# Embedded research within a transient vacuum in the managerialisation of a local authority

**James R. Duggan**

## [A] Introduction

I undertook my doctoral research as an embedded researcher on the Stockborough Challenge, a local authority initiative to improve collaboration within Stockborough Children's Services (Duggan, 2012). As my research progressed, I came to feel considerable unease about my findings, and I acknowledged this in my thesis:

> Research is a strange thing: not listening to someone as they talk is impolite; listening to someone intently and responding appropriately is polite; listening to someone intently and then spending three or more years talking to many of their colleagues to 'fact' check what they said and reading extensively to critically engage with what they were saying seems to me a particular form of malice. So thanks to all those working at 'Stockborough Children's Services' for taking time out from their earnest attempts to improve the lives of the children and young people they work with every day. (Duggan, 2012: p. 8)

While researching the Stockborough Challenge I frequently felt like a photographer at a wedding in which one of the partners had been jilted at the altar, busily taking pictures of an unhappy event. In this chapter, I explore the implications of researching a largely unsuccessful local authority initiative. I also discuss the implications of small-scale, doctoral-level embedded research which seeks to engage with, and change the policy agenda of, the managerialised public sector. I

conclude by analysing some of the factors that I judged to have constrained, limited and contributed to the failure of the initiative I studied.

**[A] Embedded Research**

Embedded research describes an arrangement whereby researchers join non-academic organisations in order to conduct mutually-beneficial research projects (McGinity and Salokangas, 2012; Duggan, forthcoming). My role as an embedded researcher was to produce knowledge which informed the development of the Challenge, whilst writing my PhD thesis on the initiative. For my role – to uncover evidence in order to inform the Challenge – to have any meaning, or impact, the initiative needed to remain open and changeable. But, before my research began, it was increasingly orientated towards a fixed series of enactments of national policy. As I go on to explain, the Challenge was defined and focused ways that became distant from my research. Therefore, my study existed in a negative space; a redundant-seeming process within the context of the embedded research relationship.

Once the possibility of informing the Challenge had passed, I began to consider what type of influence or impact my research could have. Previous commentators on embedded research into policy have observed that although evaluation is aimed at influencing policy decisions, it rarely does. Instead, such work often contributes to a process of 'enlightenment' when it 'challenges old ideas, provides new perspectives and helps to re-order the policy agenda'. (Weiss, 1999, p. 470). Aiming to add to the accumulation of knowledge through with my endeavours to enlighten the policy agenda I was working in the midst of seemed like an eminently worthwhile aim as I set out on my research journey. However, by the time I completed my research the policy agenda had moved on to such an extent that the

specific policy context to which my research related when I began had become the equivalent of an evolutionary cul-de-sac. I want here to make the claim though that my findings were more significant in a more general, wider sense.

I think the pace of change within the initiative was indicative of the on-going managerialisation of the public sector (e.g., Pollitt, 2007), something I go on to define in this chapter as researching in a 'transient vacuum'. The influence of the managerialisation of the public sector was evident both in national policy, and at the local level, in terms of the identification of managerial technologies (i.e., cultural change) and subjectivities (i.e., leadership) as ways of representing and engaging with the task of improving collaboration. There is a literature on the unintended and perverse consequences of managerial reforms to the public sector (e.g., van Thiel and Leeuw, 2002; Hood and Peters, 2004). Thus the enlightenment I hoped to achieve was extending the evidence base of the failures and constraints of applying management approaches in the public sector – managerialism – to the specific case of collaboration in children's services. In the next section, I go on to give some of the contextual background to the Challenge as well as to explain some of my main findings.

**[A] The Stockborough Challenge**

There is insufficient space here in relation to the purpose of this chapter to describe the Stockborough Challenge in full detail (see Duggan, 2012). Instead, I want to present a series of key issues that are worth foregrounding in order to understand how an initiative about public sector change became managerialized. The discussion of these issues draw on evidence from data gathered from interviews with key personnel involved with the Stockborough Challenge as well as reviews of national and authority-level policy documents.

