LOCAL LEARNING ECOLOGIES AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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Paper to be presented at the ‘Space, Place and Social Justice in Education’ conference
Manchester Metropolitan University
13 July 2012

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Introduction

The locality plays an important role in 14-19 education and training. This is the phase in which young people begin to explore the options available to them in their local area and to think about their future opportunities both in terms of education and employment. While higher attainers have a choice about where and what they want to study, regardless of the institutional arrangements in their local area, this is often not the case for middle and lower attainers who, in areas with selective sixth forms and sixth form colleges, can be denied entry to these institutions. Post-16 providers can set their own admissions criteria so students on post-16 qualifications below Level 3 are concentrated in further education colleges and work-based learning, whereas schools sixth forms and sixth form colleges cater primarily for A Level students. Although percentages vary from area to area, depending on the precise mix of schools, sixth form colleges, FE colleges and work-based learning providers, it is post-16 selection as much as learner choice which determines where 16-19 year olds study, creating a situation where the majority of those moving out of school are the middle and lower attainers, or what has been called ‘the overlooked middle’.

Arguably, therefore, it is the more vulnerable young people and those less equipped to succeed in progressing to further study and employment in a competitive marketplace, who are more dependent on the local area as their educational and economic space.

This focus on the ‘overlooked middle’ has led us to consider how to conceptualise the space within which these young people study and work. We observe that local authority boundaries do not adequately reflect the travel-to-learn/earn patterns of young people and that factors beyond the locality can have profound effects on these trends and affordability, so we have developed the concept of ‘local learning ecologies’ (LLEs) as a way of understanding the lived patterns of experience of young people in this transitional phase. In this paper we use the ecological theories of Bronfenbrenner and Finegold and earlier work on localism to build a three-element ecological model that has at its centre the concept of LLEs. In our view this type of model is useful because it allows for fluidity of ‘space’ and a way of conceptualizing the complex interactions of different institutions, actors and factors.

1 Spours et al., 2012
2 Bronfenbrenner, 1979
3 Finegold 1999
4 Hodgson and Spours, 2012; Spours, 2011
within the locality and outside it that affect its character and the education and employment opportunities for young people.

We also draw on research undertaken for the *Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training in England and Wales* (2003-2009), an Economic and Social Research Council Project, *The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the learning and skills system* (2004-2007), and a number of more recent local studies in different parts of England, to identify two ideal types of LLEs – ‘low opportunity and progression equilibria’ (LOPEs) and ‘high opportunity and progression eco-systems’ (HOPEs). The latter, as its name implies, is conceived as offering more possibilities for all 14-19 year olds but particularly those from the overlooked middle. As we indicate in our conclusion, movement towards a HOPE requires changes not only within the LLE but also at national level and it is here that we discuss the importance of a ‘social democratic’ approach to localism that involves a rebalancing of the state in order to avoid both the ‘centrally managed localism’ associated with New Labour and the ‘laissez-faire localism’ espoused by the current Coalition government.

**An ecological model**

In developing an ecological model for understanding the local ‘space’ in which 14+ participation, progression and transition into further/higher education and employment (14+ PPT) takes place in England, we attempt to capture three types of dynamics – vertical (between international, national, regional, local, institutional, personal levels and factors); horizontal (between the complex range of factors, actors and institutions that interact within the LLE); and chronological (as the LLE moves from one condition or state to another – e.g. from LOPE to HOPE). We see ecological analysis as offering a new ‘language’ to conceptualize stasis and change in a variety of environments, contexts and spaces of activity, which exist in linked scales or levels and where evolution, fragility and complexity are inherent. It is part of a diverse effort by a range of researchers from different disciplines to use ecological metaphors or models to understand complex situations in a rapidly changing world - ways of thinking about child development and resilience\(^5\) processes of business innovation and skill development\(^6\); communication and information systems\(^7\); learning

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\(^5\) e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Schoon, 2010  
\(^6\) e.g. Finegold, 1999; Bollier, 2000; Hall and Lansbury, 2006  
\(^7\) e.g. Nardi and O'Day, 1999
relationships\textsuperscript{8}, professional practice\textsuperscript{9}, education policy-development\textsuperscript{10}; and change management\textsuperscript{11}. The increasing use of environmental metaphors and analyses suggests a growing interest in seeing human power and governance relations in terms of balance, inter-dependency, sustainability and care.

