

## Teaching, School Management Pragmatism

### Background and Context

This paper builds on previous papers arising from a funded research study of the impact on school teachers' and headteachers' practices, perceptions and professional identities of the interplay between state-driven reform, broader societal change, and personal and 'institutional' philosophies of education at a time of rapid and intensive educational reform in the UK (Halpin and Moore *et al* 2000: ESRC study R000237640). A central feature of that study was to discover and articulate the various ways in which mandated policy change articulated with - or failed to articulate with - teachers' and headteachers' existing educational ideologies and practices, and with the range of educational traditions that teachers and schools draw upon in constructing their 'pedagogic identities'.

Our investigations into this very complex set of dynamics drew initially on Basil Bernstein's conceptualisations of pedagogic discourse, and in particular its most recent configuration concerning the interplay and the pulls and tensions of four competing 'pedagogic identities' in the educational field (Bernstein 1996). Bernstein's account of the complex social positionings of schools and teachers in the policy arena had highlighted the conflicting demands of:

- the need for schools to market themselves - and sometimes to 'repackage' themselves - locally in a competitive quasi marketplace (the 'local market' identity);
- the pedagogic and curricular values and vocational imperatives that teachers bring with them into the profession - and that very often *bring them into* the profession - regardless of 'external' public policy demands (what Bernstein calls the 'local therapeutic' identity), often linked to perceptions of the very specific needs and experiences of a school's individual student intake;
- and the twin diktats of current educational policy in the UK and elsewhere that education, for the sake of the nation sense of integrity and for its ability to thrive in a changing international marketplace, must be both 'retrospective' (in, for example, valuing and promoting a perceived 'best' from the nation's cultural past, or in 'getting back to basics') and 'prospective' (in promoting skills and attitudes to enable effective economic competitiveness).

### Sample and methods

Given that the emphasis of the study was on teachers' and headteachers' experiences and perceptions of the professional impact of policy change (rather, for example, than on the impact of such change on pupils' experiences), an interview-based approach was adopted, data the study being drawn principally from semi-structured, hour-long discussions with seventy classroom teachers and nine headteachers at six secondary schools and three primary schools. These interviews were followed up by group interviews at the same schools, and by detailed textual analyses of the schools' public documentation including school guides, prospectuses, websites, and whole-school policies.

Though diverse in terms of location and intake (some schools were inner-city, for example, others suburban) all the schools in the sample were quite large for their type and phase, and all were 'succeeding' schools in that they were oversubscribed and generally well thought of by the LEAs in which they were situated. The headteachers in the study were a mix of male and female (three female and three male in the secondary schools, two male and one female in the primaries), including one of African Caribbean origin, expressing a variety of general response to recent education policy ranging from 'not having gone far enough' to almost unequivocal approval to various degrees of criticism and hostility. Though the participation of classroom teachers was on a volunteer basis, those who participated were deliberately drawn from across all subject areas and included a wide range of ages, responsibilities, time in teaching, time working in current school, gender and ethnicity. We were also, as with the headteachers, fortunate in securing a good mix of generally 'positive' and generally 'negative' respondents in relation to the broad reception of recent and previous government policy and in particular of issues concerning curriculum and testing.

### **Teachers as Pragmatists**

While it had not been our specific intention to explore the nature and role of pragmatism in the (re)formation of teacher and school identities, this quickly became a major issue for us, initially sparked by one of our interview questions to teachers and headteachers: *'People have sometimes used the terms "traditional" and "progressive" as shorthand for locating themselves professionally as teachers. Would you describe your own outlook and practice using either of these terms?'*

This question typically evoked the response 'I don't see myself fitting into either category' (to quote one young classroom teacher), or 'I'm a happy medium of traditional and progressive' (to quote another). An alternative descriptor for professional practice and orientation was additionally offered by a large number of interviewees, who specifically introduced the term 'pragmatic' into our conversations, alerting us to the possibility of exploring this term more fully and perhaps using it heuristically to enhance our understandings of how teachers were responding to - or even contributing to - educational policy change.

