Value(s)-driven decision-making: The ethics work of English headteachers within discourses of constraint

Linda Hammersley-Fletcher

Abstract

This article considers the experiences and perceptions of practising English headteachers and the tensions that they face when juggling government prescription and government initiatives, which may be antagonistic to their educational values and beliefs. Managerial control over teachers work has been particularly acute and destructive to 'human flourishing'. Headteachers have a moral and ethical responsibility for the welfare and education of pupils. Such professional ethics oblige the professional to seek the good of the pupil and therefore good is viewed as intrinsic to the work of an educator. Thus headteachers are directly involved in negotiating between sometimes contradictory imperatives and drivers. How then does the headteacher cope with what Colley refers to as 'situated ethics work'? This article presents data derived from written responses from 10 headteachers that begin to open up this question. I argue that it is not uncommon for people to weaken in their values-driven stance when under great pressure. It is however important to recognize the extent to which educational values are constrained by neo-liberal value-based market agendas in order to continually question and re-evaluate what is happening within education rearticulating this for the benefit of pupils.

Keywords

educational values, morality, ethics, decision-making, headteachers

Conflicting ethics in education

Neo-liberal agendas can be argued to be acting to reconfigure professional goals through a number of processes, including: using institutional loyalty and rivalry; the pressure to manage impressions; performance indicators; and the shift to greater accountancy practices (Cribb, 2009; Glatter, 2012; Levin, 2010). Moreover schools are constantly being urged to improve (Thompson and Sanders, 2009). Grace (1995: 103) highlights the historical predilection amongst teachers and headteachers

to engage in mediation and compliance as a 'necessary response to state power'. He further argues that compliance has increased with the intensification of teaching roles and responsibilities. As Glatter (2012) argues, it is paradoxical that, at a time when autonomy is emphasized in government rhetoric, school practitioners feel themselves to be increasingly constrained by government edicts and continuous policy change. This has led to a new sense of professional roles, leaving some to lament the loss of previous virtues and values. Within this article the term 'value' is used in relation to productivity, and 'values' is used in relation to educational ethical positioning.

There is an 'association between the ideology of professionalism and ideas of ethical distinctiveness' (Cribb, 2009: 31). In other words, each profession carries with it a set of values and virtues designed to serve particular ends. This is influenced by both what people see as intrinsically worth doing and what is rewarded in terms of wider political and societal views, together with the pressure of varying degrees of need to act in the moment within what is an intense environment. Thus activities may be geared towards serving extrinsic goals set by the institution or policy arena, or activities which serve intrinsic goals at the centre of professional practice (Cribb, 2009). Fielding (2007) asserts, rather than function being subservient to the personal, the reality is reversed. In an educational setting, individuals derive merit and worth (a sense of meeting and supporting the educational needs of pupils, their own educational ideals and the demands of society) through performing their duty. There may, however, be some variance between schools and at different times in whether they act upon policy initiatives in ways that may shift the culture or alternatively act to reorientate policy, adopting the language of change but altering very little (Braun et al., 2010). Professional roles are therefore constantly being reshaped in relation to policy shifts.

The tension between meeting external expectations together with those related to the provision of a 'good' education is thus a key issue that is faced by the headteacher. Moreover in a neo-liberal or market-driven society, where measurement of performance against initiatives is celebrated as success, the inevitable outcome is that organizations spend money in areas where measurable successes can be demonstrated (Cribb and Ball, 2005). In other words the division between economic value and educational values doesn't just become blurred but can collapse, as subjectivity becomes tied into functionality and values become at worst tokenistic.

By observing and considering what individuals do, one can begin to understand their contexts and the influences upon their approaches. The work of Smith (2011) adds to this picture the importance of exploring the activities, the language and the social relationships of individuals in order to gain greater insight into their lived experiences. This article explores the experiences and perceptions of a small sample of practising English headteachers and the tensions that they face when juggling government prescription and government initiatives, which may be antagonistic to their educational values and beliefs. This article utilizes the written responses of ten headteachers, eight primary (elementary school) and two secondary (high school) phase heads, to three questions that seek to gain some insight into the conflicts and complexity they face in making values-informed decisions. The data are part of an early study designed to open up questions leading to further research. This article questions the extent to which it is possible to think through the wider educational implications of current educational practices when working under constant scrutiny and within a culture that both colonizes professional practice (Gunter, 2011) and does not tolerate mistakes. I argue that it is not uncommon for people to weaken in their values-driven stance when under great pressure. It is however important to recognize the extent to which educational values are constrained by neo-liberal value-based market agendas, in order to enable us to continually question and re-evaluate what is happening within the field of education and to actively rearticulate this for the benefit of pupils' educational development.

