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Intermediaries in local schooling landscapes: policy enactment and partnership building during times of crisis

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ABSTRACT

Despite the expansion of New Public Management reforms across the globe and complimentary trends of disintermediation, performance and privatisation, local government authorities in England continue to shape local schooling landscapes. In this paper, we document the role of a local government authority in England in an initiative called 'Building On', directed at supporting teachers in the first year of compulsory school to develop and transform their pedagogical practices in response to and following the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on evidence generated from interviews, observations and documentary analysis, we demonstrate that local government personnel performed two important and potentially decisive roles within this initiative: first, as interpreters and translators of policy; and second, as brokers of partnerships and collaborative exchanges. We then illustrate, using the analytic of policy enactment, the contextual dimensions underpinning the role performed by local government personnel within the initiative.

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, various countries across the globe have implemented New Public Management (NPM) to replace traditional government bureaucracy and welfarist policy complexes (Gewirtz 2001) with corporate, competition and performance measures of public accountability (Wilkins et al. 2024). Borrowing from public choice theory, specifically the idea that state-employed professionals working in public and non-commercial organisations behave as 'rational utility maximisers' motivated by profit and self-interest (Niskanen 1973), NPM is designed to shape and place limits on the way public organisations and workers conduct themselves. The main tactic here is *delimitation through depoliticisation*. Depoliticisation occurs when politics is subordinated to economic evaluations and technical achievements, in effect 'to displace or subsume these inherently antagonistic, productive spaces' (Wilkins 2023, 118) within economising and instrumentalising logics that allow for improved monitoring and control of public service

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performance through relations of equivalence and comparison. In this sense, NPM is ‘a goal-oriented technical project that relies on business instruments and market prerogatives to reduce complexity to properties of governable systems’ (Wilkins et al. 2024, 259). This includes the ‘relocation of decision making from representative institutions into corporate-controlled arenas’ (Gunter 2018, 10), otherwise known as ‘privatisation’, another complimentary trend of NPM. At the same time, NPM is not everywhere the same across the globe, even when certain outward functions and effects reducible to NPM can be identified across different national education systems. Wilkins et al. (2024), for example, trace the various actors, projects and networks that have given rise to different iterations of NPM in Argentina, Australia, England, Italy, and Spain. Adopting the analytic of assemblage, Wilkins et al. (2024, 270) show how ‘NPM is made and installed to accommodate specific path dependencies and value systems, but also those moments of disjuncture and struggle when NPM is restricted, rebutted or revised under the pressure of unaccommodating conditions and alliances’.

Against the background of these wider global shifts, with NPM emerging as a globally circulating discourse albeit one revised to complement national politics and projects (see Gunter et al. 2016; Wilkins et al. 2024), England has ushered in a range of interrelated policy levers since the 1980s designed to echo and redeem the principles and logics of NPM. These reforms include, to name a few: *competition* (rate-capping introduced so that school budget levels could be linked to student intake); *marketisation* (league tables introduced to compare and display schools according to attainment levels); *performativity* (teachers summoned to engage with new forms of self-reporting and self-assessment); *deregulation* (schools permitted to ‘opt out’ of local government control and become administratively self-governing entities); *privatisation* (expanded opportunities for private sector involvement in public sector organisation); and *disintermediation* (displacement of local government authorities as strategic, political bases for the monitoring and improvement of local education systems). England therefore can be considered a ‘benchmark model’ of NPM (Ball and Junemann 2012, 8) and experimental hub for advancing extreme versions of this shift (Ozga 2009), most evident by the withdrawal of power from democratically organised local government authorities as regulators of education and vehicles for school collaboration and improvement.

Local government authorities in England are typically derided by ‘modernisers’ as a hindrance to the development of a competitive, consumer-driven education system (Simmons 2009). As Lubienski (2014, 426) observes, local government authorities in England – and similar middle-tier organisations in other countries, such as ‘school districts’ in the United States and ‘regional education boards’ in New Zealand – are castigated by modernising reformers as ‘political perversions of market forces in education’. Through dismantling these traditional structures of government in favour of NPM-led reform, modernisers have marginalised traditional policy actors to make way for ‘new actors and new ideas and sensibilities’ (Ball and Junemann 2012, 32). While these reforms have weakened the influence of local government authorities as middle-tier organisations in England, there are different perspectives on, and accounts of, the extent to which local government authorities continue to shape the landscape of schooling in local contexts. On the one hand, Ozga (2009, 155–160) argues that local government authorities ‘appear to have lost their position and their place ... and may no longer be able to make a significant contribution to engendering “bottom up” development or supporting

local good practice'. Echoing this, Harris (2012, 537) observes that 'the days of local town halls making and implementing policy and shaping and directing the local schools system in furtherance of locally determined priorities seem to be gone'. Yet, on the other hand, recent research indicates that local government authorities continue to shape education provision in local areas (Crawford et al. 2022; Greany and Higham 2018; Hatcher 2014; Simkins et al. 2015). This suggests, as Simkins et al. (2015, 2) observe, that local authorities 'have not yet been entirely written out of the script'.

In this paper, we contribute to this burgeoning literature by empirically documenting the sensitising role of local government authorities as 'intermediaries' (Honig 2004, 67) who not only creatively assist teachers in their negotiations of different pedagogies, and therefore enable the 'selective recontextualisation' (Takayama 2012, 519) of national policy scripts to complement local projects and politics, but who work to improve partnership building and inter-school collaboration. We do so through an empirical study of the contribution that one local government authority made to an initiative called 'Building On', designed to support primary school teachers to develop and transform their pedagogical practices in response to and following the COVID-19 pandemic. To supplement the analysis, we utilise the analytic of 'policy enactment' to document the 'institutionally determined factors' (Braun et al. 2011, 586) that shape the strategic work of locally situated agents.

