

CRITICAL STUDIES IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP,  
MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION

# Educational Leadership

Theorising Professional Practice  
in Neoliberal Times

Edited by

Steven J. Courtney, Ruth McGinity and  
Helen M. Gunter



‘This powerful book provides its readers with a rich and productive range of theoretical lenses drawn from the social, political, and organizational sciences to make sense of educational leadership as a professional practice in these troubling times. One of the most powerful contributions is how it captures the tensions and dilemmas for leadership practitioners as they attempt to straddle the (il)logic of practice that characterizes the contemporary education field. The book stands as a testimony to and repudiation of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM): the book’s site of practice may lie in Anglophone nations, but the dilemmas and contradictions it speaks to reach far beyond their shores. There are lessons to be learned from this book for educational practitioners from a range of nations – it is a compelling book, which should be read by scholars and practitioners in the field.’

—Jane Wilkinson, Associate Professor Educational Leadership and Associate Dean, Graduate Education, Faculty of Education, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

‘This excellent book will be of help to anyone researching educational leadership, but also head teachers and other educational leaders who want or need to confront the difficult question of what sort of leader it is possible to be in current arrangements. Educational leadership has always been important, but the last 15 years have seen a profound and far-reaching elevation of it, especially in England. It is now seen as *the* key to a successful school. At the same time, there are crises in recruiting and retaining head teachers, and evidence of unprecedented stress. This paradox is one of the foundations for this book, and one of the main reasons it is so important. By presenting a diverse yet coherent series of examples of scholarship driven by critical theory, it offers ways to make sense of the interplay of policy, agency, and structure.

A particularly welcome feature is the incisive engagement with the concealed theory behind policy: the sort of theorizations that claim they are nothing to do with theory, but rather ‘common sense’, or the realm of the ‘practical’. This endlessly and deliberately refreshed element of neoliberal thinking has to be the starting-point for anyone that really cares about the nature and quality of education and its effects, or who is worried or affected by the pressure to force these things into the simplistic reckoning of examination results. Yet the book goes further than this, offering insight and imagination, pointing the way to more hopeful reconceptualizations of leadership and to opportunities for challenge and change. I wholeheartedly recommend it.’

—David James, Professor, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, UK



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# Educational Leadership

*Educational Leadership* brings together innovative perspectives on the crucial role of theory and theorising in educational leadership at a time when the multiple pressures of marketisation, competition and system fragmentation dominate the educational landscape. This original and highly thought-provoking edited collection is a much-needed counterbalance to the anti-theoretical trends that have underpinned recent education reforms.

Contributors employ a range of theories in original and innovative ways to reveal the lived experiences of what it means to be an educational leader at a time of rapid modernisation, where the conceptual terrain of ‘modern’ has been appropriated by corporate and private interests, where notions of ‘public’ are not only hidden, but also derided, and where school leaders must meet the conflicting demands of competing accountabilities. Drawing on research projects conducted in the UK, *Educational Leadership* presents convincing evidence that the need to consider theory crosses national borders, and the authors discuss changes to professional identities and practices that researchers around the world will recognise.

This detailed and insightful work will appeal to academics, researchers and postgraduate students in the fields of education and sociology, as well as those with an interest in organisational and political theory. The topical subject matter also makes the book of relevance to practitioners and policy-makers in education and the public services more generally.

**Steven J. Courtney** is Lecturer in Management and Leadership at the Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, UK. His research brings socially critical and theoretical approaches to bear on the intersection of education policy, particularly concerning structural reform, and school leaders’ identities and practices.

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This series draws on social and political theories from selected key thinkers and activists to develop critical thinking leadership tools. Each text uses the work of a particular theorist or theoretical approach, explains the theory, suggests what it might bring to the ELMA field, and then offers analysis and case studies to show how the tools might be used. Every book also offers a set of questions that might be used by individual leaders in their own practices, and in areas of further research by ELMA scholars.

In elaborating the particular approaches, each of the books also suggests a professional and political agenda which addresses aspects of the tensions and problems created by neoliberal and neoconservative policy agendas, and the on-going need for educational systems to do better for many more of their students than they do at present.

