Éducation comparée / nouvelle série, n°12, pp 99 - 124

Educational Austerity and Critical Consciousness – English Primary School Leaders wrestling with educational policy shifts

Linda Hammersley-Fletcher

Education and Social Research Institute
Manchester Metropolitan University

ABSTRACT

Education systems across much of Europe (and indeed the world) are going through a period of challenge around growing and globalised market pressures to improve academic performance. Governments have shifted towards a market-based understanding of education which sees competition and freedom within tightly regulated accountability measures as solutions to problems within the education system (Levin, 1998; Whitty, 2005). Indeed, Europe is described as operating transnational policy-making (Moutsios, 2007). Freire (1985) has argued that education is political and that educators are political actors. This paper considers the perspectives of English primary school head teachers in relation to educational austerity and explores the degree to which they can operate critical consciousness, which Friere viewed as essential for emancipation and transformation. The paper argues that rather than being subject to the deregulation of education with greater autonomy devolved to schools, English primary head teachers are experiencing what Helgøy et al (2007) describe as the re-regulation of education and a reduction of autonomy which these head teachers find increasingly difficult to align with their educational values.

KEYWORDS

EDUCATIONAL AUSTERITY; ENGLISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS; CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS; AUTONOMY; HEAD TEACHER

Introduction

Skidelsky and Skidelsky (2012) argue that there is a Western addiction to consumption and a paucity of public discussion about of what a 'good life' or a desirable life might consist. They point out that whilst economic situations improve for some, the opposite will happen to others as not all can rise to the top. Likewise gaining improvements in educational performance will always be relative to others. Nevertheless, governments across the world are engaging in educational reform in an attempt to build a more competitive edge in an increasingly global economy (Bush, 2011). At the same time the global financial crisis has led to increased measures to bring public spending under control. Thus competitive advantage must be achieved through controlling spending and improving educational outcomes, achieved for many, using stringent accountability measures. Smyth and Wrigley (2013) argue that where capitalism demands not only a workforce that is skilled but also compliant, then high-stakes accountability is focussed around economic and technical performance. Moreover, as Leaton Gray (2013) and Ball (2012) amongst others argue, opportunities for resistance have been quashed particularly where the penalties for failure are high, leading in England to educators that have on the whole conformed to Government requirements (as Grace was arguing in 1995).

As Inglis (2000) proposed, accountability amounts to the ability to fire a pistol filled with blame at the head of those who can't answer for the failings of a school. He goes on to argue that such a climate acts to restrict and reduce risk taking, inventiveness and clear sightedness. Thus schools can become places where teachers are tired, bored and hate their jobs. Such a climate of educational control and accountability raises questions of control and power in schools and about the ability of head teachers to have command over the educational experience of pupils. Friere (1970) theorised that critical consciousness was essential for transformation and emancipation (dialogic action). Thus in terms of this paper the notion of the critical consciousness of primary school head teachers in the North West of England is explored in relation to their ability to critically reflect on fast changing educational initiatives in ways that preserve what is

deemed important to them in terms of educational values. This paper will begin by discussing the European and to some extent global context of education. It will then look at the specific directions that have been adopted in England. After this a method section will outline how data was gathered and is followed by a discussion of the data in relation to the literature. Finally the paper will conclude arguing that whilst head teachers maintain a belief in the importance of student experience, their ability to act in the best interests of the pupils' education are under attack both explicitly through intensifying workloads and accountability and covertly through gaining compliance through pressures on space and time. It is argued that this compromises these head teachers' ability to become fully critically conscious.

Educational Austerity - The European Context

Centralised educational bureaucracies are being dismantled all over Europe (Helgøy et al, 2007). This movement has included the introduction of privatisation for schools and introducing state schools to marketisation. Pressures in Europe for higher educational participation, together with curricula tied to the labour market, have developed as a result of the national policies of member states such as the United Kingdom (UK) and the Netherlands. These together with non-European states, for example, Australia, Canada and the United States of America (US), have exerted a powerful influence over European policy as they have brought educational policy closer to economic requirements (Moutsios, 2007). Data networks have also become a key tool in transnational decision-making. In terms of European education policy, the influence of data produced by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (OECD), the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) have had a significant impact. Moreover the process of data comparison has enabled success or failure to be highlighted at an international level (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal, 2003). Braga et al (2011) argue that across Europe greater accountability has narrowed the focus of teachers to students that perform better, with implications for issues of social justice and the public disclosure of results leading to greater

selectivity. Further, few attempts are made to consider underlying causes, or indeed the ability of the data to give us meaningful insights (Ball, 1993). Additionally, Valencia (2010) states that significant features of discrimination related to inferior resources and un-qualified staff are not taken into account in published data and students' become stereo-typed in ways that undermine educational successes.

