

# **Headship as policy narration: generating metaphors of leading in the English Primary School**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores how doing headship may be considered as a form of policy narration and metaphor generation. Headteachers in England have to respond to high-stakes accountability policies that put their schools, their teachers and themselves under pressure to deliver what the government requires. A key role of the headteacher as policy narrator is to tell/sell a story about their school to themselves, their staff and the outside world of parents, inspectors and other stakeholders. The accounts they construct will depend to some extent on their perspectives, commitments and personal-professional identities as well as an interplay between national priorities and situated contexts. They will also depend on who they are speaking to and what they take to be a 'professional' response in relation to their policy work in school. Drawing on in-depth interviews with two experienced English primary school headteachers, Hazel and George, and Lakoff and Johnson's claim (1980) that metaphors are not just linguistic devices, but technologies of reasoning and understanding, this paper explores the ways in which headteachers deploy different tropes to explain what it is that they do. Metaphors of leadership explored include headship as branding, persuasion and not dropping the ball as well as fighting and parenting although there is an absence of any direct political critique.

**Keywords:** policy narration; primary headship; metaphors of leadership

## Introduction

In education, as in any other aspect of human life, we try to make meaning of our lives, of what has happened and what may happen in the future. This is one of the reasons why we narrate. (Hoveid and Honerød Hoveid, 2016: 640).

In this paper we want to start a conversation about the work of leadership in English primary schools. In our previous work on how policy is done in English secondary schools, we generated an emergent typology of teachers as policy actors (e.g. translators, enthusiasts, critics etc. in Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012:49) and we identified headteachers as policy *narrators*, that is; those who lead in the selection, interpretation, and translation of policy meanings and practices in their schools. Much education policy analysis takes 'all actors in the policy process to be equal, with the exception of school leaders who are given particular attention' (Ball, et al., 2012: 49). In contrast, we have suggested that different actors will be involved in processes of interpretation, translation and various technologies of policy enactment at different times and in respect of different types of policies. We also argued that the 'filtering out and selective focussing done by heads... is a crucial aspect of policy interpretation' (Ball, et al., 2012: 50) and of constructing an institutional narrative for the school. In positioning headteachers as policy narrators, we want to accent the ways in which heads decide on and 'explain' policy and construct an account of their school, to themselves, their staff and the outside world of parents, inspectors and other stakeholders. Narratives work to hold things together and provide a form of social and emotional cohesion. They are stories if you like, about how 'we' do things, who 'we' are and what 'we' stand for, and they are ways of mustering the hearts and minds that sustain the project of the school. These activities are all part of 'doing headship'.

In this paper we want to explore doing headship as a form of narration and we examine the usefulness of taking policy narration as one metaphor for headship. Much of the influential work on headship concentrates on what is

meant by effective leadership and how to 'do' it (e.g. Leithwood, *et al.*, 2008; Robinson, 2010), but here we want to foreground how being a narrator works in the demanding policy climate of the English primary setting. In the current policy landscape, English schools have to manage and respond to 'an unprecedented array of targets, comparisons and judgements... to live an existence of calculation' (Keddie, 2017: 1246; see also Bell and Stevenson, 2015). In this high-stakes environment, ultimately it is the headteacher who is accountable and responsible for the school's survival and well-being. Drawing on in-depth interviews with two experienced primary school headteachers, Hazel and George, we want to pay attention to their work as policy narrators and explore what we identify as leadership metaphors in their accounts.

This paper is divided into four main sections. First we detail the way in which we are theorising policy narration and positioning narrators as interpreters and translators of policy. Then we explain our methods. Third, we provide a brief sketch of the two headteachers whose narratives are explored in this paper and consider some of the key emergent metaphors that enscribe their leadership work. These metaphors are taken separately but in practice, these are not static ways of being or doing leadership; headteachers adopt multiple metaphors simultaneously, and sometimes these may shift over the period of a policy reform. Finally, we turn to a central matter; in our analysis we identified a range of metaphors relating to leadership in the primary school, many of which would be predictable such as the importance of relationships, support and trust. However, we did not find much evidence of critique; rather the emphasis was with pragmatic problem-solving and we reflect on why this might have been the case.