The Challenge began as a local-level initiative to understand what changes would be necessary in terms of the organisation of children's services so as to implement successfully New Labour's Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda (DfES, 2003). A common feature of the Challenge was the managers' orientation to national policy, and the way in which they sought to anticipate, interpret and enact guidance from Whitehall, as was described in Bringing Together, a long document providing the rationale for greater collaborative working in Stockborough Children's Services that drove much of the work:

> The national aspiration for joined up leadership and management is now becoming clear. However, it will be for local partners to put this into practice taking account of the local context. (Stockborough Challenge, 2007, Section 3.36)

In my research, I identified two phases of the Stockborough Challenge which I term Challenge One and Challenge Two that were defined by different representations of the problem of collaboration (Bacchi, 2009), relating to two different phases in national policy.

**(A) Challenge One:**

Stockborough Challenge One emerged, in September 2007, towards the end of the period when the ECM agenda was relatively undefined – in comparison to later guidance. In the Bringing Together document introduced above, the managers repeatedly explained that they did not know what collaborative working meant in practice but that they would figure it out through a 'conversation', or consultation, between the managers and professionals. Distributed across this document, were a range of ideas or concepts, such as the enhanced forms of

leadership the Challenge would use to improve collaborative working. In general, the approach was for the managers to understand collaboration and develop appropriate structures, roles and relationships to facilitate collaborative working. This open approach of understanding and engaging collaboration made a lot of sense to me, and it was something towards which I thought I could contribute. I had the time, resources and skills to provide relevant findings from the research literature. I had time to collect, analyse and communicate evidence from across the organisation in a coherent and informative way. Thus, I saw it as my remit to understand, define and critically engage with concepts and ideas around collaboration to inform the Stockborough Challenge.

However, Challenge One was discontinued due to a range of factors from the looming reality of the 'credit crunch' and public sector cuts to personnel changes and the newer leadership choosing to align the Challenge with the re-articulation of national policy that instructed senior managers to engender cultural change (DSCF, 2007). These factors led to the shift to the second phase of the Challenge.

**(A) Challenge Two**

The focus of Challenge Two was on fostering cultural change in order to develop a culture that was conducive to collaboration in children's services and, in particular, the Children's Trust (DCSF 2008, a, b), a national policy that was an important 'driver' in local policy. A central priority of Challenge Two was the introduction of targets, a feature of the performance-accountability regime that was presenting contrary incentives to different professionals and organizations. This new kind of priority tended to prevent collaboration. There was conflict for the professional involved in that some of them tried to resist the 'pull and push' of targets that appeared to them to obscure the 'real needs' of the children they worked with,

as well as preventing collaborative working. There were parts of the initiative that were undeveloped, but the Stockborough Challenge was finally discontinued due to (yet again) a change in policy direction from a collaborative culture within children's services towards the commissioning of external support so as to drive towards nationally imposed targets. An external advisor to Stockborough Council explained:

> It's strange how you have these things called Children's Trusts, and they had one in Stockborough but they didn't know they had one, and then they were drip fed the guidance, and then there was a moment when they said 'oh, it's about commissioning.'

What I found significant was that the managers developing the Challenge did not clarify what collaboration was, neither did they make specific just what collaborative working looked like. Perhaps this concern was based on my self-identified function of conversing between the concepts employed in the Challenge and those in the literature. Nevertheless, I was struck by the following admission by the director of the Challenge,

> What we do not yet know is quite what we are hoping to achieve through the big thinking and the small starts, what the partnership working of 2013 will look actually look like, and how we will get to the point at which we know. (Stockborough Challenge 2007, Section 1.5).

**(A) Reconfiguring my research task: viewing 'failure' positively?**

Only three months into my fieldwork phase, the initiative was discontinued. So, without the opportunity to inform its future development, I was left with the option of seeking how best to draw on my findings and analyses in

order to be able to contribute to the literature and, more ambitiously, to inform the policy agenda. Thus very early in my research I was continuously wondering about the nature of my findings.

It quickly became apparent that an uncharitable and superficial, but an essentially valid view of the Stockborough Challenge, was that the senior managers failed to adequately conceptualize collaboration, nor to propose ways in which the initiative would help professionals in the practical tasks of working collaboratively. In my research, therefore, I sought to develop a new and more appropriate way of conceptualising collaboration, bridging policy, research and practice (Duggan, 2012).

