnerships and the use of inspections (Newman, 2001; Power and Whitty, 1999).

The New Labour Government, as compared to the previous Conservative Governments, it seems had resurrected LEAs but made them more tightly controlled and regulated. They were conceptualised into an intermediary tier of management control (AC, 1998; Wilkins, 2000). The management control tasks (planning, resource allocation, monitoring, performance management and measurement) contained in the four named functions were required to be undertaken within the structural arrangements created by the DfES where schools were responsible for operational control, and the DfES responsible for more strategic decisions and control. LEAs seemingly gained management control roles that required them to respond as "agents" of the DfES (Hannon, 1999; Wilkins, 2000).

However the policy statements of central government maintained that the relationship between schools and LEAs was not to be one of control, and schools were to be independent as shown in the following quotation from a DfES White Paper:

Local Education Authorities no longer control schools but they do have a key role in challenging and supporting them... (Schools': Building on Success DfES, 2001, p. 88, paragraphs 6.52).

Although the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 gave the LEAs the general responsibility for raising educational standards by all their functions and made them accountable to the government for achieving the increased educational performance of the schools, the relationship between the LEAs and schools that would arguably allow for the managerial control to be undertaken was restricted. Through the financial devolution of funds to schools, there was created a boundary between schools and LEAs. However the LEAs needed to work with schools and through schools in order to demonstrate their organisational performance. Otley et al. (1995)



suggest that institutional arrangements may impact on the methods of control used within and between organisations. In the LEA- School situation there is an example of an institutional structural arrangement that may impact control processes used. The question becomes how control can be achieved where there is not a managerial relationship. In the next section how these issues and arrangements are conceptualised is explained followed by an empirical investigation of the situation in two LEA case studies.

### **Societal Steering, Organisational Steering and the Changing Control Roles of LEAs**

Elements of Habermas’s Theory of Steering Media (Habermas, 1987) as developed by Broadbent, Laughlin and Read (1991), provide the theoretical framework for analysing the empirical work in this paper that looks at the management control relationship between LEAs and schools.

The theory considers that the social world consists of “a lifeworld” and “systems.” The lifeworld represents a repository of societal norms and values that give meaning to everyday life. Systems on the other hand are definable arenas of action that should reflect the lifeworld’s requirements and ensure that they occur. To facilitate this anchoring, systems are guided by the third element in the framework, steering media. Habermas argues that the relationship between the lifeworld and systems ideally should be developed through communicative action but increasingly it is undertaken by the steering media of money, power and legislation (Habermas, 1987). Rather than following the requirements of the lifeworld, systems and steering media get out of hand and begin to develop a life of their own, and impose this on the lifeworld, leading to the “colonisation” of the lifeworld by systems and steering media. Rules and regulations begin to intrude into social life and instrumental thinking tends to penetrate the “moral and aesthetic spheres of life” (Singh, 2002, p. 684).

**Table I.** Types of Steering

<b>Regulative Steering</b>	<b>Constitutive Steering</b>
1. Embedded in the lifeworld context and more comprehensible to the average individual	1. Less comprehensive to the average individual
2. Freedom guaranteeing	2. Freedom reducing
3. Capable of substantive justification	3. Can only be legitimised through procedure under the superficial claims of competence and responsibility, decisions are essentially guided by the imperatives of administrative control and capital accumulation
4. Regulates the pre-existing, or the established behaviour	4. Constitute new forms of behaviour

**Source:** Adapted from Singh (2002)

Two kinds of steering are identified as regulative steering and constitutive steering. Table I shows the characteristics of the two types of steering. The difference is the extent to which steering either flows from the lifeworld and is thus acceptable to social actors, or is dependent on administrative procedures. It is constitutive steering that leads to “colonisation”.

Broadbent et al. (1991) operationalised this Habermasian theory, bringing it down from a meta – theory level (Llewellyn, 2003) and placing an organisational slant on it by arguing that at societal level, steering media consist of a range of government, professional and financial institutions. These institutional steering media guide the behaviour of organisational systems by way of steering mechanisms. Societal systems comprise public, private and voluntary organisations. All institutions and organisations have their own micro-lifeworlds (or interpretive schemes), steering media (or design archetypes) and sub -systems that are capable of developing diverse lifeworlds of their own which may or may not reflect the guiding societal lifeworld.