More concretely, in this case, such a model needs to be able to explain how international trends in the economy; national policy; the local labour market; geography and demography; young people’s perceptions of the opportunities available to them; the norms and traditions of their parents and communities; and patterns of institutional relationships work together to affect how young people see their futures and the role of education and training within these futures\textsuperscript{12}. It also needs to cast light on how a process of mediation of national and international factors by key actors within the LLE (e.g. educational professionals and employers) impacts upon practices at the lower local levels and helps to determine the condition of the LLE.\textsuperscript{13}

**Three elements of the model**

This general ecological perspective applied to 14+ PPT has resulted in a provisional model comprising three elements. The first is a multi-level ecological framework based on Bronfenbrenner’s four ecological levels of human development– micro, meso, exo and macro\textsuperscript{14}. These levels have been extended to five, with an additional exo layer, to align them more closely with governance structures in education, particularly at the local (exo 1) and sub-regional levels (exo 2). It is these latter levels that particularly affect 14+ PPT. The dynamic relationship between the five levels of the ecological framework is informed by debates about ‘localism’ that attempt to reconceptualise the relationship between national, regional, local and institutional levels of governance and, in particular, the effects of higher levels on those below.\textsuperscript{15}

Within this multi-level framework lies the second element - the ‘local learning ecology’ (LLE). The LLE is essentially constituted at the meso, exo 1 and exo 2

\textsuperscript{8} e.g. Siemens, 2003
\textsuperscript{9} e.g. Stronach et al., 2003; Fisher and Owen, 2008
\textsuperscript{10} e.g. Weaver-Hightower, 2008; Raffo et al., 2010
\textsuperscript{11} e.g. Folke et al., 2005
\textsuperscript{12} Raffo, 2010; Kintrea et al., 2011
\textsuperscript{13} Hodgson and Spours, 2009.
\textsuperscript{14} Bronfenbrenner, 1979
\textsuperscript{15} e.g. Pratchett, 2004; Hodgson and Spours, 2012
levels and is seen as a ‘space’ (geographical, economic, social, educational and physical) that is strongly defined by young people’s journey-to-learn/earn patterns. The concept of the LLE has resulted from a fusion of ideas about ‘high skill eco-systems’,\textsuperscript{16} conceptualisations of place/space and young people’s identity and agency in urban settings \textsuperscript{17} and models of weakly and strongly collaborative 14-19 local learning systems\textsuperscript{18}. We use the term ‘ecology’ in a neutral sense in that it describes a set of inter-dependent relationships. The term does not, therefore, imply a particular quality. LLE’s can exist in different forms or conditions: they can be larger/smaller, collaborative/competitive or coherent/fragmented.

The third element of the model relates to the particular ‘quality’ of an LLE. Here we suggest that any LLE can be located on a continuum, ranging from a ‘low opportunity progression equilibrium’ (LOPE) to a ‘high opportunity progression eco-system’ (HOPE). Once again we draw upon the work of Finegold\textsuperscript{19} in which he analysed the combination of factors (national, regional, local and institutional) that could move a ‘low-skill equilibrium’\textsuperscript{20} to a high skill eco-system. The concept of equilibrium and eco-system are applied in our model to the context for 14+ PPT, focusing around the provision of opportunities for successful progression with the 14-19 phase and transition beyond it to further learning or the labour market.

Element 1. The dynamics of a multi-level ecological framework

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological settings – micro, meso, exo and macro - have been given more explicit spatial and governance dimensions in our framework. Rather than being conceptualised solely in relation to the individual child and her/his development, they are also seen as levels of an education system. This leads to an elaboration of Bronfenbrenner’s four settings, into five interconnected and overlapping levels. The framework enables us to examine relationships vertically (e.g. between ecological framework levels) as well as horizontally (e.g. between individual actors within a level).

The micro is the confined space in which the young person develops her/his initial ‘learner identity’ and dispositions to the world through her/his immediate relationships with family, friends and teachers.

