

## The language of dissent - how school leaders adjust to policy change

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André Kurowski

University of Chichester, United Kingdom; A.Kurowski@chi.ac.uk

### **Abstract**

*Education has changed recently in the England and leadership of schools has changed with it. This paper examines the language of dissent, the political opposition of school leaders who meet the challenges of the educational system resulting from the government policies. They question whether these policies really serve the pupils and the community effectively. It is based on a wider piece of research involving interviews with head teachers and senior managers in a range of schools; it illustrates their frustrations at delivering a prescriptive curriculum. The research takes a grounded theory approach; throughout the interview process, themes emerged and were developed through layers of analysis. This led to the construction of a framework based on the ideas of power, ethics, resistance, and mistrust. This explains the views of school leader in conceptual terms, and it was found that they use of any form of control at their disposal, bring their own values to education, subvert where they see necessary, and at best tolerate policy.*

**Keywords:** *discourse, new public management, grounded theory, resistance*

### **Introduction**

The research question was ‘How do school leaders react to changes in educational policy?’ The aim of the research was to find out how professionals view to the introduction of private sector practices in delivery models of public services (Ferlie et al. 1996). These practices are now widespread in education and based on neo-liberal educational policy change (Ball, 2017). Changes in educational policy have emphasized a different direction in education philosophy, from a collective to a more individualistic approach, with the stated aim of improving educational standards. The emphasis of this research was policy, but also the values school leaders bring to their roles. A grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014, Glaser & Strauss 1967) was used; this method relies on as few preconceptions as possible and data to inform and provide increased focus throughout the course of the research. As such a literature review in the conventional sense was not necessary or desired; instead, the context of educational change is outlined, and ideas for starting the research were taken from this. As data was accumulated, and participant’s views began to emerge, themes were developed and a sharper direction to the research was formed. This provided a rich body of data which was analyzed on different levels, and a conceptual framework was developed to explain the responses. This article is part of a wider piece of research; one of the most striking aspects of the findings was the impulsive use of language by school leaders. Opinions and attitudes to educational policy, such as school inspections, league tables, and new forms of governance, were voluntarily expressed, and disdain for educational policy was openly voiced. This unvarnished use of language reflects Lipsky’s (1980) ideas on street level bureaucracy and Foucault’s (1973) concept of discourse and combines to produce a *language of dissent*.

### **Theoretical background**

The grounded theory approach allows for the emerging data to affect the trajectory of the research as it progresses. As such, a literature review in a conventional sense has not been used, but the context of educational policy is outlined. Also, it was anticipated that the personal educational philosophies and leadership may be significant, and these topics are included in the theoretical background as well.

### New Public Management

Neo-liberal thinking has changed the education system in the UK from a public service to a business (Ball 2017). Recent educational policy has de-constructed collectivism and re-invented a form of Victorian laissez-faire individualism (Ball 2017: 2); it has shifted education away from an issue of social welfare to a matter of political economy, and led to a 'destatization' of the political system (Jessop 2002: 199).

New public management refers to the modernization of public services by introducing market-oriented management processes in the expectation of more cost-effectiveness (Hood 1991), based on business practices (Ball 2017). It is about markets, managers and measurement, and profit, although more around efficiency than effectiveness (Ferlie et al. 1996). Public organizations emphasize equity (for staff and the customer) and universality of provision, but for private organizations, this is less significant, and questions are asked about the integrity of new public management (Kolthoff, Huberts & van den Heuvel 2006). With themes from economics, accounting, and private sector management (Ferlie et al. 1996), emphasis is on ideological reform. This has led to quasi markets and 'choice and competition' (Ball 2007: 24). Conscious decisions to further the public interest have given way to the consequences of self-interested decisions made by producers and consumers in a competitive market (Le Grand 2002). Amid this, the consumer is empowered to check the supply of public services under certain notions of quality (Apple 2016). Education has become a product where the individual customer (i.e. the parent or pupil) competes to get what they see as the best education from the system.

According to Syvertsen (1991) public service includes universal access, uniform rates, regulated profits, and high standards of quality, for the public good. New public management includes private sector principles such as performance management and measurement, performance indicators, and pressure on low performers to improve (Ferlie et al. 1996). Thus, paradoxes and dilemmas can be found; where consumers are not equal and competition is introduced for personal gain of the suppliers, universal provision can suffer. Private sector organizations exist to create value for their shareholders, but public organizations aim to generate public value (Wei 2008). As a result, the value of education can be difficult to identify (Wei, 2008). This becomes unreliable when considering aspects such as children's well-being, healthy behaviors, and attitudes (DfES 2005), and sociological and cultural capital factors (Bourdieu & Patterson 1990). Teachers have found conflict with performance indicators (Miller & Cable 2011), as performance indicators:

*"Measure not what is necessary but what is measurable and therefore you very often end up with results which (simply) suit the government statisticians..."* (Jackson 2006)

However, the methods of new public management are useful in controlling education professionals through power relationships (Hope 2010) where schools are subjected to surveillance (Bourdieu 1999). Transparency means that they are under constant scrutiny (Ferlie et al. 1996, Murphy 2013) of the trust-less panopticon, a disciplinary society of scrutiny designed to maximize the efficiency of the institution (Foucault 1977).

