

Chapter 11

Towards Effective Management of a Reformed Teaching Profession

Mike Wallace

Britain Leads the World – In an Unwise Direction?

The purpose of this chapter is to argue that effective leadership and management of the education profession requires a shift of direction away from current orthodoxies of radical transformation, promoted by reform policies, towards a more temperate approach. Temperance would serve a less ambitious but more realistic endeavour to bring about incremental improvement in students' education. It would encourage and enable teachers to operate as professionals, exercising the judgement necessary to do their best for their students in their classroom and school settings. Conversely, it would embody the expectation that teachers should act professionally in their relationships with colleagues, students and parents, within broad consensually defined limits of acceptable practice.

Ideally, more temperate organizational leadership and management would be supported by more temperate central government policies than the raft of reforms designed literally to 're-form' the education profession by tightening central government control over the scope of practice. They embrace both indirect control measures, as in the national specification of the curriculum, and direct, as in the 'remodelling' of the education profession itself. Recently a senior government official commented to me, with some pride, that Britain leads the world in driving the 'delivery' of public service transformation through its target-setting regime. In the absence of a political U-turn, effective leadership and management of the education profession would imply protecting the capacity of teachers, as far as was possible, to mediate the contextually insensitive central government reforms connected with this control thrust, for the sake of effective educational provision – in spite of, rather than because of, UK government policy-makers' well-intentioned efforts.

Signs that the wisdom of such reformist zeal may be questionable are not difficult to detect. Three examples will suffice. First, at the international level. Between 1991 and 2001 the UK dropped from 13th to 20th place in the league table published by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (2003), charting the proportion of students from 30 countries achieving good qualifications at the end of their secondary school education. Improvement in the UK according to this measure was outstripped by greater improvement in other countries with less ambitious

reform movements. Could the comprehensiveness of UK reforms have contributed to the unintended consequence of slipping down the international league table?

Second, at the national education system level, chronic overload of teachers and headteachers built-up from the onset of central government reforms in the late 1980s. By 2002, teachers in a national survey (GTC, 2003) identified the three factors that most demotivated them as: 'workload (including unnecessary paperwork)' (56%), 'initiative overload' (39%), and the 'target-driven culture' (connected with performance and improvement targets imposed by central government). Some 35% indicated their intention to leave the profession within the next 5 years – and only just over half were expecting to retire. Could the endeavour to drive up standards through multiple reforms encompassing 'tough targets' have contributed to the unintended consequence of driving out experienced professionals on whom implementation depends, and generating a chronic teacher shortage?

Third, at the school organization level, 'superheads' – experienced and superlatively successful headteachers appointed under a central government policy to turn round failing English secondary schools – have experienced mixed fortunes. Three of the first nine superheads appointed to schools in socially deprived areas resigned in the same week (TES, 2000). Could the assumption that leadership success in one context was automatically applicable to another have contributed to the unintended consequence of perpetuating problems for staff in some of our most challenging school settings?

Each instance reflects – however indirectly – the good educational improvement intentions of policy-makers or leaders and managers coming unstuck, consistent with what Fink (2003: 105) dubs the 'law of unintended consequences...for every policy initiative there will be unpredicted and unpredictable results'. Occasionally the results may be fortuitous, exceeding expectations without deleterious side-effects. But more often they amount to an 'own goal', revealing that the reality of implementation falls far short of policy-makers' envisioned improvement goals. Either way, there is intrinsic ambiguity over how things will turn out until after the implementation effort.

Reforms have long been driven by the attempt to tighten political control: ultimately to reduce the diversity of 'progressive' and 'traditional' professional practices emerging by the 1970s, proximally to minimize ambiguity over the change required for that reduction. It seems ironic that this endeavour is the root cause of such debilitating unintended consequences alongside many intended improvements. For there is little evidence to suggest that most policy-makers and, in their turn, organizational leaders and managers act other than in good faith in their genuine quest to improve education. If we are to move towards more effective educational improvement strategies, we need to deepen our understanding of irony and to learn to live with it as an integral feature of professional practice, rather than continue trying haplessly to eliminate it through ever-tighter political or leadership and management control.

Accordingly, a case for temperate leadership and management of the education profession will be made, using an ironic perspective on organizational life and change developed by Eric Hoyle and myself (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005). This is

neither a theory nor a model, merely a heuristic tool for exploring ambiguity and the propensity for unintended consequences of actions. But it does offer a new platform for thinking about how to improve education through loosening central controls enough to facilitate the bounded expansion of professional practice. Most ideas underpinning this perspective are scarcely novel. But they have been marginalized in the educational leadership and management literature.