### **Headteachers as policy narrators**

A great deal of research has explored what is involved in headship and a lot of attention has focused on trying to elucidate and pin down the qualities that are involved in effective and successful headship – more commonly referred

to as leadership (Day, et al., 2016). As Bush and Glover (2014:567) point out in their review of empirical evidence of school leadership:

[T]he quality of leadership is a critical variable in securing positive school and learner outcomes. Leadership is second only to classroom teaching in its potential to generate school improvement.

In consequence, there is an overwhelming supply of books that exhort headteachers to improve their leadership as a touchstone for success. For example, there are titles like '*Leadership Matters: How leaders at all levels can create good schools*' (Buck, 2017), as well as texts like '*Lead like a pirate: make school amazing for your students and staff*' (Burgess and Haif, 2017) – a title that contains within itself an intriguing metaphor for headship as a form of buckaneering. There seems to be an almost insatiable demand for these sorts of texts based on the premise that the 'right kind' of leadership is the salvation for all schools.

Many of the models of what is taken to be effective headship are currently based on different typologies such as distributed leadership, collegial leadership and so on (Bush and Glover, 2014). According to Harris (2013) the dominant discourse of headship has centred on distributed leadership for some time; an approach where tasks are shared in ways that de-centre the role of the head. However, as Holmes et al. (2013:282) note, headteachers frequently have to respond rapidly to changing circumstances and new policy directives and the need to take action quickly may not 'always sit comfortably with principals' desire to avoid 'top down' decision-making'. They suggest that headteachers have a complex role to play in navigating sometimes competing and high-stakes demands; they also need to be able to take their staff with them.

In our earlier work on policy enactment in secondary schools, we argued that policy making in schools is a more fragile and unstable process than is sometimes detailed in research. We claimed that the type and level of the policy (mandated or optional for example), contextual factors such as finance

or facilities, as well as the different subjectivities, beliefs and values of in-school policy actors played a part in how policy got 'done' in school (Maguire, et al., 2014). Nevertheless, policy work is not open to boundless interpretations; policy enactments are 'creative and sophisticated but they are set within a logic of conformity and the imperatives of performance and competition' (Ball, et al., (2012: 97).

Being a policy narrator is a complex and potentially powerful role when policies are interpreted, translated and communicated to a range of people. Headteachers will not be the only policy narrators in educational contexts, but, in the final instance, headteachers are responsible for ensuring that their schools are compliant with mandated policies. The role of the headteacher as narrator is to tell/sell the main story and in the current policy landscape, headteachers in England may be caught up in tensions between autonomy and accountability (Bruns, *et al.*, 2011) and have much less space to be edu-heroes who challenge and resist aspects of policy that they are less comfortable with. However, in the stories that they tell, there may still be some scope for creative ways of working.

## **Study and methods**

In preparation for a larger study into the primary school setting in England, we conducted a small number of interviews with teachers in two primary schools. One school was in inner London; the second in a suburban location within Greater London. By selecting schools in contrasting locations we ensured different types of catchment areas, as our previous study in secondary schools showed that the needs of diverse intakes and communities played a part in how policies were enacted and leadership was understood (Braun et al. 2011). In this small-scale study, we were aiming for schools with an attainment record around local and national averages that were broadly considered as 'good' schools by the English school inspectorate. The two schools we selected were well established neighbourhood schools, run by

experienced headteachers George and Hazel, who we profile more fully below.

In our analysis of two extended and in-depth interviews with the headteachers, we undertake a form of narrative enquiry; that is, we will be trying to convey their experiences while taking account of the cultural and policy contexts in which they/we are located (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). A narrative approach recognises that interviews are co-constructions between the individuals concerned. Conversations between headteachers and university-based researchers will be imbued with power-relations, with hesitations, as well as with some needs/desires to produce the 'good' school, the 'good' headteacher as well as the 'good' researcher.