The changing role of local government authorities

The role of local government authorities as intermediaries has a long and messy history in England stretching back to the Middle Ages. The period roughly spanning 1832 and 1974 marks the emergence of what is called 'modern local government', during which time reforms were introduced to, among other things, create towns in the image of parliamentary boroughs, shift power away from church authorities and towards state-controlled authorities, and to formalise localised administration through devolved statutory responsibilities. These arrangements were designed to complement a 'complex, "polycentred" division of power and responsibility appropriate to differentiated tasks' (Ranson 2008, 204). In the 1980s and under the authority of the then Conservative government, major reforms were introduced to oppose the 'tight party management and paternalistic style of the Labour administration' (Sallis 1988, 114) that had dominated up until that time. This included permitting schools to opt out of local government authority control and become independent managers of their own provision, as evident by the creation of City Technology Colleges under the terms of the Education Reform Act 1988 and the Local Management of Schools. A corollary of this was that budget responsibility was devolved directly to some schools, thus stripping local government authorities of their powers as planners and funders of these schools. The Education Reform Act 1988 also made it possible so that children were allocated a school place by application (parental choice) rather than by the local government authority, further diminishing the discretionary powers of local government authorities. As Jones (2003, 131) observes, the Education Reform Act 1988 signalled a decisive break from post-war government policy in that 'it destroyed the educational culture which had been developed between 1944 and 1979, and began the work of creating a different one, in which old "social actors" were marginalized and new ones rendered powerful'.

These education reforms were later accelerated and expanded by New Labour governments (1997–2010) and the Coalition government (2010–2015) through the creation of academy trusts, that is, schools or clusters of schools (multi-academy trusts) that are state funded and privately run pursuant to a contract with the Secretary of State (Wilkins 2016). A watershed moment came with the introduction of the Academies Act 2010 which made it possible for all ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ schools (and, for the first time, primary schools) to apply to the then Department of Education to convert to academy status, with the implication that school governors and school sponsors would shape decisions about admissions, finance, teacher pay and conditions, strategy, and the like. Since the Academies Act, the total number of academies in England has risen from 1,952 in 2011/12 (Department for Education 2013) to 10,176 in 2022/23 (UK Government 2023).

The expansion of the academies programme has resulted in the ‘hollowing out’ of local government authorities – what Lubienski (2014, 424) terms ‘disintermediation’ – undermining their role as brokers of inter-school collaboration and monitors of school improvement (Simkins et al. 2015). At the same time, local government authorities continue to be responsible for a range of education-related statutory duties including fair admissions, home-to-school transport, place planning, securing provision for Looked After Children and funding and co-ordinating support for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (Department for Education 2014). Moreover, while ‘academisation’ of schools has expanded significantly since 2010, it has been approached and taken up in ‘highly complex and varied ways’ (Keddie 2019, 16); that is, far from being a linear or straightforward process of adoption and retention, academisation has been ‘mediated and struggled over, and sometimes ignored’ (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012, 3). This is evident in primary school education where, at the time of writing, local authorities continue to manage 9,990 schools, accounting for 59.5% of the total number of primary schools in receipt of public funding in England (see UK Government 2023). Research carried out by Keddie (2019, 19) goes some way to capturing these struggles over academisation in the primary education sector in England, pointing to how a ‘plurality of situated, professional, material and external factors can converge in ways that produce negative and positive views about this reform’. This can result, as Keddie demonstrates through two contrasting case studies, in academisation being embraced and accommodated by some and stifled and refused by others. The ‘micropolitics of resistance’ (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012, 150) that Keddie documents, also evident in the work of Greany and Higham (2018) and Spicksley (2022), not only disrupts the current Conservative Government’s preference for mass academisation (Department for Education 2022) but also challenges those who see local government authorities as an ‘inefficient, and an artificial, bureaucratized barrier between producers and consumers’ (Lubienski 2014, 426). As Greany and Higham (2018, 46) report, the majority of primary school leaders remain ‘firmly committed to maintaining a coherent local system of support for schools and to an ongoing role for the LA (local authority) in overseeing and co-ordinating this’. Such commitments, and the ‘discomforts, oppositions and resistances’ (Maguire, Braun, and Ball 2018, 1061) they engender, mean that local government authorities continue to play an important role in the running of many primary schools, albeit from an increasingly marginalised position.

This marginalised position has emerged as a key empirical focus for other researchers too (see for example, Crawford et al. 2022; Greany and Higham 2018; Hatcher 2014; Simkins et al. 2015). Insights from these studies demonstrate a changing albeit renewed role for local government authorities. Greany and Higham (2018, 42–43) illustrate that while local government authorities are forced to ‘rationalise’ their services and ‘reorganise’ the support they offer to schools, they have retained ‘strategic influence over academies and some level of service delivery for their remaining maintained schools’. A trend common to the four local government authorities studied by Greany and Higham (2018, 42) was the shift away from a ‘traditional local hierarchical governance’ model and towards a ‘commercialised network governance’ model where they sell or broker services and develop new local networks that influence other middle tier organisations, including Multi Academy Trusts and Teaching School Alliances. Similar insights reported by Crawford et al. (2022, 801) point to the role of local government authorities as key actors within a ‘multi-dimensional middle’, a space where they make ‘judgements about how active they should be, who they should engage with, and how’.

Research design

This paper draws on evidence generated through a 12-month study of ‘Building On’, a collaborative initiative developed to support Year One (children aged 5–6) teachers in one city in England to transform their pedagogical practices in response to and following the COVID-19 pandemic. Eight Year One teachers from six primary schools – some of whom worked in the same school, either as co-teachers (Teacher 5a & 5b) or as colleagues in a multiple-form entry setting (Teacher 4a & 4b) – participated in one or more semi-structured interview between September 2021 and August 2022. In addition, two local government authority advisers and one consultant, commissioned by the local government authority, were interviewed. A breakdown of the interviews carried out and the pseudonyms assigned to participants is presented in Table 1. Each interview was carried out online via Zoom, recorded and professionally transcribed. Additional evidence was collected through observations of, and documentation related to, six 90-minute online

Table 1. Semi-structured interviews conducted with participants.