This article begins by looking at the methodological approach adopted and then explores the data alongside the literature to demonstrate the ways in which data-led understandings have developed and shaped this article in relation to the literature consulted. The intention is to develop further understandings of the complexity of educational leadership roles in the current policy environment, through drawing upon literature that crosses into the policy and sociological arenas.

Method

In order to better understand the activities of schools in relation to the ways in which educational values are integrated into school life, there was a clear need to draw upon the perceptions of headteachers. It was therefore important to collect qualitative data to gain richer and deeper understandings and some insights into heads' attitudes towards educational values and opinions. Moreover, in order to avoid imposing literature onto data collected, beyond articulating the three particular questions being asked, a grounded approach was adopted to analysis. 'Through our methods, we first aim to see this world as our research participants do – from the inside' (Charmaz, 2006: 14). In this way these data would lead the analysis, and literature would be applied as the findings emerged. Taking a grounded theory approach allows the researcher to refine and reshape their data collection. Thus as Spencer et al. (2003) indicate, a scaffold of interpretations was developed in order to gain a wider perspective from which these data could be understood.

Data were derived from detailed written reflections produced by an opportunity sample of eight primary and two secondary school headteachers, looking at how they perceive the challenges and tensions of their daily workload and how they respond to challenges where posed in relation to their educational values. Headteachers were identified through teacher contacts in the North and Midlands of England who were asked to identify headteachers known to them where these contacts were willing to answer some questions. Ten headteachers volunteered to do so and represented a mix of schools ranging from those situated in 'leafy suburbs' to those situated in areas of social and economic deprivation. Table 1 illustrates the data available from the sample in terms of the experience of the heads sampled and the location of the school. Because most respondents were unknown to the researcher and contact was facilitated through email, either directly or through the contact teacher, schools were not identified in relation to Ofsted results. Therefore assessment about links between responses and school success cannot be made from this sample. However, it was known that at least one school was deemed outstanding and another in special measures. Responses varied from 2 to 4 pages in length and data were analysed through reading and rereading responses in order to identify the emerging themes and make some initial codings. This understanding was checked and rechecked by refining, clarifying, and developing the codes in relation to these data. This process added detail and complexity to the themes identified (Charmaz, 2006). As ideas emerged these were grouped into categories and then related to the literature. From this it was possible to identify links between these data and the ethical audit categories proposed by Cribb and Ball (2005) which was subsequently employed to develop further understandings. Thus as Spencer et al. (2003) indicate, a scaffold of interpretations was developed in order to gain a wider perspective from which these data could be understood.

The approach taken had both advantages and disadvantages. The key advantage was in allowing headteachers the time and space to reflect and express themselves in a considered way without pressure or unintended interference from the researcher. The key disadvantage was in terms of the time demanded of busy headteachers who in some cases might have found it easier to talk through an interview process. It is also important to recognize the small sample size in considering the

Table 1. Experience of sampled headteachers.

	Primary School A Inner city	Primary School B Leafy suburbs	Primary School C Inner city	Primary School D Inner city	Primary School E Inner city	Primary School F Inner city	Primary School G Inner city	Primary School H Inner city	Secondary School A Leafy suburbs	Secondary School B Inner city
Years as head	14	24	13	11	1	17	8	2	4	11
How many schools as head	1	1	3	1	1	5	2	1	1	1
Years in teaching	30	38	27	37	22	26	21	12	25	31

findings, which can give indications only of the potential issues arising in schools. The research nevertheless uncovered some useful and interesting perspectives.

It is important to consider the behaviours of those researched in order to expose their perceptions. In this case this was achieved through individuals describing their behaviours and views (Sfard and Prusak, 2005). Thus, gathering 'rich' qualitative data enables the researcher to follow emerging leads. In order to investigate headteachers' understandings of their own dilemmas the research approach adopted was designed to enable them time to consider and reflect upon three questions. A written response was sought to the following. The first question asked them to comment upon those influences that had shaped their leadership style. The second asked about the chief dilemmas that they faced as a headteacher. The final question asked about how challenges to their educational values were managed.