The Analytical Advantage of Combining Traditions

The ironic perspective draws eclectically on several traditions of enquiry driven by different and partially incompatible ‘intellectual projects’ (Wallace and Wray, 2006):

- Exploring organizational practices and their underlying ideologies to develop ‘knowledge-for-understanding’ of more academic than practical interest (e.g. March, 1999; Rowan and Miskel, 1999; Weick, 2001).
- Focusing on individual and collective professional learning from a positive standpoint towards practice and policy to develop prescriptive ‘knowledge-for-action’ that will inform policy and professional development interventions (e.g. Leithwood and Louis, 1998; Wallace, 1996).
- Examining practice and policy from a sceptical standpoint to develop ‘knowledge-for-critical evaluation’ that exposes their underlying ideologies and negatively judged unintended consequences, through sociological studies of teachers’ workplace (e.g. Woods et al., 1997; Helsby, 1999; Osborn et al., 2000).

Eric Hoyle and I are engaged in a hybrid intellectual project, harnessing ideas from each tradition towards our ends: to build our critique of current orthodoxies of school leadership and management and policy, from which flows our rationale for advocating a more temperate approach. We seek to deepen understanding through the ironic perspective to inform efforts to improve practice and policy. But we stop short of prescription. The ironic perspective implies that whatever may turn out to work will vary with contingent and partially unpredictable local circumstances. So the more detailed any prescription, the more insensitive it becomes to contextual contingencies, and the more it is vulnerable to the irony of unintended consequences – creating more problems than it solves.

The case for temperance is developed in the remaining sections via the ironic perspective. First, the perspective itself is outlined. Conceptual tools are offered for focusing on the extent of ambiguities that are endemic to organizational life and their inherent exacerbation by change, within broad structural parameters – economic and ideological – delimiting what is considered to be doable and what is even thinkable (see Wallace and Pocklington, 2002: 47–51).

Second, ironies of managerialism are explored. Managerialism is stipulatively defined as excessive leadership and management, threatening to become self-serving rather than serving education, and to inhibit the professional practice that they

purport to transform. Belief in managerialism results in overestimating the capacity of policy-makers to control organizational leadership and management, and the capacity of organizational leaders and managers to control teaching and learning for effective student education.

Third, evidence is considered, primarily from the teachers' workplace literature, of the diversity of responses to managerialism in schools. Far from entering into the spirit of reforms, many (perhaps most) teachers go through the motions where required to meet external accountability requirements. Simultaneously, they adapt contextually insensitive reforms wherever possible to make them work in the contingent circumstances of their classrooms and their schools. The hypothesis is offered that they subscribe to a sceptical view of government policies, a pragmatic orientation towards their implementation, and a constructivist and collaborative approach towards teaching and learning. Finally, this approach is endorsed as an effective way of meeting irony with irony. It is argued that such an approach should be embraced by leaders and managers and policy-makers in developing a more temperate approach towards incremental improvement. This will reduce external pressure and expand the scope for teachers to serve education as responsible and creative professionals, while monitoring to ensure that their practices remain acceptable.

The Ironic Perspective

The connotations of irony range from coincidence, through the literal meaning of words contradicting someone's intention, to unanticipated outcomes despite one's best efforts. All highlight the limited capacity of people to make sense of the social world and to control it to suit their interests. Irony offers scope for a new perspective because it neatly captures the phenomenon of limited human capacity which is intrinsic to organizational life and to change, especially that flowing from policy initiatives. Connotations of irony with most analytic potential are selectively employed in the perspective, since there is no canonical definition of irony.

This perspective offers a sensitizing device for exploring the empirical gap between intention and outcome or between concept and experienced reality, and the conceptual gap between declared and implied meaning, which together contribute to the limited manageability of organizational life and change (Wallace, 2003). It provides one starting point for considering how to cope as effectively as possible with relative unmanageability. Two forms of organizational irony may be distinguished. *Situational irony* refers to those ironies that are constitutive of social reality. The key manifestation is the unintended consequence: most commonly when good intentions have unfortunate consequences, but potentially where apparently unfortunate occurrences bring unexpected benefits.

Semantic irony refers to irony in language – whether intended, or unintended but observable. Intentional irony includes wordplay where the meaning conveyed contradicts the words used, as when an organizational mission statement is

invoked cynically to underscore its transgression in practice. Intentionality can be difficult to ascertain, especially where, say, organization members feel pressurised to adopt visionary terminology. Some may employ it with unreflective sincerity. But others may employ it with intentional but covert insincerity, because they perceive that their career prospects depend on the appearance of sincerity. Visionary rhetoric is especially vulnerable to semantic irony. There is a designed-in disjunction between the lofty aspirational rhetoric and the mundane organizational reality that is experienced.

Preconditions for irony are created by various sources of *ambiguity*, or uncertainty in meaning. Practices, organizational structures and language may all be interpreted differently, causing some degree of dissonance or unpredictability. Doubt over what is actually happening, vacillation between alternative interpretations of the same event, or equivocation over what should be done are often reducible, but can never be eliminated.