Ball states that "...policies cannot be divorced from interests, from conflict, from domination or from justice" (2012, p. 3). Thus those holding favourable political stances (ie; those aligned to neoliberal market-driven goals) gain greater persuasive power (Lumby, 2013; Leaton Gray 2013). Globally, access to funds in education is heavily influenced by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and Aid Agencies (Samoff, 2013) who therefore hold power over the direction that education follows. Samoff (2013) asserted that the basis for such economic support is derived from the principle that the banks and various funding agencies are investing in human capital with a focus upon increasing production. For Samoff (2013), these rationales are questionable and for Morrow and Torres (2013) are based around reproducing the power and the interests of capital. This is further exacerbated by what Moutsios (2007: 19) described as,

> the erosion of the ideological boundaries between the Right and the Left, the shift of political debates to instrumental agendas, the commercialisation of electoral campaigns and the politicians' image, the communication of political messages through the media show-like audiovisual environment, and the widespread dissatisfaction and political apathy amongst the citizens.

For Moutsios, the direction of the European Union is explicitly to develop into the "most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world". (2007, p. 19). However, as Smyth and Wrigley (2013) argued, educational reforms to achieve this tend to be based on the conclusions drawn about school effectiveness in the United States. They go on to illustrate the problematic nature of transferring agendas from one country to another through the example of Germany. Here differences between types of public school mean that pupils can be segregated from 10 years old, despite children having the same levels of literacy, on the basis of parental choice and teacher

recommendations leading to a direct relationship between higher class and greater success. This therefore indicates that simply setting targets that schools must achieve under represents the levels of complexity involved that sit outside the particular ability of a pupil at a particular time and ignores the relationships between a variety of factors such as class and success. Moreover, Scandinavian countries have avoided ability grouping and try to support students in the transfer to pre-university and vocational routes (Smyth and Wrigley, 2013). In addition they have 90% of pupils voluntarily staying in full-time education until 18 or 19. Thus they do not appear to have 'suffered' in relation to educational achievement through the lack of ability streaming.

Education policy additionally reflects moves in countries such as the UK and US to decentralise education, and forms part of wider neoliberal policies for a reduction in the responsibility of Governments for addressing social needs on the basis that the best will survive. At the same time Governments also do what Helgøy et al (2007) describe as 're-regulation' through the use of target setting, performance measures and quality indicators. Sleegers and Wesselingh (2006) discuss the tensions faced by the Dutch government in terms of meeting the agenda of good quality education whilst at the same time decentralising schools. They argue that roles for schools in terms of establishing social order, work against the ability to be autonomous. They are concerned that autonomy may threaten issues of social justice and also mean that Government were not taking responsibility for their task to provide education for all. To address this, Government still provides regulation but then it is problematic to argue that the schools are in fact autonomous. Sleegers and Wesselingh also argue that there is little evidence to show that increased autonomy for schools results in better school governance. Glatter (2012) argues that the degree of autonomy in England is far greater than that experienced elsewhere in Europe. For much of Europe the tradition has not been for schools to have autonomy. However, as Helgøy and Homme (2007) posit, the kind of autonomy held influences the ability of the profession to influence practice. They state that accountability related to performance and individuals acts to undermine professional autonomy. They go on to assert that in Sweden where individual autonomy is emphasized then the ability to

influence national policy is weakened together with a reduction in the authority of the profession. However, Helgøy and Homme argue that in Norway a sense of teacher's holding not individual but collective autonomy, allows these teachers to influence policy.

The market-led push for educational improvement through accountability and autonomy masks a number of underlying factors that are likely to be influential. For example there are questions about whether attitudes to educational achievement are being driven by neoliberal markets as Smyth and Wrigley (2013) suggest, where this is aimed at developing a skilled but compliant workforce. There are also complexities underlying data around achievement that are often ignored such as Valencia's (2010) point about the underlying social inequity. Moreover issues of social justice may be ignored or underlie explanations of educational achievement (Ball, 2012). Irrespective of the particularities of educational practice "the ubiquitous rise of neoliberal philosophy over recent decades has transformed the economic and social landscapes of many countries across the world" (Hammersley-Fletcher and Qualter, 2010, p. 363).

Educational Austerity – the English context

Some of the threads of current neoliberal demands for educational accountability in England could arguably be dated back to the Ruskin speech (1976) by the Labour politician James Callaghan, a speech that promoted the use of measurable targets to ensure that schools were doing their duty with regard to pupils, carers and society (a speech made shortly before he became Prime Minister). Moreover, the Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher (Prime Minister from 1979-1990), had a significant and long-lasting effect on the practice of education. The encroachment by governments of all political persuasions over education in England has been long-standing but has now intensified. Further, as Webb et al. (2009) stated,

> In England in the name of public accountability the controls over the work of schools and their teachers have escalated and strengthened challenging teachers' integrity and promoting 'a low trust relationship' between society and its teachers ... national testing, OFSTED [*Office for Standards in Education*] inspections and

> performance management had intensified the teachers' work through generating escalating paperwork in the form of school policies, lesson plans, pupil assessment and recording, written responses to national and LA [*local authority*] initiatives, and reports to parents and governors, thus creating a situation whereby however many hours teachers committed to school, they never considered the time adequate to meet expectations (p.416-417)

The influence of government policy has been further enhanced through the reduction of funding to, and importance of, Local Authorities who were formerly strongly connected to schools, offering advice and support services which are now largely disbanded in favour of commercial organisations. This is part of a wider argument that opening up systems to market pressures results in the market deciding what practices are most effective, which in turn means that the market becomes the instrument of improvement (Hursh, 2005). Leaton Gray (2013) asserted that the current educational rhetoric emphasises the links between education and the workplace and that this is done within a rigid and politicised notion of the education system. This further erodes the power of the professional educator in arguments where teachers are accused of not preparing students sufficiently for their working life.