To the extent that steering processes guide the behaviour of organisational systems towards goals, the processes of steering arguably represent processes of organisational control. Indeed Baxter (1987) suggests that when discussing steering media, Habermas (1987) is referring to control media and that his main concern is how actions may be co-ordinated.

Applying the Broadbent et al. (1991) framework to the education field it is possible to conceptualise the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as a societal steering medium that guides the behaviour of all organisations within the sector through the use of a variety of steering mechanisms. These steering mechanisms include statutory laws, such as those contained in the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 and the regulations relating to Fair Funding. Schools may be characterised as societal systems, responsible for the delivery of education, with their own micro lifeworld and design archetypes by which their organisational activities are performed.

Theoretically there is a conundrum about the role of the LEAs; they do not deliver discernible functions and consequently cannot readily be thought of as organisational systems in the Habermasian sense. However they are tasked by legislation with ensuring that they raise standards of education in their locality, suggesting that LEAs are institutional steering media. Judging from the previous discussion about the LEA role in education management, they seem to represent an intermediary tier between the DfES and schools with organisational steering responsibilities to raise education standards as required by the DfES. In other words the role of LEAs as envisaged by the DfES within the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 is to act as inter-organisational control steering media between the DfES and schools. However, the DfES at the societal level has created a structural relationship between LEAs and schools that does not permit hierarchical and direct forms of control. As a consequence, LEAs, through their design archetypes, may have to develop alternative ways of pursuing their organisational steering roles. The empirical work in this paper reports on how two LEAs undertake this organisational steering.

## **Research approach**

This study of the control roles of LEAs was undertaken using a case study approach. One of the benefits cited for case studies are that they allow an exploration in a deep way of phenomena in their real life situation and within their social and organisational context (Otley

and Berry, 1994; Scapens, 1990). Case studies acknowledge the holistic nature of issues. Scapens (1990) explains this clearly as:

“The holistic approach is based on the belief that social systems develop a characteristic wholeness or integrity and it is inappropriate to study their individual parts taken from context” (Scapens 1990, p. 271).

LEAs have several responsibilities including educational, democratic and financial responsibilities. All these responsibilities may be interrelated and may have an effect on their management processes. The case study approach offered the possibility to study the totality of their roles. The use of case studies allowed an exploration of the actual situation of the senior officers within the two LEA organisations during the first period of the New Labour Government.

There are problems associated with the use of case studies that are often cited. The findings from case studies may have limited generalizability. The empirical work relates the theory to a particular place, a particular group of people, operating at a particular time and under particular circumstances as is common with qualitative work (Wolcott, 1990).

The empirical work in this case study involved analysing the responses of two LEA organisations that will be referred to as Langham and Borrowdale<sup>2</sup> to societal steering contained within the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. Table II summarises the data collection at Langham and Borrowdale.

**Table II.** Data Collection at Langham and Borrowdale

<b>Method of data collection</b>	<b>Langham</b>	<b>Borrowdale</b>
<b>Semi - structured interviews</b>	20 interviews with 3 assistant officers, 2 head teachers, one councillor, 5 senior officers and the Director of Education.	8 interviews with 3 assistant directors and 1 senior officer and the Director of Education
<b>Documents Reviewed</b>	Internal documents Inspection Reports	Internal documents and Inspection Report
<b>Observations</b>	4 Departmental meetings (1 internal management meeting and three meetings between LEA officers and headteachers) 3 Public Meetings	-----

<sup>2</sup> The real names of the LEAs have been disguised to maintain the anonymity of the officers.

Much of the data was collected through semi-structured interviewing. The use of interviewing offered an effective strategy to obtain rich material for qualitative analysis (Fielding and Thomas, 2001; Dille, 2004). Through such interviewing it was possible to gain an understanding of the views of the LEA officers as interviews “allow us to investigate, in critical ways, our respondents’ comprehensions of their experiences and beliefs” (Dille, 2004, p. 128). The topics discussed during the interviews were derived from a literature review on management control, and accountability. Additionally, the interviews sought to understand the LEA officers’ relationships with schools and the DfES, and how these relationships impacted upon the management control processes. The interviews were taped although notes were taken during the interviews. Subsequently each interview was transcribed.