Participant	Term One	Term Two	Term Three
Teachers (School Type)			
Teacher 1 (Academy converter)	✓	✓	✓
Teacher 2 (Local Government Authority Maintained)	✓	✓	✓
Teacher 3 (Local Government Authority Maintained)	✓		
Teacher 4a & 4b (Local Government Authority Maintained)	✓	✓	✓
Teacher 5a & 5b (Academy converter)	✓	✓	
Teacher 6 (Local Government Authority Maintained)		✓	
Local government authority (LGA) personnel			
LGA adviser 1			✓
LGA adviser 2			✓
LGA Consultant			✓

cluster meetings facilitated by the local government authority in collaboration with teachers. An overarching focus of the study was to document the various socio-cultural-political conditions that support and/or constrain the pedagogical transformations that teachers within the Building On initiative attempted. In this paper, we present evidence related to the involvement and role of the local government authority which we refer to as Brannington City Council. The research was granted ethical approval by the University of Suffolk.

The building on initiative: background and context

Building On was a collaborative initiative developed by Year One teachers and local government authority personnel in a large city in the Southwest of England. The initiative was borne out of discussions between these policy actors about how best to respond to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic for children making the transition from Reception to Year One, which in England sits at the intersection of Early Childhood Education and Compulsory School Education. As one local government authority adviser explained:

The project started with a concern for children's learning and development as we all came out of lockdowns. It was that first cohort of children who we knew had missed a lot of their Reception year and were going into Year One. We felt that they'd missed a lot of learning and development and missed a really pivotal opportunity for high quality early years practice and provision . . . they weren't going to be ready to sit down and learn at tables when they hit Year One like some schools want them to be. (LGA adviser 1)

Concerns about the transition from Reception to Year One in England, as well as the challenges that children and families can experience when navigating it, are longstanding (Alexander 2010; Ofsted 2004). However, by restricting children's access to education and disrupting their ability to participate in transition practices, the COVID-19 pandemic created additional concerns about how best to support children and families during this time (see also Bakopoulou 2022).

Yet, while the initial concerns of Building On were about responding to the immediate challenges posed by COVID-19, the initiative quickly evolved into a community of various participants whose shared motivation was to reflect more broadly on the purposes of Year One:

COVID has been the perfect opportunity to say 'the kids actually need more play. They need more interaction'. The balance of education needs to be tipped back again towards the children. (Teacher 1, term one)

It has evolved and it's got to the stage of how long is a piece of string? Out of a seminar (organised by Brannington City Council to support transition during COVID-19), we were just talking at the end and a few people were saying 'oh, it'd be really good if we could get something going to help us properly change Year One'. So, we volunteered to host regular clusters where we will come together as a group of practitioners to discuss what we are thinking and doing in a very supportive way. (LGA adviser 1)

For those involved in the initiative, the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to think differently about education (Collet-Sabé and Ball 2023). Not only did the pandemic loosen the grip of powerful assessment and inspection policy

technologies, creating ‘a degree of freedom unseen since the 1980s’ (Bradbury et al. 2022, 777), but it also opened up time and space for teachers to deliberate and explore ‘critical questions’ about ‘purposes, values, ethics, concepts, understandings and responsibilities’ (Fielding and Moss 2011, 18). While such questions are a central feature of what it means to participate in a democratic politics of education (Biesta 2009), they are often marginalised in systems underpinned by NPM discourses where emphasis is shifted towards strategies, techniques and practices that ‘work’ to deliver desirable outcomes in a secure and calculating way (Ball 2021). However, for the architects of the Building On initiative, like other primary school teachers in England (Moss et al. 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst for re-thinking education and exploring alternatives in the first year(s) of compulsory school. This was captured by one teacher who noted how ‘lockdowns and COVID have changed the landscape of what’s important for children’ (Teacher 2, term two).

Although a full description of the adaptations made by the Year One teachers within the Building On initiative lies beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to theorise the broad pedagogical shifts that were taking place during this time. This, we hope, will enable a deeper understanding of the role that Brannington City Council performed within the Building On initiative. One important point to make, and something we return to later in the paper, is how the pedagogical changes made by teachers were voluntary and flexible rather than mandated and prescribed. The extent of each teacher’s transformation was for them to negotiate and was contingent on the situated particularities of their local context. Naturally, then, the extent of the changes made ranged between each teacher engaged in the initiative and, as such, it is more accurate to speak about pedagogical transformations rather than a single, unitary transformation. However, differences in transformation were a matter of degrees as opposed to direction, as all teachers described broadly similar shifts. The following quote is illustrative of the transformations made:

We used to teach in a subject-discrete way and so we were doing huge amounts of literacy, a maths lesson every day, a phonics lesson every day, reading every day and then supposed to cover each of the foundation subjects mainly in afternoons . . . the mornings were so intense, with this back-to-back, very adult-led environment. I just found it so overwhelming and so did the children . . . It feels so much better . . . It has felt less pressured time wise and I have got flexibility . . . Because I feel like I can be more responsive to the children, rather than trying to make them fit the curriculum. So, I now start more from the children. (Teacher 5a, term one)

This description, as well as those provided by other teachers involved in the initiative, document a number of adaptations, including the way timetables were constructed and the way teachers and children related to one another. Drawing on Bernstein’s (2000) theories on educational transmission, these pedagogical transformations could broadly be characterised as attempts to move away from ‘performance’ based characteristics and towards more ‘competence’ based tenets (see [Box 1](#) below). That is to say, teachers sought to move away from practices that emphasised ‘specific outputs’ and ‘specialised skills’ and instead positioned children as ‘active and creative in the construction of a valid world of meanings and practice’ (Bernstein 2000, 43–44). It is important to note, however, that while such shifts were deliberate and significant for all involved, they were never

	Performance model	Competence model
Space	Spaces clearly marked and explicit. Clear boundaries limit access and movements.	Few specially defined pedagogic spaces. Absence of boundaries limiting access and movements.
Time	Time is pre-determined and lessons are explicitly punctuated from one another.	Time is seen in the present tense and continuously negotiated between learners and educators.
Discourse	Practices focus on specialised and discrete subjects, skills and procedures.	Practices take the form of projects, themes and ranges of experiences.
Evaluation	Assessment procedures place emphasis on what is missing. Explicit boundaries separating success and failure.	Assessment procedures place emphasis upon what is present.
Control	Control rests with educators. Strong disciplining regulation where deviance is highly visible.	Educators are positioned as a 'facilitator' and emphasis is on children as self-regulating. Control is negotiated on a personalised basis.