\textsuperscript{16} Finegold, 1999; Hall and Lansbury 2006
\textsuperscript{17} e.g. Lupton, 2010; Raffo, 2010, Dillaborough and Kennelly, 2010
\textsuperscript{18} Hodgson and Spours, 2006
\textsuperscript{19} Finegold, 1999
\textsuperscript{20} Finegold and Soskice, 1988
The *meso* is the wider context populated by professionals within which the young person’s experiences and relationships begin to expand and where her/his ‘imagined futures’ begin to take place. As with Bronfenbrenner, the meso is associated with a more diverse and complex set of relationships beyond the immediacy of the micro. For 14-19 year olds this will include the school/college or work-based learning provider, the curriculum and the inter-relationship with a wider range of professionals. It is also a space in which professionals have the potential to collaborate – whether this be within a department, across the institution more broadly or involving multi-agency working\(^{21}\) with different types of professionals who come from other ecological levels.

Moving outwards we come to the exo 1 system level, which for Bronfenbrenner is any setting which does not involve the developing person directly, but in which events take place that have an impact on that person. In our conception and in relation to 14+ PPT, the exo 1 level comprises the dynamics of a locality - a local demography and geography, community traditions, institutional arrangements, travel-to-learn patterns, the 14+ provision and curriculum offer and networks of professionals and other social partners including the local authority. This ecological level is one of the prime spaces within which the LLE operates and, unlike for Bronfenbrenner and his conception of the developing child, this setting is also the terrain in which some young people directly participate, particularly lower and middle attaining learners, because of their need to travel for vocational provision that is often not provided in their school sixth form. Paradoxically, this is also the level that may remain relatively unknown to them if they find themselves positioned within restricted micro and meso environments.

The exo 2 system level does not exist in the Bronfenbrenner model: we have introduced it because of the strong relationship between local and sub-regional/regional factors in 14+ PPT. Moreover, it has been recognized as a distinctive ecological level in the literature on skills ecosystems\(^{22}\). The exo 2 system level comprises the regional economic landscape and labour market, employers, training providers and their organisations, regional agencies and networks, including further and higher education institutions, specialist vocational provision and wider travel-to-learn/earn patterns.

\(^{21}\) Warmington *et al.*, 2004  
\(^{22}\) e.g. Finegold 1999, Hall and Lansbury 2006
The macro embraces both international trends (e.g. globalisation, migration, the economy, the Web) and the national political level, including the role of government policy and the use of policy levers. We are particularly concerned about the role of macro factors in relation to the levels below. In ecological terms macro factors, such as national policy and the economy, can act to disturb or destabilise local relations. These wider factors are always present, but the question we wish to ask is whether they can be effectively mediated by social partners at the meso and exo levels to work in the interests of the young people in the LLE. Previous research on the English system\(^\text{23}\) has argued that centralised policy levers could be reconfigured into ‘policy frameworks’ that afford spaces for local stakeholders to act upon policy, to tailor it to the needs of localities and their communities, thereby helping the ‘macro’ to play a more positive role in the LLE.

**Element 2. Local learning ecologies (LLEs)**

The LLE is defined and constituted by the actions, practices, and perspectives of the individuals (young people and the most immediate adults) who interact at the micro level, albeit in response to the wider structures and practices at the other four levels (meso, exo 1, exo 2 and macro), including the actions of key stakeholders who mediate national policy and affect the dynamics of the LLE. LLEs thus comprise a complex set of relationships between young people’s travel-to-learn/earn patterns; the organizational configurations of schools, colleges, work-based learning providers and higher education institutions; the character of the local labour market and the opportunities it provides; the social and economic geography of an area and the nature of communities and their traditions. All of these act together to affect the opportunity landscape for young people at 14+.

Into this element of the ecological model we have integrated the work of those concerned with ‘space\(^\text{24}\) and ‘place\(^\text{25}\) in order to understand the relationships between spaces, cultures and personal learner identities, particularly at the neighbourhood and community level. However, in this element of the model we also seek to apply notions of space and place to levels of governance so that we can explore how these work in terms of the role professionals and civil society organisations play at the meso and and exo levels as they mediate macro factors. It is precisely these mediating roles within the LLE that influence its condition.