New public management can result in a different kind of moral mind-set (Earley & Greany 2017) which can change in public service ethical standards (Maesschalk 2004). Values can be defined as what is good and worthy to us (Williams 1970); they mold and inform behavior (MacCarthaigh 2008) and how we engage with the world (Rokeach 1979). However, there can be contradictions; value systems are personal (Kidder 2003), and those imposed by government can cause tension with obligation to implement policy (Bush 2008). School leaders regret a reduction of professional autonomy (Giles et al. 2005); teachers not supporting privatization are more interested in teaching and professional autonomy (Edmondson & D'Urso 2009), especially with disadvantaged groups (Leithwood, Steinbach & Jantzi 2002).

Quality is also an issue. A system of inspections has been introduced (Education Reform Act 1988) and results of the inspection are published and contribute to the school's position in league tables.

However, inspection regimes are not universally approved of; the intention is to drive up quality, but they can be unrealistic and punitive to the point of bullying, especially in failing schools (Combi 2013). League tables and rankings of schools, which do not focus on absolute performance levels, can have adverse consequences (Hood 2010). Such measures do not allow for the context of schools in terms of social deprivation or other indicators. In addition, schools have greater freedom to select the pupils; this can lead to higher positions in league tables by attracting parents with greater aspirations for their children (Garner 2011). Conversely, children whose parents place less emphasis on aspiration can find themselves grouped together in schools, the so-called sink schools (Ball 2017). These hit the most deprived children and lead to a 'spiral of decline' (Garner 2011: 1) in the educational experience for such children.

### **Philosophy of education**

Legislation, starting with The Education Reform Act (1988), has brought major changes to the financing, organization, and management of state education (Ball 2017), but it has also affected philosophical ideas about education. Despite the 'facade of the rhetoric of "education for all"', the state has started to play a 'diminishing role' (Hill & Kumar 2012: 1); Giroux (2011) sees this as an encroachment on the social justice of education. The post-war period represented progressive reform and all-party consensus on education (Jeffreys 1984). This liberal model of education is a way of 'transmitting and conserving society's achievements' (Dewey, 1966: 20) to make for a better society, and for 'personal growth and democracy' (Bowles & Gintis 2016: 55). This model of education was aimed to develop children naturally with a teacher as a guide, not a task master; emotional and intellectual development were to hold equal importance, to take the 'lid off kids' (Bowles & Gintis 2016: 63) as a 'moral, ethical and democratic' process (Aubrey & Riley 2017: 48). However, education is now more testing based and geared to employment, a vocational model, but Down (2009) points out the danger of valuing education purely for economic growth.

### **School governance**

School governance refers to the way that schools are funded and managed and has a significant effect on the leadership of the school.

Neo-liberal reforms have introduced a social market economy (Ball 2007) into education, the state was seen as wasteful and inefficient, and the free market as the engine of national economic competitiveness (Eagle 2003). State schools, from the 1980s onwards, were required to re-focus and re-design amid strict financial controls (Ball 2007), including pressure to generate more income; schools found themselves in competition with each other, local management of schools (i.e. outside of local authority control), parental choice, and new imperatives for school leaders (Ball 2007). The focus of schools became outcomes, whether through norm referencing (schools competing) or criterion referencing (targets and benchmarks) (Aubrey & Riley 2017). Legislation has also led to performance management of teachers (Middlewood & Abbott 2017), changes in the way teachers are employed. This is a departure from the traditional welfare state model (Hill & Kumar 2012; Powell 2007). Schools became individual organizations that could make their own financial and strategic decisions, whereas before, education was centrally controlled. However, there is some controversy over these developments; according to Dunt (2014), this does not necessarily lead to improved achievement, and the introduction of competition among colleagues, formal judgement of schools and chasing money, has been branded as insulting (Hill & Kumar 2012). Recent changes have resulted in new types of schools; *academies* are schools which have opted out of local authority control and are strategically and financially independent, and *free schools* are new schools set up to meet local needs but outside the control of local authorities. Much has changed with educational policy and the views of these changes were sought from the sample in the research.

### **Leadership**

On one hand, writers refer to an ethical and contextual style of leadership related to the educational field, and on the other, a more managerialist approach that assumes management is a transferable skill that can be applied regardless of sector, based on outcomes. According to Leithwood, Steinbach and Jantzi (2002), it is important for school leaders to generate a caring value system for staff and students in a Maslovian sense (Aubrey & Riley 2017), as well as collective leadership, moral purpose, and collaboration (Lambert 1998); this can be considered 'moral confidence' in an 'ethical system' (West-Burnham 1997: 241). Decision-making and judgements (Earley & Greany 2017) can both drive an organization and guide tough decisions (Dean 2011); where staff share strong values and are led by example, principled decisions will generate respect from others and preserve self-worth and integrity (Dean 2011). Leadership at the heart of an organization is the most effective way to achieve the desired vision for staff and students (Leithwood, Steinbach & Jantzi 2002), and crucial for organizational effectiveness (Earley & Greany 2017). In education, concepts of leadership are transformational and distributive (Bush & Glover 2014); emphasis should be on authentic leadership (Simpkins 2005, Begley 2007) based on the leader's moral maturity (Gardner et al. 2005), values and reflective practice, as opposed to a fake ethical approach, or inauthenticity (Shamir & Eilam 2005). Spiritual leadership (Woods 2000), as such, is based on what is right or good (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach 1999, Rokeach 1979).