The second method of data collection was the analysis of documents. Atkinson and Coffey (1997) suggest that documents are ways that organisations represent themselves “collectively to themselves and to others”. Documentary analysis can contribute to understanding of substantive content of the documents and also illuminate deeper meanings through their style and coverage as they are socially produced (Macdonald, 2001; Ritchie, 2003). Initially the aim was to use documents for the purpose of developing an understanding of the contextual background of the case studies. But following Atkinson and Coffey (1997) it became clear that documents could show how organisations work and how people work within the organisation. Indeed they represent the collective memory of the organisation and are “social facts...produced, shared and used in socially organised ways” (Atkinson and Coffey, 1997).

In addition to the interviewing at Langham, non participant observation of three types of meetings, an internal departmental management team meeting, meetings between LEA officers and schools and public meetings were undertaken. Observations provide a chance to record behaviour and interactions between participants as they occur (Ritchie, 2003; Holliday, 2002). The observations took place after the interviews and when the researcher was known to most of the officers. It is not possible to tell whether her presence inhibited the discussions.

By attending and observing these three types of meetings insight was gained into the different roles the education departmental officers performed and the different parties with whom they interacted. Through careful consideration of issues discussed at these meetings and reflection on the behaviour and actions of the education department officers an understanding of the complexities and the multiplicity of roles of the education department became possible. This coupled with the interviews and documentary analysis provided a rich tapestry of organisational life of Langham education department and allowed a deeper involvement at Langham. At Borrowdale due to limits placed upon access, there were no observations undertaken.

The analysis of organisational steering was undertaken by searching for themes in the interview data and the internal documents. Brewer (2000) suggests that the analysis of themes in most ethnographic research is not an exact science but it needs to be performed systematically and rigorously (Brewer, 2000, p. 167). The decision was made not to use any computer software to analyse the data though computer-aided analysis provides several benefits including speed, improved rigour, consistency with the conceptualisation of data and theme building (Spencer, Ritchie and O’Connor, 2003; Fielding and Thomas, 2001). Computer-aided analysis objectifies words spoken in interviews and removes them from the context (Atkinson and Coffey, 1997; O’Dwyer, 2004). The aim was not to lose the richness of the data. It was through continually

listening to the taped interviews, selecting, sorting, and processing the information that the themes of the research would emerge.

## **The Two Case Studies**

Langham and Borrowdale are situated in a large metropolitan city in the South of England. They have similar socio-economic contexts and that may be characterised as socially, economically and ethnically diverse. At the time of the empirical work, between 2001 and 2003, both authorities were Labour controlled local authorities. There were marked differences between the two departments. Langham had a long history of education management having been created in 1965 whilst Borrowdale was relatively a new authority having been established post the Education Reform Act 1988. Borrowdale was also smaller than Langham having responsibility for 56 schools as compared to 83 schools in Langham. Both education authorities had been inspected by the Office for Standards in Education prior to the empirical work. Borrowdale had been given a positive report in 2000 with office for standards in education stating the following in its report:

“The LEA is well run and enjoys the confidence of its schools” (Borrowdale Office for Standards in Education Inspection Report 2000, paragraph 6).

“The LEA has no major weaknesses” (Borrowdale Office for Standards in Education Report 2000, paragraph 9).

“There is much to admire in [Borrowdale]. The LEA is well led; it plans well, and has good systems...” (Borrowdale Office for Standards in Education Inspection Report 2000, paragraph 10).

Thus Borrowdale provided an example of, arguably, a successful LEA, that was operating in a period of relative stability during the period of the empirical work.

The Office for Standards in Education Report for Langham in 1999 was more cautious in its support for the LEA. Langham had received a reasonable but not glowing Office for Standards in Education Inspection report in 1999<sup>3</sup>. Two comments from the report are:

“[Langham ] is an effective LEA. Over the last two years it has worked well with its primary and special schools to raise standards and improve quality and management” (Langham Office for Standards in Education Inspection Report 1999, paragraph 5).

“There are also some weaknesses the LEA urgently needs to address...Standards have remained static, or fallen in the two LEA maintained secondary schools” (Langham Office for Standards in Education Inspection Report 1999, paragraph 12).

During the period of the empirical work Langham was in the process of renewing its formula for allocating budgets to schools. There was much activity therefore that provided the opportunity to attend several meetings and to consider how the department operated in a period of considerable change.