We wanted to listen to our headteachers' accounts about their work, what was important to them and how they managed in difficult policy moments. In talking of narratives – the head's stories - we recognise the complexities and contestedness that characterises discussions about what is involved in narrative enquiry (Livholts and Tamboukou, 2015). Our approach is based on the claim that personal meanings are constructed and reconstructed through the working and reworking of narratives. In telling stories we are actively engaged in 'creating meaning' (Atkinson, 2007, p. 232). Connelly and Clandinin (1990:2) have justified the use of narrative work as follows:

The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are story-telling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990: 2).

Thus, in this paper, from the perspectives of those leading this task, we explore how policy narration work is approached in English primary schools.

We used a system of open-coding to analyse these two extended interviews based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach of generating initial codes, searching and reviewing emergent themes. We then examined these themes and categories in relation to any metaphors for headship and leadership in the primary school. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's claim

(1980) that metaphors are not just linguistic devices, but technologies of reasoning and understanding, we wanted to tease out the ways in which headteachers deployed different tropes to explain what it is that they do. We did not ask the two headteachers to produce metaphors that described their policy work; in what follows we have ‘imposed’ our own metaphors on what they recounted to us. Before we turn to these metaphors more directly, we start by briefly positioning our two primary school headteachers.

### **Positioning the headteachers**

Hazel and George are in their mid fifties and early sixties respectively. Both have worked in primary schools for most of their working lives. George has been a headteacher in the same school since the late 1980s and Hazel has taught in her school for twenty three years and has been the head for the last six years. George’s school is located in an area of high deprivation in inner London. The intake is diverse with more than sixty languages being spoken by the children and their families. The school offers breakfast clubs, classes on Saturdays and holiday activities to support the local community. Hazel’s school has a less diverse intake, and the local community is relatively more prosperous compared with George’s school. George has retained a long-standing staff; Hazel has more difficulties in staffing as housing is expensive in her area. George and Hazel are strongly embedded in the social fabric of ‘their’ schools and their continuity of service makes a powerful contribution to the stability of the school and its place in the local community (Wheatley, 2006). It also means that their visions and their approaches to policy are deeply sedimented into the ways of working in their schools. They are intimately tied into and with the identity of their schools and are comfortable in their roles.

Hazel and George are recognised as successful leaders, exemplified by George’s role in his local authority and by Hazel being asked to become an executive head to care-take another primary school facing difficulties. In their interviews, both heads spoke positively about their schools, their parents, their teachers and their children.

## **Policy narration as branding**

The way headteachers do policy narration work will be influenced by the identity of their school; an identity or brand which they will have helped shape. George and Hazel talked about the cultures of their schools and while there were overlaps in their concerns to meet accountability demands, there were some differences in accent and approach. It is far too simplistic to see this identity/culture shaping work as a form of the sort of high-stake branding and marketing that captures time and money in the higher education sector (Bock, *et al.*, 2014); nevertheless, establishing and maintaining a school brand which will be reflected in documentation, in logos, and importantly, on the school website (Pauwels, 2011) is a key part of policy narration. It provides a rationale for explaining how some policies will be 'done', while other policies have to take a backseat. Branding helps to explain 'who we are and what we do':

It's changed over the years since I've been here. It always has had a very strong family/community feel. Its strengths have always been around the fact that it focuses on values, things like respect for all people, respect for yourself, doing the best that you can, all of those sorts of things... I know that we have had to change our culture, we have had to become more focused on academic results and making sure that those are achieved, and that has shifted our priorities. (Hazel)

In the last three years, the school had not done as well as it would have liked in its Ofsted inspection (graded as 'good' although wanting to be 'outstanding') and Hazel was focussing on attainment and standards far more than George, at least in relation to how both heads spoke about their work in school. Hazel focussed inwards on attainment; George spoke mainly about other dimensions of headship, particularly community relations:

And our parents' activities, we will have artists in residence, we run art classes for them, dance classes for them, cookery classes. We do things that they can come and enjoy themselves with, not necessarily



things that you come because you haven't got the right standard to do. And we do a lot of work with them and we have a lot of fun with them as well. We look after them. (George)