MacDonald (1995) noted the shift away from leadership as a professional, to technician and manager, to a reductionist-based model that ignores larger leadership skills, a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to recognize dispositions, values, and identities (Cuban 1998). This is affected by *managerialism*, the general idea that better management will provide an effective solution to a wide range of social and economic ills (Pollitt 1993). Managerialism is based on functions, authority, and influence (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach 1999) and can be more about control; Gray (2000) lamented the loss of a professional ethos and a sense of public service. Managers are now managing professionals (teachers) rather than professionals (teachers) managing their own work; this can lead to distractions from what they consider their real work (Conway 1993). Managers are encouraged to work to further their own interests, through results and target driven cultures (Mills & Friesen 2001). However, according to Simic (1995), effective managers are not usually successful in career progression, and those who work hard for their own careers are not effective managers. Even so, values affect leadership; the most effective school leaders show flexibility rather than dogmatism, based on core values of persistence, resilience, and optimism, even in the face of unhelpful educational policy (Hill et al, 2016). They have strong moral and ethical purpose and a strong sense of social justice (Hill et al. 2016, MacCarthaigh 2008). It is against this background that the school leaders in the sample were asked about leadership in their schools, and how they felt schools should be led.

### **Methodology**

#### **Grounded theory**

With a varied sample of head teachers and other senior managers from a range of schools in different sectors, it was anticipated that responses would be dissimilar and unpredictable. That is the reason grounded theory was selected as a research approach, to provide 'substantive theory' (Glaser 2001) or 'a systematic process for the abstract conceptualization of latent patterns within a social reality' (Holton 2007: 268). It was not intended to verify theory through research (Glaser & Strauss 2008) or to feed back into and modify theory (Merton 1949). That would require there to be an existing theory and as Glaser and Strauss (2008) point out, that could limit the scope of the research. As such, a literature review was not used as the theory must fit the situation or be applicable and meaningfully relevant (Glaser & Strauss 2008). This focus and flexibility and interaction between data and analysis was found to be useful to get members 'taken for granted assumptions and rules' (Charmaz 2014: 35).

Provisional ideas were used for the first interviews to address what participants defined as interesting or problematic before re-evaluating the research process to focus on key analytic ideas (Charmaz 2014). The object was to clear the way for *developing* not freezing theory (Glaser & Strauss 2008). These ‘less specific’ ideas (Strauss & Corbin 1997: 65) led to an ‘intersection of multiple realities’ (Strauss & Corbin 1997: 65) that the participants experienced as leaders of schools.

### The sample

The study included eleven leaders in education in the context of new public management. As the research population as such, was likely to be professionally and geographically diverse, relevant leaders in compulsory educational settings were selected from state and private primary schools (and middle schools where they exist), high schools, and recently developed hybrids offering the National Curriculum. Most of the sample were head teachers, with the balance being those in senior management, selected on their theoretical relevance (David & Sutton 2011). All eleven were selected on the basis that they had experience in strategic leadership in schools. The first participants were selected according to availability (or convenience sampling) (David & Sutton 2011), but as the research developed, a more targeted approach was used. For example, younger head teachers were included, to balance those who were older and had more experience.

Access was problematic, but gatekeeping straightforward. Securing interviews with school leaders proved to be more difficult than envisaged; choosing participants became more of a case of accidental or opportunistic sampling where ‘the researcher simply chooses a sample from those to whom (s)he has easy access’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011: 156). Gatekeeping, or being allowed or denied access (Holloway & Wheeler 2002) did not pose a major problem; as head teachers are (increasingly) autonomous, the permissions needed were basically from the head teachers themselves.

Categorical variables (Siegal 2013) about the participants were used as a tool to reflect on the data. These included characteristics such as gender and age, aspects such as length of service, seniority, role, educational setting. These characteristics were used to determine relationships to the data (Siegal 2013); for example, younger professionals could have had different views from those with more experience, which was in fact the case. When the concepts developed were reasonably able to describe the situation (David & Sutton 2011), interviewing was discontinued. In the event, it was not so much data saturation (i.e. when there is enough information... and when further coding is no longer feasible (Fuchs & Ness 2015), but diversity of data that called a halt to the data collection. An overview of the sample is given in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Overview of the sample.

Code	Role	Years' in post	Years in sector	Age	Gender	Type of school	Number of Pupils	Governance
P1.1	Head Teacher	22	30	56	M	Primary	200	Local Authority
P1.2	Head Teacher	11	30	56	F	Primary	194	Local Authority
P1.3	Head teacher	14	27	49	M	Primary	302	Local Authority
P1.4	SEN Coordinator	6	10	40	F	Primary	240	Local Authority

P1.5	Head Teacher	1	15	53	F	High	1100	Academy
P1.6	Head of PE/enrichment	0	17	47	M	High	650	Free School
P1.7	Head Teacher	1	32	55	F	High	1100	Academy
P2.1	Head Teacher	7	7	66	M	Primary	160	Independent
P2.2	Head Teacher	3m	14	53	F	Primary	196	Local Authority
P2.3	Head Teacher	4	15	38	M	Primary	250	Local Authority
P2.4	Executive Head Teacher	21	27	50	F	2x Primary	286	Local Authority

### The research instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used initially for their flexibility (Becker & Bryman 2004) to ask supplementary questions (Basit 2010), and to gain more focus as interviewing advanced (Charmaz 2014). Some pre-conceptions about the research were retained ‘around key areas of interest’ (Becker & Bryman 2004: 406), for example policy change and performance management. This was useful to decide if questions were redundant, or to change focus (Basit 2010), and it allowed certain questions to be dropped in the event of data saturation (Charmaz 2014) on some issues.