It soon became apparent that although the classroom teachers in our sample were typically presenting themselves as professional pragmatists, they were not all being pragmatic in the same way. Nor were they universally comfortable with their pragmatic orientations. We came, therefore, to construct what remains a very provisional taxonomy comprising three related but differentiated kinds of teacher pragmatism - 'contingent', 'principled' and 'strategic'. Subsequent revisitings of the data have suggested a fourth - and qualitatively different kind of pragmatism - that I have referred to elsewhere (Moore 2004) as 'ideological' pragmatism and that I will discuss later on in this paper. Whereas the first three kinds of pragmatism are used to describe teacher and headteacher *responses* to specific elements of either local or centralised policy change and might therefore be described as *instrumental*, ideological pragmatism refers to the adoption of pragmatism *itself* as an appropriate and virtuous professional orientation, typically connected to notions of adapting a balanced, 'non-political' view.

It is important to point out that members of the research team were aware that their initial taxonomy might be suggestive of a simplicity - indeed, of a dichotomisation - that we had neither found in our data nor wished to impose on our analysis, and we were clear from the outset that the modes of pragmatism we had identified were not mutually exclusive and certainly not suggestive of oppositional categories: that is to say, teachers and headteachers could not neatly be labelled themselves as, say 'contingent pragmatists' or 'principled pragmatists', but were rather understood as professionals adopting different pragmatic positionings either over time (or indeed at the same time) in relation to different sets of working conditions or policy developments.

### **Contingent Pragmatism**

To refer to our initial descriptors, *contingent pragmatism* refers to those instances wherein teachers adapt or embrace teaching approaches and philosophies according to specific circumstances that may change with time or location - perhaps the circumstances of their own particular school's intake and location, for example, or the circumstances of particular pressures such as those imposed by national literacy or numeracy strategies or the demands of SATs. In such cases, we found that teachers often felt *constrained or resigned* to be pragmatic, adopting pragmatism as a kind of coping strategy (Woods 1985). The research suggested that such pragmatism can involve the temporary suspension of elements of previously-held values and philosophical or pedagogical orientations (for example, preferences for student-centred teaching), whereby these are, to quote one newly-qualified teacher, 'put on one side', perhaps to be taken up again as and when circumstances change.

Examples of this kind of enforced or resigned pragmatism were particularly apparent when we talked to teachers about recent trends towards more strictly enforced school uniforms in English schools, and away from mixed-ability teaching to increased setting of students according to notions of ability. The following example, drawn from our interview with Bill, a secondary-school English teacher in his early fifties who was also a deputy headteacher at his school, offers a useful illustration both of the existence of contingent pragmatism and of its potentially troubling nature.

#### ***BILL***

Bill's school had recently moved away from mixed-ability teaching towards more setting of students according to ability. It had also changed from being a non-uniform school to one in which the wearing of school uniform was compulsory. Bill's attitude toward each of these developments had remained touched by ambivalence. While the decision to adopt school uniform, had, he told us, been taken 'very democratically, involving teachers, parents and students', he had openly opposed it at the time, on the grounds that the existence of school uniform was likely 'to create even more problems' - including more staff-pupil conflicts - than it would solve. Even though this view was based on Bill's own experience of having moved from a uniform-school to a non-uniform-school, he had, by the time of our interview, come to accept - if somewhat tentatively - that 'probably, overall, [introducing uniform] was the right thing'. Bill's subsequent defence of his position, however, suggested a continuing lack of comfort with this personal shift of view as, indeed, with his shifting ground over mixed-ability teaching:

*'I think we had to go for uniform because of the rivalry, the competitiveness – and parents overtly wanted it ... I think probably overall it was the right thing. You know, I think it was because of a sense of identity. We made the uniform friendly. Most of the parents like it. Some of the kids didn't, but most of them did.... I think it's very hard to know in the long run. You know, our intake has gone up, and we are much more popular. That might be one of the reasons.... I think it might lead to an improvement in exam results, and a good [government inspection report] – you know – because those things do have an effect, quite a large effect, out there. But I'm still not.... Again, I suppose it's like the mixed-ability thing: I'm willing to go along with whatever we agree democratically. But I was not one of the people necessarily in favour.'*

Bill's self-conscious and slightly reluctant change of view is typical of the 'contingently pragmatic' responses of many of the classroom teachers in our sample. While its apologetic, somewhat unconvincing nature speaks of half-hearted acceptance rather than full-blown allegiance to an item of policy change, it seeks to *justify* what has clearly been an uncomfortable, enforced change of approach, within the terms of a pre-existing, comfortable and highly valued one - in this case, an allegiance to 'democracy'. It also implies that the acceptance of this particular change is something of a temporary settlement, flagged up by the parenthetical but highly significant 'I think probably...But I'm still not....'.