Box 1. Performance- and competence-based principles (Bernstein, 2000, 44–50).

totalising; aspects of performance-based pedagogies were still reported in all cases, particularly in the teaching of phonics.

While there is longstanding interest in and support for the integration of competence principles in the first year(s) of compulsory school (Alexander 2010; Plowden 1967), research demonstrates that they can be difficult to enact and sustain in practice (Nicholson and Hendry 2022). The reasons for this are complex and multifaceted. Some challenges are material, such as inadequate resources, and others are professional, such as a lack of support from colleagues and/or senior leaders. Another barrier is the external tension between the 'social logic' of competence models (Bernstein 2000, 42) and the 'technocratic mindset' (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021, 25) that NPM reforms have sought to instil in primary education in England. Here, the 'emancipatory flavour' of competence models (Bernstein 2000, 44), where individuals are abstracted from 'distributions of power and principles of control' (43), sits uneasily within a system predicated on efficiency, standardisation and performance/contract accountability (Braun and Maguire 2020; Hall and Pulsford 2019). Under the principles and logics of NPM, pedagogical practices are valued in terms of their capacity to be rendered calculable, creating a landscape where 'results are prioritised over processes, numbers over experiences, procedures over ideas, productivity over creativity' (Ball and Olmedo 2013, 91). This performative culture favours and presupposes performance modes of education, especially those where 'outputs can be measured and optimised' (Bernstein 2000, 50). Competence-based principles therefore represent 'interrupt[ion]s or resistances' (Bernstein 2000, 51) to NPM, meaning their enactment can be complex, challenging and, at times, unstable. To be sustainable in compulsory school contexts, competence models require strong institutional and locally supportive conditions. Here we document how local government authorities can enable such conditions by examining two key roles performed by Brannington City Council in the Building On initiative: first, as interpreters and translators of policy and second, as brokers of partnerships and collaborative exchanges.

Local government authorities as interpreters and translators of policy

The first key role performed by Brannington City Council in the Building On initiative was that of a policy mediator. As noted by Ball et al. (2011a, 628), ‘not all of the significant policy actors are based inside schools’ but rather ‘local authority advisers, consultants, or edu-businesses can play a key role in the policy process’. During cluster meetings, local government authority personnel – by which we mean two advisers and one consultant commissioned by Brannington City Council to contribute to the Building On initiative – provided ‘interpretations’ and ‘translations’ of national policy. That is, they engaged with both the ‘languages of policy’ (interpretation) and the ‘languages of practice’ (translation), mostly in ways that were ‘closely interwoven and overlapping’ (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012, 45–47). Through this work, local government authority personnel established themselves as influential actors within the policy process and the cluster meetings they organised and facilitated became sites of locally responsive, negotiated policy activity (Colebatch 2009).

The interpretation and translation processes carried out by local government authority personnel during this time – that is, their ‘recontextualising procedures’ (Bernstein 2000, 60) – were focussed on supporting teachers to navigate the tension between competence-based pedagogical principles and the demands of national policy. As Braun and Maguire (2020) and Hall and Pulsford (2019) document, the commitments of primary school teachers to developing and enacting responsive and creative pedagogies can sit uneasily within the current neoliberal policy climate and its emphasis on standardisation, testing and performance. In recognising this tension, local government authority personnel based their interpretation and translation work on helping teachers to navigate it:

What we try to do is to find a way through the tension between what practitioners want and the external expectations . . . I don’t think there is one right compromise for everybody, I suppose. I’ve always tried to find that middle ground between government diktat and principles. My framework is to work to bring those two, what can appear polarised positions, together. (LGA consultant)

My advice to teachers is first of all to recognise that there’s tension there. The message that we give out to schools is while those two [policy and practice] things might be slightly different sides of the same coin, they’re the same coin. And you can have good child-centred practice which doesn’t lose sight of the fact that good numeracy skills, good oracy skills and strong writing skills are absolutely front and centre to the journey for the children. It is not a choice of one or the other . . . And so I’ve always thought that there’s a way to be principled and pragmatic at the same time. You don’t have to fly flags for one way of doing things because that’s never the reality. (LGA adviser 2)

By emphasising the ‘middle ground’ and being both ‘principled and pragmatic’, local government authority personnel were focussed not on constraint *or* agency but on constraint *and* agency and the inter-penetration between them (Ball 1994, 21). That is, they sought to identify ways through which teachers could exercise agency alongside, in-between and amongst the constraints of policy (Duarte and Brewer 2022). These efforts are reflected in Figure 1 below – an agenda from a cluster meeting organised and facilitated by the local government authority – which illustrates how national policies (e.g. national curriculum, Ofsted

4 th CLUSTER MEETING	
18 th November 2021	
4:00-4:05	Welcomes (*****)
4:05-4:15	OPEN DISCUSSION What is going well with interactions in children's play and learning? Share and reflect.
4:15-4:25	Survey Feedback (*****) – National Curriculum in continuous provision The teaching and learning continuum. Deployment of other adults Interactions- reminder Observing the learning Ofsted –articulating the provision. A model for planning NC learning opportunities for quality interactions
4.25-4.35	***** Input
4:35-4:40	Case study- ***** from ***** *****
4:40-4:45	DISCUSSION – breakout room
4:45-4:55	***** Input
4.55-5:15	Break out room - Feedback and comments
5:15-5:25	DISCUSSION Reflecting on moving forward
5:25-5:30	Research participation

Figure 1. Cluster meeting agenda for the building on initiative.

guidelines) were interpreted and translated in ways that complemented the enactment of competence-based principles (e.g. observations of learning, interactions) in Year One.