Change is an intrinsic feature of organizations, even in a relatively stable policy environment. It contributes to ambiguity through generating uncertainty relating to the learning entailed in putting the change into effect. As time unfolds, turnover of organization members arises sooner or later and responsibilities are reallocated. Incomers are faced with learning to operate in their new organizational setting, while longer-serving colleagues must adjust to them. Most learning required to fulfil novel tasks involves tacit, incidental learning through the job experience (Wallace, 1996). It may be augmented by conscious reflection on action and by preparatory or ongoing training. Planned changes add temporarily to the intrinsic level of ambiguity while further learning is necessitated to implement the shift in practice. Even modest improvement efforts imply some challenge to habitual practices and assumptions.

Initially, the meaning of planned change will be ambiguous. Organization members cannot wholly understand the new practice before they have individually (and often collectively) experienced it and integrated it into their repertoire. Equally, how to implement the change will be ambiguous before the implementation attempt is made. Preparatory training cannot provide implementers with what they can learn consciously or tacitly only by modifying their practice in the normal work setting, ideally with feedback (Joyce et al., 1999). Knowing precisely how to make a change in practice can emerge only from trying to do so, however well informed by others' advice. Full sense can be made of a significant change only when it becomes assimilated into normal practice and its initial degree of ambiguity diminishes.

Attempts to change practice across multiple organizations generate ambiguity of a different order of magnitude. Innovations may accrete, forming an evolving profile for every organization. Each innovation may be at a different point of implementation, and may compete for priority with the other innovations, alongside responses to unplanned contextual pressures or temporary crises, and the rest of ongoing practice. Greatest ambiguity is likely where a programmatic sequence of linked reforms is applied across multiple systems of organizations, as with the UK central government's public service modernization strategy (OPSR, 2002). A set of political principles (itself embodying ambiguity in advocating national

standards alongside devolution) underpins a broadly consistent programme of reforms for every public service, of which education is but one.

Normal practice in such organizations is affected by myriad factors associated with organization members' characteristics, the system of which their organization is a part, and their social milieu. To the extent that they possess agency, they have some capacity to choose their course of action in the light of their interpretation of the situation (Giddens, 1984). This capacity to act in alternative ways according to alternative beliefs which cannot be directly controlled creates a permanent degree of ambiguity. Change piles on further complexity. Expression of agency amongst implementers inevitably creates potential for ambiguity through the possibility of different responses, including covert or overt resistance, or even subversion by hijacking a change to achieve incompatible goals (e.g. Wallace, 1998a; Moore et al., 2002). Since policy-makers cannot achieve total control over implementation, they cannot escape generating preconditions for irony.

Sources of Ambiguity

A chronic gap between the ambition of official goals proclaimed for many organizations and their realization has often been noted. It is widely institutionalized through vision and mission statements designed to give organization members something to aim for which is beyond their immediate reach. A variable degree of endemic *organizational pathos* (Hoyle, 1986) ensues, where goals promise more than the reality experienced.

Planned change across a system of organizations is equally characterised by endemic *policy pathos*, a chronic gap between policy-makers' stated goals and the extent to which they are achieved. Policy-makers can have only limited knowledge of the contextual detail of the organizations which are the target of their initiatives, and cannot predetermine change outcomes. The greater the ambition of policy changes, the greater the learning required of implementers, and the greater the scope for less-than-faithful implementation. Hence the long-established notion of 'mutual adaptation' between policy-makers' vision for change and implementers' practice (McLaughlin, 1991). Scope for infidelity derives from the capacity for agency which limits the manageability of change. Implementers may pursue various operational goals, perhaps extending to covert subversion.

Organizational and policy pathos result not only from consciously proclaimed ambitious goals. They also result from all the other ongoing activity in each organization into which the policy change is launched. The range of official and unofficial goals being pursued is likely to be both *diverse and diffuse*. Today's policy change overlays yesterday's improvement strategy, itself added to routine work across the organization or system.

The diversity of supplementary goals, rather than the diffuseness of a particular goal, generates ambiguity. Narrowing the focus of any goal and measuring its achievement cannot remove the ambiguity connected with pursuing this goal along-

side all the other goals also being pursued. Some goals may be incompatible with others (as with enforcing national standards and promoting devolution). Once there are multiple goals, it becomes impossible to pursue them all with equal vigour. Prioritising some means that others get subordinated. Many goals are not amenable to operationalizing in terms of measurable performance. (How can, say, 'developing a lifelong love of learning' be determined until students reach the end of their lifecourse – when they will be in no condition to confirm or deny that love?)