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\(^{23}\) e.g. Coffield *et al.*, 2008  
\(^{24}\) e.g. Massey, 1995; Raffo, 2010; Dillabough and Kennelly, 2010  
\(^{25}\) e.g. Lyons, 2007; Gibney *et al.*, 2009; Kintrea *et al.*, 2011
Element 3. Different conditions of LLE – LOPE and HOPE

An underlying assumption of the ecological model as a whole and applied to 14+ PPT is that LLEs fall upon a continuum, with movement from a ‘low opportunity progression equilibrium’ (LOPE) to a ‘high opportunity progression eco-system’ (HOPE) – both of which are ideal types. This suggests that sustained movement from LOPE to HOPE requires changes to be made at all levels of the ecological system framework. However, arguably, some movement along the continuum can be achieved and stability reached if changes are made at the meso and exo system levels (i.e. within the LLE). Here we venture an initial hypothesis as to how the respective ecological levels function in a LOPE and then a HOPE.

In the case of a low opportunity progression equilibrium (LOPE), factors at all the levels interact in such a way as to diminish opportunities for 14+ PPT. There appears to be a direct relationship between national macro factors (such as national economic conditions and educational policy), the established features of a locality (e.g. the labour market and institutional formation in the exo levels) and key socio-economic features of communities that manifest themselves at the micro and meso levels. In the context of current policy in the English system, if unmediated, the macro level works to keep the exo levels in a fragmented and competitive condition, which allows the educational meso and micro-relationships to remain relatively unchanged. At the centre of this equilibrium are weak collaborative relationships at the meso and exo levels that could otherwise provide greater educational, progression and transition opportunities within the LLE, particularly for lower and middle attainers.

LOPE meso-systems can be characterized as introspective with a concentration on examination performance rather than the wider curriculum, learner progression and transition or the local community. Professionals in this type of environment will tend not to give priority to relationships with others beyond their institution. This makes these institutions less resistant to the effects of the macro system, particularly in terms of policy levers such as inspection and performance tables. LOPEs thus can comprise highly differentiated meso environments in which competitive institutional arrangements fuel social divisions across schools, colleges and work-based learning providers and 14-19 partnerships remain under-developed and ‘weakly collaborative’. This can lead to a relatively unco-ordinated local curriculum offer

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26 Hodgson and Spours, 2006
with gaps and duplication in provision, together with a lack of clear progression pathways and little provision of impartial Careers Education Information Advice and Guidance (CEIAG). These conditions can be exacerbated by weak local civic leadership and under-developed, collaborative professional relationships, so that micro and macro demographic, social and economic factors are insufficiently mediated to ensure high levels of equity and opportunity for young people. In this context the market and institutional self-interest dominate the narrative about progression opportunities and young people’s futures; a situation in which middle and lower, rather than higher attainers, are more likely to suffer. Furthermore, this form of introspection can lead to weak connections between education providers and local and regional employers. The result is that there is little or no shared understanding or narrative about regional opportunities and futures. Again this is much more important for those learners who are not going to make a transition to higher education outside the locality or region.

Nested within the LLE are the multiple micro-ecologies of the young people. The LOPE does not provide the conditions to nurture those who are not actively exposed to a wide range of learning experiences in their family settings. In its extreme form, it becomes an impoverished environment in which learning identities and imagined futures are created and recreated in a restricted and parochial way because these are the ones that make most immediate sense to the young person in terms of affiliation, whether this be to the most immediate family, peer group or even a gang.

In the English case, the macro level in LOPE systems is overly dominant because it interacts in such a way with the meso level that it weakens the mediating power of the exo levels by, for example, actively promoting the market and failing to ameliorate economic instability; concentrating policy at the national level with little power-sharing at other levels; and introducing rapid top-down policy change that disrupts relationships below. In addition, the lack of recognition of the exo system levels tends to exclude the all-important education professionals and wider social partners from the policy-making process and discourages the joined-up working at the local level that is essential to the promotion of 14+ PPT.