Over the course of the academic year, cluster meetings were used to identify where there might be 'room for manoeuvre' (Ball 1994, 18) within various policy texts (see Figure 1):

So much of the key stage one curriculum is about skills and concepts that you can learn in very playful ways . . . [our role] is about getting teachers to think for themselves about what aspects of the curriculum can and cannot be learned through play. So, our message is to be clear about what you have to teach and then be creative about how you use the rest of it, using resources and the playfulness to introduce things, or sometimes trusting that if your environment is good enough, children will discover that in their own time, in their own way. (LGA consultant)

We really unpick what inclusive assessment looks like and we use the language of Ofsted, you know, 'what they know, remember, and can do'. Well, where are five-year-old and six-year-old children who might also have missed out on some learning and development through the pandemic going to show you what they know and understand? So that will include child-led activities, playful development and learning environments that enable them to bring their natural disposition to the things that we want them to learn. (LGA adviser 1)

These extracts evidence 'writerly' (Bowe, Ball, and Gold 1992, 11) or 'exhortative' (Ball et al. 2011b, 615) readings of policy; that is to say, they exercise judgement and creativity and consider opportunities and possibilities. Such readings appeared to shape the sense of *writerliness* with which teachers themselves started to interpret and translate policy:

I can grasp it better now, and see how it can be adapted, and articulate how I'm addressing those national curriculum descriptors through their [children's] own interests and their own learning. (Teacher 5a, term two)

I think it's about being creative with it. Now I know I can look at this curriculum and I know how to manipulate it for want of a better word into how I want play-based provision to look. (Teacher 6, term two)

These 'active' readings of policy were important for and potentially critical to the pedagogical transformations enacted by teachers within the Building On initiative. They brought new perspectives to bear upon policies that are often considered, and in some cases experienced (see Nicholson and Hendry 2020), as being irreconcilable with competence-based pedagogies. A 'content analysis' carried out by Manyukhina and Wyse (2019, 236–237), for example, concluded how the English national curriculum can 'assign teachers the role of knowledge transmitters as opposed to facilitators or mediators of the learning process', a dynamic they argue 'is unlikely to leave room to build teaching on learners' individual characteristics, such as their personal backgrounds, interests, goals, and priorities'. This reading suggests little latitude for the inclusion of competence-based principles in primary education in England. Yet, in the Building On initiative, the ongoing interpretations and translations presented by local government authority personnel supported teachers to reconcile their pedagogical intentions with their obligations to enact statutory policy.

Our analysis illustrates how the presence and expertise of advisers and an external consultant was affirming for teachers within the Building On initiative. Teachers viewed these actors as knowledgeable and found their interpretations and translations of policy authoritative, supportive and reassuring:

I think that they're [the clusters] really reassuring. I think sometimes when you're doing this and there is no one else at school to sort of say 'are we doing this right?' you can feel a bit lonely and then you suddenly have this panicky feeling like 'oh I don't have control because I've given the control over to the children', and then I think maybe we're not doing it right. So, going to these cluster meetings and having them (LGA personnel) there [as] calm reassuring voices of, 'no, this is important, and this is valuable' is great. (Teacher 4a, term one)

For me, being able to listen to them (LGA personnel) is inspirational. It brings me back to my pedagogy, I suppose, what I believe, and they are so helpful in clarifying some points and being very clear ... I don't think it would have been nearly as effective without them. (Teacher 5a, term one)

Although a commanding presence within the initiative, the way that local government authority personnel presented and negotiated their interpretations and translations encouraged teachers to actively participate in and reflect on the policy process. That is, while the local government authority consultant and advisers were 'authoritative interpreters' (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012, 7) of policy, they did not position teachers merely as 'receivers' (49) of said policy. This was evident not only in the practices enacted by local government authority personnel during cluster meetings – such as, inviting teachers to shape the focus of upcoming sessions and allocating time within them to discuss, reflect and feedback (see Figure 1) – but also in how they spoke about their intentions for supporting teachers to transform their practices:

We wanted that reflective journey to happen, not necessarily reach a fixed outcome, because it was about empowering the teachers to reflect, to make their own decisions and feel like

they could have really well-informed conversations with their senior leadership teams to support some of the changes that they wanted to happen . . . everybody's doing it in the capacity to which they're able under the constraints that they work in. (LGA adviser 1)

The role performed by local government authority personnel, as noted here, was not to present undifferentiated or top-down interpretations and translations of policy. Instead, there was recognition that the teachers involved in the Building On initiative had different discursive possibilities for enacting competence-based pedagogies. Thus, while the interpretations and translations of policy provided by local government authority personnel were helpful and influential, they were not intended to be simply 'implemented'; rather, they needed to be reconstructed and remade by teachers in context and practice (Braun et al. 2011).