Inherent *limits to rationality* of organizational life and policy implementation are a perennial source of ambiguity. As March and Simon (1958) long ago demonstrated, rationality is always bounded because it is impossible to weigh up all possible consequences of all possible decision choices before selecting the optimal course of action. Satisficing is the best that can be achieved, using whatever evidence is available to inform a hunch about which way to go.

Limits to rationality come in several forms. First, *cognitive* limits flow from the impossibility of predicting future outcomes of decisions and an inevitably restricted awareness of what is happening inside and outside any organization. The more complex and programmatic a change, the less comprehensive an overview is feasible, since no individual can share the experiences of everyone involved. Consultation, surveillance and outcome measurement can provide only limited evidence of the interaction between the change and other aspects of organizational contexts. The greater the effort to gather information, the more likely it is to precipitate the irony of distracting implementers who are the sources of this intelligence from dealing with the change itself.

Second, *logical* limits apply where individuals' pursuit of a particular goal can prevent it being achieved when others also pursue it. A classic education example is promoting greater consumer choice in a context of restricted resources. Collective choices will be delimited by the pattern of alternatives in the marketplace. Where more people make the same choice than the capacity of provision, they collectively inhibit each other from attaining what they have individually chosen. Marketization risks the irony of frustrating choice because the aggregate of individual choices cannot be reliably manipulated to ensure that demand matches supply.

Third, *phenomenological* or interpretive limits are imposed where the same event or change process is construed in incompatible ways. As a social institution, a school may be viewed very differently by senior staff and class teachers. The diversity of possible constructions is limited by widely held assumptions about what schools are and what counts as professional practice. But there is always scope for incompatible perspectives which will be regarded as 'rational' by their protagonists. The frames of reference governing social constructs may relate to contradictory beliefs, norms (rules about how people should behave) and values. Witness the pursuit of organizational efficiency by minimizing the resources required to achieve given outcomes alongside the pursuit of greater effectiveness, for which additional resources may be needed.

Fourth, *control* limits flow from the probability that nobody, of whatever authority, can achieve absolute control over others. Control ambiguity flows from the interdependence of all organization members: power is distributed – however

unequally – within and between organizations. Even those with most authority depend ultimately on the cooperation of those whom they lead, and their support can never be wholly predicted. Any individual has some capacity to resist or subvert working to achieve official goals.

Unresolvable *dilemmas* (see Ogawa et al., 1999) add another perennial source of ambiguity for individuals, groups, organizations or multi-organizational systems. Action oriented towards one pole of the dilemma triggers negative consequences, building pressure for action towards the opposite pole. No stable, cost-free middle ground is achievable between both poles. What is good for system-wide reform may not be good for those whose additional effort is necessary to make it happen, as indicated by the irony mentioned earlier of overloading teachers for the best of educational reform intentions. Intrinsic reform dilemmas arise over what balance to strike between pace of change and sustainability of envisioned new practices, and between central direction of a universal form of change and nurturing local innovation which is more sensitive to local circumstances.

Such sources of ambiguity generate potent preconditions for reforms to generate the situational irony of unintended consequences, inhibiting policy-makers from achieving their goals. Even more ironic, those unintended consequences that they judge negatively tend to stimulate them into ameliorative policy-making, bringing the situational irony of more change with its accompanying ambiguity. Favourable conditions for further unintended consequences are thus created, and so the likelihood of yet further amelioration. Take the instance of teacher overload brought on by reforms. Government ministers' ameliorative response was more reform: compulsory workforce remodelling that includes restricting teachers' duties and the formal integration of learning support assistants into classrooms. More change, more ambiguity – and the irony of further restricting the scope for teachers' professional discretion.

Ironies of Managerialism

Leadership and management have a vital part to play in supporting organizational activity and improvement. Effective leadership and management of schools create structures and processes and establish relationships enabling teachers to engage as fully as possible with teaching and learning. The term 'managerialism' is normatively and critically conceived as *excessive* leadership and management, reaching beyond an appropriate educational support role and threatening to become an end-in-itself. Managerialism is underpinned by an ideology which assumes that all aspects of organizational life can and should be controlled. In other words, that ambiguity can and should be radically reduced or eliminated. The ironic perspective helps explain why this assumption is false.

It was noted earlier how an underlying thrust of UK education reforms has been to delimit much more tightly the boundaries of teachers' professional practice, curbing the extremes that by the 1970s were causing public and political disquiet.

Increasingly these reforms have been designed to channel teachers' agency towards achieving instrumental goals driven by economic interests. The irony of well-intentioned government policies inhibiting as well as enhancing educational achievement is an unintended consequence of an over-optimistic belief in the comprehensiveness of potential control over teachers' professional work. Delimiting unacceptable extremes of practice implies, appropriately, control at the edges where practices would be condemned by most people (say gross incompetence, negligence or indoctrination). But reformist zeal has gone much further towards educational micromanagement, attempting comprehensive control of teaching and learning and their leadership and management. This is too much of a good thing. The content of reforms and the change process invoked to implement them have exacerbated the endemic ambiguity they were implicitly designed to eliminate, enhancing the pre-conditions for irony.