Both headteachers were invested in producing cultural narratives that stressed a child-sensitive, caring rhetoric of primary education (Nias, 2006) alongside the dominant government discourse of standards and deliverology. As experienced heads, they recognized the pressures involved in putting these conflicting factors into practice in their schools:

Well, I suppose what we'd rather be, or what we try to be, is a school that tries to teach children how to think, how to reason, how to prepare them for the future world... But we still have early years assessment, we still have Year 1 phonics, we still have Year 2 and Year 6 SATs overriding everything. (George)

In producing a narrative about their schools' identity, both heads spoke of the importance of working with their local communities and being caring and respectful of their families. This approach was part of their brand. Yet, as Bell and Stevenson (2015: 149) make clear, while policy may be made 'up there', its enactment 'down here' is not always a linear and straightforward matter.

### **Policy narration as persuasion**

Hazel and George are ultimately responsible for ensuring that their schools are policy-compliant and doing well in accountability measures as well as being affirming places for learning and teaching. If these tasks are not accomplished, they could be at risk of losing their jobs (Barton, 2018).

Leadership is a deeply moral process (Begley and Johansson, 2003), and we are not suggesting that headteachers are solely motivated by anxieties about their own career- although these anxieties must be deeply troubling at times. Hazel and George have to 'deliver the goods' and that means ensuring that they take their staff with them to achieve these accountability goals.

In what Hazel says, we see how her stress on building relationships in school works to promote trust, a key ingredient in effective leadership (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015; Seashore Louis and Murphy, 2017). Her hope is that when challenges appear on the school horizon, her teachers will trust her to do her best for everyone:

Many years ago on some leadership training that I did... (the tutor) said that there were only three things you needed to think about in leadership, and that is: relationships, relationships, and relationships. And I completely buy into that. And I have to say I invest a lot of time in building relationships with the staff so that they know that I trust them, they trust me. And, again, it sounds silly but it isn't because if you can get to the point that they do trust you, when you then have to introduce something that *isn't* popular, they will trust you and they will go with you. (Hazel)

George had been the head of his school for an extended period and was the longest serving member of the school's work-force. For this reason, he seemed to have an assured place in the school, a place where his voice would be evident and a powerful influence in deciding how things should be. He didn't speak about establishing trusting relationships in the way that Hazel had – but he did talk about interpersonal and inter-school support, "So we are very much a support structure for each other and we give unconditional support to each other".

In her school, Hazel sometimes had to persuade staff of the need to focus on attainment more directly:

So, for example, when I was saying about a sharper focus on English and maths, I shared that with the staff, I said, "We are a fabulous school, we're warm and fuzzy and lovely and we're all great with our children and they love us and we love them. But, however, we do need to remember we're a school and actually we're not doing our children any favours if we're not getting those really high standards, if we're not aiming high and having high expectations. And we do need

to think about English and maths more. And let's...how are we going to put this in the curriculum?" (Hazel)

Here we see an appeal to school culture and identity in order to persuade the staff of the need for a particular policy move that draws on emotions, trust and care. But there is a bottom line here – the need for 'good' outcomes.

In an in-depth study conducted with nine school leaders, Courtney and Gunter (2015: 412) found that one way in which heads were able to lead and 'persuade' and share the vision was through 'getting the right people on the bus', a 'seductive' metaphor intended to represent the ways in which headteachers can select (and remove) their staff. In this way, policy narrators can ensure that they are able to muster policy consensus and inspire loyalty in their staff which is essential in ensuring that all runs smoothly (Bush and Glover, 2014). In George's case, as a long-serving headteacher, he had appointed all his staff. Hazel had inherited some of her staff, people whom she had served with for some considerable time, although she had appointed the majority of her current staff. Thus the metaphor of policy narrator as persuader or even as brander could possibly be subsumed within the metaphor of getting and keeping the right people on the bus – those teachers more likely to share the vision and approach. In practice, there is likely to be a tension between getting and keeping staff, and getting and keeping staff who share the headteacher's vision - part of the 'messy reality' of life in schools.