Local government authorities as brokers of partnerships and collaborative exchanges

The second key role performed by Brannington City Council in the Building On initiative was to broker partnerships and collaborative exchanges between schools across the city. Partnerships and collaborations were seen by advisers as essential to the success and sustainability of the pedagogical transformations pursued by teachers within the initiative. For example, speaking about their intentions for supporting teachers, one adviser highlighted:

We wanted quite a lot of peer-to-peer learning where they could hear from each other about how they had solved some of the barriers or not solved them at all . . . People learn best when make the decisions for themselves, try it, reflect and have a supportive network to go to and share, even when it goes badly wrong and when you try something and it's chaos. But somebody else will say, 'oh God, it was like that for me the first time I tried that. But then I did this, and I found the children really responded.' And of course, you go away and try it, don't you? (LGA adviser 1)

The collective ways of working – e.g. cluster meetings and school visits – that were orchestrated by advisers were welcomed by teachers and supported them to reflect on and transform their own practices:

I went to another school, and I was taking so many pictures. I was messaging my TA (Teaching Assistant). I was doing videos. We've come back and we've redeveloped part of our space based on what they had. It's great to visit and talk to people that are on the same page . . . You know, talk to likeminded people. It's like going into a support group. (Teacher 4a, term three)

It allows you to reflect on your own space. When you think you're nowhere and you go somewhere else and think, 'Yes, actually, this area in my room facilitates that same kind of learning and with a couple of tweaks we could absolutely be there' . . . I think sometimes you do need to step outside of your own little space as it allows you to see it a bit more clearly. (Teacher 1, term three)

These extracts evidence how collaborative exchanges, by inviting actors to share ideas, recognise barriers and identify solutions, can support teachers to achieve more than they would be able to alone (Muijs, West, and Ainscow 2010). They also illustrate the sense of comfort and confidence that can come from engaging with 'likeminded' professionals

who are pursuing similar goals. When enacting pedagogical practices that resist or circumvent NPM discourses, as teachers in the Building On initiative were, the presence of a local community that provides mutual support and critical friendship is valuable, if not essential.

For school-to-school partnerships and collaborations to flourish and be sustainable, certain conditions are required. Armstrong and colleagues' (2021) review of evidence on school-to-school collaboration, for example, underscores the importance of leadership, to coordinate activities and build capacity, and relationships, to establish trust and communication. In the Building On initiative, Brannington City Council's advisers played a leading role in establishing and attending to these conditions, particularly through orchestrating cluster meetings and school visits and using their local knowledge to connect schools who were 'contextually matched' (Armstrong, Brown, and Chapman 2021, 343), whether through school population, geography or the particular aspects of practice their teachers were attempting to transform. In taking responsibility for this work, advisers alleviated some of the key factors – funding, resources and workload – that can hinder schools from engaging in collaborative exchanges (Armstrong, Brown, and Chapman 2021). In addition, Brannington City Council's involvement in the Building On initiative appeared to help schools overcome what Armstrong et al. (2021, 343) identify as a 'major obstacle for collaborative practice between schools'; namely, the marketised policy environment that schools operate within. An environment where schools are required to be attentive to the market concepts of supply and demand and compete with one another for pupils, funding and resources can hinder collaborative activity (Greany and Higham 2018; Keddie 2015). However, as a middle-tier organisation, Brannington City Council were able to perform a 'third-party coordinating function' where they could 'oversee, broker and orchestrate collaborative activity' (Armstrong, Brown, and Chapman 2021, 334) for the benefit of all schools involved in the Building On initiative. This dynamic – where all teachers within the initiative had access to and benefited from the 'assistance of outsiders' (Ainscow and Howes 2007, 295) – appeared to negate the 'entrepreneurial-competitive' (Ball 2021, 58) rationality that the market seeks to instil, instead creating a culture of trust, cooperation and reciprocity:

I think that's quite a unique thing of this project is that it really has been quite a collegiate kind of opportunity for trusts and academies and local authority maintained schools to come together and share practice ... It's a bit like the French thing, you know, it's egalitarian, fraternity. And that's what we are. It's a real fraternity of practitioners who support each other. They go to see each other's classrooms, they reflect back and nobody dismisses anybody else's practice, whatever level they are reflecting and developing at, they are valued. (LGA adviser 1)

I've been amazed at the generosity of the people in the group because you're really putting your hand up aren't you and being brave to say 'yes, come in and scrutinise my classroom'. (Teacher 1, term three)

Partnerships and collaborative exchanges can, and no doubt do, take place without the support of middle-tier organisations such as local government authorities. However, by 'holding the space' (Lofthouse 2023) and demonstrating 'network competencies' (Greany and Higham 2018, 68), advisers created the conditions for teachers within the Building

On initiative to engage in, and experience the benefits of, collective and collegiate ways of working. To borrow Greany's (2022, 259) term, they were the 'glue' that ensured all teachers wanting to develop and transform their practices across the city were included, supported and welcome.

Staying 'relevant' in 'precarious' times

The role that Brannington City Council performed within the Building On initiative was influential in supporting the pedagogical transformations that teachers attempted. Yet their role should not be seen as linear or simply as 'a straightforward response to a "problem"' (Braun et al. 2011, 587). As Greany (2022, 262) demonstrates, the roles that local government authorities are performing in England are not 'uniform' but rather 'reflect the accumulated actions and logics of multiple players'. This requires us to see the role that local government authorities perform as 'contextually mediated and institutionally rendered' (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012, 3). In this final section, we briefly consider some of the contextual dimensions underpinning Brannington City Council and their role in the Building On initiative. To do so, we draw on Braun and colleagues' (2011) heuristic framework for 'taking context seriously', focussing on *situated*, *professional*, *material* and *external* dimensions (Box 2). As we demonstrate, these dimensions 'overlap and are interconnected' (Braun et al. 2011, 588) and are continuously being negotiated, contested and/or struggled over (Ozga 2000, 2). Such nuances, although messy and complex, are important to understanding the context in which Brannington City Council were able to support the Building On initiative.