Many reforms have focused on direct control of teaching and learning, including the national curriculum, the literacy and numeracy strategies, national assessment, league tables and inspection. A complementary programme of reforms has focused on tightening control over leadership and management as a means of indirect control of teaching and learning. Ostensibly, freedom to express agency at the organization level has been opened-up through local management and the establishment of trust schools. But other reforms have delimited this freedom to ensure that leaders and managers act as conduits for the teaching and learning reforms and assist government policy-makers in reducing the scope for teachers' professional judgement. Development planning and school self-evaluation are linked to external inspection whose criteria relate to other reforms. Performance management is linked to nationally prescribed and locally negotiated student attainment targets. National leadership training – some compulsory for aspiring headteachers – is linked to responsibility for 'delivering' central government education reforms and sustaining the new practices required. A key tenet of managerialism is thus that the agency of teachers can and should be channelled within narrow limits delimited by central government policy-makers, or by leaders and managers acting on their behalf. Empowerment to express agency lies solely within the bounds of predetermined policy.

Indicative ironies of managerialism include, first and foremost, the over-restriction of teachers' scope for professional judgement in the classroom, which fails to allow sufficiently for contextual contingency. Every classroom is like all other classrooms, some other classrooms and no other classroom. Teaching and learning are highly contextualised and replete with endemic ambiguity. What works with one student or class may not work with another, and teachers soon develop a repertoire of strategies on which they draw according to their ongoing diagnosis of each teaching situation. This repertoire is never complete, as new classroom challenges, collaborative working and planned professional learning opportunities stimulate further practical experimentation. Mandatory reforms focused on teaching and learning, for whose faithful implementation school leaders and managers are held accountable, tend to be couched in terms of a relatively untested 'one size fits all' strategy aimed at tightening the boundaries of teachers' discretion. The insensitivity of the reforms to contingent classroom circumstances exacerbates the endemic level of ambiguity,

as teachers try to make them work in detailed contexts for which they could never be designed. Yet within broad limits of acceptable practice, teachers' discretion is essential for educational improvement because of their need to adapt to contingent and relatively ambiguous circumstances. Policy-makers have apparently failed to comprehend the nature of professional practice. The drive to halt its unacceptable extremes has been over-applied, generating the irony of halting much necessary experimentation within these extremes on which the success of educational reforms depend.

Second, managerialism operates ironically as a 'weapon of mass distraction'. Reforms have brought a huge increase in the quantity of leadership and management which sap the time devoted to teaching and learning. Not just temporarily to implement particular reforms, but permanently once they have been put in place. Yet schools used to be run with far fewer specialised leadership and management roles, and research has consistently shown that what happens in the classroom is far more important for educational outcomes than leadership and management. At best they can create favourable conditions for teachers' professional practice. At worst, they can get in the way of teaching. For leadership and management tasks extend to class teachers. Distributed leadership is generally advocated as empowering teachers as leaders. But time spent leading is time spent not teaching, a key contributor to the intensification of work that, as indicated earlier, has demotivated so many in the profession. Additional leadership and management tasks for headteachers have precluded their involvement in the leadership of teaching and learning.

Third, managerialism amounts to an unhelpful 'solution in search of a problem' (March and Olsen, 1976), creating conditions that encourage leaders to generate problems to solve because they are expected to demonstrate proactivity. Leadership has been distinguished from and given primacy over management as the more proactive aspect of coordinating teachers' work. Pressure from agencies linked to central government (e.g. DFES, 2004; OFSTED, 2003) is increasingly placed on staff with leadership responsibilities to express proactivity as a moral imperative, whether through inspiring colleagues or providing innovative leadership of teaching and learning. Speculatively, identifying and solving problems legitimates new leadership roles, underpins career advancement opportunities, and justifies special pleading for resources. Conditions are ripe for leaders to overcomplicate existing problems or manufacture new ones in the name of innovation for greater effectiveness. The epithet 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' has no place in educational transformation.

Fourth, leadership and management have been partially professionalized as part of the government strategy to halt the gradual professionalization of teachers. By the 1970s the extent of teachers' classroom autonomy had allowed extremes of practice to emerge which brought on the reforms. The irony here is that giving leaders and managers the 'right to manage' is nominal, so increasing the level of ambiguity they experience because their increased autonomy under local management is belied by their obligation to follow government policy – 'the right to manage on our behalf'. The National College for School Leadership is instrumental in giving leadership and management the hallmarks of a profession through its training programmes, research reviews contributing to the specialist leadership knowledge

base, and articulation of national standards embodying an implicit ethical code (DFES, 2004).