Barber (2006; 2007) as an architect of public service reform during Blair's time as Prime Minister, identified three different models of management that influenced the policies of the then Labour government. He argued that command and control was necessary to move failing or inadequate practice to become adequate; he advocated the use of 'quasi-markets' to devolve control to organisations such as schools who needed to be freed to move from 'adequate' to 'great' through the forces of the market in attracting 'consumers'; he also advocated 'devolution and transparency' where service providers were in control and results of their efforts were published. This competition would, he believed, improve performance through market forces. Seddon (2008) suggests that Barber justified the advocacy of this approach through the argument that other countries were copying this approach, a defence that Seddon finds of questionable value. Whilst adopted by Blair's government, Seddon is

sceptical that Barber's coercive educational approach driven by targets had achieved improvement other than those delivered through teachers learning to 'teach to the test'. Seddon describes it as "tampering on a massive scale" (p. 118) with no understanding of the impact.Glatter (2012) points to the English governmental pursuit of autonomy which, despite having been a growing priority for over 20 years, is seemingly leading to teachers feeling increasingly constrained in ways they have never felt before. The current Conservative / Liberal Democrat Alliance government, represented in education sector by the Conservative education Minister Michael Gove, could be engaging in significant, and what some see as hugely damaging, further erosions of the education field. This has led groups of academics and teachers to publically question the ministers plans for a more rigid curriculum, with children learning by rote, memorising facts and figures rather than develop problem solving and thinking skills (see for example http://www.cambridge-news.co.uk/Education/Tricia-Kellehers-Blog/Responding-to-Michael-Gove-in-the-Daily-Mail-and-The-Blob-20130324135909.htm - accessed April 2013). Rather than engage in debate Gove labelled these petitioners as member of the 'Blob', a reference to a 1960's film where an alien entity tried to absorb all human life and dismiss the criticism as part of a radical-left political attack. More recently Gove has called for tougher governance of schools and a 'school readiness' agenda on pre-school provision, again against a backdrop of protest. Leaton Gray (2013) believes that education reforms are centralizing power in a manner that operates to exclude and marginalize the experiences of teachers and pupils. Glatter (2012) argues that to enable autonomy to work, school leaders need to be freed to think about educational matters without the distraction of other issues and they need adequate support, the presence of which Glatter questions. Smyth and Wrigley (2013) point out that real changes in schools must be focussed on respect for pupils, their families and their cultures and notions of changing lives and life chances.

Bush (2011) argued that in England, school educational reform has been addressed through both the decentralisation of responsibility to lower levels of the hierarchy whilst at the same time increasing levels of accountability. Thus, what might at first appear to be a movement towards greater democracy, becomes in fact a vehicle through which

teachers and schools are controlled through greater numbers of staff being responsible for improvements that have a direct influence on improved performance. Moreover, it can be argued that the government increasingly uses a rhetoric of self-evaluation to utilise data gathering as a tool for governing and controlling schools (Ozga, 2009). And as Smyth and Wrigley (2013) argue, blame for data indicating poor performance in schools is laid directly at the doors of the teachers despite the rigor of such data being questionable when more closely inspected. Making judgements on schools on this basis is a practice which Power and Frandji (2010) pointed out is viewed as an extremely unpopular and ineffective approach by teachers. An environment where the penalties are harsh is unlikely to encourage a practitioner to 'take risks' and yet creativity and innovation often evolve from risk-taking. In addition Power and Fandji (2010) argued that where a school is deemed to be failing following inspection, then teachers become demotivated, discontented and consider themselves to be failures, hardly something that is likely to improve practice.

In such an environment of stiff competition, harsh penality, devolved power with little support and an emphasis on compliance then the ability of teachers to be able to engage in critical consciousness around issues of education and educational approach could be perceived to be under threat or at the very least subject to constraints. It is this issue that is explored through the data in relation to English primary school head teachers.

Explanation of the Data and Approach

Qualitative data collected from primary school headteachers' in the North-West region of England is utilised to illustrate the issues raised in this paper in relation to the effects of Educational Austerity on head teachers' perceptions of their educational leadership role. These data comprised 8 written statements in relation to educational values and the challenges they perceived in preserving these values together with 4 semi-structured interviews designed to ascertain the same information (thus information from 12 primary headteachers in the region). Head teachers were identified through student/teacher contacts and data collected in 2011-12. Responses were anonymised and the headteachers represented a range of experience from new

headteachers (1 year) to long standing headteachers (24 years); a range of school sizes (210 – 500 pupils); and geographical locations (leafy-suburbs to inner city). Schools included were also representative of varying degrees of recognised success from those rated outstanding to those in challenging circumstances. Data collected from the written responses are labelled Heads A – H and the interview material is attributed to Heads I - L. An overview of these data are shown in table 1.