The data

Having examined the responses to the questions asked it was clear that answers spanned across the boundaries of each question and that the work of Cribb and Ball (2005) presented a helpful way in which to categorize and understand the responses. They draw upon three aspects of teachers' work that can be considered in relation to conducting an ethical audit of privatization, although they also stress the over-simplification that any such breakdown of issues entails and all are permeable, interrelated, and complex. The first aspect is *Consequentialism*. This is where decisions are made on the basis of weighing up the positive and negative effects in order to reach a decision or an ethical position. The second is *Deontological reasoning* which focuses on those elements of work that are deemed to be part of the duties of the job. Third and finally is the aspect of *Virtue theory*. This describes the relative importance placed upon particular characteristics or character traits and a set of 'virtues' are constructed that are associated with those who carry out the job successfully.

Cribb and Ball also point out that, 'what counts as 'common sense' ethics – is a product of institutional and social frameworks' (2005: 120). They suggest including ethics as an important ingredient of the audit process. Therefore the set of aspects identified is useful in terms of beginning to interpret the data gathered as a result of this research and in gaining a sense of the wider ethical framework that headteachers operate within, together with developing a deeper understanding of the issues faced. Each element will be considered in turn.

Consequentialism: ethics and professional roles

In this section the ways in which decisions are made on the basis of weighing up the positive and negative consequences of actions in order to reach a decision or an ethical position is considered.

The professional has a role in developing their ethical agency through both their engagement in a profession and through the way in which the role is enacted (Cribb, 2009). The question is whether changes and shifting practices are seen as an erosion or a reorientation of ethical positions, and at what point professionals should draw the line. In terms of professional engagement, after writing about the impossibility of being able to meet all needs at all times, it quickly became apparent that headteachers were primarily (and perhaps understandably) focused upon the immediate, pressing and localised issues that are always present, irrespective of the wider political demands of the moment. A prominent factor discussed was the behaviour of pupils and occasionally staff and parents, which often seemed to involve the head having to mediate between pupils, staff and parents (in all combinations). Heads were anxious to have a positive outcome in circumstances of

conflict but also wished to be seen to support all parties as far as possible whilst at the same time arriving at a conclusion that was viewed as fair. They were conscious of their duty to staff colleagues whatever the justice or injustice of the teachers' position and consequently the sensitivity with which they had to handle situations, especially where they viewed the teacher as having adopted something of a problematic stance. It could be argued that prioritizing humane concerns over efficiency and effectiveness should be evident in the values-driven practice and judgements made by school leaders. However, 'there is no simple translation between institutional obligations and ethical obligations, between "doing my job" and "doing the right thing"' (Cribb, 2009). As one head argued, on occasion,

> There is a clear sense of a no-win situation and the situation could get significantly worse no matter what you do
>
> (Secondary B)

Thus these heads appear to feel that they are placed in an invidious position and one where the situation could easily deteriorate. One very clear explanation from a secondary headteacher sums the issue up:

> Children are invariably infuriated by inconsistency in this respect and always look for fairness. Staff and parents likewise will often make judgements based upon hearsay, inaccuracy and speculation in relation to a disciplinary matter. Improved technology now means that the time for an effective investigation can be curtailed by inter-pupil communication or contact with home by mobile phone. Equally staff expectations of the action required are often completely unrealistic or unreasonable – this is always a delicate handling matter especially when confidentiality is an issue and they are unaware of all the facts.
>
> (Secondary A)

However, as the achievement of targets rises in importance, the tolerance of behaviour that detracts from that progress may become more censured by parents, teachers and society in general. The media often portray poorly performing schools as those whose pupils are lacking in control and schools leaders as heroes or villains (Thompson, 2008). It is the neo-liberal ideology that legitimizes, rather than leaves as peripheral, 'customer' satisfaction and media portrayal as measures of success.

Concerns were expressed about meeting agendas for school improvement. The head in Primary F reported looking at the curriculum in terms of producing the required outcomes in year 6 (the final year of primary education). There has also been a tendency to put more pressure on secondary schools than primary schools as these are the institutions that provide their pupils with the education necessary to take an active part in society and contribute something worthwhile (Grace, 1995). This may explain why, whilst raised in some primary school data, concern about behaviour (from pupils and staff) was strongest in the responses of the two secondary heads. These heads therefore acknowledged the care that they need to take as leaders and decision-makers and the complexity of arriving at clear answers.