Whether Bill's settlement - which appears to provide some degree of comfort that allows him to get on with the principal task of teaching to the best of his ability within the pulls and constraints of a not-always-sympathetic *system* - remains temporary or becomes permanent is, as in the case of other teachers who spoke to us in a similar voice, uncertain. It may itself be dependent partly upon the prevailing circumstances at any given point in time and place. Much depends too, of course, on the individual teacher. In the case of Bill, the changes that he had reluctantly accepted, although they may have been prompted by changes in the wider social and educational systems, were changes that had been initiated within the school itself, and it was partly for this reason that he had accepted them with equanimity if not with enthusiasm. Other teachers, including teachers at Bill's school, presented themselves much more as *victims* of imposed change (Smyth *et al* 1999:1), particularly where they felt these were being enforced by powerful systems that rendered opposition futile. Such teachers (Moore and Edwards *et al* 2002) also adapted pragmatically to contingencies, but with a far greater degree of reluctance and discomfort than Bill, and with a far greater feeling of their own cherished pedagogical values - and even their own professional identities - being undermined. As one teacher at Bill's school, Graeme, put this in relation to the changes he felt forced upon him by, among other things, increased formal testing of students:

*'I have become less progressive: I have become reactionary, I find...I have become less liberal...in my thoughts about education. As a teacher, I have become more abrasive'*

Some of these teachers' responses brought to mind Britzman's observation, that 'there are always antagonistic discourses that urge particular dispositions *at the cost of others*' and that consequently 'the teacher's identity expresses a *cacophony of calls*'

(Britzman 1991, p.223, emphases added). That cacophony may result partly from mismatches between teachers' existing ideologies and priorities and those imposed or encouraged by education policy (see, for example, Stronach *et al's* discussion [2002:119] of the difficulties and pain encountered by the teacher who finds that she has to juggle 'with her own professional goals ... and external pressures from tests'), but partly, too, from conflicts between a teacher's preferred *modus operandi* and that which is forced upon them by broader social circumstances beyond their immediate control. As Hewitson reminds us in this regard:

'Student attendance, student moods, time of the day, subject area and student feelings about particular areas, state of the home scene - dozens of factors affect whether a lesson achieves the goal that a teacher might have in mind for the day.'

(Hewitson 2004, pp.88-9. See also Billig *et al* 1998:46 and Cole and Knowles 1995:131)

### **Principled Pragmatism**

Britzman's suggestion (1991, p.223) that 'no teaching identity is ever single or without contradictions', and Billig *et al's* argument (1988, p.46) that teachers' ideological conceptions are not always 'neatly packaged and consistent' offer a helpful introduction into considerations of a different kind of professional pragmatism, that we chose to call 'principled pragmatism.'

Principled pragmatism refers to those cases wherein teachers adopt introduced changes into their existing practice more deliberately and proactively than is the case with contingent pragmatism, and are happy, in hindsight, to justify them within the wider contexts of their work. Evidence from the research suggested that such pragmatism is usually more comfortably accomplished than contingent pragmatism, and has the potential to be more durable.

### ***EDWARD***

This kind of pragmatic response is illustrated in the testimony of one young teacher, Edward, who worked in a different school from Bill (see also Moore and Edwards *et al* 2002). Edward was self-consciously eclectic and pragmatic, both in his pedagogy, through which he proactively and without prejudice sought out and used a variety of instructional approaches, and in his educational *views*, including views about recent educational reforms such as the greater devolution of budgets to schools or the imposition on schools of a national curriculum.

Some of Edward's pragmatism was of the 'contingent' variety described above - that is to say, it appeared thrust upon him with varying degrees of coercion by circumstances outside his immediate control. He cited, for example, the constraints of available financial and material resources as forcing him towards a more 'traditional', front-of-class approach to teaching than the one he had begun with, which, given those constraints, had limited his time for the preparation for and marking of his students' work. While he had not, he said, ruled out the possibility of a return to a

more 'progressive' mode of teaching, that would only happen if the economic circumstances, nationally or locally, changed sufficiently to make it practicable.

It was precisely Edward's willingness to accept local and temporal constraints in respect of his professional practice, however, that simultaneously reflected and created the possibility for that other kind of pragmatism - 'principled pragmatism' - that we had identified, whose case can be argued by the teacher *beyond* specific reference to the here and now.