Table 1

HEAD	Years as Head	School Size	Location	Ranking
A	14	350	Inner city	Good
B	24	420	Leafy Suburb	Outstanding
C	13	500	Inner City	Satisfactory
D	11	340	Inner City	Satisfactory
E	1	300	Leafy Suburb	Requires improvement
F	17	250	Suburb	Good
G	8	370	Inner City	Good
H	2	300	Inner City	Satisfactory
I	2	220	Inner City	Requires improvement
J	6	290	Inner City	Satisfactory
K	22	510	Inner City	Outstanding
L	25	210	Leafy Suburb	Outstanding

In analysing the data an interpretivist position was adopted, encouraging the heads to be as free as possible to define their own

meanings. As Rumsby (2007) recommended, the headteachers and researcher worked to develop a level of trust so that heads could co-elaborate ideas. Thus the information was analysed and then re-checked by the headteachers to ensure understandings were as close as possible to the intended meaning. Data were analysed using mind-mapping techniques (Buzan and Buzan, 1996). Whilst these data can only speak for schools in the North-West region of England, further research is planned to assess its wider applicability

Education and Primary School Values

The primary heads in this study were asked to articulate what they believed to be the purpose of education and their role within it. Without exception these teachers talked about making a difference, expanding lives, offering chances that they never had themselves and for one head the development of staff was also part of this purpose.

> I think my ideal is to see every child that passes through my hands, to make a difference to that child, to enable them to be a happier citizen than they might have been without my influence, and that might be in an academic way, that might be an emotional way depending upon where the child is when they come to me? (Head I)

> …it's seeing that nothing is impossible, you know that you may have experiences yourself where you have felt like your wings are being clipped or somebody has put that ceiling on your own learning or knocked your self-esteem so that you fail to actually reach your potential, and knowing that anything is possible and when you see some of our learners who come in from a very very low starting point begin to start believing themselves and begin to acquire that self-confidence, that resilience in learning, the robustness, they shed that fear of failiure because they think actually we're learning more from all the things we get wrong than the things we get right, uhm, and growing in self-belief and knowing that nothing is outside of your reach. (Head J)

> I think that it is about making sure that these children get a fantastic education but I also have to manage the learning of adults, so I have ambitious plans for each individual member of staff, whatever role they have in school because it's critical. (Head K)

These responses reflected a 'Plowdenesque' view of education that has a particular tradition across primary education in England and is not dissimilar to the child-centred values identified by Blenkin and Kelly (1987) as characteristic of the 1960's. However whilst there appears to be some continuity in this description of what it is that primary schools and their head teachers offer to pupils, the context within which this is achieved is different. Friere (1985) has written extensively in the areas of power and emancipation, where education forms the basis upon which change can be brought about. He posited that power works both on and through people. Thus power is not an entirely negative force but the basis upon which resistance and struggle arise as well as a force that can be used to subjugate people by dominant groups. Blackmore (1995) however, considered that where people are subjected to increasing pressures of work, the 'spaces' where they have opportunities to reflect and critique policy imperatives and indeed consider the validity of obligations pressed upon them are reduced or even disappear. Thus under conditions where time and space become 'naturalised' and un-problematic, ethical boundaries might more easily become challenged (Colley, 2010). These head teachers declared their responsibility for the educational experiences of the pupils in their care but at the same time have a duty to government in meeting regulatory requirements and whilst the overall sentiment in what these schools are offering seems little changed, the circumstances and responsibilities around this offer can at times act in tension with this educational philosophy. This can leave head teachers feeling vulnerable and with difficult decisions to make in deciding how to move forward. This tension is now explored.

Educational compromise

Heads' reported making decisions with reference to best meeting the needs of the child as their priority.

> My bottom line is that we do what is the right thing for the children in our care, and that's what I keep coming down too, is it really in their best interests? (Head J)

Despite presenting a position where decisions were made in the best interests of the child further interrogation of the data revealed some contradictions to this initial impression. Gunter (2011) is convinced that we are being actively diverted from critically reviewing current educational practices and furthermore, new activities quickly become part of a sedimented history that is not easy to challenge and that few think to question. It appeared that head teachers are faced with a range of demands that don't enable them to take time to review how these 'fit' with their educational values and that they can feel overwhelmed.

> I think it is easy to forget what your educational values are with the maelstrom of decisions that we have to take all bound up with legalities and the threat of Ofsted. (Head H)

> Sometimes there are difficult decisions that have to be made and carried out and it does affect your personal life and your well-being. (Head A)

> ...if the wrong approach is taken by school leaders this can lead to a culture of blame with low expectations for performance, behaviour and job satisfaction. (Head E)

The comments from these heads illustrate the challenge of the head teachers' role in terms of their responsibility for children, their educational values, their sense of public duty and the potential for censure which may cloud their view of what they see as working in the best interest of pupils. These quotations also demonstrate the fear held about the inspection regime and the power that this judgement has over the heads in terms of future success or failure as suggested by Inglis (2000).