Situated context

Brannington City Council is a city-wide unitary authority in England with a resident population of around 500,000, 30% of whom identify with ethnic groups other than white British. The Authority, which had an elected Labour mayor but was politically under no overall control, had been particularly impacted by the *external* context, with 61% of its primary schools converting to an academy, around 20% higher than the national average (UK Government 2023). Despite the attrition of resource and responsibility brought about by high-levels of academisation, Brannington City Council, like other local government authorities (see Machin 2023), played a critical role in helping their local

Situated contexts (e.g. locale and history)

Professional contexts (e.g. values, commitments and experiences)

Material contexts (e.g. staffing, budgets and infrastructure)

External contexts (e.g. pressures and expectations from broader policy context, legal requirements and responsibilities)

Box 2. Contextual dimensions for 'taking context seriously' (Braun et al. 2011, 588).

community to navigate the *situated* challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. As we allude to above, the Building On initiative was borne out of concerns about the impact of the pandemic on children's learning and development. Brannington City Council were proactive in both raising and responding to these concerns and engaged with all primary schools across the city, regardless of whether they maintained them:

We invited all primary schools and head teachers for a webinar and their response was phenomenal. We had over a hundred people desperately trying to get in. It was probably about 120 people in the end joined, which for us is enormous because I think there's about 120 primary schools. Everybody wanted to come. It was phenomenal. (LGA adviser 1)

Another *situated* factor was the involvement of Brannington City Council's Early Years team in the Building On initiative. The disruptions to children's transition from Reception to Year One caused by the pandemic meant that advisers responsible for Early and Primary education phases worked closely with one another. This meant that the Early Years team, who had a strong reputation across the city, became heavily involved in supporting the Building On initiative:

There is a very strong presence for early years support in the city. Over the years they've built a really strong team of people and have got great practice. To be honest, it feels like they've had more resource to engage in research-based practice, which has never been the case for the primary team. (LGA adviser 2)

For a depleted Primary team (see *material* context), the presence, support and pedagogical expertise of the Early Years team was an important factor in the Building On initiative, both in its inception and continuation.

Professional context

Professional dimensions such as values, commitments and experiences can determine how active local government authorities are, who they engage with and how (Crawford et al. 2022; Greany and Higham 2018). Despite the ongoing depletion of resource (see *material* context) and responsibility (see *external* context), advisers at Brannington City Council were positive about and committed to their role in supporting children's education across the city. This was evident not only in their response to the *situated* challenges of the pandemic but also in how advisers viewed their roles more broadly:

I really still think that there is a role for local authorities to play for the good of schooling provision across a city area or a local authority area. Academies were supposed to be this sort of panacea and we'd have this bright future where every school, in every community was going to be good and strong . . . well actually, the profile of academies versus LA maintained schools across the city, there's a stronger profile of good and better schools in the LA. (LGA adviser 2)

We have a quality improvement function and we have to be doing that. It's meaningful work and it's what we should be doing because we know that some children in the city are not achieving as well as they could be or getting the opportunities. (LGA adviser 1)

From these extracts, it is possible to identify potential tensions between adviser's *professional* outlooks and attitudes and the ongoing efforts within national policy – the *external* context – to reduce their influence. This was not a sum-zero issue but rather there was

a constant and ongoing ‘skirmishing between structure and agency’ (Greany 2022, 263), a case of local government authority advisers adapting national policy (see *external context*) while at the same time it was adapting them. For example, in response to an increasingly competitive and multi-dimensional middle-tier, Brannington City Council advisers revised and changed their *professional* commitments so that they were more responsive, and hence more appealing, to schools:

We’ve tried to move away from the sense that schools are having to be accountable to us. We’ve tried to flip that so it’s more about us being accountable to them and us saying to them ‘what is it you need?’ and ‘we’ll try and work with you on that.’ So, it’s around their priorities and I see our role now as more of a coaching role really. It’s about supporting them and building their own capacity rather than going in and being inspectorial with them. Because that’s what it used to feel like. And I just don’t think that’s particularly helpful. (LGA adviser 2)

This shift in approach – from ‘inspectorial’ to ‘coaching’ – reflects how local government authorities have had to ‘reconceptualise their approach’ and move away from ‘traditional, hierarchical authority over schools’ (Greany 2022, 257) in response to national policy demands for improved school autonomy. In the context of the Building On initiative, the shift in the *professional* context was important. It meant that when teachers expressed a desire to transform their practices, Brannington City Council advisers were accommodating, supportive and influential.

Material context

The *material* context of Brannington City Council was challenging, with advisers describing funding as ‘stretched’ and ‘tight’ and staffing as ‘precarious’ and ‘uncertain’:

Funding is really difficult and resource and people power are really low. It feels like we’re stretched at all times and the role that we have around school improvement to support schools with is tight and becoming tighter almost by what feels like the month at the moment . . . And the pressure from the City Council is not that different to many other councils – a massive multimillion pound deficit each year that needs to be made up and looking to reduce costs, mainly around staffing because the wage costs are the big ones. So, it feels like quite a precarious position to be in really. (LGA adviser 2)

Not only were Brannington City Council’s finances being ‘relentlessly squeezed’ (Woods and Simkins 2014, 328) but their infrastructure was also being dismantled. As one adviser stated:

They [central Government] are forever fragmenting all the services and the operations that are happening and taking responsibility away from the local authority. But then at the same time, central government come running to us when they want something doing. (LGA adviser 1)

Despite this challenging context, two *material* dimensions appeared particularly critical to the role Brannington City Council performed in the Building On initiative. The first was the ability to commission an external consultant who had expertise in supporting the pedagogical transformations teachers were attempting within the initiative. As we illustrate above, the local government authority consultant made an important contribution to the Building On initiative, particularly through their authoritative interpretations and

translations of national policy texts. As one of the advisers stated, this brought ‘national level expertise direct to teachers in a personable and bespoke way’ (LGA adviser 1). The second dimension was Brannington City Council’s ability to quickly and efficiently deploy technology to organise and facilitate online cluster meetings. The use of Zoom helped advisers circumnavigate both *situated* challenges (e.g. COVID-19 lockdown restrictions) and *material* constraints (e.g. funding and infrastructure). In doing so, it supported them to play an influential and leading role in the initiative, one that they might otherwise not have been able to perform.