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<sup>3</sup> During the period of my research in 2003, Langham was inspected by Office for Standards in Education and given a “clean bill of health”.

A further difference between the two departments was that Langham was operating under tight financial constraints as a result of redundancy and political decisions taken during the late 1980s and early 1990s. It had funded education at lower than the required Standard Spending Assessment<sup>4</sup> for education for several years. The officers however prided themselves in delegating high levels of funding to schools as part of Local Management of Schools, and Fair Funding. Borrowdale in contrast had funded the education service at rates higher than their Standard Spending Assessment.

### **Organisational Steering: Control and Influence**

The empirical work at the two case studies showed the officers having similar views of their relationship with schools. The officers were adamant that they did not control schools. For example:

“We have limited powers. We cannot tell schools ‘you must’” (Langham Finance Officer 2).

“The nature of the job is to build partnerships and a common agenda and to work on shared issues” (Langham education officer 1).

“So the role of the local authority in actually running schools, in terms of controlling schools is very, very limited” (Langham Education Officer 2).

“Local authorities have limited power to influence schools because of Local Management of Schools and passing over funding...” (Langham Finance Officer 1)

“The thing we are absolutely clear about is that we don’t control schools. We do not have the power” (Borrowdale Education Officer 2).

“Any individual school can put their two fingers up at us. We cannot tell them what to do” (Borrowdale Director of Education).

“The relationship with schools is not based on power” (Borrowdale Finance Officer 1).

“Schools are completely free” (Borrowdale Finance Officer 2).

Judging from the quotations the officers have a view control as domineering and consistent with the notion of power. The officers understand control as command control that is authoritative and coercive. The officers at the two case studies preferred to discuss their relationship with schools in terms of a process they called “influence” as the following series of quotations demonstrate.

“Our work with schools these days depend crucially on influence which in turn rests on credibility, diplomacy, cunning at times, political judgement and professional expertise” (Langham Education Officer 2).

“We have influence and influence rests on credibility” (Borrowdale Finance Officer 1).

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<sup>4</sup> The Standing Spending Assessment is a notional amount of local funding levels set by the central government. It is expected to guide Local Authorities with their spending allocations for each local service.

To further understand organisational steering in this setting requires an examination of nature of influence as described by the officers in the two case studies. Broadly, this involved the building of close relationships with schools and then the use of methods akin to social and informal controls to engage with schools and encourage them to follow the LEA direction (Hopwood, 1974; Parker, 1986; Merchant, 1997; Pant, 2001).

### **Building Close Relationships**

At Langham and Borrowdale the officers used terms that denoted close liaison in their working relationships with schools. An essential requirement for the influencing of schools was a close relationship with schools. The officers suggested that a significant part of their time was spent in developing these relationships. They used various metaphors to describe the relationships they attempted to develop.

One officer at Borrowdale described their relationship with schools as “a family relationship”. Another officer explained that “the LEA was the schools and the schools were the LEA” implying that they were one unit despite the formal legal and financial boundaries created by government to separate them. At Borrowdale the officers used their mission statement to develop cohesiveness with schools. The director of education explained that the mission statement formed a unifying force for the officers and the schools and ensured that they worked together. The aim of the department was to work with schools as if the LEA and schools were one entity and to remove the boundary created by societal steering.

Additionally the idea of a partnership relationship was used to describe how the departments engaged with schools. An officer at Langham explained that the nature of the LEA task was to build relationships in order to develop a common agenda of issues that allowed schools and the LEAs to together. At Borrowdale, similarly, an officer also claimed that the way the department worked with schools represented a true partnership.

“We have built something based on partnership with the schools. All of the important bits. Working together with schools community, members and firms. I have a role in the education service. Persuasion and getting everyone to work together. Not in a line management role” (Borrowdale Director of Education).

Officers at both departments highlighted the symbiotic relationships they aimed for. At Borrowdale the view from one officer was that successful school performance equated to successful LEA performance. The idea was that the LEA was only as good as the schools because schools delivered the actual performance on which the LEA performance depended. Thus it was necessary for the officers to work closely with schools.