Not only are head teachers subject to the judgement of inspection regimes but also to media interest as the following statement illustrates. One head teacher talks about the anxiety caused when a

relatively small incident was picked up by the local media and used to criticise the head's practice in a manner that presented only a partial understanding of the problem. The head says that,

> After a week of sleepless nights I decided that I had to go on the offensive. By building on the many positive relationships that I have within the community I started to once again totally believe that I was right and that I had a massive level of support amongst my parents. This enabled me the strength to shield myself from any threats that may still lie ahead from this incident. (Head C)

The vulnerability and worry expressed within this quotation is likely to become more acute as the potential penalties for failure increase. Further, little account is taken of the emotional work undertaken in thinking through how to cope with such issues (Colley, 2006).

> the danger becomes on messing too much or having other agencies control you so much that it [*making the right decision*] becomes incredibly difficult, (Head K)

As Head C exemplifies, in cases where local support (and particularly that of parents) can be called upon, and where trust can be preserved, then this gives head teachers a greater ability to make difficult decisions, but it also demonstrates the potential fragility and importance of trust in allowing educators to function. Therefore, the dominance of market ideals around accountability and fewer opportunities for challenge when under pressure, raise concerns about the extent to which educational values become distorted (Fielding, 2007). As one head explains the only time that is available for some reflection on what is happening is during the summer break.

> Most of my 'big' thinking tends to take place in periods of holidays, in particular the summer break. I'm not sure how other HTs make 'big' decisions at other times during the year!! I find I need the space to think out big ideas first before I share them with others. (Head G)

> If I am pressed to respond quickly and under instant pressure I usually do quite well but this is not the best style for me. When pressed by time I fall back on my experience, my learning, my professional values and my studies of human nature and then respond to what I see in front of my eyes. (Head B)

These quotations indicate that head teachers have the desire to think about wider strategy but that such thinking has become constrained and forced into tighter time schedules that are pushed outside of everyday activity. In the second example the head tries to adapt the demands in relation to educational values but does not like being pressured into making decisions too quickly. It could therefore be argued that intensification of the workplace can mediate against the ability to make carefully considered decisions. Nevertheless a head may have misgivings about particular policy initiatives but continue to work on them accommodating these whilst attempting to alleviate the worst aspects of it.

> It is really challenging if change is forced on an organisation from external sources and is not firmly based on personal principles. As a leader I try to introduce those changes that I and my team believe will benefit the experiences and attainment of our pupils and minimise change if it goes against my personal values. (Head E)
>
> I am very loathe to do something that doesn't reflect my core beliefs, if I don't think it's going to benefit my children then I'm extremely reluctant to do it, and if I do do it then I do it in a, in the least destructive way that I can whatever that is (Head I)

These quotations demonstrate that some head teachers may continue with practices that are antithetical to their educational values but see their role instead as working to moderate the effects of poor policy decisions. In these cases, the head teacher does the job with apparently little argument, but works to 'soften' the change through more covert activity. These responses would indicate that if you are under pressure

to act on external policy initiatives, then even the appearance of surface quiescence can potentially further compromise your educational values and beliefs. It certainly appears to make head teachers less likely to openly object to policy shifts or to appear to be rejecting them.

Management through Sanctions

The pressure to prioritise outcomes in terms of league tables has long played a dominant role in English state schools (see for example Gunter and Rayner, 2007). Schools are experiencing huge pressure through both published league tables and Ofsted inspections, which can influence parental choice about which school to select for their children. Whilst one might decide that such pressure is justified, as all schools need to deliver a 'good' education to their students, this also assumes that the measures selected accurately reflect the entire experience and learning that takes place within it (Ball, 1993). Accountability agendas have increasingly dominated judgements about educational success (Gorard et.al., 2002). Indeed as Davies et.al. (2005: 494) stated (from an economics-based perspective),

> Education policy in England has openly cast teachers as 'agents' who cannot be trusted to focus on the outcomes that principals [those commissioning teachers] want or to achieve the standards that are possible.

This attitude validates managing teacher behaviours through systems of sanction and reward (Davies et.al, 2005). Braga et.al (2011) argue that such sanctions also focus schools on performance.

> The challenges with raising standards in school means that you may embark on a path to raise achievement or improve rates of progress knowing that if it doesn't have the desired effect that your decision could send your school into a category and may truncate your career. (Head H)

> Local league tables also feature highly in thinking. (Head F)

The first quotation illustrates starkly the fear and risks engendered when undertaking a strategy for improvement. All heads mentioned tests, results and attainment and this was clearly something at the top of their minds in relation to decision-making. As Smyth and Wrigley (2013) point out, sanctions are an important way of controlling the educational market. That doesn't mean that heads were always convinced of the methods suggested to raise attainment. The following quotation illustrates one experienced head's frustration at having to alter successful practice.