> I am more acutely aware of the 'grey areas' of decision making and judgement - very few situations are black and white and often if they seem so, I am suspicious!
>
> (Secondary A)

It may also be that as a relatively new head this respondent was aware of their own shift in understandings and therefore more able to articulate this shift in perspective, having experienced it

recently. Gunter (2011) details the ways in which the English neo-liberal agenda has acted to regulate schools and reformulate them as sites of leadership activity, reform and innovation (within circumscribed boundaries), together with added benefit from a greater link to business practices and indeed private-sector partnership or ownership. As Gunter (2011: 4) argues, the premise has developed that

> Leadership was an inherently good thing, it was necessary as a practice and as a rhetorical device to enable 'improvement', 'modernisation', 'transformation', 'effectiveness' and the delivery of predetermined outcomes

Whilst it can be argued that this portrait of the prevailing agenda pervades much of societal activity, there is within this a myriad of interpretations of what this agenda should look like in practice, both at the policy-formulation stage through to the practices as enacted in institutions such as schools. For example, the media have a key role in policy processes, enabling a range of policymakers to expound their ideas, evaluate policy as it happens, critique and provide policy alternatives (Thompson, 2008). Headteachers are placed in a position of responsibility where judgements are reached based on the consequences of their decision-making in relation to examination results, Ofsted outcomes and potential repercussions in the media.

One relatively new headteacher made a clear statement about the ways in which heads can feel a fear of risking failure and blame.

> Making the right decision is a major concern for me as a relatively new head. If I'm honest I'm terrified of failure and the punitive approaches that the Government set for school inspection /improvements. (Primary H)

This is not a discourse of criticism and resistance, as noted amongst headteachers by Grace in 1995. This response is instead predicated on the notion that there must be 'a right answer' and that finding this is what is expected of them as head. Thrupp and Lupton (2006) point to the contextless nature of much school improvement pressure and that applying similar criteria to all, which takes no account of context, further adds to the pressure in meeting accountability agendas. As Lumby (2012) suggests, covert power operates by shifting perspectives so that practices are seen as unchangeable or without an alternative. The data here indicated that headteachers' decisions were influenced by wider political drivers and the threat of sanctions and public judgement are weapons that can be used to focus headteachers more fully on meeting publically recognized targets rather than leaving them to question the political environment in relation to educational practice. Glatter (2012) points out that the link between this environment of competition and performance has not been demonstrated to lead to school improvement. Moreover if, as Head F indicated, these activities take a 'toll' on headteachers, then this has implications for the energy and space left to them to think through imposed agendas. As Primary D head states,

> Without correct conditions for learning, how can children progress academically, yet so much of our time is focused on literacy and numeracy and achieving 'agreed' targets.

Where working practices lead to a reconfiguring of the use of time and space, there are also dangers posed for ethical boundaries (Colley, 2010). Such shifts and challenges should not go undetected or unconsidered. Responsibility lies not just with those involved with implementation

but with those who make policy. In making the processes of policy development and operation more explicit, it is possible to begin to alter these and act to improve political and administrative systems by working from the bottom up through those actually performing and implementing policy (Wilson, 1999), thereby overcoming problems with governmental approaches that do not take implementation into account (Levin, 2010).

As Wallace et al. (2011) argue, school teaching staff may maintain allegiance to their professional culture in ways that make their stance to government change contingent upon a match of policy with educational values, although the authors later state this is more a case of aspirational contingency than of current activity. Moreover situations where decisions and policies are produced in 'rapid-fire', may or may not be linked to other policies and with little thought to how they might be implemented, are often simply a reaction to public pressure or expectation (Wilson, 1999). Thus policy formation itself is a series of complex and potentially disconnected events that happens at a number of levels from government to institutional level. However, the dominant neoliberal political discourse frames interpretive action and represents school leaders and teachers as having been freed from state control (Wright, 2011).

One head points to the attempt to sift through a dilemma, giving a sense of the 'toll' that this is taking.

> Is now the right time to become an Academy? How wrapped up are my own political views with the need to move my school forward? Is this right thing to do? Potentially scared from breaking free from the LA, but what services do I currently get good value for money from? Would my budget be in a stronger position? Questions, questions, questions!
>
> (Primary G)