### **Policy narration as not dropping the ball.**

We have detailed the constraints of the English primary school setting where there are numerous instances of datafication, testing and accountability demands as well as curriculum initiatives that have to be met (DfE, 2018). For instance, in English primary schools there are specific requirements related to the teaching of reading and English grammar that have to be enacted (Torgerson, et al., 2018). A major task for headteachers is to ensure that their school is compliant with mandated policy reforms (Holmes, et al. 2013; Bell

and Stevenson, 2015) regardless of their own views about the efficacy, or otherwise, of what has to be done. In portraying headteachers as jugglers who cannot afford to drop the ball, we are borrowing (to some extent) from Barber et al's (2016) work about the 'science' of needing to deliver results in an ever-changing high-demands policy landscape.

Hazel was aware of the rapid pace of policy change:

I mean, they are...they come fast and furious, they change all the time. We have a list of statutory policies, ones which must be published on your website, ones which you must have, and I have a folder up here.  
(Hazel)

She was not concerned so much with what she had to 'deliver' on as she seemed to accept this situation as a given and was pragmatically getting on with the job; she was somewhat dismayed about what this process of high-stakes accountability might be displacing:

I think it's right that the school had a sharper focus on English and maths and preparing children... And those I'm one hundred percent passionate about getting to a certain standard before they leave their primary school. And I don't think perhaps that we were sharply enough focused on those so that I don't object to. What I don't like is that the other is pushed out. (Hazel)

George was frank in what he saw as some of the gains for children from recent accountability and performance measures. Like Hazel, he did not describe any problems with working to raise children's attainment. He did express concerns about overt prescription and lack of autonomy:

Without a doubt the level of achievement and attainment has improved since the SATs came in and also – in a school like ours – and the quality of teaching has improved since Ofsted came along. And you would be a fool to say, no, it would all be better without it. If it was balanced, if we weren't completely dependent on the SATs – and your

reputation is dependent on the SATs – if we weren't dependent on what an Ofsted inspector says about your school, life would be a lot easier and perhaps schools that were really keen on moving their children forward and becoming good learners and good thinkers would do very, very well anyway. (George)

Both heads were comfortable with 'delivering' as they were committed to seeing the children make progress, part of their school culture and identity.

Hazel was less happy with a related policy, performance related pay, supposed to 'incentivise' teachers to raise their game (Storey, 2010). As she explained:

So depending on whether the teacher's practice is judged as 'requiring improvement' or 'good' or 'excellent practice', that relates to how many points they will increase on the pay scale. We've got to make decisions, I've got to make decisions, about what we could... about qualifying and quantifying how good progress... So I do think that teachers will be questioning: "You've said my class haven't made good progress, based on my data, and yet looking at the [children's work] books and looking at where...." I just think it's a nightmare. (Hazel)

Both headteachers recognized that the need to deliver 'good' results was ultimately their responsibility, and the practical question they faced was often how best to deliver while juggling a myriad number of policy demands; some mandated and others promoted as examples of 'best practice'. They took a pragmatic approach to doing policy rather than engaging in any more overt critique of what had to be achieved by the school. However, there is evidence of some strain caused by the 'fast and furious' production of high-stakes policy demands. In response, Hazel and George seem to have constructed narratives that enable them to reconcile any tensions through justifying the ends over the means (Hargreaves and Lowenhaupt, 2017) – deliverology demonstrated in children's raised attainment scores. In this scenario, their role was to keep all the policy balls in the air!

## **Policy narration and distributed leadership**

A great deal of the literature on headship, effective management and leadership speaks to the value of sharing responsibilities, coming to collective agreements and working collaboratively (Bush and Glover, 2014: Harris, 2013). As Spillane et al (2007:104) explain, 'a distributed perspective is not intended to negate or undermine the role of the school principal, but rather to extend our understanding of how leading and managing practice involves more than the actions of the school principal'. George and Hazel recognize that they need to co-opt and involve their teachers in order to enact policies effectively. As Hazel says: 'I think, as a leadership team, if you then build that culture of mutual respect and trust... it doesn't have to be me that's building it.'