Describing the Challenge as a 'failure' was uncomfortable to me, due to the negative cultural connotations. It also reflected in negative ways on the managers and professionals in Stockborough. More than this, it seemed unfair and beside the point! The failure of managers to define collaboration and to specify the Challenge was maybe less important than the nationally-defined and driven managerial context that informed and constrained how the managers and professionals interpreted and engaged with the challenge of improving collaboration at the local level. Some of these issues are explored in the next section.

**[A] Researching in a Transient Vacuum**

The 'transient vacuum' is presented here as a metaphor for the spaces that emerge within the managerialisation and neoliberalisation of the public sector, and the challenges of conducting critical research with the aim of informing the development of an initiative whilst also contributing to policy. I understand managerialisation as the application of business rationalities and practices to the public sector with the consequential re-articulation of behaviours, expectations,

values and beliefs along business lines (Clarke and Newman, 1997). Neoliberalisation is taken to mean an ideological and class project to subsume society and social relations within the market (Harvey, 2007).

'Transience' denotes the temporal, spatial and dynamic aspects of public sector reforms. The English public sector has been the site of considerable re-organisation or 're-disorganisation' (Pollitt, 2007) since the 1980s. What characterises this kind of re-organisation/re-disorganisation is hyperactive change processes at a rapid pace, as well as national scale introduction of new structures, and organisations, with a typically abrupt end of initiatives, and the introduction of more re-form. The Stockborough Challenge exemplified many of these features of transience. It was developed in response to the ECM agenda in England which were in turn based on ideas developed in Vermont (Garrett, 2010). This nomadic policy articulation was also evident in Scotland's Getting it Right for Every Child (Scottish Executive, 2006). This policy transfer and proliferation tends to happen in spite of the concerns about the limitations and absences of such policy 'travel'.

Indeed, the common culture and leadership of Stockborough Challenge Two was indicative of on-going re-articulations of managerialism in response to the apparent failure of New Public Management (NPM) (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Clarke et al, 2000; Exworthy and Halford, 2002). Researchers have identified a trend, labelled post-NPM, for leadership campaigns focused on common and converging cultures in order to remedy the negative effects of NPM in the public sector (Christensen and Lægreid, 2008, 2011).

The focus of the Challenge was a roving and transient problem, following the priorities of national policy. First, the concern was to understand and improve collaboration; then it became about cultural change; finally, the initiative was

discontinued when, amongst other factors, national policy switched to commissioning – as described above.

A further significant factor was the transience of the key personnel involved in developing the Challenge. The initiative started in September 2007. The original author of the Challenge retired in November 2008. For a while, a key supporter became acting-Director of Children's Services. He left the authority in the summer of 2009, followed by the Director of the Challenge in November 2009. Then, the leading Challenge 'champion', an energetic headteacher who had pioneered the initiative in a school, also left. It is perhaps unhelpful to attribute these changes to any particular trend such as managerialisation. Professionals have always retired and resigned to take up better opportunities elsewhere. But the public sector has become a site of considerable instability, with staff working on short-term contracts, and continually moving on (Easen et al., 2004). In addition, the spread of managerial identities and entrepreneurialism has resulted in individuals continually moving on for career advancement (Ball, 2003; Pollitt, 2007).

The vacuum which I identify relates to the intangible and hard-to-describe experience of researching an initiative where the 'centre did not hold', in terms of there being a clear and coherent focus at the local level linking concepts, people, organizations and activities. There was no sense that the real agency was with the local authority. Rather, the actions of the managers were in effect attempts to interpret and enact national policy through the Challenge as best they could. This local-national disjuncture is represented in the shift from collaboration to commissioning.

There was also a series of disconnections between the language of policy and professionals' substantive understandings of what these things were as well as what was required to enact them. There were various words in national policy and the local policy of the Challenge that described 'collaboration', such as 'partnership' or 'joined-up working', but, as was acknowledged by the director of the Challenge, practitioners did not know what collaborative working would look like, or how they would develop their knowledge and their skills.