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**Educational leadership: Theorising Professional Practice  
in Neoliberal Times**

*Edited by Steven J. Courtney, Ruth McGinity and Helen Gunter*

# **Educational Leadership**

Theorising Professional Practice in  
Neoliberal Times

**Edited by**

**Steven J. Courtney, Ruth McGinity  
and Helen M. Gunter**

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# Contents

<i>List of tables and figure</i>	ix
<i>Common series foreword</i>	x
JILL BLACKMORE, HELEN GUNTER, PAT THOMSON	
<i>Foreword</i>	xvii
DAVID HARTLEY	
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xxii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xxiii
<i>List of contributors</i>	xxv
<b>1 Introduction: theory and theorising in educational leadership</b>	<b>1</b>
STEVEN J. COURTNEY, RUTH MCGINITY AND HELEN M. GUNTER	
<b>2 Theory sex to leadership heteroglossia: using gender theories to surface discourses of headteacher compliance and transgression</b>	<b>12</b>
KAY FULLER	
<b>3 Re-figuring the world of educational leadership: struggles with performance, disenfranchisement and critical consciousness</b>	<b>27</b>
LINDA HAMMERSLEY-FLETCHER	
<b>4 Theorising senior leader identity in schools in areas of economic hardship</b>	<b>42</b>
ADRIAN LYTHGOE	
<b>5 Negotiating meaning in multiple communities of practice: reconciliation and dis-identification in the identity work of headteachers leaving Anglican primary schools</b>	<b>56</b>
DAPHNE WHITEOAK AND PAT THOMSON	



<b>6 Leadership and the power of others: re-thinking educational leadership with Magical Marxism and Spinoza</b>	<b>71</b>
JAMES R. DUGGAN	
<b>7 Re-thinking governmentality: lessons from the academisation project in England</b>	<b>85</b>
STEPHEN M. RAYNER	
<b>8 Creating expert publics: a governmentality approach to school governance under neoliberalism</b>	<b>97</b>
ANDREW WILKINS	
<b>9 Hannah Arendt, judgement and school leadership</b>	<b>111</b>
DONALD GILLIES	
<b>10 Interpreting historical responses to racism by UK Black and South Asian headteachers through the lens of generational consciousness</b>	<b>124</b>
LAURI JOHNSON	
<b>11 Behind and beyond “moral purpose” in contemporary school leadership reform: the challenges for critical research?</b>	<b>138</b>
STEPHEN ROGERS	
<b>12 Conclusion: educational leaders and leadership re-theorised for the present and beyond</b>	<b>151</b>
STEVEN J. COURTNEY, RUTH MCGINITY AND HELEN M. GUNTER	
<i>Index</i>	<b>167</b>

# Tables and figure

## Tables

3.1 Participants' role and data-gathering method	31
10.1 Pioneer BAME headteachers	126

## Figure

5.1 Expectations other members have of headteachers mapped against the dimensions of Anglican school headship	64
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# Common series foreword

Examine any government or professional association website, and the international lexicon is clear – leadership, vision, distributed leadership, autonomy, professional development . . . If the website references the source of these ideas, chances are that some of the same authors' names appear. We are sure that we would not have found this homogeneity thirty years ago. While there was an international circulation of educational ideas and texts in the educational leadership, management and administration (ELMA) field, the development of a celebrity leadership culture promoted by international gurus with modernizing know-how is a new phenomenon. It is worth considering why this might be the case. We think immediately of four possible reasons.

- (1) Leadership now encompasses all aspects of 'continuous educational improvement'. All professionals (and increasingly children and young people as well) are identified as leaders, doing leading and exercising leadership. Headteachers, or principals, are deemed repositories of leadership that they do or do not 'distribute' to others to enable 'delivery' to be 'maximized'. All educational professionals are spoken to or about as school leaders, often without reference to role titles, and so just about everyone is potentially included as consumers of leadership ideas and models.
- (2) There is now a much greater focus on leadership development. Education policymakers from the right and left communicate understandings that if policies are to be implemented then they need leaders at the local level to make that happen. Many have also decided that they only need to provide directions for change and frameworks for what is to be done, then devolve the means to secure resources necessary to the local leader.
- (3) Systems now assume that they need to be seen to be using 'world's best practice'. National governments are highly conscious of their place in international league tables, and their national credibility rests on being able to show some kind of 'continued improvement'. They are extremely vulnerable to media portrayals of 'failing' schools and/or systems. They believe that there are international 'solutions' to local problems which may appear not dissimilar to problems in other jurisdictions.