> I said to the inspector, so even if it doesn't work and, and the children are not benefiting from it I still have to do it? And what I'm doing that the children are happy with and it's benefiting and they're making progress, well you're going to tell me it's not good enough because it doesn't follow the scheme? (Head L)

The head is clearly exasperated by the insistence from the inspection team that good practice should be ignored in order to follow Government guidelines which were felt would be less successful.

There was also an example where a head teacher acted to 'police' teachers indicating a frustration with staff who, once having agreed an agenda for change, were not following these agreements.

> Managing staff, who know protocol, have even been part of the original consultation but then 'do their own thing'; the constant reminding of expectations!! A big demand on my time!! (Head G)

This scenario demonstrates that the teaching staff were not as convinced by the new strategy as the head believed them to be. Rather than asking questions about the strategy itself and demonstrating critical reflection, the head appeared to be more concerned about achieving compliance. Notions of compliance is arguably equated to being seen as being values-neutral. Snook (2007) asserted that schools struggle hard to act in ways that are seen to be 'value neutral' but the reality is that they are anything but neutral. One head illustrated his attempts to neutralise his potential for bias when making decisions,

> When a HT makes any big decision, you have vested interests, an emotional demand is then made of you to see a project through… any big decisions I have made, you sometimes need to de-personalise your own role in moving something forward. Especially when you have put everything into a project! This, I admit I find hard when I want to do something, that I really believe will benefit the school, that I don't take barriers, obstacles and resistance from staff to heart… (Head F)

This head recognised the importance of reflection and in re-presenting arguments in the face of opposition. Moreover it is important to recognise that the head is likely to be motivated by what is seen as being in the best interests of the school and its' pupils. Neverthless Lumby (2012) expressed her concerns that,

> power is enacted not just by overt coercion or the exercise of mandated authority. Power is also exerted covertly through the structures, processes and agency that shape what can be thought, what can be discussed and what can be disputed or resisted. (Lumby, 2012: 580)

Lumby's statement raises questions about whether political neutrality is either possible or perhaps as desirable as it may be presented to be. In wrestling with decisions we are trying to expose our pre-dispositions and consider ways forward with more information at our disposal, but have we also unpacked the political influences that position our thinking sufficiently? Through utilising the distance that critical review brings, issues can emerge where none were thought to be present.

A head teacher who acknowledged the need to understand one's own philosophical position in order to mediate policy shifts stated that it was tiring having education being treated as a political football.

> I am very uncomfortable being used as an agent of social change and in the last 10 years or so ... this social change agenda has been difficult for me and my school. There is a clash of philosophy here that is ongoing and it confuses my staff and parents. I constantly need to

> remind all the people at this school what our philosophy is and that we do not change that at the whim of a government. (Head L)

Although it would be possible to assume that education is necessarily an agent of social change, school and their teachers being part of a constantly evolving culture, this head undoubtedly found the 'clash of philosophy' the most difficult aspect of what is described as a decade of change. The discomfort was with the notion that schools should in anyway be adopting a political position through their activities and curriculum. The view expresses distress that changes of government could bring about changes of direction that express a particular view of education. It is interesting that it was only the most experienced head teachers that alluded to this exercise of external political power another head Illustrating this point when talking about recent adjustments to Ofsted inspection rules remarking that,

> there's a distinct possibility, you begin to really micromanage schools through Ofsted...you've got freedom you can open a free school you can be an academy etc etc so, kind of, in a sense in a structural way it looks like we're moving towards more of that freedom but in actuality we're going to manage it through this other alternate process and micromanage it to a great extent. (Head K)

This head stated that he felt that freedoms had been restricted and reduced incrementally over time. As a further head recognised, in order to survive, the role of head teacher demands,

> energy, humour, broad shoulders and thick skin - all of which should be on the person specification for any Head teacher Appointment (Head D)_

Lumby (2013: 20) underscored that,

> Leaders are not always free to act as they wish. Apart from legally mandated frameworks, there are pressures exerted by others to enforce or influence them into particular attitudes or actions.

What this data illustrates is that whilst North-West primary heads are maintaining some degree of critical consciousness, they are nonetheless feeling that their actions are increasingly governed by forces outside of schools. To varying degrees they are arguing that they feel that their autonomy is under threat. This is an interesting argument when compared with others within Europe where, as Glatter (2012) argued, autonomy has never been such a dominant force. Nonetheless, Helgøy and Homme (2007) pointed out that accountability related to performance and individuals can undermine professional autonomy and it is this autonomy that the head teachers included in these data would seem to find difficult to sacrifice. The comments above are related to a sense of loss of power around decision-making, professional judgement, and being forced to undertake new initiatives with little time to relate these to their philosophical position in relation to the child and education.