George did not talk about how responsibilities were shared out in his school as directly as Hazel. Clearly, schools can only work effectively if they draw on principles of shared collegiality and dispersed leadership; there is far too much to get done and teachers have different expertise in different policy arenas such as SEND, early years provision and the ubiquitous need to raise attainment:

My role in the school is a monitoring role, it's a support role, it's someone to show enthusiasm for when staff need to move forward, someone to be there when staff need someone to help them, also to try and encourage people to work together in partnership together.  
(George)

At various places in this paper we have signalled a contradiction in the way that head teachers 'do' policy work in practice. Head teachers cannot do everything themselves and need to share policy tasks; however in the current policy landscape, according to Torrance (2017: 93), 'neo-liberalism produces responsibilisation... and far over-emphasises the individual nature of responsibility'. So, while primary teachers take a significant amount of responsibility for their children's outcomes, mediated by incentives such as performance related pay, head teachers face a tougher outcome - 'you lose

your job if examination results are inadequate' (Courtney and Gunter, 2015: 401). So delegation and distributed leadership may be partial, situated in practice and specific to policy requirements – a partially empty metaphor when it comes to the bottom line of raising attainment, or not!

### **Additional metaphors for headship and policy work**

In this paper, we have highlighted some of the key metaphors for policy narration that we identified from our coding and analysis of two primary school headteacher narratives. Some of these metaphors would be predictable to readers familiar with headship in the English primary school, and probably elsewhere too. All headteachers have to do policy work and cannot do this without the support and commitment of their classroom teachers. Trusting teachers and caring for them helps sustain staff in times of acute anxiety, where professional commitments can be called into question by policies that might seem to conflict with concerns about the well-being of children (Molina-Morales, *et al.*, 2011). Here we want to briefly consider some additional metaphors for understanding and illuminating how head teachers narrate policy work. For example, Hazel described some of her work as 'fighting':

Because I feel that I can fight my corner, because I will rely on book scrutiny (looking at the children's work-books), I will challenge anybody who's saying, you know, your data is showing that they're not making progress. (Hazel)

From George's narrative, what emerged consistently was his wider policy involvement and support for partner schools within his district:

We give support to other schools. We would not ask for any funding for it, we would work alongside as much as possible, our first aim would be to raise the staff morale and work alongside them to show that there's a way forward, and then do our best to just assist and help in a cooperative, helpful way. (George)

We run a number of courses at this school and we gave them [other schools] places on those courses to say “come along”,... I would be as supportive towards the heads as I could be in the sense that I’m in the fortunate position that things are working well for me and I know what it’s like when they don’t. (George)

George tended to speak more about the wider community aspects of his work rather than the more direct pedagogical processes that occupied Hazel. This may have had something to do with his long career as a headteacher; it may have been because his school was performing well, freeing him up to concentrate on an outwards-oriented role of headship that he was more engaged with and more excited about. He did however take a somewhat paternalistic approach towards aspects of his headship:

I look after my teaching staff the same way I look after my parents and my children. So if my teaching staff have any issues in relation to housing or partners or anything else I will give them the same level of concern and care I would give to any parent that comes in because I have a very high level of concern for them and I can honestly say I love my children greatly in this school and I love my staff, and I look after them as much as I can. (George)

In what he says, there is evidence of a metaphor of his work as parenting. There is a substantial literature on the complexity of being a primary school teacher as a form of ‘care’ and ‘mothering’ (Hauver James, 2010). It could be useful to pursue this metaphor further in relation to contemporary forms of headship in primary schools in these neo-liberal times. Does this care involve buffering staff from the travails of policy; is it patronising or paternalistic to some degree, is it even effective?

### **Policy metaphors and headship – discussion and conclusion**

In their review of managing educational change effectively, Holmes, et al. (2013) identified a number of factors that appear across most of the research.