External context

At the time of our research, the ‘policy hyperactivity’ (Ball 2021, 212) surrounding academisation meant that Brannington City Council’s position was uncertain and precarious. As one adviser explained:

We operate with a sense of trepidation at all times. Because you’re never quite sure that you’ve got a future, you know? And so that message about academisation is going to happen for everybody, it’s the future. And then there was a pause on that through COVID and then the new White Paper said 2030 is the point at which there’ll be a fully academised system. And now that’s not translated into the Bill. So it feels like there’s this sort of yo-yo of uncertainty that LAs operate within where we are not quite sure what our future’s going to be like. (LGA adviser 2)

This challenging environment is navigated differently in different contexts, as Greany (2022) documents through vignettes of local authorities undergoing processes of ‘adaptation’, ‘survival’, ‘transformation’ and, in some cases, ‘Soviet-style collapses’ (254–256). The interpenetration, or ‘skirmishing’ (Greany 2022, 263), between structure and agency is important in determining how local government authority responses are constructed. We illustrated above how the *professional* context at Brannington City Council was adapted in response to *external* pressures. However, this influence worked both ways; that is, the *external* context was adapted and shaped by the *professional* values and commitments held by advisers. For instance, adviser’s *professional* beliefs that their role was important and necessary for the ‘good of schooling’ (LGA adviser 2) across the city meant that they were reluctant to support the Department for Education’s (DfE) plan to convert more primary schools to academies:

There’s over 40 primary schools in the city whose head teachers and governing bodies have made an active decision that they want to maintain their connection with the local authority. And the DfE didn’t seem to get that they’ve made an active choice . . . And then they (DfE) were saying to us ‘okay, can you help us open up the conversation [about conversion] now?’ The expectation from the DfE that we as local authority officers are going to be orchestrating our own demise, that doesn’t make any sense to me at all. I’m not going to persuade LA maintained schools that they should go and join a trust, because every school that goes is another nail in our coffin. (LGA adviser 2)

The reluctance to support the expansion of academisation across the city, however, was combined with a need to be pragmatic about and opportunistic towards the current landscape, where academy trusts occupied an established and influential position within the education ecology:

But that being said, the reality is that academies exist and that agenda is probably not going to go away. So if we are going to try and sort of raise practice, we need to do with as many partners as possible ... And some of those trusts have got resource, which a lot of the maintained schools and local authority haven't, and they've got a sort of a political impetus behind them. So, if they get engaged in a project like this and if we can show as a local authority that we're being proactive and positive in our engagement with the academy sector then ... it sounds bad, doesn't it? But it's about sort of manipulating the political capital to some degree to make sure that the Regional Director's office in the Southwest sees that the local authority is still relevant. (LGA adviser 2)

The *external* context that advisers were operating within, as these extracts evidence, was replete with 'moral and political dilemmas' (Greany and Higham 2018, 69). Such an environment requires 'creative, systems thinkers and boundary spanners' (Greany 2022, 262), individuals who are able to navigate – or 'manipulate' – an increasingly challenging and complex *external* context in ways that are 'positive' and 'proactive'. For Brannington City Council, the Building On initiative was an opportunity for them to assert and maintain their 'relevance', or, in Greany's (2022, 263) terms, their 'influence, legitimacy and moral authority'.

Conclusion

Since the 1980s, education reformers in England have rolled out policy and legislation designed to reduce the discretionary powers and influence of local government authorities. These reforms are predicated on a 'deep and longstanding mistrust' of local government authorities (Harris 2012, 511) who, despite being democratically organised institutions, have been derided as manifesting 'some of the worst pathologies of public administration of education' (Lubienski 2014, 426), seen to tolerate, as Deem and Davies (1991, 157) once noted, 'low educational standards and undesirable ideas'. Yet our analysis of Brannington City Council in the Building On initiative challenges such perspectives and demonstrates that local government authorities, despite the ongoing attrition of resource and responsibility, can play an important and influential role in supporting local schools and teachers. Through their interpretations and translations of national policy and their brokering of partnerships and collaborative exchanges, Brannington City Council created the conditions for teachers within the Building On initiative to develop and enact locally responsive pedagogies in response to and following the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, they helped to form and sustain what Urban et al. term a 'competent system', one where:

reciprocal relationships between individuals, teams, institutions and the wider socio-political context ... [provide] support for individuals to realise their capability to develop responsible and responsive practices that respond to the needs of children and families in ever-changing societal contexts. (Urban et al. 2012, 21)

Brannington City Council's role within this 'competent system' enabled teachers within the Building On initiative to overcome many of the challenges that teachers encounter when enacting pedagogies that resist or circumvent NPM demands for performativity. This influential and potentially decisive role demonstrates, in line with the argument put forward by Fielding and Moss (2011), that the involvement and support of local government authorities can increase the likelihood of local projects being successful and

sustainable. This was clear when one teacher stated: ‘if the local authority is behind it, then it should and could work’ (Teacher 2, phase two).

In our analysis, and through the application of the analytic of policy enactment (Braun et al. 2011), we have illustrated that Brannington City Council’s role within the Building On initiative arose out of and was shaped by particular contextual dimensions. These included a perceived duty to support schools to overcome the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic (*situated*); the reconceptualising of their role as one that is responsive to the needs and motivations of teachers (*professional*); the commissioning of an external consultant and deployment of technology (*material*); and a desire to maintain and assert their relevance in an increasingly competitive middle-tier environment (*external*). These contextual dimensions invite us to see the role performed by Brannington City Council within the Building On initiative with ‘particularity’ and ‘uniqueness’ (Stake 1995). However, given that local government authorities are continuing to exert influence in new and innovative ways (Crawford et al. 2022; Greany and Higham 2018), we suggest that it is possible, but by no means certain, that the findings we document here might transfer to other geopolitical contexts. To this end, we hope to have captured, within the space permitted, some of the key contextual dimensions underpinning the role that Brannington City Council performed within the Building On initiative, enabling readers to consider and identify where there might be similar possibilities in other situations.

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