Conclusions

As the accountability stakes continue to rise so do the constraints on practice (Webb et al, 2009, Gunter, 2011; Glatter, 2012). Moreover this accountability drive is linked to notions of gaining competitive advantage on the world stage. As Samoff (2013) argues performance is also based on the power of the elites that set the agendas for change. Helgøy et al (2007) point out, as accountability for performance rises then professional autonomy and the ability to influence policy reduces. This leaves head teachers in positions where much of their decision-making is reactive, made under pressure and has a variety of negative impacts should the decision made prove to be unsuccessful (Inglis, 2000). Therefore, rather than a deregulated system, the head teachers reported in this paper are experiencing the re-regulation described by Helgøy and Homme (2007) where the controls over their work are engendered through a system of harsh consequences for mistakes.

The data gathered here demonstrate the toll that decision-making under such pressure takes with discussions of loss of sleep, worry, lack of time to reflect all adding to the stress that these head teachers were experiencing. Galton and MacBeath (2008: 105) suggested,

> Teachers continually operate at both the cerebral and the emotional level in their decision-making and that teaching is as much about the heart as it is about the head.

It was however notable that it was only the most experienced heads that were able to step back a little and engage in a deeper level of critical consciousness that allowed them to think about the wider political landscape and the effects that this was having on their capacity to manoeuvre. None however raised questions about the justification for a market-led view of education which, as Gunter (2011) argued, has become part of a 'taken for granted' approach across the globe. Notwithstanding this, each head reported growing interference with decision-making and a reduced ability to take risks with their reputation which tended to focus them on the immediate rather than the long-term educational goals with a tendency to conform in a determination to be seen as non-political. Current government edicts and advice are based on little obvious debate and, despite a call to teachers to become more creative, the effects of accountability policies result in teachers who are too worried to take risks. As Power and Frandji (2010) argued, in order to engage in creativity and innovation it is really important to take risks. However what is clear from these data is that the head needs time to carefully consider strategy and must be convinced that any risk is worthwhile if they wish their career to continue. This consciousness is likely to lead some to becoming 'risk averse'.

What therefore become important considerations are the implications of an education system that is highly regulated, where there is little trust and where educators' opportunities to resist are curtailed. Indeed it is possible to argue that the desire for individual autonomy is part of the problem. As Helgøy and Homme (2007) argued, in Norway, where individual autonomy was less dominant than collective autonomy, teachers have a greater influence over educational policy. Clearly there are some significant questions about practices in England that should raise concern for other countries adopting similar approaches. Moreover, it was evident that these English head teachers would benefit from the space to think through alternative ways of viewing education in order to conceptualise new

approaches to practice. Indeed Greenfield and Ribbins (1993) believed that educators are bound by their professional role, to seek better values and openly question and seek justification for the positions they take and the ways in which they utilise power. I argue that this role has not always been taken as seriously as it should and that adopting such a position would engage heads in levels of critical consciousness that would enable them to engage more forcefully in the educational agenda and take active responsibility for change.

References

Ball, S.J. (2012) *Politics and Policy Making in Education* (2012) (vol 33) Oxford: Routledge

Ball, S.J. (2007) *Education plc: understanding private sector participation in public sector education.* London: Routledge.

Ball, S.J. (1993) "Education Markets, Choice and Social Class: the market as a class strategy in the UK and the USA" *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 14 (1), 3-19.

Barber, M. (2006) "Reform of our public services is a test for managers" *Finacial Times* ,30 September 2006

Barber, M. (2007) *Instruction to Deliver.* London: Politico's Publishing

Blenkin, G. and Kelly, A. (1987) (2nd ed) *The Primary Curriculum: a process approach to curriculum planning.* London: Paul Chapman Publishing

Braga, M., Checchi, D. and Meschi, E. (2011) : Institutional reforms and educational attainment in Europe: A long run perspective, Discussion Paper series, Forschungsinstitut zur Zukunft der Arbeit, No. 6190, http://nbn-resolving.de/ urn:nbn:de:101:1-201201104019

Bush, T. (2011) "Leading and Managing Education in an age of Austerity" editorial in *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership* (39) 2 pp 154-155

Buzan, T. and Buzan, B. (1996)*The Mind Map Book: How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential* London: Penguin Books

Colley, H. (2006) "Learning to Labour with feeling: class, gender and emotion in childcare education and training" *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 7(1) 15-29

Colley, H. (2010) "Time, space and ethics work: towards a 'politics of we' in a de-boundaried occupation", paper presented at *The British Educational Research Association Conference*, University of Warwick, 2nd -5th September.

Davies, P., Coates, G., Hammersley-Fletcher, L. and Mangan, J. (2005) "When 'becoming a 50% school' is success enough: a

principal-/agent analysis of subject leaders' target setting" *School Leadership and Management* 25(5) 493-511

Fielding, M. (2007) "The human cost and intellectual poverty of high performance schooling: radical philosophy John Macmurray and the remaking of person-centred education". *Journal of Education Policy* 22(4) 383-409.

Freire, P. (1985) *The Politics of education: culture, power and liberation* London: Bergin & Garvey.