After seven interviews, key issues were defined (Brundrett & Rhodes 2014), to follow emerging lines of enquiry (Yin, 2009). The themes that emerged are shown in Figure 2 and range from leadership to financial issues, from policy to professional discretion. Figure 2 illustrates the original questions and how they were adjusted to fit the data emerging from the interviews. For the last four interviews, a hybrid was developed, more guided conversations rather than structured queries (Basit 2010). Part of this process was to explain or re-frame questions for the participant, but also to allow the participants the freedom to lead the direction (Kvale 1996). The interviews took place mainly at the participant’s place of work, were conducted by me, audio recorded and transcribed word for word. The first seven interviews were approximately one hour long, but as focus was achieved the last four were around 40 minutes. Participants were coded from P1.1-P1.7 and to P2.1-P2.4.

**Figure 2:** Interview questions.

<b>First wave interview questions (Seven)</b>
1 What do you see as your main role?
2 How would you characterize your preferred style of management/ leadership?
3 Can you tell me about commissioning of services and what role that has in your work?
4 What influences how you assess the performance of your staff?
5 How do you feel about local/national ‘measures of the school’s performance’?
6 How do you feel about educational policy initiatives from central government?
7 What is your approach to achieving ‘efficiencies’?



<b>Second wave interviews (Four)</b>	
Based upon themes emerging from data generated from first wave interviews	
Leadership	1 How would you characterize your leadership style?
Educational philosophy	2 What do you see as the purpose of education?
Professional discretion	3 To what extent do you 'follow' policy dictates?
Policy change	4 What are your views on recent/ current educational policies?
Finance and governance	5 How do you feel about the financial role Head Teachers have?
Human resource issues and teacher training	6 How do you performance manage your staff?

### Method of data analysis

Grounded theory was used to build theory from data from the ground up (Greener 2011). Coding was used to 'draw out the particulars from within each empirical case or instance of data collection....', to translate events into 'units of meaning' (David & Sutton 2011: 198-9). A process of constant comparison took place to consider (existing or new) theory as coding progressed (Glaser & Strauss 2008). Without an hypothesis at the start, the technique of 'analytical induction' was used to evaluate the data generated for theoretical relevance. This involved a 'tentative hypothesis' to 'fit' the data (David & Sutton 2011: 340).

Three levels of coding were used (Hodgkinson 2008) - open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. First, tentative labels were created based on the meaning emerging from the data (Charmaz 2014). Second, patterns were identified across the data among the open codes. Third, key examples from the emerging patterns (David & Sutton 2011), were sought. Memos (Charmaz 2014) were attached to sections of data and emerging codes for constant comparison; this led to the generation of themes. How things are said became as important as what was said, and I made 'sense of the situation' in the light of my own 'concerns and goals' (Becker & Bryman 2014: 396-97).

### Findings

**Figure 3:** Conceptual framework.

<b>P</b>	Power	Ethics	<b>E</b>
<b>R</b>	Resistance	Mistrust	<b>M</b>

The data presented in this article is part of a wider study not intended to research language, but as the language used was so significant, extracts of data are given here that illustrate the use of language.

During the first seven interviews, the process of coding and categorization of the data started using single words, paragraphs or pages of text (Soldana 2016) to remain open to the data and to see nuances in them (Charmaz 2014). From the data, some expected, and some unexpected themes emerged, but although it was not anticipated, the language used by most of the sample was striking. The vocabulary and expressions displayed a great deal of dissent and disdain for educational policy. Quotes show an open and unanticipated hostility for policy and it was clear that the sample had their own ideas about the education system and recent changes. However, it was the more experienced school leaders that had confidence to criticize policy and this was based upon their forcefulness. All the sample demonstrated high levels of empathy with children and their families and their communities and felt

that educational policy was not meeting the needs of those in areas of social and economic deprivation. Although policy is presented by the government as fixed and compulsory, it was not universally followed; some leaders made their own rules about how to educate their children in the context of their own schools. Finally, it became apparent that the sample had little faith in educational policy in terms of meeting the needs of the children in their schools; they simply did not think it would work. As a result, the conceptual framework of Power, Ethics, Resistance and Mistrust (see Figure 3) was developed to explain this lack of faith in policy and the language of dissent. Selected quotes are used below from the research to illustrate each of these concepts, with accompanying theoretical analysis to place the quotes in context.

### Power

Power has been used as a concept to explain the data because it was found that the older and more experienced the participants were, the more power they had at their disposal to challenge policy, the older and more experienced of the sample, were philosophical about their plight:

These quotes from one a highly experienced Head Teacher illustrate the advantage of experience and belief:

*P1.3 'Being a head, I think involves an inner strength which, yes, it is enhanced by experience and time to look back at experience, but it is about that inner conviction.'*

*P1.3 'It is bending the system I suppose.... you should have the courage to be the leader you need to be for the children in your care.'*

... and the resilience that comes with it....