In the case of a high opportunity progression eco-system (HOPE), a self-sustaining

27 Hodgson and Spours, 2011a; Lee and Wright, 2011
28 e.g. Raffo et al., 2010; Kintrea et al. 2011
29 Coffield et al., 2008
logic is established primarily through processes of devolution. For example, macro factors, such as the economy and national policy, work to support the mediating effects of social partners at the exo 1 and 2 system levels. These, in turn provide a framework for actions at the meso level (e.g. by schools, colleges) aimed at fostering 14+ PPT for all young people. Wider national measures can also facilitate personal and family involvement by beneficial social policy, such as the Education Maintenance Allowance. The HOPE dynamic also suggests the possibility of a virtuous cycle involving all the ecological levels not only top-down, but also bottom-up as learners and their families are more able to participate in a more accessible education and training system.

A HOPE LLE thus functions in a more expansive way than its LOPE counterpart. Focusing on learner attainment at the meso level may be considered important, but progression is seen as a priority. Subject teaching, for example, will be encased in a wider curriculum that promotes the skills, knowledge and attributes needed to make progress; relates the education system more broadly to the community; and builds bridges with and to other parts of the ecological system. Different groups of professionals are likely to work in a more collaborative way within the institution around these goals and thus develop a more expansive professional identity. Ideas about an ‘area-based curriculum’ provide useful illustrations as to how learning can operate across the micro, meso and exo 1 systems. Crucially, there is a greater awareness of the progression and transition needs of learners beyond the institution and, therefore, a willingness to look outwards from the meso environment to develop provision at the exo levels that meets a wide range of learner needs. In particular, there is an active attempt to embrace collaboration around the curriculum areas that are often under-served within a competitive environment - 14+ lower level provision and vocational opportunities. At its most advanced, the HOPE LLE is one that connects the micro-system of the learner to the meso level of the institution and then, as maturation demands, to the broader exo 1 and 2 landscapes. In terms of professional practice, a more expansive LLE invites teachers and lecturers to be prepared to collaborate with different types of professionals (e.g. health, business) and to become more aware of the professional practices and systems needed to open up opportunities for the young people in the locality.

30 Education Maintenance Allowance was a means-tested weekly grant given to young people to encourage them to participate in post-compulsory education. It was discontinued in 2011 and replaced by a significantly smaller budget for post-16 providers to use at their discretion to support 16-19 year olds.

31 e.g. Gruenewald and Smith, 2008; RSA, 2010
Building on this expansive approach to the meso level, the HOPE exo 1 system level features a high degree of curricular, professional and civic organization comprising strongly collaborative institutional arrangements; a comprehensive curriculum offer with clear 14+ progression pathways that are agreed and designed by groups of professionals working with the wider community and social partners; and the provision of high quality, impartial CEIAG for all learners at key transition points. Institutional and civic leaders see themselves as ‘place shapers’\(^{32}\) so that there is a strong, shared and positive narrative for young people about the opportunities within the locality and beyond. This role has traditionally been played, or at least facilitated, by local authorities which, in England, still have statutory responsibility for ensuring adequate education provision for all the young people in their localities but without the power to make this a reality. In a HOPE, therefore, local authorities would need to combine forces with wider social partners in the area, particularly further education colleges, local employers, voluntary and community organisations, governors and parents, to champion the needs of all the young people in their locality.

Effective progression and transition for the majority of learners will depend on the wider economic landscape. This brings us to the HOPE exo 2 system level, which in its ideal form would be characterized by strongly shared regional economic and regeneration agendas and narratives articulated by civic leaders, employers and other social partners. In such a context, higher and further education providers would see themselves as regional hubs and as part of a strong skills and economic development network\(^{33}\). The role of education professionals in such a system would be to collaborate with other economic and political partners to strengthen links between the exo 1 and exo 2 system levels through bridging organisations, such as 14+ Progression and Transition Boards.\(^{34}\) A move towards this approach is vital for the whole ecological model, because it is ultimately the wider labour market opportunities that exist at this level that help to create the positive narratives at the levels below. Again this is particularly important for middle and lower attainers who are arguably less likely to travel outside the region for higher education, more likely to want to enter the labour market early and more concerned to find employment close to home.