An example of this kind of pragmatic response was provided by Edward's interesting explanation of sitting his students in rows (in opposition to his previous practice of sitting them in small groups around tables) and the promotion within his classroom of 'democracy'. Observing that he saw himself as 'neither "progressive" nor "traditional"', Edward went on to say:

*'I try to look back on each of those approaches and use parts of them both...I would say I am a happy medium of traditional and progressive. ...Traditional - you can see the chairs in rows; but progressive in the sense that I'm ...keen on allowing students to speak for themselves.'*

Though sitting his students in rows may have originated - at least partly - in his perceived need to rethink classroom management in the context of externally-imposed economic constraints, it is clear from his testimony that Edward had come to see - or perhaps to find - a *value* in this different approach, arguing that, contrary to what one might expect, the physical 'isolation' and compulsory ordering of his students had not compromised his agenda for developing democratic processes and practices within his classroom, or for promoting student voices: on the contrary, he even suggested that the increased amount of teacher control effected by the arrangement provided a better context and climate for the development of structured classroom 'conversations':

*'What the discipline of this kind of [seating] arrangement does (I make them put their hands up, too!) is that they actually have to listen to each other now instead of what they were doing before which was just calling out and interrupting. So they have learnt something about democracy.'*

While it might be argued that Edward was simply seeking a justification for an action which he initially (and perhaps still) found undesirable in his own or others' eyes, inserting a hard-to-defend resort to traditionalism into an acceptable discourse of democracy, his undisguised enthusiasm for the change tended to argue against this interpretation. In striking contrast to Bill (who did not suggest that school uniform or setted classes had contributed to democracy; merely that they had been introduced by way of a democratic process), Edward's movement in this case may have been contingent and approach-based at its inception, but had evidently 'become' principled and attitude-based over time - comprising, perhaps, a move away from the kinds of 'temporary', 're-orientation' change described by McLaughlin (1991), in which the teacher or school internalises 'the language of reform but not its substance' (Ball 1997, p.261), towards a more durable 'colonisation' change (Ball, *ibid.*) that involves a major shift in 'the cultural core of the organization' - incorporating, in this case, the culture and value-system of the individual classroom teacher.

## Strategic Pragmatism

A third kind of instrumental pragmatism related very specifically to the ways in which headteachers managed their schools, including, centrally, the ways in which they acted as mediators of public policy initiatives. As with the contingent and principled pragmatism encountered in our interviews with classroom teachers, this form of pragmatism - which, in its conscious acknowledgment of making sometimes unpalatable compromises, most closely resembled contingent pragmatism - appeared to have a specific function in relation to policy implementation both as a survival mechanism and as a form of resistance in which an acceptable degree of congruence could be found between policy demands, market demands and the demands of the 'therapeutic' (Bernstein, op.cit.).

It is sometimes suggested (Hartley 1997; Gewirtz and Ball 2000) that, given the current pressures and constraints on UK schools, headteachers tend to consciously or unconsciously adopt government policy, including that which appears to promote specific (usually managerialist) management styles, often at the expense of initially (or espoused) preferred practice - resulting in 'not just new ways of speaking' (as in the kinds of 'reorientation change' associated with some of the forms of classroom teacher pragmatism we have discussed above), but '[new] ways of *thinking and acting*' (Gewirtz and Ball 2000, pp. 265-6, emphasis added). Ball (1999), citing Plant (1992:87), goes so far as to claim that, under the impact of market values, a 'culture of self interest' is developing in schools.

Though our own research found evidence of schools' and teachers' accepting or 'buying into' certain market values, including a drive - often configured by respondents as an undesirable necessity (cf. 'George' below) - to compete for students with other schools, contrary to our initial expectations most of the teachers and headteachers we spoke to appeared determined to retain core 'non-contingent' values as far as they felt was possible; that is, they were conscious of having to make compromises and having to be pragmatic, but keen to move towards the parameters of possible resistance in formulating their responses to mandated policy. In our study, there was very little hard evidence of headteachers absorbing or indiscriminately buying into mandated change, with a substantial majority of seven out of the nine interviewed displaying what we took to be a healthy refusal to be dictated to by government reforms where these ran counter to cherished values. These headteachers self presented as much more inclined to mediate, assimilate and even subvert such policy than to adopt a fundamentally submissive or accommodatory stance toward it, and to treat each initiative on its own merits (see also Moore and Klenowski 2003). These headteachers seemed to adopt a strategic-pragmatic orientation that was part contingent, part principled, but generally more deliberate and more widely *applied* than either of those varieties in responding and adapting to mandated policy in a variety of ways. These ways (illustrated below) included:

- incorporating or acknowledging mandated policy where it chimed with their own pre-existing views and values;
- modifying mandated policy where there was some perceived level of match and mismatch with their own pre-existing views and values;

- internally - if not always publicly - rejecting mandated policy where it seemed untenable within the context of the school's existing ethos.

As one primary head observed with reference to this latter approach: 'What we actually do and what we tell the government we do ain't necessarily the same thing!'

It must be acknowledged that the schools in our sample were all 'succeeding' schools, and that this may have well had an impact on their positional *possibilities* (Coldron and Smith 1999). As Bernstein (1996:74) has argued, schools that are perceived as doing well may have the luxury of maintaining their preferred (therapeutic) pedagogic identities, whereas struggling schools (often in the most challenging areas) may inevitably be 'more concerned with the *marketing* possibilities of their pedagogical discourse' (my emphasis). The point remains, however, that the heads in our sample claimed very strongly a desire to privilege their own core values *to the extent to which they were able in the circumstances*, and we had no reason to suspect that heads in less 'well placed' schools would have a markedly different desire, even though that desire might be tempered more strongly by or come into more difficult conflict with the desire for survival.

### ***THE HEADTEACHERS***

Articulations of strategic pragmatism on the part of the headteachers we interviewed were many, and spoke of a specific managerial *role* that itself had roots in a 'pre-reform' past. This role was put succinctly by one inner-city primary-school headteacher, Moira, who told us:

*'Everything that comes in, I look at what I think and I adapt it slightly. But that's my role as [the headteacher]: it's not to take something from the [government] or anywhere and just impose it - and I'm not sure if that's what's always expected really... You are meant to adapt... If you're gonna make it work, one person just can't "hand it" to another person.'*

Another primary-school head, Harry, suggested similar independence of thought in his claims that:

*'As new initiatives and new things happen in education, you then have to sort of pitch them against what you believe at the moment, and try and fit those in and work out where they fit into your existing philosophy. .... Your views do change, you know: because you are often in a situation, particularly where you get to a deputy and a [headteacher]ship, where you can't just say "Well, I don't believe this is right, the literacy hour, the numeracy hour, the National Curriculum, so I'm not doing it." So you have to try and fit that into your existing philosophy. .... As long as the initiative doesn't cut right across - you know - fundamental views, then you'll kind of fit in with it.'*

A secondary-school head, George, offered a further example of the kinds of institutional 'orientation change' described above, in his confession that, although totally opposed to the government's initiative of production 'league tables' of public examination results, he was happy to make use of such tables to boost his own school's recruitment in the face of competition from a newly opened selective-entry



school down the road - not through 'odious comparisons', but by reasserting the school's inclusive, multi-cultural, comprehensive ethos. As George put this:

*'I will exploit that, without selling my soul and becoming a league tables man. ... So in that sense, you know, I do stand up there and I will use the divisive view quite sensibly as a PR marketing tool to sell what we are.'*

Rather than wholeheartedly 'buying into' packages of government reform, it was evident that for each of these headteachers the *required* response was perceived as amounting to little more than (to quote another head) a 'jumping-through-hoops exercise' - a possibility hinted at by Legget (1997), when he argues that despite its increasingly intrusive character, public policy inevitably retains an element of remoteness from the lived realities inside schools.

Certainly, the premeditated, pragmatic approach of most of the headteachers in our sample appeared, at least at first sight, to be as far a cry from 'coping' pragmatism as it is from the kinds of 'colonisation change' found by other researchers in the field (Ball 1997, Gewirtz and Ball 2000) and, to a lesser extent, in our own study. The kind of strategic pragmatism we identified in the work of headteachers seemed to be an authentic, legitimate *tactic*, whereby school leader-managers could, with a greater or lesser degree of success, preserve and develop cherished values, ideologies and attendant practices when these were seen to come under threat from external policy directives and/or from market forces. Nor did we find an easy line between dominant *management discourses* and headteachers' management practice. While not wishing to downplay the importance of the warning given by Mahoney and Hextall that 'Once a managerialist model subsumes political accountability ... its effects and those of its legitimating discourses become all pervasive as the stress on commercial styles of management replaces the former public service ethic' (Mahoney and Hextall 1997: 150), we found that the rhetoric of the headteachers we spoke to had at least as much of the public service ethic about it as of the new managerialist, and that movements across or syntheses of 'the sub-cultures of "finance" and "learning"' (Ball 1999:6; Clarke and Newman 1992) were also difficult to find, notwithstanding George's tongue-in-cheek observation cited earlier.