Whilst these heads are concerned with learning they are also focused on standards, value and political positioning, this quotation highlighting the intense pressure to conform to external agendas for efficiency and accountability. Cribb discusses the arguments 'for both embracing and (partly) insulating ourselves from role related ethical viewpoints' (2009: 37). Here we see a potential for 'bracketing' (Giddens, 1991). This encompasses the notion that individuals separate personal action and activity from that of wider political drivers, thereby categorizing and dividing the political from the non-political. It could be argued that this divide, whilst making life more bearable as one can then function with contradictions, represents a more cynical approach to a role. It allows the individual to 'play the game' whilst at the same time holding underlying beliefs that this initiative is unworkable, unpalatable or, for example, unlikely to improve the educational experiences of pupils. Moreover the work of El-Sawad et al. (2004: 1198) demonstrated that, in order to avoid 'crippling dilemmas' where contradictions are faced on a daily basis, individuals engage in 'doublethink' where contradictory beliefs are able to coexist within individuals. Therefore individuals can present internally consistent narratives that contradict other narratives from the same individual. This is a product of an interaction between the conscious and the unconscious in an attempt to keep individuals secure. 'Doublethink is one product of unconscious processes allowing conscious attention to focus on whatever enables the person to function at that moment' (El-Sawad et al., 2004: 1199). They go on to state 'we suggest that, rather than confronting and attempting to resolve contradiction, people contain it by offering different (and separate) narratives' (2004: 1199). One might postulate that the need for Giddens's (1991) 'bracketing' or El-Sawad et al.'s (2004) 'doublethink', becomes understandable and even essential in order to survive as an individual. This thinking however, also enables the marketization of education to

survive. Thus focusing on the daily activity enables the heads to put to one side wider educational debates until they have the space to process these tensions more fully. Further, as Bottery (2006: 111) argued, 'Given the kinds of pressures they [teachers] face at present, many retreat into the antithesis of globalization-the retreat to the parochial and insular, in the hope that at this level, true meaning, personal identity, enriching relationships can be found.' One headteacher reported more openly talking about political agendas with staff.

> 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 governmen … Education being used as a political football is very irritating to me … I usually don't value their ill thought through and politically motivated changes. I find in this aspect I need to keep my staff motivated and keep reminding them of why we turn up to work each day.
> (Primary B)

This quotation is very much about the value versus values question, the head stressing the importance of values over and above those of value. The school here is situated in a relatively privileged area in comparison with other respondents. The quotation also indicates that this head views education as an 'us and them' divide – perceiving political influence to be often and arbitrarily uninformed and unhelpful. Wallace et al. (2011) point out that the power to mediate government reform is delimited through the need for schools to show that they are compliant with the accountability agenda.

Thus it becomes important to understand what agendas become privileged when external agendas with high-risk consequences for failure are in direct tension with beliefs about good educational practice that allows for greater creativity and flexibility than for effective compliance.

Deontological reasoning: Educational duties and values

The second aspect of an ethical audit highlighted by Cribb and Ball is *Deontological reasoning,* which focuses on those elements of work that are deemed to be part of the duties of the job. These duties can be those embedded within the job description or those which, through experience, the person associates with the job. One may also refer to those duties that are bound up with values-held. Thus there will be calculations about competing duties and the relative degree to which each duty gains prominence. When acting within networks, motivations may vary and shift from cynicism to compliance to creative reshaping which influences the ways in which change is negotiated (Fenwick, 2010). Thus in education, consideration of all individuals in relation to one another should be a priority in developing young people who can effectively contribute to and be part of a vibrant and supportive society. This perception could be argued to be a part of the professional ethics of teachers. Nonetheless headteachers act as a filter for staff in terms of policy interpretation (Ball et al., 2009). The growing concern for the replacement of public services, which aim to provide for the common good 'by all things privatised', erodes the underpinning ethics of services that work to place human beings at their centre. Bottery (2012) writes convincingly about the need to develop systems that are sustainable and urges changes to the current drive to make heavy and unreasonable demands upon headteachers and in doing so drive them to take early retirement.

The reactions of heads to issues that challenge their values is a good way of exposing what they see as the overriding stance or position that they should adopt in relation to their job. This also exposes the tensions between explicit and implicit duties. When asked about the process of dealing with challenges, headteachers reported that they go through a number of stages in processing their

reactions and decisions. First they digest the issue themselves, to give themselves time to consider the problem and to come to understand how it might be dealt with. They then talk this through with their senior leaders. The next stage is to consult staff and sometimes headteacher colleagues whom they have learned to trust. In other words, in terms of their situated ethics, these heads did not want to make decisions before gathering ideas about how others perceive and react to the challenges. They wanted to know that their decisions seemed reasonable to others and understand the potential consequences for a 'poor' decision. Much of this discussion was presented as finding ways to conform to external requirements and manage colleagues and their educational offer to allow this to happen in ways that were as supportive as possible.