*P1.3 'It is the thick-skinned approach to it and not taking everything personally rather than not caring any more-because I still care very passionately, but I am more able to put things in place and not worry about the negative consequences of those things.'*

Depending on the authority available to the participants, they objected to policy in different ways. As stated above, most of the sample had reservations about policy in their own ways. However, some were more forthright than others. One experienced participant who claimed to know her children better than those making policy, flatly refused to deliver separate literacy and numeracy sessions for her children, even though this was prescribed by policy:

*P2.4 'I refuse to do a literacy and numeracy hour; I embed literacy and numeracy in other subjects.'*

She explained that during inspection, when she would be judged on this, she would contrive a situation to satisfy inspectors, but as a rule she would not implement a strategy that she felt was not right for her children. This conviction was replicated by another experienced Head Teacher when referring to leadership. However, the rate of conviction was proportionate to the perceived levels of unavailability participants perceived themselves to have:

*P2.4 'It's alright for me, I have done 21 years, if they kick me out now, I have had a good innings, I can afford to leave...'*

Measures of political intervention and quality in schools were questioned widely by participants. Another issue with inspections centered around socio-economic and cultural factors. At the time the inspection regime took little account of the background of the children and the communities they come from. Therefore, inspections were considered to be missing important factors:

*P1.2 '....but there is a whole context around a school, so you can't judge it on one measure.'*

The same participant took a much broader view of education and development than policy required:

*P1.2 'I am looking at children as a whole rather than looking at them getting their SATS results in Year 6.'*

This participant had his own views on the introduction of the National Curriculum and how it led to control and a loss of freedom



P1.2 *'... when the control of the National Curriculum came about and the real element of government involvement-their involvement is on a very management level....'*

### Discussion

This sample uphold their own values and adjust their role around their own values, acting out a form of political leadership (Bush 2011). *Power* can be distinguished between personal and professional interests (Hoyle 1986). According to Weber, power is social action by actors to enforce their own will (Weber 1978). Rational target power concerns work in accordance with the expectations of the outside world to achieve objectives. Value rational power concerns conscious belief in ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other absolute value of a certain behavior (Weber 1978). Both forms of power were represented by the sample; first, what government and local authorities expect from school leaders, and second, the power school leaders exercise within and beyond their schools. Foucault claimed that 'power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere' (Foucault 1998: 63). Power is not simply an institutional phenomenon; it is in a state of constant flux and negotiation. Foucault (1973) saw power as elusive, removed from agency and structure, and used this to explain why state power does not always lead to social change. Power lies in observation, punishment, and normalizing discourses through the concept of panopticism (Foucault 1977). This can explain power of policy makers and administrators of policy. All the participants felt as if they were being observed through the inspection agency, and judged on test results, inspection outcomes and league table positions, even those who had highly successful schools. However, most of the participants were unaffected by the normalizing of discourse and used their power to challenge it.

Power was derived either through success at the school, for example through Ofsted ratings, by perceived relative immunity to any sanctions, or through expert knowledge (Rodriguez & Craig 2007). Bourdieu's concepts of practice and habitus can explain the nature of the sample. Practice refers to the activities of the actors in relation to the wider society, in other words what is actually done (Murphy 2016); habitus concerns the disposition of the actors and how they 'make meaningful contributions to practice' (Murphy 2016: 123). These abstract mental habits (Bourdieu 1977) are schemes of perception, classification, appreciation, feeling, and action; they allow actors to find new solutions to new situations without calculated deliberation, based on their gut feelings and intuitions, and the sample exhibited this.

Discourse can be a site of power, but it can also evade and subvert strategies of power (Gaventa 2003); 'discourses can be a starting point for an opposing strategy' (Foucault 1998: 100-101). The participants' preference for autonomy is based on ideas of professionalism and its perceived demise (Crow & Weindling 2010). They do not see the neo-liberal doxa (Bourdieu 1999) or policy technologies (Ball 2017) as inevitable and obvious (Rosamund 2002); almost all regret the pathologisation of public sector provision (Kenway 1990). They are motivated by autonomy, mastery and purpose (Pink 2009). The participants use agency and independent action to make their own free choices (Barker 2005), to create new discourses and dialogues of self-identity. Foucault (1998) saw power as elusive but the participants have re-constructed themselves using their power; we are not what we are, we are who we can become (Caldwell 2007). They are using disruptive innovation (Christensen & Overdorf 2000) to force their own change.