### **The Nature of “Influence”**

Influence comprised several complex manoeuvres. The primary objective was to move schools decision making in the direction the officers required. In effect it was a steering process that had to be achieved subtly. An element of the “influence” process was suggesting alternative solutions to problems. The intended outcome was for the schools to understand

these, and following the LEA reasoning shift towards the directions the officers suggested. However the schools needed to feel that the decisions they took was theirs. One officer at Borrowdale provided the following thoughtful question and answer defining the process of influencing:

“How do you influence people and organisations to move in a certain direction? Influence means you have to express the pros and cons and people will get there themselves” (Borrowdale Finance Officer 1).

The starting point is to examine what the officers in the two departments sought to influence in terms of their relationship with schools. Both departments cited that their role was to raise standards of education in their schools. This goal was referred to by the officers in the two case studies during the interviews and also appeared in the internal documents reviewed. In the Borrowdale Strategic Plan 2000-2005, for example, the following statement appeared that showed the centrality and acceptance of the importance of raising education standards:

The 1998 School Standards and Framework Act has broadened the role of LEAs by placing a duty on them to raise standards... everything that the LEA does is enabling the learner to have access to education provision, or part of that education provision and contributing directly to the learner's achievement, or providing a support service either directly or indirectly, so that opportunities for learning are enhanced. In particular, it translates into promoting the effectiveness of schools and all the services the LEA provides. (Education Department Strategic Plan 2000-2005, p. 2).

To be able to have an impact on education provision and standards was represented as the core of the LEA role. The use of the word “enabling” signified the ethos of what the Borrowdale LEA was attempting to achieve. Learning had to be facilitated by promoting school effectiveness through the LEA services. In other words, schools would be effective if opportunities for learning are enhanced by the LEA services or the LEA contribution to education standards was through giving schools the opportunity to get on with the ‘real’ education.

Beliefs in educational values formed the underlying interpretive schemes of the two departments. Theoretically, interpretive schemes illustrate the organisational micro lifeworld (Broadbent et al., 1991) and provide insights of why organisations believe they exist (Greenwood and Hinings, 1988). One officer at Borrowdale explained it in this way:

“You will find that a lot of people that work in the LEA are like teachers. It is vocation more than a job. They do not lose sight of the children. Our job is to support schools.” (Borrowdale Finance Officer 1).

The officers sincerely wanted to support the learning of children. The problem was that the LEA contribution to the process of raising education standards would always be indirect. The departments were removed from the actual delivery of education. The Fair Funding regulations and the contents of the Code of Practice on LEA /School Relations placed constraints on the LEA ability to directly affect school management processes. School autonomy was the societal lifeworld mandated by the DfES. This clashed with the interpretive schemes at the LEA organisational level that supported being involved with schools to facilitate education. This situation manifested at the organisational level with the departments preferring to discuss their steering relationship with schools in terms of influence rather than control. This officer described it as being a “critical friend”:



“You have to look elsewhere than the simple role of running schools. You look to a number of crucial roles around the area of standards...influencing... by being a critical friend of the school, by challenging schools, by promoting excellent practice.” (GB, Langham Education Officer 2).

The assertion of influence therefore provided a way for the officers to engage with the provision of education, without breaching the legal requirement for school autonomy, and yet also supporting their interpretive schemes. The perception of influence allowed them to demonstrate a contribution to education.

The empirical work showed how the two LEAs attempted to make an impression on management within schools. Their influencing processes seemed to follow the reasoning of the “school improvement camp” (Gerwitz, 1998) that argued that with effective leadership and good teaching, school performance improves and thus is necessary to “cascade good practices” to ensure school improvement. At Langham an officer described how the officers attempted to influence school management in this way:

“Our main function is to strengthen school confidence. Management of schools needs to be strong. We help them find solutions. This creates an independent school.” (EF, Langham Education Officer 2).

The core purpose of influence from the above quotation was to “help them find solutions”. What this entailed can be inferred from the following quotation made by a Borrowdale officer:

“Helping schools to think through their reality.” (CD, Borrowdale Finance Officer 1).

The perception of the officers seemed to be that schools lacked confidence. More so it was through the process of the LEA helping schools to acquire solutions that schools would gain the confidence to be independent. It is noticeable from the language being used that the officers have created a belief that independent schools develop from the engagement with the LEA. Schools were assumed to be unsure in their decision making and needed the help of the LEA with their decisions. The purpose of the “influencing” activities was to help schools with decision making.