> Leading change is always a dilemma, as you have to think about the change, decide on its worth and then try to anticipate the reactions of your team. It is really challenging if the 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 minimize change if it goes against my personal values.
>
> (Primary E)

Therefore, responses indicated that heads may mediate change on the basis of their educational principles and, as Braun et al. (2010) argued, this may mean that the intended change is superficial on occasions. Moreover, Wallace et al (2011) state that as awareness grows of the change agency that school leaders (at all levels) possess, then alongside this comes a possibility for the adaptation of change to match more closely with teachers educational values and ethical approaches. The head from Primary B talked about the need to defend one's position on occasion (see later arguments) and also the need to rely on staff expertise where this may inform the decision to be made. Wallace et al. add that acting to mediate change can also be argued to simply make policy more effective rather than challenge it. Moreover, where the accountability stakes are high, then trust becomes essential to offset risk. Throughout these discussions the issue of benefit to pupils was the 'duty' most cited as influencing the decision made, alongside a strong sense of desire to meet external agendas and be judged favourably. This is not surprising at a time when accountability and consequences are such dominant forces (Cribb and Ball, 2005). There were also indications of the effects of current neo-liberal agendas on the thinking of heads that went beyond that of complying with external agendas for change.

> I am very informed by my professional ethics. I see pupils as clients and as a professional my relationship is with my client. I don't see local or national government as my client. If I turn my attention to local or national government I have to turn my back on the pupil. I don't see myself as an agent of government or an agent of social change. This view puts me out of step with many colleagues as a significant number seem to be motivated by politics or religion at school … I find a considered and shared response to deep dilemmas really helpful and really powerful.
>
> (Primary B)

This statement is interesting in its description of pupils as clients (a market-based description) whilst at the same time talking about the political agenda as one which if engaged upon would undermine the school's duties to pupils. Here politics and religion are rejected as not relevant to education but something to which other heads are subject. This expresses not only an element of double speak (El-Sawad et al., 2004) but also a depoliticized view of education which is

vulnerable to the whim of political interference (given that the head has to turn away from it). Nevertheless this head has a clear notion that the pupils are the priority. Again the issue of marrying the value agenda with values and duty is problematic.

The head from Primary E exemplified a challenge recently faced where both the explicit duties and those associated with values combined. Here a member of staff was having frequent bouts of illness. The head had also some personal experience of periods of ill-health and was therefore sympathetic to the member of staff. It was necessary however to deal with this problem because the absence of this member of staff was causing 'knock-on' effects on other staff who were having to cover the workload. Thus the headteacher had to work through the processes for dismissing this member of staff, despite the underlying understanding the head had of this colleague. The final statement this head makes is that 'I keep coming back to the basic principle that the children come first and I am their champion so that helps me maintain sanity'. Thus in, this case, professional duty and ethical positioning in relation to the children within the school allowed this headteacher to make an uncomfortable decision.

A contrasting example comes from a head who became involved in political dispute for the first time, around the issue of boycotting standard assessment testing (SATs).

> Last summer's Sats boycott would be a good illustration. A considerable amount of consultation took place with other headteachers, teachers in my school, governors, parents and children. They were all involved, and I made my case clearly and listened carefully to their response. I was very conscious of both sides of the argument, and how it would seem if we didn't take part, particularly as the Year 6 cohort that year wasn't very strong. I have also never taken industrial action and wanted to make sure that I had weighed the arguments from each angle. I was also conscious that many other headteachers in our LA would take their lead from what I was going to do – an added pressure. At the heart of the decision making process (as with most school decisions) was the question, 'What is right for our children – both now and in the future?'
>
> (Primary F)

Therefore there are times when heads feel it their duty to act in a more openly political manner that challenges their duty to carry out government initiatives in the light of experience which, in this case, told them that testing was counter-productive. As Primary A head stated, 'I think you have to voice your opinions and take action if necessary'. Three of the primary heads reported joining this protest. This may constitute some of the potential for action predicted by Wallace et al. (2011). Making a political stand was not however an easy choice, nor did it come before some years of acting to comply with such assessment agendas. Interestingly, in the secondary school examples where, as Grace (1995) argues, the context can be more explicitly political, discussion was focused very much on duties to handle local disputes, to accept that you may need to make difficult decisions and to consult those who can provide legal and informational support.

The issue of time to think through and consider issues was a key point raised by the primary school heads.

> The number and far reaching implications of decisions that I take daily never ceases to amaze and alarm me ... 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.
>
> (Primary H)

> I find I need the space to think out big ideas first before I share them with others ... In terms of affecting my work life balance, I feel I have had to 'protect' myself at times. When a HT [headteacher] 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-personalize 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.
>
> (Primary G)

Thus, in order to see the issues clearly and be able to weigh up the different aspects of duty and issues between values and value, it is necessary to create some space to think. It is also clear that for newer heads such as head H the consciousness of the responsibility of the role appears to be very dominant. As Colley (2010) argues, the time-space aspect of working life has grown more constrained and linked to an increased focus on control. This is difficult in a situation where, as heads pointed out, the emotional drain of taking tough decisions was extremely high. Moreover, gaining compliance is easier where the divide between personal and work space has become blurred (Blackmore, 1995).