In addition, there was a troubling feeling within the Challenge's that there was a lack of substance to the initiative. The Stockborough Challenge had begun with the aim of figuring out ways of collaboration, but it became a cultural change campaign associated with the development of the Stockborough Children's Trust. The Challenge was utilised by the managers as they interacted with other policies at the national level (e.g., the Building Schools for the Future funding stream) as well as at local levels (e.g., Stockborough Council's corporate transformation).

That policies and priorities shift is not hard to understand, nor are the issues relating to the multiple and representational uses of the Challenge. But the issues about knowing the words for collaboration, yet not knowing how to do it, interested me, and became significant concerns within my research. After a good deal of reading, I came to understand the disjuncture between words and the ability to enact them in terms of forms of contextualized and re-contextualized managerial knowledge.

**[A] Managerialism and knowledge**

Flybjerg (2001) observes that the fields of policy analysis, management, planning and organization are now dominated by rational, de-contextualized and

rule-based approaches to making decisions. These approaches often exclude experience and situated, intuitive or contextualized knowledge. Furthermore, management thinking and its application in the public sector is informed and predicated in terms of managerialism, an ideology that asserts the rights and legitimacy to manage as well as the universal applicability of management strategies and tools in public and private organizations and projects (Fergusson, 2001).

Research documents the influence of both management approaches and managerialism in New Labour's public sector reforms and in educational and children's services policy (Newman, 2001; Gunter, Hall and Mills, 2012). In driving public sector reform, New Labour adopted particular approaches, such as 'deliverology' (Barber, 2008), that sought to define practitioners' actions and meanings from the centre, so closing the scope for local interpretations (Bevir, 2005). One of the consequences of this adoption was that the intersection between policy and practitioners in education, as Smyth (1998) identifies, constructed teachers and other professionals as 'ventriloquists', implementing with compliance the rational, technocratic and managerial reforms without the space, time or legitimacy to disrupt, resist, question or dialogically engage with directives.

Both 'de-contextualized knowledge' and 'ventriloquism' help in understanding how the managers in Stockborough could speak the language of collaboration, yet not know how to re-organize children's services to improve collaborative working. Furthermore, the continual shift in the Challenge from collaboration, to culture and, finally, to commissioning was illustrative of the centralisation, to the national from the local level, of the representation and interpretations of problems, such as how to improve collaboration. The vacuum was therefore, at least in part, the feeling of researching in a context where ventriloquists spoke a language of and acted upon

de-contextualized concepts, articulated and inscribed in documents by national policy makers, all of which was disconnected or laid upon the local context of professionals seeking to work together to improve the lives of the children and young people they worked with.

So, with reference to the ways in which managers' roles, relationship to policy and forms of knowledge, it is possible to defend the problems and apparent 'failures' experienced in the Stockborough Challenge. Rather than labelling such phenomena as failures, it would be more appropriate to emphasize the constraints imposed on public sector workers by managerial rationalities. With this in mind, I returned to the task of how to contribute to the literature by articulating my findings about how the managerialised representations and change processes obscured and constrained the task of the enactment of policy.

In short I considered my research as a further case detailing the failure of managerialism in the public sector - but at this point I began to connect the critique I was developing with previous scholarship dealing with failure and ideological projects.

**[A] Failure and the Neoliberal Project**

I have been purposefully using the word 'failure' throughout this chapter because the characterisation of the endemic incompetence of the public sector worker, in short the discourse of derision (Ball 1990), is a cornerstone of the neoliberal argument for the continued re-organisation of society along market principles (Johnston and Kouzmin, 1998). The Stockborough Challenge could be placed within this cynical discourse, detailing the failure of the public sector, and therefore forming a part of the imperative for reform. This way of looking at reform

views policy initiatives as transient vacuums. If the Challenge was an example of a failed managerial process, there is a view that, rather than being an unintended or unfortunate consequence of managerial/reformist reforms, that failure is an integral and purposive component of the neoliberalisation of the public sector. There is, as mentioned, the foundation of the neoliberal project on the claimed failure of the bureaucratic and professionalised public sector. Some critics go further. Mirowski, for example, describes the working of the, 'neoliberal playbook: attack the legitimacy of government, assume power, impose various neoliberal market/ government "reforms", wait for failures, rinse, repeat.' (Mirowski, 2013, unpaged).