Schools needed to have faith in what the LEAs were suggesting. Credibility was central to the influencing process. Being credible was important because once achieved it became possible to persuade the schools to follow the officers’ suggestions. Credibility derived from the professional expertise projected by the officers. The reasoning seemed to be that as long as schools were convinced that the officers had professional expertise and that the officers knew what they are discussing; schools would be more inclined to accept the LEA direction. Moreover it was important to relate the expertise to the needs of schools. The issues of professional expertise were wrapped up in the personalities of officers working with schools.

Two areas of expertise required for the management of schools were the financial and educational pedagogical areas. Financial issues in schools induced anxiety and had a capacity to undermine the “authentic work” of schools (Laughlin, Broadbent, Shearn and Willig–Atherton, 1994, p. 64). During the Devolved funding group meetings observed, the head teachers present appeared anxious about all financial matters. As the LEA had roles in setting budgets for schools through the Fair Funding formula funding mechanisms they felt it important to be seen to be contributing to the management of finance. They were also responsible for auditing and monitoring of finances held at school level. Educational activities represented the “authentic” work of schools that needed to be improved but they were affected by financial issues. One

officer at Langham explained that “schools with deficits are usually schools causing concern.” Financial and educational expertise together and singly were important functions to be influenced. An officer at Langham intimated the importance of financial and educational information and expertise provided by the LEA:

“SM puts the figures together. Without it schools would be lost. They would be swamped and will have to spend all their time on data and information analysis and have no time for real education” (HW, Langham Data Analyst).

The expertise comprised both the gathering of data and the information interpretation and analysis. The financial discussions at Langham were directed by an officer whom the schools described as a person “of integrity” which meant that schools were predisposed towards listening to him. At a meeting in September 2002 the head teachers asked the LEA finance officer to take them through instructions from the DfES. The head teachers relied upon him to explain the meaning of financial changes pertaining to Performance Related Pay and their refrains “it's all so complicated” and “it is so confusing” were repeated many times and gave the LEA officer the opportunity to influence their understanding.

The head teachers accepted the interpretations he provided them about funding and financial matters. The two head teachers interviewed suggested the finance section was highly rated and revolved around SM:

“That is because they offer us information, good clear information. The information is easily accessible; it is not wordy and it is to the point. They're always available to talk to as well, if there is something that you are unclear about, there's always somebody available to talk to.” (JD, Langham Head Teacher).

“There is massive amount of respect for SM and the team and the work he does. The way he addresses the heads, the appreciation we feel for him... the role of the LEA is basically SM, there is no one else.” (OM, Langham Head Teacher).

The provisions of “good clear financial information” by officers accepted as knowledgeable and sincere led to the finance officers at Langham appearing credible to schools. Through the sharing of information, the officers addressed the concerns of schools. In a similar vein at Borrowdale one officer explained that schools made their resourcing decisions with the support of the LEA and because of the good relationships between officers and schools as this statement indicates:

“Money comes in and is devolved to schools. It is up to the school to use the money as they want. We have a strong relationship with schools. It is a hand- on relationship so we can advise schools in their spending.” (CD, Borrowdale Finance Officer 1).

Financial issues are important to schools and remained an area where schools felt vulnerable. Thus being able to explain and use the language of finance offered the departments the opportunity to engage in the “influencing” processes.

Whilst at the theoretical level money represents a medium that can be used to steer organisations, at the empirical level my analysis of the situation suggests that it was discussions and explanations of funding and finance issues that offered steering opportunities for the LEA officers. Personalities leading the steering processes were important, a point that is not reflected

within the skeletal theory. Additionally the intermediary position of the LEA within the education structure between the DfES and schools would suggest that they had the advantage of understanding financial issues from two perspectives, allowing them the opportunity to be effective interpreters. They understood the requirements of the DfES and the implications for schools and this enhanced their credibility to schools. Furthermore as already discussed the two LEAs were operating under financial constraints and could not readily provide extra financial resources. Financial management design archetypes provided several influencing opportunities, the most important of which seemed to be encouraging schools to understand the language of finance, and what the implications of options were.