Virtue theory: Characterizing the 'good' teacher

The third and final aspect of Cribb and Ball's ethical audit is the aspect of *Virtue theory*. This describes the relative importance placed upon particular characteristics or character traits and a set of 'virtues' are constructed that are associated with those who carry out the job successfully. These virtues are held in relation to the perceived purposes of the role, such as what is necessary for people to flourish and develop in a particular job. This leads into discussion about the sorts of people and the characteristics valued in the teaching profession. For example, does the profession attract people who are driven by values rather than value?

If human beings work only in relation to one another as argued by Fielding (2007) and we are also influenced by the ethics and values of the profession into which we enter (Cribb, 2009), then the influences upon headteachers in terms of their leadership might be expected to come from interactions with 'significant others' and through observing how those in the 'profession' of teaching operate. This was strongly borne out by the commentaries from these headteachers who all cited relationships that had influenced them. Many of these relationships combined those of the family with those of the profession.

All responses clearly demonstrated that headteachers were not operating in a vacuum but in relation to others for whom they had respect or from whom they could learn. Moreover, observation of how others in the profession handled themselves and the job was clearly a strong feature influencing their approach. Additionally, as Thrupp and Lupton (2006) argue, the messages about school improvement that are being promulgated are ones that make simplistic links between adopting a particular approach and success. Perhaps, however, a reaction to constrained freedoms was realized in the case of the action to resist the standard attainment tests and the more recent teacher strikes over pension rights.

Interestingly, a key issue to come through the responses from the two secondary headteachers was about the importance of the desire to improve things around themselves.

> My motivation to become a leader grew from a desire to change things for the better and influence policy beyond the classroom. I am a pragmatist and almost always can see both sides of every situation – however this does not impede my decision-making, I believe it makes it stronger and more balanced.
>
> (Secondary A)

Headteacher B referred to 'A strong sense of social justice' as a driver in joining the profession. Both also referred to personal integrity as being of paramount importance. Thus their focus was upon the characteristics that they bring to the profession and to leadership. As Gunter (2011) argues, however, this emphasis on leadership and leadership qualities is part of the neo-liberal agenda of compliance where some have the power to gain the compliance of others. Further, Thrupp and Lupton (2006) state that there is an attitude that differences between schools are purely the responsibility of the schools themselves, despite knowledge that leaders who have had success in one school may not be able to repeat this success in another setting. Could it therefore be asserted that these qualities, identified as part of the professional offering to the headteacher's role, are in fact influenced by and contributing to a neo-liberal hegemony? In contrast, the primary heads talked more about what they learned from colleagues and techniques that they had adopted to make them better headteachers. The primary heads saw themselves as facilitators of a team of staff. This seems linked to the generally smaller context of primary schools and the young age of their pupils and thus involvement in 'family-like' contexts.

Responses also emphasized personality traits that respondents valued and give an insight into those valued within the profession. Again many of these reflect the leadership qualities critiqued by Gunter as based on neo-liberal policy approaches.

> A leader who takes you with them, inspires and encourages, moulds and supports will always be remembered and respected. However a leader who bullies, ignores, is uninspiring, fails to listen to different points of view and won't adapt to change will also be remembered but not with respect ... My first head was inspirational and nurtured the development of creative, motivated teachers however he failed to challenge the staffroom dinosaurs and neglected the organizational aspects of leading an organization. As a lowly classroom teacher it was fascinating to observe how the deputy was able to step in and fill most of the gaps.
>
> (Primary E)

Responses also begin to build a picture that indicates the importance placed by these heads upon commitment, passion, persuasiveness, expertise, empathy, creativity, being able to see all sides. We see that staff may work in combination to provide these skills. As one might expect, many of these qualities are articulated as 'soft skills' such as caring and supporting.

There were also comments relating to taking a tougher stance, such as tackling difficult colleagues (i.e. Primary E above). Another commented about the need 'to have the ability to be decisive and make tough decisions' (Primary A). And as Primary G head stated, it is important 'to not "throw" the towel in when the going gets tough'. These heads saw themselves as the example from which their staff will take a lead, thus they needed to demonstrate the qualities they saw as important to the job and stand firm on some issues. Nevertheless, the data seemed to indicate that in most cases these heads were making pragmatic decisions based on a best match between external and internal agendas and their beliefs about educational good practices. The reality is therefore developing interplay between value and values in a manner that allows the headteacher to survive.