### Ethics

The participants demonstrated high levels of empathy for children in their schools, and this was the main driver for most. Know their children and communities better than policy makers was seen as highly significant. One highly experienced Head Teacher said:

P1.2 *'The willingness to stand up for what they see as right for the children.... It is about the individual and the qualities that individual brings to that role.'*

.... and questioned policy in terms of the value for children:

*P1.2 'Is that benefitting the children of this community?'*

Sensitive to cultural factors, one was highly critical of Standard Assessment Tests for young children based on their ability to engage culturally with the format of testing. This participant, a newly qualified Head Teacher, said:

*P2.3 'I watched 15 kids break down and cry because they couldn't access it. I thought to myself at that point "that is never happening again in my school...."'*

He claimed that the socio-economic background of his children was a barrier:

*P2.3 '... this new measure was not fit for purpose. If I was sat in a leafy suburb it's probably a little easier, but all schools?'*

To another Head Teacher, at the end of a long career, the problem was obvious:

*P1.1 'Common sense does seem to go out the window when pressure of exam results takes over. (Failing schools) focus purely on the exam results.'*

He empathized with his children because he is from the same background as them:

*P1.1 'I come from a council estate-I know what it feels like, I can feel what the kids and parents are going through. Should we be continuing that package within the rules that we have? That can't be right.'*

On the topic of testing children, few felt that testing was the most effective method to judge children's abilities, at least not the children in their schools. An experienced Head Teacher said:

*P1.2 'I would have loved to have opted out because I don't think the style of the tests suit this type of children.'*

He considered tests to be narrow, not only in academic terms but also in the holistic development of children:

*P1.2 '...it's much easier to have a test score or an Ofsted grade and use that as a key driver than it is to spend time looking at things that are less easily measured, like how high is a child's self-esteem.... that is much more difficult.'*

These sentiments illustrate the derision over a curriculum that is perceived as too narrow and the loss of opportunity for their children. Another Head Teacher at the end of her career said:

*P1.3 '... because ultimately, we are there to create as much opportunity for those children....It is about making sure they have self-esteem so they can be resilient so that if they take a knock, if things don't go as well, they can be effective learners.'*

*....and the wider impact on children:*

*P1.3 'It is all linked to their mental health, behaviour that is reflecting the issues that are underlying that and our system does not want to bend in order to accommodate.'*

One of the sample, who was instrumental in setting up one of the new breed of Free Schools, felt that the curriculum is much more prescribed than it was in the past and there was a feeling that educational policy is narrow and limiting:

*P1.6 'We believe.... that education is more than English, maths and science. If you want to know a good school, go and see their music department and their PE department. If they are good, I guarantee their exam results are good as well.'*

## **Discussion**

The sample's *ethics*, or strong opinions or beliefs (Cambridge Dictionary 2017) often came into conflict with policy. The dilemma for the sample is 'compassion and flexibility on the one hand and rigid rule application on the other' (Lipsky 1980: 15). Good leaders communicate clear sets of personal and educational values and moral purposes for the school (Day, Harris & Hadfield 2001). Usually these values are influenced by government (Bush 2008), however, most of the sample in this research have individualistic values. They demonstrate a caring principle and ideals such as modelling and collaboration, to provide a guiding force (Giles et al. 2005). Perception and reaction are prior conditions

for practice (Rawolle & Lingard 2013); most of the participants in this research debate and discuss and focus on values (Hill et al. 2016). These values form the habitus and are central to guiding their practice. They see education more as a passage to citizenship, and membership of a state (Bailey 2010) and preparation of children for social life. The hidden curriculum refers to education of the masses for economic needs (Bowles & Gintis 2016), but vocational training is not the universal panacea (Bailey, 2010). Education has the potential to supersede politics (Emerson 2016), school is a leveler in society offering more than employment opportunities, but also social mobility. This resistance to the distant control of policy technology (Ball 2017), and an attempt to break out of the Weber's iron cage of bureaucracy (Murphy 2013) to preserve freedom and creativity. Some were concerned at what they perceived as surveillance: inspections, lesson observations, publication of test results and league tables in an 'accountability trap' (Murphy 2013: 85) where reaching required outcomes for their children was considered unfeasible. This is meeting targets but 'not necessarily performing better in the real world' (Murphy 2013: 85). The participants' values reflect 'holistic learning' and 'authentic knowing' (Murphy 2013: 69). Few questioned the emphasis on literacy or numeracy, but considered it too narrow at the expense of more holistic aims, including transferable skills for their lives after education. Bureaucratic governance of education has led to a totally administered world (Murphy, 2013) and to the realization of Weber's iron cage where individuals in organizations based on efficiency and control (Murphy 2013), have reduced levels of professional freedoms, resulting in specialists without spirit and sensualists without heart (Weber 1958).

Pressures on freedom were perceived to compromise professional status. Professions require community rather than self-interest, public service rather than private gain and adherence to a code of ethics, as well as theoretical knowledge (Barber 1963) and service to public good (Millerson 1964). The participants all had strong convictions and individualistic approaches. Somewhere highly idiosyncratic and engage policy with charismatic authority and leadership (Langlois 1998). They are motivated by values and the pursuit of individual visions (Southworth 1993), which is a (tacit) rejection of managerialism (Simkins 2005), and reductionist competence-based models (Earley & Weindling 2004) of education. Entrepreneurialism now pervades in schools (Ball 2007), but the sample were unconvinced about the business of education (Ferlie, 1996), and they question the pathologisation of the welfare state model. Oplatka, Hemsley-Brown and Foskett (2002) found that teachers were interested in teaching not marketing. Edmondson & D'Urso (2009) claim that those supporting privatization of education were more extrinsically motivated by pay, but none of the sample were not motivated as such. For most of the sample, values were translated into actions for the benefit of pupils, staff, and community. Values transcend both contexts and experiences (Dean 2011), form the habitus (Bourdieu 1977), and are central to guiding their practice; the participants have the moral confidence (West-Burnham 1997) to say the unsayable (Ball 2007) on policy. Autonomous professionalism overrides the role of the compliant bureaucrat (Lipsky 1980).