At Borrowdale the notion of credibility gained through the provision expert support was also manifest in the empirical findings. Here the officers discussed educational expertise constantly and privileging it rather more than financial expertise. As already shown, Langham had acute financial issues this could explain the subtle difference in the focus of influencing processes of the two departments. The Borrowdale officers considered that it was through helping to raise educational standards that they could have most impact as this quotation from an officer showed:

“Yes, I believe in school management and all that research shows that school management is the key to school improvement. But we take the view that what will make the most impact in raising standards is what happens in the classroom. Inspectors are by profession teachers and educationalists. What they know about is what happens in classrooms.” (PG, Borrowdale Education Officer 3).

The emphasis in this statement is in being able to have an impact on (that is influence) the pedagogical practices of teaching and learning. However by working through their professional teaching and educational expertise the officers believe they can also guide school management. The interviewee discussed this as their “scaffolding process” because they used the professional inspections and reviews to help schools to develop their own review and monitoring that hang on the LEA methods as shown in the following comment:

“So through our work on how we monitor and how we give feedback and set objectives, we are demonstrating to less experienced senior managers or middle managers how they can operate an internal monitoring and evaluation system. So we are kind of scaffolding school -monitoring systems.” (PG, Borrowdale Education Officer 3).

The scaffolding process allowed schools to use LEA data and LEA analysis as part of their own self -evaluation. It allowed schools to engage in development planning with the support of the LEA. It was work that used the professional knowledge of the officers.

From the empirical work there appeared to be several aspects to the influencing activities once the close relationship with schools had been developed. Primarily it was achieved through communication and information flows between the education departments and schools. The Borrowdale officers suggested that they maintained open communication processes with schools and purposely ensured that lines of communication between the LEA and schools are kept short. Any head teacher could contact the senior officer and the director of education at any time. The officers ensured that communication was a two way process whereby they listened to the concerns of the schools and responded to them and encouraged schools to listen and respond to the LEA. Through the communication flows the LEA officers explained to schools their objectives, their plans, the underlying reasons for decisions and the effects of choices made on schools. For example in discussing funding one officer stated:

“Then there is a lot of consultation, many phone calls are made so that we can help them decide on appropriate activities that the funding can be used for.” (BA, Education Officer).

At Langham influencing activities also took place through the communications between the department and schools. The policy was to control all information about education that schools were to get. At a departmental managers meeting there was a discussion about the need to ensure that all news about education to schools should originate from Langham as the following quotation shows:

“Everything that goes to schools should come from us... the soft news and the hard news.” (Langham Director of Education).

There was much consultation between the LEAs and their schools as the officers undertook the influencing activities. Consultations were held for the Education Development Plans and for decisions about funding. Much of the consultation took place through the working groups between the LEA officers and schools. At Borrowdale the department had cycles of meetings between the Director of Education and headteachers and also between assistant directors and headteachers. One officer explained the reason for the working groups in this way:

“We spend a tremendous amount of time, effort with schools; we value working with our schools. A number of formal bodies... where the LEA controls the agenda and where also the school controls the agenda... We must have mechanisms to respond to schools or they get frustrated.” (Borrowdale Finance Officer 1).

At Langham likewise the “influencing” activities were conducted through the various LEA and school discussion groups that the department developed and maintained. Within these discussion groups the LEA officers were able to indirectly contribute to decision making in schools through the interpretation of government directives that they gave. During the meetings of the Devolved Funding Group, there was a decided camaraderie between the officers and the head teachers. The DfES was seen as a common enemy whilst schools and the Langham departmental officers were seen as being on the same side against central government.

In summary the influencing activities involved the LEA officers using persuasion and diplomacy to gain consensus on aims, funding issues and other strategic decisions associated with the management control of education at the local level.

## **Discussion**

The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 and the related regulations from the Department of Education and Skills made LEAs responsible for improving standards of education but additionally constrained them from taking direct action to control schools. The LEAs needed to be able to *steer* schools. Within this paper LEAs have been conceptualised as organisational steering media (Broadbent et al., 1991). The empirical work has shown that discourse was used to cross the organisational boundary between the schools and the LEAs. It was possible to justify actions to schools and direct schools towards LEA requirements because schools were participating in the decision making.