Fifth, the rhetoric of radical transformation of education to be nurtured by transformational leadership is mythical, producing semantic irony where language belies experience. The isomorphism between supposedly local community-driven school vision statements reflects the success of government reforms in prescribing most of their visionary content. What is described as transformational leadership is more accurately expressed as *transmissional leadership* – ‘any vision you like as long as it fits with central government’s vision for you’. The major irony here though is situational: central government reforms heralded as transformational (e.g. OPSR, 2002: 2) systematically inhibit any potential for radical transformation at school level. They narrowly delimit the boundaries for experimentation through the curriculum specification, target and accountability regime. A further irony is that conditions for transformation were greater when teachers had much more professional autonomy, and the reforms have systematically removed that capacity.

Further, it is questionable whether state education, essentially a conservative institution for social reproduction, could realistically take the lead over economic institutions for transforming society. What is being sought of school leaders and managers is faithful transmission of political goals and promotion of activity to implement them, not transformation of their schools according to their own diverse beliefs and values and those of local community members. The ambition of transformational goals belies the limited capacity of any public service to spearhead radical social change. Much stronger structural economic social forces ensure that state education remains more responsive than revolutionary.

Ironic Response

Perhaps the ultimate irony is that most headteachers and teachers appear not to have embraced managerialism, retaining their allegiance to teaching above their allegiance to leading and managing. Behavioural change can be enforced through surveillance and sanctions. Cultural change cannot. Research evidence from teachers’ workplace studies suggests that maybe the dominant response is to cope with the excesses of managerialism, keeping up appearances of faithful implementation for accountability purposes, while seeking ways of mediating reforms to make them work in the contingent circumstances of individual schools and classrooms. Enduring ambiguity remains over how far the appearance of centrally directed reform is matched by the reality of professional practice. Here lies an obverse of the irony for policy-makers that their well-intentioned reforms bring negative unintended consequences. It is that implementers retain sufficient agency to meet irony with irony through their partially covert buffering responses as leaders and managers, and as teachers.

Research on development planning in the 1990s (Wallace and McMahon, 1994; Wallace, 1998b) illustrates how this chronically raised level of ambiguity has been generated. School development planning was a managerial innovation for

supporting school staff with implementing reforms. The lock-step annual planning cycle and typically pre-specified limit to the number of priorities that could be addressed each year was insensitive to the diversity of school contexts and – more ironically – to the incremental imposition of further central government reforms. Ameliorative adjustments had to be made as existing reforms proved either unworkable in themselves, or to clash with other reforms. The annual cycle was over-rigid for the relatively turbulent planning environments into which it was introduced, but it must be seen to be followed. The form this intervention took did not allow for incremental updating of plans. It exacerbated the endemic ambiguity for school leaders and managers flowing from their dilemma over long-range direction-setting versus retaining short-term flexibility to adapt to unpredictably evolving circumstances.

A common response was to compile the development plan as required, especially once the inspection regime came to include examining each school's development plan document. But then informal incremental planning, conducted alongside development planning, actually guided practice. It offered needed flexibility that the annual development planning cycle did not. Adaptation was required for coping with a reform that might have been well matched to relatively stable pre-reform school contexts when it was developed, but was ill suited to the more turbulent programmatic reform contexts in which it was to be implemented.

Overall, research into the impact of reforms on the experience and practice of professional staff suggests that they respond differently. These responses may be categorized as compliance, non-compliance, or mediation. Compliance connotes that reform goals are accepted, whether enthusiastically (implying belief in these goals), or resignedly (implying belief that behavioural acquiescence is prudent). Compliance reduces ambiguity for policy-makers as long as reforms are workable. Non-compliance connotes anything from retreatism, covertly perpetuating present practice in the hope of not being detected, to overt resistance. This response generates ambiguity for policy-makers over determining the extent of non-compliance and over how to increase compliance.

Mediation is different. It can comprise an ironic form of response where staff try to adapt reforms to make them work according to their existing professional values in their circumstances. Workplace studies imply that such mediators are principled, sincerely endeavouring to work around externally imposed requirements. They express what may be termed *principled infidelity*. 'Infidelity' follows from not adhering fully to policy-makers' expectations. 'Principled' follows from attempting to sustain their professional values instead of embracing the alternative values under-girding reforms.

Bending agency towards mediating reforms adds ambiguity where superficially dutiful compliance covers divergent practices. Insofar as reforms like development planning are contextually insensitive, covert adaptation by mediators may make them work better than if mediators had been more compliant. Principled infidelity may undermine the achievement of policy-makers' reform goals to the letter while contributing to the spirit of these goals by making a related but more realistic practice work (as with development planning). Mediators may thus reduce negative unin-

tended consequences of reforms by giving priority to the interests of staff and the local community over those of policy-makers.