Pollitt (2007) provides an alternative, more descriptive view, arguing that the constant change in and re-disorganisation of the UK public sector, especially in the English context, is a product, of the high priority of public service outcomes, the ability of administrations to instigate reform, as well as the the disruptive and complex consequences of making changes. The frequency of change makes it difficult to determine what the effects of change are and what works. That frequency also reduces the effectiveness of the public sector through churn and disruption. These factors provide the context to understand why reforms frequently end in failure.

**(A) Back to the Challenge:**

If I label the Stockborough Challenge initiative a failure, what is it that I judge to have failed? Should I locate the explanation with the actions of the managers in Stockborough, based on an inference that public sector managers elsewhere fail, or that private sector managers would have done a better job? Indeed, what does it mean to label the Challenge as a failure? The managers, at least from my viewpoint, did not figure out how to do collaboration better. But perhaps that was not the priority or the only goal. Furthermore, it was arguably the continual change in policy

orientation – collaboration, cultural change, Children's Trusts, commissioning – that prevented any focused and sustained engagement with one task.

It is significant that there was a lack of evidence on many dimensions of improving collaboration and the particular approach promoted by policy. Previous writers document the lack of evidence or conceptual clarity on collaboration in both research (Canavan et al, 2009) and in policy (Clarke et al, 2008). For example, the Audit Commission (2008) reviewing the Children's Trust policy, which became part of the focus of Challenge Two, found that there was no evidence to support the formation of the Trusts or for the subsequent shifts in the form of cultural change. More generally, there is a lack of evidence on which managerialisation is based (Pollitt, 1995; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2003; Pollitt, 2007). There abundance of examples where the application of managerial or privatized dynamics in the public sector has been counterproductive, or of dubious benefit (Pollock et al, 2002; Pollock et al, 2007) or created perverse consequences (Ravitch, 2011).

Yet, in the short but eventful time since the research was conducted the Right, in the form of the Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition, has forged ahead with the rapid and substantive outsourcing and privatisation of the public sector including local councils, children's services and education. For example, the One Barnet transformation programme is in the process of outsourcing all council services to private contractors (Barnet London Borough, 2010). Free schools and academy chains are 'free' from local authority controls and so are able to innovate to drive up standards in education (Gove, 2012).

It is fair to say that there are different standards of permissible failure for the traditional public sector (professionalised, unionized, public) in comparison to managerialized forms of the public sector (managerial, marketized and outsourced).

The quote below is taken from Tory Modernization 2.0, a publication by the Conservative pressure group, Bright Blue. In the chapter on 'Accelerating education reform' the author writes,

> Sometimes, however, markets can be unfair and inefficient, and government has a positive role to play in redressing this: indeed, if you believe in markets, you need to be prepared to make them work, not just leave them to fail. (Shorthouse, 2013, p. 61)

This idea that markets can fail but the idea of the market, or at least a different form of *the* market, as the taken-for-granted solution to problems is a fundamental tenet of neoliberalism (Mirowski, 2013). Indeed, within the context of the reform of the public sector, including the Stockborough Challenge, the acknowledged failure of NPM and the managerial project in the public sector was engaged with by post-NPM strategies. That was a re-articulation of the managerial project drawn from the same tradition of managerial thinking with a greater emphasis on leadership. An alternative approach could have been to realize that managerial approaches in the public sector are inappropriate. Yet it seems unthinkable that in the contemporary 'centre', 'centre-right' discourse to propose that any apparent failure in the public sector should be engaged with by a meaningful and substantive focus on professional values and practice, or on democratic accountability.

I am left with the sense that this is fundamentally not about evidence of the failure or success of managerial reforms; but rather an ideological project, and the way in which this consensus has been articulated, reinforced, re-articulated, and defended. Maybe such a claim can be brought about by doctoral research?