All organisations have underlying interpretive schemes which guide their management processes (Broadbent et al., 1991). The officers of the two LEA organisations espoused underlying beliefs

in the purposes of education typical of educational administrators generally (Bush and Kogan, 1982, Farrell and Law, 1999). Arguably these values were also the values ascribed to by schools and thus the steering processes were founded on shared interpretive schemes. For example, at Borrowdale there was a recognisable logo "the learner at the centre" which each officer referred to during interviews. It created and maintained a focus for the LEA and the schools. The Director of Education at Borrowdale explained that each year she invited all head teachers to a meeting and where she "preached to this mission" thereby constantly emphasising the collective shared visions and values to show what could be achieved together.

The theoretical framework considers that the organisational design archetypes (in this case the processes of influence) are guided by the interpretative schemes of the organisations. As intermediary organisational steering media, the two LEAs seem to have developed design archetypes to steer schools that depended on the relationships they maintained with schools rather than on any formal links. Schools were made to feel free to take their own decisions suggestive of regulative steering which is more enabling or "freedom guaranteeing" and founded on shared values (Habermas, 1987; Broadbent et al., 1991). The steering between LEA officers and schools seem to be founded on control in terms of participation and other indirect or informal methods. The consultations and communicative interactions were the design archetypes for achieving the necessary control without actually ordering schools. The LEA officers through the communications projected themselves as experts, knowledgeable of education, finance, management, and of the local areas.

In an inter-organisational situation, such as the LEA- school situation, the importance of social and behavioural controls may be privileged possibly because there is an interdependency required to achieve educational performance. The education authorities maintained indirect control by dwelling upon the symbiotic need of each for the other. This has reminders of the arguments by Pfeffer and Salancik that where there are outcome and behaviour interdependences, social controls equate to inter-organisational influence (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978, p. 40). LEA performance depends on schools' performance and they remain accountable to the DfES for this and thus influence, negotiation and social controls with schools are important.

Schools, in the context of the theoretical framework, are organisational systems responsible for the delivery of the educational outcomes whilst the LEAs are accountable to the DfES for ensuring that the delivery of education happens. This complex accountability situation makes the application of direct controls difficult. Social and behavioural controls that rely on persuasion and influence may be the only available and feasible methods by which the LEAs may direct the schools. They are also the methods acceptable to the DfES.

The departments were very aware that their position in the education structure is contested and that their steering could perhaps only be undertaken by creating a collaborative environment. The DfES has, through its regulatory processes created the situation whereby LEA performance accountability is dependent on school performance. Where schools educational standards are rising, then the LEA is arguably succeeding. One officer at Langham explained the LEA situation in this way:

"It [the LEA] does not control schools. But it is held accountable by government for the standards of those schools which is a curious arrangement." (an officer at Langham).

The arrangement is curious in that the requirement for accountability to the DfES is direct but the control relationship with schools are required to be indirect and unobtrusive which appears to be how the officers work with schools. The removal of financial and operational decision making away from the LEA has meant that the LEA officers cannot be seen to be directing the management of schools. The case studies show that the two LEAs have used the bonds between themselves and schools to extend their boundaries and continue to direct schools.

## Conclusions

The findings from the case studies are similar to those of Edwards et al. (2005) when they argued that LEAs have been successful in adapting their management practices to survive the threats they faced with the introduction of Local Management of Schools. Fair Funding and the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, introduced by the Labour Government, and offered the LEAs the opportunity to gain intermediary steering roles between the DfES and Schools. The case studies suggest LEAs accepted the new roles and attempted to manage the situation by redefining their control relationships with schools.

However using the Broadbent et al. (1991) ideas, the role of institutional steering media is to steer organisational systems in line with the societal lifeworld. The societal lifeworld projected by the DfES, through its regulatory processes, appears to favour decentralised schools taking their own decisions to meet the needs of educational consumers; that is parents and school children. The case studies seem to show that the LEAs support schools in ways that may not be commensurate with the societal requirements as depicted by the DfES. They continue to direct schools all be it in more subtle ways. Yet arguably, that schools continue to engage with the LEAs could be suggestive of school preference to focus on pedagogical rather than managerial and financial matters. The LEA steering arguably makes this possible for them. The issue then becomes whether the DfES requirements do depict societal requirements or whether as a societal steering medium the DfES is attempting to colonise the societal lifeworld. The general negative reaction to the recent white paper introduced in autumn 2005, 'Higher Standards, Better Schools for all: More choice for parents and pupils', that suggests the roles of LEAs should be further restricted seems to suggest that the thrust of the New Labour educational reforms may not reflect societal aims.

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