Principled mediators may be regarded as committed ‘ironists’ whose infidelity should be endorsed in coping with reforms that are not of their making. Speculatively, such ironists express an *ironic orientation* towards professional practice and change. They appear to be sceptics, committed to improving educational practice. Their scepticism is born of their familiarity with endemic ambiguity and the ironies that often arise, and their reservations about the impact of ‘one size fits all’ reforms on their practice and on the interests of their students. They are likely to adopt the position which Moore et al. (2002) labelled ‘principled pragmatism’. This term was applied to headteachers who seek to square reforms with their personal educational beliefs and values. Mediators are likely to be reflexive about their successes and failures with a view to improving, and to adopt a perspective on change which, while open to new ideas, features a strong sense of contingency. Externally initiated reforms or other changes are assessed against the perceived needs of staff and students, scrutinized for their workability in this local setting, and compromises sought where necessary to cope with policy-makers’ unrealistic expectations.

The ironic orientation hypothesized here has affinity with the relatively indeterminate, inherently ambiguous nature of professional practice. Traditional claims for professional autonomy have long lost political and public support. Arguments for the exclusive entitlement to apply esoteric knowledge learned through lengthy training in making inferential diagnoses and administering treatments (Abbott, 1988) in uncertain situations has been widely interpreted as merely protecting professionals’ self-interests. Reforms have undermined teachers’ autonomy and rendered them more accountable to central government and to parental preferences (Dale, 1989). But the unrealistic endeavour behind managerialism to eliminate ambiguity in teachers’ professional practice has misread the ineradicable core of ambiguity that is endemic to it. An ironic orientation is therefore appropriate in accepting the inevitability of ambiguity and irony and pragmatically seeking ways of coping as effectively as possible in contingent circumstances.

Wise Moves: Towards Effective Management of a Reformed Teaching Profession

Any educational improvement strategy carries risks, and endemic ambiguity coupled with its exacerbation by change mean that there can be no guarantees of success. But learning to live with irony is a good risk. It offers considerable potential for enhancing teaching and learning, supported by temperate leadership and management and temperate policy-making. This potential rests on harnessing the ironic orientation towards educational ends through moderation rather than missionary zeal, the cautious pursuit of incremental improvement rather than transformation, and coping with ambiguity and irony rather than attempting to eliminate them through hyper-control.

Moderation, incrementalism and coping may sound politically unattractive. The UK electorate has long been groomed to expect visionary rhetoric and rapid results. But the electorate has also been groomed for cynicism about broken political promises where the rhetoric has ill-matched their experience of education and other public services. Ministers can ill afford the bad risk of adding further to the growing sense of public disenchantment.

Effective management of a reformed teaching profession entails most significantly the policy-makers who exercise overall responsibility for the national state education system and leaders and managers in the schools themselves, supported less directly by staff in intermediate administrative organizations and government agencies. Lets us consider the contribution of the former two groups to managing the teaching profession effectively by maximizing the potential for educational improvement.

Temperate Policy-Making

The international comparison mentioned earlier suggests that there is ample room for greater educational effectiveness. Future policy-making therefore needs to be directed towards realistic improvement. First, when setting the political agenda more extensive consultation with representatives of leaders and managers and class teachers on whom implementation depends could offer a reality-check for politicians' ideas and foster implementers' cooperation. The risk for politicians of 'provider capture' to suit professionals' interests over those of students and parents is set against the risks of non-compliance, ameliorative policy-making to address problems created by unrealistic reforms, unfulfilled public expectations and further decline of electoral support.

Second, an incremental strategy for evolutionary improvement with allowance for problems to emerge could maximize the capacity for fluent adjustment, and even rethinking the strategy itself in the light of any ironic consequences. The political risk of appearing to have run out of big ideas by eschewing visionary rhetoric and tight control is balanced against the risks of undeliverable promises, of sunk investment in unworkable reforms whose retraction may be judged a political U-turn, and of demotivating and burning out implementers on whose efforts policy-makers depend.

Third, building flexibility into reforms could deliberately foster the principled infidelity necessary for implementers to make generalized practices work in specific settings. The risk of unacceptable mediatory responses is set against the risk of central direction that is too rigid to provide this vital element of integral adaptability.

Fourth, promoting the development of school staff capacity to cope with endemic ambiguities and those added by change could help teachers and headteachers to pre-empt the ironies that striving for impossible certainty can precipitate, and to deploy routine strategies for coping with the ironies that slip through. The risk of imprecision and opacity is set against the risk that implementers

will be completely thrown whenever negative unintended consequences arise despite their best endeavours.