\(^{32}\) Gibney \textit{et al.}, 2009
\(^{33}\) e.g. Hall and Lansbury, 2006
\(^{34}\) Hodgson and Spours, 2011b
In a HOPE, learners in their micro-ecologies have the space and incentive to flourish. Because of the nature of the LLE, they have greater opportunity to participate in a number of social, cultural and educational settings; their horizons for action can expand and the ecological landscapes open up. Critical actors for promoting 14+ progression in the HOPE are the personally engaged professionals, such as teachers, youth workers and careers advisers, who act in conjunction with the family, as friends, mentors and tutors, who can provide narratives about positive futures and challenge narrow horizons for action. Their role is particularly important for middle and lower attainers whose progression routes and transitions are often more tortuous and complex and who suffer disproportionately from youth unemployment.

Unlike the LOPE where the macro-level exercises a largely negative effect in the English context, in a HOPE it can play a facilitating role by nurturing the health of the system levels below. In particular, the macro level (e.g. government policy and agencies) can provide the space for exo systems to develop so that they can play a vital part in stimulating the economy and providing greater economic opportunities for young people. Finegold argues that national governments have to provide ‘catalysts’, such as funding, for ecosystem development. Coffield and colleagues suggest the need for national policy frameworks that promote the active participation of social partners at the lower levels with maximum space for local discretion to operate, according to the demands of the LLE. The development of the exo 1 and exo 2 levels could thus be seen in England as part of a wider rebalancing of the state in a more devolved and democratic direction and as a way of tackling regional and local inequalities. It is to this aspect of the ecological framework that we now turn in discussing the relationship between localism and the state.

The state, democracy and localism
The ecological model needs to be considered in relation to a wider discussion of the state, democracy and localism because of the close alignment of the ecological levels or scales with those of governance and the ways that issues of power, democracy and markets have developed in a period of neo-liberalism. The relationship between these fundamental factors have broadly taken two forms - new

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35 Hodkinson, 1998
36 OECD, 2009
37 Finegold, 1999
38 Coffield et al., 2008
39 Amin et al., 2003
public management, involving a centralized state and the encouragement of marketisation (typically promoted by Conservative governments in the UK) and adaptive managerialism with its emphasis on an top-down and bureaucratic role for the state, albeit mixed with a prominent role for markets. Adaptive managerialism was very much reflected in the political approach of New Labour (Newman, 2001).

In this context of these different forms of centralisation, it has become politically fashionable for all political parties to talk about devolution and freedom at the local level. Unsurprisingly, the concepts of localism and decentralisation have been and continue to be hotly debated. Some question whether ‘the revival of the local’ is in fact a neo-liberal means of assisting markets to become more efficient, less regulated by national governments (e.g. Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Lindblad et al., 2002; Ball, 2010; Hajer, 2005) and potentially exclusionary (Hajer, 2005), or that the idea heralds a new era of popular participation in shaping localities and public services (e.g. Jenkins, 2004; Stoker, 2004; Lawson, 2005; Avis, 2009; Newman and Clarke, 2009).

Whether localism is the latest manifestation of neo-liberalism or signals the emergence of a more democratic era will depend, however, on the version of localism on offer. In the UK context we suggest that three competing versions of localism have emerged in policy discourse, reflecting different balances and inter-relationships between the centralized state, markets and democracy (Hodgson and Spours 2011). The first is associated with the previous Labour Government (1997-2010), in which its attempts at empowering the local in England was subordinate to its centralist drive to reform public services. This we have termed ‘top-down localism’. The second version is emerging from the new UK Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government (2010-), in which ideas of local empowerment are closely tied to the reduction of the extended state and increased role for markets via the strategy of privatization. These themes are interwoven in the Coalition Government’s Localism Bill (House of Commons 2010). This we have termed ‘laissez-faire localism’. A third version, which has its roots in the UK as a whole and includes examples of policy developments in Scotland and Wales where devolved administrations have been pursuing distinctive approaches to the governance of public services (Waring et al., 2009). This third model, termed ‘democratic localism’, has been supported in literature from a range of political and academic sources involved with local government (e.g. Filkin et al., 2000; Stoker, 2004; Skelcher et al., 2005), in education (e.g. Coffield et al., 2008; Avis, 2009; and in the work of those
associated with social democratic and liberal politics in the UK (e.g. Lawson, 2005; Wakefield, 2010; Grayson, 2010; Cox 2010). Compared internationally, some have argued that the English system should copy other countries and that ‘the legitimacy of local government as a tier of government should be constitutionally protected, as it is in other EU states’ Cox (2010: 9).