> A highly visible headteacher, happy to communicate the good news and the not so good news takes time, energy, humour, broad shoulders and thick skin – all of which should be on the person specification for any Headteacher Appointment.
>
> (Primary D)

Conclusions

Fielding (2007: 383) argues that,

> We need philosophy now, primarily because we have reached a stage in both our advocacy and our practice of schooling where optimism, energy and good will of contemporary approaches are leading us down a road that, albeit unintentionally, is likely to produce a society that diminishes our humanity, destroys much that is of worth, and denies much we seem to desire.

Such diminution is intensified by the growing emphasis on a neo-liberal set of virtues, values and motivators that place privatization and markets at the centre of an agenda for reinvigorating education (Cribb and Ball, 2005). In fact it is possible to argue that neo-liberal political agendas present markets as a means by which social justice can be achieved (Wright, 2011). Moreover this stance is presented as a 'necessary' antidote to counteract educational bureaucracy and professional angst and defensiveness. As Bottery (2006: 104) states, in a market-driven environment, in business 'the intellectual capital of its employees, is best exploited, not by top-down direction, but by multi-level collaboration' which allows for flexibility and empowerment, but, as Bottery goes on to say, educational practices appear to be adding constraints and standardizing practice. Schostak (2011) argues that education is one form through which there is a subtle management of people towards compliance. For this to succeed it is helpful for it to be accepted that there is no alternative (Apple, 2006; Schostak, 2011; Wright, 2011; Lumby, 2012).

It is important to consider the extent to which actors within the education system operate on the basis of the educationally informed 'values' that they bring to the profession (those derived from personal experiences of, and within education and society), whilst at the same time delivering educational policies developed largely by government agencies that may operate in tension with these values. It is therefore helpful to explore how educational values are reformulated or even distorted (Fielding, 2007) within such a culture and the extent to which this might compromise broader understandings of what it is to be educated. The advantage is seen in relation to uncovering more explicitly those ethical and values-driven considerations of headteachers. As Grace (1995 116) stated,

> Headteachers are at the focal point of the translation of policy into practice and they are in a strategic position to evaluate ideological and political claims and counter-claims about the consequences of change for schooling culture and for its outcomes.

The practices discussed through the data, whilst limited in scope and the number of respondents, suggest that ethical positions might be both eroded and reorientated at the same time and that drawing a line is extremely difficult under current stresses upon accountability and where there exists public recrimination if a mistake is made. Thus, despite a strong support for the pupil being at the heart of education, there were indications that these headteachers also felt it imperative to meet the external targets set for them. Colley's (2010) situated ethics becomes then an issue of survival and inevitably doublethink (El-Sawad et al., 2004) is one strategy that may enable headteachers to live with their dual aims to develop 'good' education as well as meet societal goals. The evidence collected did not suggest that the headteacher respondents were rampant political activists. Quite the opposite, they in fact appeared moderate in their positioning and on the whole were attempting to 'do the best that they could' for all involved.

What is perhaps of more concern is the extent to which neo-liberal agendas have, through the constant bombardment of new initiatives, undermined the spaces within which headteachers are able to think and are able to challenge these dominant ideologies. Consequently the importance of space for building dialogue and trust between school staff is emphasized by Thompson and Sanders (2009). Such spaces, they argue, enable staff to manage the tensions between performance regimes and creative endeavour. Intrinsic values about being child-centred had allowed these heads, on occasion, to make a stand in relation to extrinsically driven value agendas where the two came into clear conflict (Cribb, 2009). Thus these headteachers did not always maintain a doublethink position but consciously acknowledged the contradictions and adopted a position. Nevertheless, the heads' sense of need to meet government agendas was strong and closely tied to what Fielding (2007) describes as their sense of professional duty, compliance increasing as a result of intensification (Grace 1995). Headteachers were understandably concerned to avoid public disapproval and act to meet targets for improvement or a neo-liberal set of agendas for compliance (Gunter, 2011; Schostak, 2011). Consequently, it is possible to surmise that the underlying conflict between values and value is played out daily and places heavy emotional demands upon headteachers that can lead to illness or early retirement (Bottery, 2012). The personal is thus at risk of becoming subservient to the functional (Fielding, 2007), which makes this an important area for further investigation. It seems particularly apposite to begin to revisit questions of ethical practice and update previous research in this area given the particularities of the neo-liberal political agendas of current times.

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