Fifth, developing unobtrusive monitoring and mild accountability mechanisms that make maximal use of new technology could pre-empt or otherwise alert policy-makers to any unacceptable extremes of professional practice in schools. Focusing on surveillance of extremes could minimize unproductively diverting the attention of the conscientious and competent majority of staff from their core purpose of education. The political risk of having insufficient information to prove system-wide quality of educational performance to the electorate is set against the costs of strong surveillance and heavy information demands in terms of staff distraction.

Temperate School Leadership and Management

Temperate policy-making has important implications for temperate school leadership and management. First, the nature of professional practice, consistent with the ironic orientation, implies that teachers could be more effective if they were given greater (though not unlimited) scope to exercise responsible professional judgement. Overall, more effective leadership and management mean less leadership and management. Since teachers have become caught up in specialised managerial roles and distributed leadership, relieving them of non-teaching tasks where possible would enable them to concentrate more on their teaching. The role of headteachers and other senior staff is to be exemplary practitioners of principled infidelity, whether in giving enthusiastic support to implementing policy changes, adapting them, protecting teachers from them, or promoting local innovation. The risk of confusion over the coordination required to promote coherence and progression in teaching and learning is set against the risk of leadership and management becoming self-serving at the expense of the educational activity it exists to serve.

Second, for headteachers, as the formal 'top' school leader, a key strategy for coping with further reforms is *orchestration*. A stipulative definition of this concept is 'coordinated activity within set parameters expressed by a network of senior leaders at different administrative levels to instigate, organize, oversee and consolidate complex change across part or all of a multi-organizational system' (see Wallace and Pocklington, 2002: 207–209). Orchestration encompasses considering whether and how to respond to externally initiated change. It extends to active promotion and organization to get change under way, and continual monitoring and adaptive action to cope with the unfolding consequences of ambiguity. Headteachers as orchestrators could take the strain off their colleagues and absorb some of the stress induced by reforms through the three subthemes of flexible planning (for rapid adaptation while attempting to sustain a broad direction), culture-building and communication (for fostering a sense of communal commitment to high quality educational provision), and differentiated support (for helping other staff to learn how to cope with their tasks). The managerial risk of being held to account for colleagues' unfaithful implementation of externally instigated changes is offset by the

risk of overloaded and overstressed staff, and so an impoverished educational experience for students.

Third, temperate leadership implies fostering good professional practice in all areas of work. It could include encouraging staff and ensuring that they both operate professionally through exercising the judgement that is necessary for the assiduous performance of their tasks, and act professionally through developing and sustaining appropriate relationships with colleagues, students and parents. It could run to fostering continual individual and collective professional learning within the 'professional learning community' (Bolam et al., 2005) in each school, protecting the degree of autonomy needed to make reforms work in every teacher's classroom. The managerial risk of losing control over colleagues' practice in implementing change is set against the risk of inhibiting their capacity to express principled infidelity in making change work for the sake of high quality service provision.

Fourth, leaders and managers could actively encourage the generation of ideas, techniques and procedures from professional practice (within the boundaries of acceptability), through identifying, supporting and achieving congruence between experimental practices and externally shaped requirements. They could expand the scope for distributed leadership focused on teaching and learning, creating favourable conditions for emergent practice among different specialised groups. The risk of unworkable innovation or unacceptable divergence from regulatory norms is set against the risk of failing to develop improved, context-sensitive ways of doing the things that matter most to staff, students and parents.

Finally, promoting a climate of 'high trust-with-verification' could set the expectation that staff will take responsibility for operating professionally and so not abuse the autonomy accorded them to foster local innovation and emergence. An initial presumption of trust, rather than the mistrust that strong surveillance and accountability mechanisms signify, stands to maximize capacity for coping with the increased ambiguity accompanying reforms or locally initiated change. It carries the risk that staff might betray this trust (hence the need for verification through accountability mechanisms), balanced against the risk that a low-trust climate marked by obtrusive surveillance may militate against staff taking responsibility for their professional conduct.

A more temperate approach to managing the education profession offers politicians and school leaders and managers the least-worst prospect of failure, since in a world of endemic ambiguity success cannot be guaranteed. Temperance is practically realistic in not promising more than can be delivered with any certainty. A temperate approach accepts the wisdom of risking mildly ironic consequences: giving teachers back the 'right to teach' is likely to produce moderate diversity of incrementally changing practices and outcomes. But it minimizes (though it cannot eliminate) the risk of generating serious ironic consequences. Intemperate approaches promise much more, but they inherently increase the risk of debilitating irony because of their ambition: whether the mandating of new practices inhibiting local experimentation needed to find what works in different contexts, raised expectations that cannot be met, or perverse side effects such as appearance taking precedence over the reality experienced by students and parents. And where is the wisdom in that?

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