The relationship between democratic localism and the ecological model revolves around the question of the most appropriate level at which different decisions should be made. This third model emphasizes the importance of rebalancing the state in order to avoid the problems of top-down localism and laissez-faire localism – that is both the continued influence of the centralized state and the ‘local trap’ (Brown and Purcell 2003), in which there can be an over-estimation of the ability of the local to deliver positive social and policy outcomes. Instead, we argue that democratic localism could provide a framework for ‘scalar politics’ in which the scale of the local is understood in relation to other scales in which it sits. Democratic localism could provide the political conditions in which local learning ecologies could thrive.

In contrast to the ‘laissez-faire’ version of localism, which is explicitly ‘anti-state’, democratic localism stresses not only popular participation at the lowest possible levels, but also a strong role for national government to address issues such as wage inequality and inequity of access to public services. It also envisages distinctive roles for regional and local government, with regional formations, for example, providing co-ordination in areas such as labour markets and economic development. This draws on Stoker’s notion of the New Localism, which he describes as ‘a strategy aimed at devolving power and resources away from central control and towards front-line managers, local democratic structures and local consumers and communities, within an agreed framework of national minimum standards and policy priorities’ (Stoker, 2004: 2). Democratic localism also emphasises popular participation and co-production of services; the promotion of public value; effective, bottom-up feedback loops in policy-making and the stronger involvement of social partners that depends on the sharing of strong civic and educational values to provide the ‘glue’ between the various social partners. Within a democratic model the main motivation is not simply responding to policy from above, but collectively understanding what is necessary and determining appropriate local action.

The process of rebalancing thus requires shifts in how central government sees its role. National leadership would need to move away from micro-management to
strategic leadership and to devolve powers so that regional and local government and communities have the necessary tools to transform their localities and regions, but within a clear national framework that supports equity (Coffield et al., 2008). Pratchett (2004) usefully conceptualizes this type of rebalancing by making a distinction between the autonomy of ‘freedom from’ (higher authority) and the responsibility of ‘freedom to’ act collectively and effectively at the regional and local levels and to obtain the powers at the local level to do the job. For democratic localism to work in its most inclusive sense will also require a slowing down of the political process and the deliberate creation of stability to forge a collective sense of ‘place’.

**Democratic and ecological conceptions that work for social justice**

The relationship between democratic localism and the ecological model lies in the ways in which local learning ecologies (comprising meso, exo 1 and exo 2 levels or scales) are embedded in the wider macro. This hinges not only on the politics of state and democracy, but within this the consciousness of education professionals and wider social partners working within the affordances of the state to mediate the relationship between national, regional and local. The fusion of state/democracy and ecological conceptions can facilitate three related developments. First, the ecological framework aids awareness and consciousness of the inter-relationship and interdependency of a complex range of factors at the local and sub-regional/regional levels that constitute the local learning ecology, which in turn shapes participation, progression and transition opportunities for young people. The concept of the LLE is thus a framework through which to understand the intricacies of local conditions. Second, recent development work around the formation of ‘14+ Progression and Transition Boards’, for example, points to the role of professionals and their social partners collaborating and acting as ‘boundary crossers’ as they work across the different scales and levels through local bridging organisations and networks. These seek to co-ordinate local provision, progression routes and opportunities for successful transition to the labour market and higher education for young people that are played out at local and sub-regional/regional. Finally, the political dimension of democratic localism suggests an additional dimension of consciousness and action - that is working with others involved in the macro level or scales to argue for the incentives, affordances and spaces to offered for local action and feeding back to the national level about the effects of national policy on the levels below. In political-democratic terms, professionals and recrafting elements of civil society. Democratic localism and the rebalancing of the state as part of a multi-
level ecological conception can inspire a new relationship between policy actors at national, regional and local levels as they both act in 'stewardship' to nurture opportunities and work for social justice played out at the local level and the spaces in which young people attempt to envisage and make their future.
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