**[A] The Role of Critical Research**

So what role can such small-scale, embedded research perform in engaging with, and abating, this shift towards the manager and the market? It is contrary to logic that research should not be carried out, investigating and exploring the limitations of policies, and producing evidence-based work from which to criticize and recommend policies. The field is not short on critique of managerial and neoliberal reforms. Indeed, researchers have pointed out the limitations of these reforms on a near industrial scale for years (e.g., Gerwitz, 2001; Ball 2003, 2008). Yet the re-organisation of public services under New Labour focusing on 'choice' and 'quasi-markets', as well as on the out-right privatisation under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition has continued apace. So how can doctoral or academic research be done differently?

A starting point can be found within Apple's (2006) Interrupting the Right strategy. There, he argues that the Right was not always so powerful. Moreover, the Left can learn from the purposeful and ruthless ways in which neoliberal advocates rearticulated the 'common sense' of the age. Indeed, there are a number of books that detail how this strategy was executed (Peck, 2013; Mirowski, 2013). A central feature of Apple's argument is that the Left must change the way it communicates, as the Right has learned to speak to the everyday concerns of the person in the street.

Thus, critical research can essentially stay the same, but the post-research dissemination can lead to a more activist stance, challenging neoliberal doxa in the

public and media spheres. As a newly minted PhD, I could grow into such a role, with practice and dedication. But I think such a strategy would miss something out.

Dunleavy, et al (2005) identify a two-tier process in the rise to prominence of New Public Management (NPM), a central driver in the managerialisation of the public sector. There were three themes of NPM: disaggregation of public sector bureaucracies; the introduction of competition; and the incentivisation of employees. Crucially these higher-order concerns were underpinned by,

> a prolific second tier of NPM-badged or NPM-incorporated ideas, a whole string of specific inventions and extensions of policy technologies that continuously expanded the NPM wave and kept it moving and changing configuration. (Dunleavy et al., 2005, p. 5)

These technologies, varying from performance-related pay to the purchaser-provider split, were imported from business and other cognate fields and applied in the public sector. In doing so, business rationalities, assumptions and practices were imported.

Returning again to the Challenge, it was the identification with national policy of the managers that may have been the key to the key processes. The application of roles, tools and technologies which were broadly managerial, and predominantly focused on motivating individuals to change, came to replace and obscure Challenge One's initial aim of understanding collaboration and developing appropriate facilitative conditions. However, the Challenge was indicative of a broader shift from NPM to post-NPM, which reflected the shift from management tools to a greater emphasis on leadership and cultural change in order to support new forms of collaborative working.

During the transition from NPM to post-NPM, there was a significant moment when national policy makers acknowledged the critique or perhaps just the limitations of NPM tools in the public sector. They sought to find new technologies and tools that were amenable to working and managing in collaborative contexts. It is perhaps of little surprise that the solution for the failure of management tools was to select a different formulation of management tools. In the case of the Challenge, this was found to lead to similar limitations in supporting collaborative working.

If those opposed to the managerialisation and neoliberalisation of the public sector are to learn from history how to adopt and adapt a similar project, then the development of the critique and the articulation of key themes – democracy, equality, professionalism – must be complemented with the identification and development of a battery of tools and technologies. These tools and technologies need to be both consonant with the critique - but also useful to practitioners. It is not however an easy task to identify how these tools and technologies will be developed without the financial support of government, or global edu-businesses, to develop and promote within national - and international - policy spheres (Ball, 2012).

One idea is for practitioners and embedded researchers to develop, test and share new tools and technologies in collaborative ways, through online and networked communities, according to agreed protocols and procedures. There are spaces within the managerialized educational context in the United Kingdom. The 500 strong and growing Co-operative School Movement is a case in point. There is the scope to create new pedagogies and practices centred on more co-operative values. The real challenge will be for practitioners to find the time and effort to develop, record and share these alternative ways of working, while ensuring all the time that they do not fall foul of the performance-accountability regime. It is the role

of embedded researchers to support and broker these processes of practitioner-developed technologies and modes of organising this requires both funded and ‘underground’ research, facilitating the sharing and spreading of co-operative, pro-democratic and professional-focused practices and ways of working.