### **Beyond the Responsive: Pragmatism as Ideology**

Pragmatism of the kinds I have so far described is not, of course, new to teaching, any more than is pedagogical *eclecticism* (Girard 1986; Larse-Freeman 1987). As has been pointed out elsewhere, such eclecticism may itself be underpinned by pragmatic orientations that may be either epistemological or practical (Hewitson 2004; Whitty *et al* 1998) or both. For some teachers we spoke to, like Edward, pragmatism was clearly linked to existing pedagogies of eclecticism related to notions of pedagogic effectiveness and based on a view that the best instruction needs to seek out and utilise the best of a *variety* of instructional approaches regardless of any 'ideological' inflexion they might have. Nor, as our headteachers were keen to point out, were forms of pragmatism new to *management*. What was very noticeable, however, was the extent to which the concept of pragmatism - of 'being pragmatic' - had become a conscious, deliberate and pervasive part of teachers' and headteachers' vocabulary in educational discussions, and the extent to which it was used in either an explanatory or a justificatory manner.

We were inclined to attribute this phenomenon in no small part to the sheer weight of responses that teachers and headteachers were currently having to make to changes in public policy and practice, and the rapidity with which those responses were being demanded. As has previously been suggested, these instrumental forms of pragmatic response were, thus, partly about survival: both professional/emotional and institutional.

What I want to suggest now, however, is that these forms of instrumental pragmatism may be embedded in and influenced by a fourth kind of pragmatism, more discursive in nature, that I shall call ideological pragmatism. This particular pragmatic orientation raises awkward questions about the nature of the pragmatic positionings suggested by the teachers and headteachers we interviewed, suggesting that though some forms of pragmatic response may self-present or 'start off' as fundamentally tactical or strategic, they have a much stronger potential to develop into - or indeed to mask - those '[new] ways of thinking and acting' suggested by Gewirtz and Ball (op.cit.) than the respondents themselves may have acknowledged.

Unlike contingent and principled pragmatism, ideological pragmatism is not so much descriptive of the particular pragmatic response itself, but rather of a particular orientation *towards* pragmatism. It is an orientation already evident, in a small way, in Edward's suggestion that 'I try to look back on each of those approaches and use parts of both of them': an orientation, that is, whose presupposition is that pragmatism has a value *in its own right*; that it is an appropriate, 'balanced' and virtuous approach to professional life, and is further exemplified by the following extract from one of our interviews with a primary-school head, Helen, explaining her support for many of the new policy initiatives that she had had to 'mediate':

#### **HELEN**

*'There are a lot of good things about the child-centred 'seventies educational climate that we've been keen to hang on to, but we also grasped some initiatives which...are actually taking education back towards a more traditional approach .... I think that the problem with education too often in the past is that it... polarised politically... And because New Labour haven't polarised it, in a sense it's a bit more difficult to make those distinctions. I think that people [now] are much more pragmatic in the methods they use. So things like pupil grouping don't become a political issue so much. You are actually looking at the evidence, you are looking at the research and what works best for the kids, what are the pros and cons.'*

Helen's *educational* (re-)orientation, as illustrated both here and elsewhere in her interview, appears to be based not so much on cherished or even 'new' educational *values*, or on the conflicts and accommodations between these values and the 'imposed' values of mandated reform, as on an internalisation of what Newman (2000:49) has described in the wider political context as 'a narrative of past failure and future possibility'. Her explanation of her position is, that is to say, based on the notions that:

- children's education has previously suffered at the hands of ideological conflicts between and among educators and policy-makers;
- the current UK government has adopted a (desirable) 'ideologically neutral' approach to education;
- this approach is based on disinterested considerations of 'evidence' rather than on unquestioned, ideological 'stands'.