### Resistance

Most of the sample questioned policy, but some actively refused to accept it and worked against policy for the benefit of their children, as they perceived it.

One, the Head Teacher of a private (fee paying) school refused to enter children for exams they felt children would not benefit from:

*P2.1 'We don't ask them to sit. So, if the government measures our performance by EBAC (English Baccalaureate) we will suffer. I say, for this child, a foreign language is inappropriate.'*

The educational philosophies of the sample came through in their responses; recent developments in education have resulted in a mechanistic process that was rejected by most, including the Head Teacher of one of the new academies:

P1.7 *'Tick box culture: I think it stifles creativity and it makes staff, teachers feel that they, I suppose in a way, that they are working towards that tick list as opposed to working towards their specific skills.'*

This resulted in a great deal of discrimination about educational policy by some, including the Head Teacher of a private school, who was also a trained lawyer:

P2.1 *'I think you must exercise a discerning judgement on government policies. Some of them can be very well done and the fruit of a lot of good minds on committees and should be assessed and we get DfE circulars down, we do receive all of those.'*

On an increasingly standardized curriculum, one participant in a school serving an area of deprivation, said:

P2.4 *'Yes, it should be a personalised curriculum....'*

Many expressed sentiments that they rejected the role of manager to a centralised education system; one, an experienced Head teacher, claimed:

P1.2 *'Absolutely, I don't believe in management, I believe in leadership.'*

They continued to think that they had autonomy based on their local situation, and one challenged the (then) Secretary of State for Education. A highly experienced Head Teacher said:

P1.1 *'Where is there a forum to say, "Gove you haven't got a clue what you are talking about?"'*

On authority in their schools, all felt that they were leaders, and not the managers they felt policy was trying to make them become. One explained how the expectations changed:

P1.5 *'When the control of the National Curriculum came about and the real element of government involvement-their (head teachers in individual schools) involvement is on a very management level.'*

On being a 'manager' in an office rather than a leader who interacted with children, one said:

P1.3 *'I don't think that I am ever going to be able to just be in an office and kind of be divorced from the reality of what goes on in the school.'*

An experienced Head Teacher exercised great deals of discretion over whether they followed policy or not:

P1.1 *'...and that's not saying that I don't check, because you have to.... So where are we going to go with this? Yes, that's a good idea. But we have to have success criteria and we have to track them through because it's no good doing anything if you are not checking whether it makes an impact.'*

On the inspection regime for schools, there was little sympathy for its bluntness. An experienced Head Teacher said:

P1.3 *'I don't think it's an effective way. I don't mind it, I am not dead against it, but there is a whole context around a school, so you can't judge it on one measure.'*

.... and on increasingly qualitative methods to judge the quality of schools:

P1.3 *'It's much easier to have a test score or an Ofsted grade and use that as a key driver than it is to spend time looking at things that are less easily measured, like how high is a child's self-esteem.... that is much more difficult.'*

The sample had their own views on training for head teachers. One experienced Head Teacher felt it to be unnecessary:

P1.1 *'... probably did need to do the head teachers' qualification. I have had different experiences and probably didn't need to do that.'*

....and on evaluation of the quality of teaching for new teachers, he said:

P1.1 *'We cannot just keep banging them with a stick. We have to give them time to get it right. You can't just go in: 'Ah you're rubbish!''*

## Discussion

The more experienced of the sample were prepared to question the 'necessities' of the 'economic perspective' (Ball 2017: 19). They were prepared to say the unsayable on, for example, the narrowness of the curriculum and the need to broaden it (Gardner 2006). There may have been *resistance* against the feasibility (Kubisch 1997) of policy in terms of meeting the needs of their children, but it was also an issue of social justice, about giving opportunities for all. Those confident enough, challenge official policy on a continuum (Bush & Glover 2014); this ranges from defy through to subvert, from ignore to wait and see. Some leaders have enough confidence to resist or even confound the system (Hoyle & Wallace 2005). Resistance was seen, at least partly, as a mechanism for survival, but also about personal interests (Hoyle 1986). However, these interests were not related to 'status, promotion and working conditions' (Hoyle 1986: 128); it was more a matter of negative reinforcement (Flora 2004), not seeking advancement but preventing undesirable consequences. Many of the sample spoke of sheltering themselves and their schools from what they considered to be adverse policy. Public officials can exercise *street level bureaucracy* (Lipsky 1980) and have two mind-sets: on one hand the bureaucratic mind-set, compliant with supervisor's directives, and on the other, the professional mind-set, involving discretion and autonomy. The sample exercised professional discretion. Although few expressed overt political views, there were reservations about the neo-liberal educational agenda (Joseph 1975) such as testing, league tables (Gove 2012), and the (economic) individualism (Ball 2017) wrapped up in the neo-liberal agenda. Despite this, most participants did not resist against the 'necessarian logic', the idea that the state must be remade to respond to international pressures from globalisation (Ball 2017, Watson & Hay 2003: 295). Reactions to policy were more about the level of discretion (Lipsky 1980) they were afforded, the space between adverse policy and how it is delivered under pressure, legal rules, and autonomy for decision-making (Loyens & Maesschalck 2010). This gives the opportunity to undermine support for the government in terms of advancing social welfare, equity, and justice (Brodkin 2012).