Galton, M. and MacBeath, J. (2008) *Teachers Under Pressure* London: Sage

Glatter, R. (2012) "Persistent Preoccupations: The Rise and Rise of School Autonomy and Accountability in England" *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership* 40(5) 559-575

Gorard, S., Sewyn, N. & Rees, G. (2002) ''Privileging the visible'': a critique of the National Learning Targets, British Educational Research Journal, 28(3), 309-326.

Grace, G. (1995) *School Leadership – beyond education management.* London: Falmer

Greenfield, T. And Ribbins, P. (Eds) (1993) *Greenfield on Educational Administration.* New York: Routledge

Gunter, H. M. (2011) *Leadership and the reform of education.* Bristol: Policy Press

Gunter, H. And Rayner, S. (2007) "Remodeling Headteachers in England: Is It the End of Educational Leadership?" *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning*, v11 Article 14

Hammersley-Fletcher, L. and Qualter A. (2009) "From Schools to Higher Education - neo-liberal agendas and implications for autonomy." *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 41(4) 363-375

Helgøy, I. and Homme, A. (2007) Towards a New Professionalism in School? A Comparative Study of Teacher Autonomy in Norway and Sweden, *European Educational Research Journal*, 6(3), 232-249

Helgøy, I., Homme, A. and Gewirtz, S. (2007) Introduction to Special Issue Local Autonomy or State Control? Exploring the Effects

of New Forms of Regulation in Education, *European Educational Research Journal*, 6(3), 198-202.

Hursh, D. (2005) 'Neo-liberalism, Markets and Accountability: Transforming Education and Undermining Democracy in the United States and England', *Policy Futures in Education* 3(1) 3–15.

Inglis, F. (2000) "A malediction upon management" *Journal of Education Policy,* 15 (4) 417-429.

Leaton Gray, S. (2013) "The Big Society, education and power" *Power and Education* 5 (3), 248-267

Levin, B. (1998) "An epidemic of education policy: what can we learn for each other?", *Comparative Education*, 34(2) 131-142.

Lumby, J. (2013) Longstanding challenges, new contexts: Leadership for equality. International Studies in Educational Administration. 40 (3): 17-32.

Lumby, J. (2012) "Leading Organizational Culture: Issues of power and equity" *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership* 40(5) 576-591.

Massey, D. (1992) "Politics and Space / Time" *New Left Review* Vol a 65-84

Morrow, R.A. and Torres, C.A. (2013) "The State, Social Movements and Educational Reform" in Arnove, R.F., Torres, C. A. and Franz, S. (2013) *Comparative Education: the Dialectic of the Global and the Local.* Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield pp 89-112

Moutsios, S. (2007) "The European Union and its Education Policy" in Kothoff, H-G. and Moutsios, S. (eds) (2007) *Education Policies in Europe: Economy, Citizenship, Dniversity,* New York: Waxmann pp 15-26

Nóvoa, A., and T. Yariv-Mashal. 2003. Comparative research in education: A mode of governance or a historical journey. Comparative Education 39, no. 4: 423–39.

Ozga, J. (2009) Governing education through data in England: from regulation to self-evaluation, Journal of Education Policy, 24:2, 149-162

Power S. & Frandji D. (2010) "Education markets, the new politics of recognition and the increasing fatalism towards inequality", *Journal of Education Policy*, 25(3) 385-396

Rumbsy, R. (2007) Staff well-being: negotiating new organisational realities in schools facing challenging circumstances, *International Electronic Journal of Educational Leadership and Learning,*11(17)

Samoff, J. (2013) "Institutionalizing international influence" in Arnove, R.F., Torres, C. A. and Franz, S. (2013) *Comparative Education: the Dialectic of the Global and the Local.* Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield pp 55-88

Seddon, J. (2008) *Systems Thinking in the Public Sector: the failure of the reform regime…and a manifesto for a better way.* Axminster: Triarchy Press

Skidelsky. R. and Skidelsky, E. (2012) *How Much is Enough: the love of money and the case for the good life.* London: Allen Lane

Sleegers, P. and Wesselingh, A. (1995) Dutch Dilemmas: decentralisation, school autonomy and professionalisation of teachers, Educational Review, 47:2, 199-207, DOI: 10.1080/0013191950470207

Smyth, J. and Wrigley, T. (2013) *Living on the Edge: rethinking poverty, class and schooling.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing

Snook, I.A. (2007) "Neutrality and the Schools" *Educational Theory* 22 (3), 278-285

Valencia, R. (2010) *Dismantling contemporary deficit thinking: educational thought and practice.* New York: Routledge

Webb, R., Vulliamy, G., Sarja, A., Hamalainen, S. and Poikonen, P (2009) "Professional learning communities and teacher well-being? A comparative analysis of primary schools in England and Finland" *Oxford Review of Education* 35 (3) 405-422

Whitty, G. (2005) 'Moving Beyond Recent Education Reform – and Towards a Democratic Professionalism' *paper presented at the International Symposium on Education Reform and Teachers, Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo, November, 2005*