Helen's suggestion that student grouping is 'not a political issue' is an interesting one, that only achieves credence *within* the discourse and ideology of pragmatism, effectively sidelining issues of gender, race, class and power-relations to the newly created wastelands of ideological positioning. In the educational context, the potential of this fourth mode of pragmatism to become a force for *conservatism* is plainly evident, representing what Toynbee (2001), with reference to a similar ideology in the wider political arena (New Labour's 'Third Wayism', which is, interestingly, also invoked by Helen in the above extract) calls an 'escape from self-definition'. In this manifestation, pragmatism in both the local pedagogic and the wider political context becomes an ideology at whose centre, paradoxically, is a critical, rhetorical *opposition* to ideology and, therefore, by implication, to the very conviction-politics whose robes it often borrows. That is to say, it becomes an ideology that conceals its own ideological nature (as it must, if it is not to be condemned by its own philosophy) - first by reconfiguring the meaning of ideology, and then by condemning ideology as undesirable.

### **The 'De-Politicisation' of Teachers?**

The identification of ideological pragmatism clearly raises some very difficult and complex questions. In particular, we need to know more about (a) the relationships between ideological pragmatism and instrumental pragmatism; (b) the relationships between pragmatism at the school management level and pragmatism at the level of classroom management and pedagogy.

With reference to the first of these, it is clear that ideological pragmatism and instrumental pragmatism, though *qualitatively* distinct, are by no means *operationally* distinct. Most notably, ideological pragmatism provides what might be called a *justificatory context* as one of the conditions in which the instrumental pragmatic position might be adopted. To refer back to two of the examples of instrumental pragmatism already given, we might speculate that that any potential difficulties experienced by Edward in adopting his principled-pragmatic approach to pedagogy, or Bill in adopting his contingent-pragmatic responses to school policies on uniform and setting, were rendered easier by the fact that their pragmatism was embedded in a notion of pragmatism as virtue, and that this acceptability was, furthermore, 'normalised' in its widespread location outside the school walls - not least in a spirit of 'consensus politics' and 'third wayism' that continued to be espoused by a long-serving prime minister and the country's central government.

As has already been indicated, the less enthusiastic forms of pragmatic response, such as that illustrated in Bill's testimony, often led to justifications of the acceptance and implementation of unliked policy through its framing within discourses that were more acceptable (e.g. discourses of democracy), or through an insistence on locating debates around the issues in local (contingent) *circumstances* rather than addressing

wider social *issues* ('I don't like school uniform, but we need it here/with these kids because...'). It also resulted in an increased unwillingness on the part of many teachers - certainly, many of those we spoke to - to debate such key educational and social issues as:

- the relevance and status of social justice in the school curriculum;
- the degree of importance of 'basic' literacy and numeracy skills in relation to social, creative and thinking skills;
- the choice of 'content' in school curriculum subjects;
- the desirability or otherwise (on social rather than narrowly 'academic' grounds) and the corresponding effects of 'setting' or 'streaming' students according to 'ability';
- the pros and cons of school uniform.

On these issues, teachers seemed reluctant - almost guilty - about taking an oppositional (perceived, perhaps, as an 'extremist') stance, and any resistant positioning seemed to have become, by and large, apologetic or weak. To put this another way, both teachers and headteachers very often seemed more inclined to position themselves, both professionally and philosophically, in terms of the local, instrumental rather than the wider, social effects of key educational issues, leading us to wonder whether, as McLaren (1995) has suggested, they might have become less likely to mobilize locally or nationally for active, collective political opposition, tending rather to have their energies diverted to the internal politics of their own institution. If this is the case, teachers and headteachers might be seen, despite the testimonies of the heads cited above, to be buying into a discourse of pragmatism which is effectively (Toynbee, *op.cit.*) a discourse of de-politicization - or perhaps of *re-politicization* into a 'centre ground'.

### **Teachers and headteachers: issues of perspective**

If ideological pragmatism, with its conservative and *conservatising* nature, suggests one set of questions about the democratic development and implementation of education policy and the extent and nature in policy development and implementation of local *agency*, strongly related considerations of the differences between the (typically proactive) instrumental-pragmatic stances of headteachers and the (more often reactive) instrumental-pragmatic stances of classroom teachers suggest another.