This may be reaction to change. Of the resisters to change outlined by Mullins (2005), threats to power and influence and loss of freedom may be factors, but selective perception is a more appropriate explanation. This selective perception is based on educational values; these fit more with liberal education and democracy (Dewey, 1966) and cultural capital (Peterson & Kern 1996). It also rejects neo-liberal doxa (Vernon, 1969), challenges to the welfare state (Kenway 1990) and questions rational-mechanistic approaches to management (Ball & Youdell 2008). They cherish the habitus (Bourdieu 1977) of their educational values. For most, discretion was used liberally to interpret adverse policy (Lipsky 1980) on the grounds of social justice and equality. This is where panoptic surveillance (Foucault 1977) through inspections was resented as it restricts creativity and freedom; the sample prized professional autonomy (Giles et al. 2005) highly. Some did defy, subvert, and ignore policy (Bottery 1998), and the value-based habitus created new discourses to shield children and staff from the vagaries of adverse policy.

## Mistrust

*P1.7 'I am not a great supporter of the present regime. So, I am cynical about their motives'*

This quote from an experienced Head Teacher immediately demonstrates general discontent with policy, but also, they question the validity and authority of policy making....

*P1.7 'I guess it comes back to not speaking to the educationalists or imposing your... experience on education.'*

....but also the lack of consultation with educationalists in formulation of policy:

*1.7 'It's not actually working alongside the educationalists themselves and coming up with a collaborative approach to the curriculum'*

Recent changes seem to have brought a culture clash between educationalists and policy, a coordinator of Special Educational Needs said:



1.4 *'It's not their natural thing for people who have chosen to go into education.... SMT struggle with target culture.'*

Many of the sample felt that reform was an obstacle to a successful school rather than a formula for development. Most of the participants also felt that the curriculum in its present form is too narrow and limiting, including the Head Teacher of an independent school:

2.1 *'There are caveats to it that I don't agree with, because they decided which eight subjects will count.'*

On the issue of school inspections, hardly any of the sample were in favour of the present inspection regime, an experienced Head Teacher had a great deal of sympathy for their staff:

P1.1 *'Ofsted inspections are meaningless, new teachers should be observed by their peers.'*

Inspection includes observation of teachers in the classroom and all teachers are judged by the same criteria regardless of experience. He questioned:

P1.1 *'How can new teachers be expected to perform as well as experienced teachers?'*

Again, the question of validity arose; there was little faith in the ability of the inspectors doing teacher observations:

P1.1 *'Who is doing these observations? Quite often, it is people who cannot do it themselves.'*

As an experienced Head teacher expected to judge the performance of staff through payment by achieving targets, there was some reluctance to do this:

P1.2 *'You have targets, and you are performance managed about where you must lead the school to, you pass that down and it is very target orientated. I have got to do this, so I do this.'*

## Discussion

There was evidence of *mistrust* and reluctance of participants to follow policy by most of the sample, especially those who remember greater freedoms from earlier times. This mistrust can be explained by the discourses (Bourdieu 1977) used by policy makers; policy is not viewed as inevitable and obvious (Rosamund 2002). According to Ball, 'authoritative readings of prevailing political and economic conditions' (Ball 2007: 2-3) presents policy as a done deal, and those with less experience are more likely to be uncritical of policy, the inevitability of policy becomes the unsayable (Ball 2007). These discourses revolve around derision that pathologises the welfare tradition of public sector provision (Kenway 1990). Ball claims that policy discourses need to develop trust to discourage the speaking of the 'otherwise' (Ball 2007: 2-3), but as Kenway (1990) pointed out, discourses of distrust can be the result. For many of the sample, education of children overrides the certainty of enterprise and dynamism (Ball 2017). This modernization includes competition with other schools for students and resources (Middlewood & Abbott 2017), benchmarks, testing, and examination outputs (Ball 2017). Central control for schools, using management approaches of the private sector (Middlewood & Abbott 2017), is also a source of contention. The participants prioritize the interests of pupils and their communities (Fielding 2003).

## Conclusion

The education sector has changed significantly, and this research sought to find out how school leaders view recent policy. It used grounded theory to build a picture of their views from the interview data and constructed a conceptual framework to explain these views. As can be seen from the language used, the sample do not supportive recent changes. There is much resistance and individuality based on ethical practice, and this subverts the enactment of policy. This is where the current generation of school leaders at least, reject the taken for granted doxa; they will not accept the prevailing assumptions about education, uncritically. They create their own cultures to meet the -needs of their children, staff, and communities as they see fit. According to Beck (1992), modernity is characterized by manufactured



uncertainty and subjects take risks to deal with the resulting hazards and insecurities, and the participants have made their choices. Despite operating in a state funded system, the sample felt confident to voice their views about education in straightforward language. Language is a means of acknowledging human thinking, intentions, and social behavior (Hall 2002), and the sample have expressed this very clearly. The unfiltered comments they have made reveal courage and conviction as well as where their true interests lie. Questions can be asked about the suitability of education policy for all children; if school leaders can see problems with policy for many children, then there is much waste; of policy and of children's talent. Perhaps it would be useful for policy makers to acknowledge the views of the professionals on the ground if policy is to be implemented openly and successfully.

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