These include the development of a shared vision, engendering trusting relations with staff, using different resources to solve problems; concentrating on teaching and learning as well as being responsive to various external requirements. In what Hazel and George have to say, it is evident that they both recognize the importance of these ingredients in doing headship and in doing policy work. This is evidenced above in our key metaphors for their policy work: branding; persuasion; not dropping the ball and distributed leadership. How these factors were accented by the two heads contrasted in some respects. Hazel was far more pragmatic and focused on attainment; George seemed more involved in his wider community work. However, had his school not been doing so well, things might have been very different. Thus, we would argue that there is a need to take seriously the situated realities that surround primary schools as these contextual matters play a powerful role in doing headship and in the metaphors that headteachers generate about this process; for example, 'fighting' or 'supporting'.

One of the difficulties and shortcomings of this paper is that we are only drawing on the narratives of two headteachers. A larger sample might have produced a different set of metaphors for headteachers' policy work. Another shortcoming is that we are only drawing on how the two headteachers narrate their policy work; we are not incorporating the comments of other teachers in Hazel or George's school and we are not using our own in-school observations of practices, branding artefacts, the school's websites or any other aspects of the material world of the two schools. We are simply working with the narratives that these two heads co-produced in two in-depth interviews with us. We ask what kind of selves are being claimed in these stories, and while it is clear that selves in stories are constructed, there are questions to be asked about how and why they are constructed/told in the way that they are. In particular, given the pressure of performance demands, accountability and tensions provoked by policies that might not always have sat well with aspects of their visions and philosophies (Braun and Maguire, 2018) why were their narratives configured in largely positive and 'can do' ways?

George and Hazel produced narratives that spoke to the traditional caring and community-focused worlds of the primary school. Both spoke warmly of their staff and the need to support their work. Both spoke straightforwardly about the need for good academic outcomes as well. However, neither headteacher spoke in ways that critiqued or questioned mandated policy work or stressed any negative policy aspects or anxieties other than in relation to inspections and accountability demands, and we want to explore possible reasons for why this might be the case. It may have been that Hazel and George felt professionally responsible for producing a positive account of how policy work was done in their school. They may have been used to sidelining or discounting any ambivalent or negative feelings – or not sharing these with others, seeing a positive approach as ‘being professional’ (Pratt-Adams and Maguire, 2009).

Crawford (2007) has written of the ways in which headteachers consciously work to produce the professional leader; one who defines and maintains ‘the boundaries of what is, and what is not, “appropriate emotional display”’ (Crawford, 2007, p. 96). Headteachers have a responsibility to tell a good story about their school. Additionally, headteachers may be working to stay emotionally ‘safe through comfortable, well-rehearsed generalisations’ that may be ‘part of a defensive strategy, a strategy of intellectualising, of ‘managing’ painfully confusing emotional experiences’ (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013: 31). Coutney and Gunter (2015:413) claim that headteachers’ vision work ‘is a compulsory activity of educational leadership and consists in school leaders implementing relentlessly the ideology of standards, and misrecognising the external provenance and homogeneity of this mission as contextual, personal and unique’ In consequence, they add that ‘busy and overworked headteachers are immunized from thinking politically’ (p.412).

We would argue that this ‘absence’ is also part of the policy narration approach that primary headteachers come to employ, in part as an emotional defence against acknowledging aspects of their role as almost impossible to bring off. Being a leader is about inspiration, commitment and coping

brilliantly; it is not about doubt or anxiety. The extent to which headteachers have to, and do, adopt and internalize performance management is evident in what Hazel and George say about the need to do well in national tests; if this is accomplished, then there may be space for other policy work.

In our search for metaphors through which to analyse the policy narratives of these two primary headteachers, we want to underline that what gets narrated in interviews will be influenced by situational constraints, and by aspects of identity and axes of differences between the conversationalists such as age, gender and status. Interviews are performances and headteachers will want to defend against any researcher's judgements so they will be careful in what they say – this is part of their professional repertoire. They will also be extremely experienced in producing positive and affirming narratives about their work and their school. Perhaps then our final metaphor for heads doing policy work is that, of being an artist and writer; they have to engage in painting a good picture and telling a good story, in ways that help them make meanings of and understand their working lives to sustain their children, their staff, their parents and, not least of all, themselves.

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