What I have been moving towards in this connection is a suggestion that while the headteachers in our study tended to *present themselves* as subverters, mediators and adaptors of mandated policy change, adopting a deliberate, strategic pragmatism in order to preserve cherished personal and institutional values, and while this may be seen as an authentic stance, the classroom teachers more typically suggested that their practice had modified - and continued to do so - as a result of mandated reform; that in some cases, this had led to a grudging rejection (temporary or permanent) of existing values and preferred practice; and that in others it had led to a more ready abandonment of previously held views and positions.

There is no room here to explore in any detail this apparent mismatch of perceptions. My suggestion, however, is that the difference may be partly due to the different sites and circumstances within which these pragmatic professionals are rooted, and partly -

although this has yet to be tested - the result of a possible self-deception on the part of the headteachers. *Put simply, it may, in practice, be far easier for headteachers to claim positions of resistance in relation to mandated policy change than it is for classroom teachers to put such resistance into effect.* Although the headteacher's position may be partly - even largely - dependent on such matters as positive government inspections, good test results and responding to customer demands, it is the classroom teachers who, in the end, are mediating directly between the detail of policy and the demands and needs of their particular students. It is in their work that any ideological struggles are habitually rooted in the day-to-day experience of practice, where major decisions often have to be made 'on the hoof', where the buck finally stops, and where the professional consequences of 'failure' as measured against mandated criteria may be particularly severe; and it is they who must deal directly and repeatedly with the various and often conflicting demands of student behaviour, national curriculum requirements, and their own professional and ethical positionings. While headteachers may genuinely believe that their instructions to teachers and their mediations of mandated policy leave cherished school values intact, the truth may be that the teachers themselves are often in a state of 'coerced complicity' in the marginalization of those values, and that they are driven principally, in this complicity, by fear as well as by a desire - and indeed a need - to survive. It was evident from all of our interviews with classroom teachers, for example, that the impact of what is sometimes called the performativity discourse (Ball 1999; Mahoney and Hextall 1997) was, inevitably, evident in the thinking and classroom practice of these teachers (and strongly so, too: teachers are, after all, bound to feel a moral if not an educational responsibility for helping students through SATs and public examinations). That it was also there in contexts in which, as Ball suggests, '[teachers] struggle and compromise, plan and act spontaneously, and improvise within and across contradictory roles and expectations' (Ball 1999: 10) is also extremely important to acknowledge. So too, however, is the possibility that such negotiations might pass largely unacknowledged, both among teachers themselves and in what some of the teachers saw as an increasing narrowing of the parameters of discussion and debate between classroom teachers and senior managers. As one teacher told us: 'There are some things you just wouldn't raise at a staff meeting or with your line manager: it would just be seen as whinging.'

To illustrate this point in a little more detail, at one of the secondary schools in our study the headteacher was to make the following telling observation:

*'When I first became [a headteacher] I think I wanted to be in on everything... But now I manage the outcome. So...everybody has an action plan, and that relates to the School Development plan. And if they meet their own targets, I don't care how they get there. ... I trained all the heads of department to use the [official government inspection] format of observation of lessons, and we do that and we grade lessons. I must say, not everybody is happy with that, but they do it. So I wouldn't say that all the things I want everybody is totally happy with, but I think there is a lot of trust that we are going in the right direction. [The staff] are prepared to give [me] the benefit of the doubt in some things they are not yet quite comfortable with.'*

While this same headteacher asserted elsewhere in her interview, not without cause, that she trusted her staff, that she believed in 'light touch' management, and that she

continued to support an inclusive ideal that saw 'education as a means of social engineering', her staff were quite clear in interview

- that it was the results *within* the context of national tests and examinations by which they would, ultimately, be judged, both internally and in the outside world,
- that it was those particular results on which their jobs, the quality of their professional lives and their chances of preferment hung,
- and that those results must consequently be achieved *by whatever means*.

If this headteacher was able to defend treasured ideological positions at the management/school leadership level, there was clearly a danger of 'colonisation' change occurring 'beyond her sight and reach', at the *classroom* level. If this is indeed the case, and if the case exists across schools, there is a strong likelihood of schools' ideological positionings being far more seriously threatened than some of the 'instrumental pragmatic' responses of our teachers and headteachers suggested, particularly when we factor in the possibility of a growing, conservatising ideologisation of pragmatism that hegemonically impels practitioners towards positions of pedagogical compromise.

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