- (4) There now seems to be a self-promoting and mobile leadership industry made up of knowledge producers and popularisers located in private companies, universities and schools. This leadership industry has made significant interventions in all spheres of activity, including in education and in educational leadership. A select range of academics and consultants, the travelling leadership entrepreneurs, offer a set of tailor-made, as well as off-the-peg, ‘solutions’ to individuals, organisations and governments. These solutions are sold as transnational, evidence-based and transferable across all contexts.

The readiness of the leadership industry to provide policy and professional solutions creates a situation in which it seems, if one examines the kinds of training on offer to potential school leaders, that there is one best way to do leading and leadership, and to be a leader.

The promotion of policy anxiety, leadership and entrepreneurial activity is not necessarily, we suggest, a virtuous circle. We call this conjunction of interconnected educational reform drivers the Transnational Leadership Package (TLP).

### **The emergence of the TLP**

The TLP is not a homogenous body of work or people. It is derived from different national and cultural settings. It draws on a range of intellectual histories and practice traditions in different national contexts within ELMA. There are distinct, but interrelated intellectual lineages within the field of ELMA which can be backtracked from contemporary concerns to particular historical contexts and theoretical origins. We call these lineages, paradigms. ELMA paradigms cannot be easily disconnected from each other, either theoretically or chronologically, as different approaches were often developed differently in different places and at different times, in response to the failure, or lack of explanatory power, of earlier paradigms. The ELMA paradigms, each with their own internal logics, can be roughly depicted as:

- (i) the US adoption of the Ford manufacturing Taylorist principles of **scientific management** (standardisation, specialisation, synchronisation, concentration, maximisation and centralisation) as the ‘factory model’ to emulate in schooling during the 1920s. Its later renditions are the school effectiveness and school improvement movements (SESI), and this is now interlocked with education policy through the imposition, across the entire public sector, of private sector market principles in the form of New Public Management (NPM). The core principles underpinning the resulting corporatisation, managerialisation, privatisation and marketisation of schooling are competition and compliance, efficiency and effectiveness. Aggregated data – school rankings and comparisons – are central to this push.
- (ii) the post-war **human relations** movement, again largely US driven. This movement recognised how supportive social relations and participative

decision-making informed productivity. This human relations paradigm has re-emerged in the 21st century as the therapeutic turn, where emotional intelligence and managing interpersonal relations and intercultural communication are now seen as core leadership skills, rather than a display of weakness. This paradigm informs the move away from the provision of public services through institutions towards brokerage, contracts and partnerships. Notably it is visible in the contemporary organizational and pedagogic discourse about personalised provision, choice and wellbeing/resilience.

- (iii) the **US theory movement** of the 1960s sought to establish ELMA as a value free science. This paradigm has been ever present in ELMA, but has gained new clout through the contemporary focus on large-scale quantitative studies, evidence-based/informed practice and data-driven decision-making. Prime examples of this trend are the involvement of TLP in the USA *No Child Left Behind* policy, and *Every Child Matters* in England.
- (iv) the **experiential or pragmatic perspective** of the UK tradition which derived from a strong practitioner orientation and apprenticeship model of leadership. This has recently re-emerged in the ‘what works’ discourse in England when leadership accreditation and training provisions were taken up by governments, and as teacher education is pushed back into schools.
- (v) the **socially critical, neo-Marxist and feminist perspectives**, emerging predominantly from the geographical margins of Australia, New Zealand and Canada during the 1980 and 1990s. These are now being reinvigorated with the revival of social justice as a leadership issue, given the marked growth of educational inequality in and between both developed and developing nation states who adhere to austerity policy regimes and re-energised nationalisms. This book series is located within this tradition.

There is now a convergence of the ELMA paradigms. This has occurred at the same time as what are loosely called ‘neoliberal’ policies have spread from the Anglophone nation states to Asia, the Middle East, Mexico, South Africa and South America. Key aspects of the neoliberalist agenda are virtually enforced by international bodies such as the IMF, World Bank and OECD, and results of international standardised testing such as PISA are now a crucial reference point for policymakers in most countries in the world. This policy spread has been made possible in part through the advocacy work of knowledge and know-how entrepreneurs whose activity informs, and is sometimes commissioned by, these international agencies. The result is a conjunction of ELMA paradigms in preferred models such as transformational leadership, which is simultaneously about delivery, an emotional commitment to the delivery and a predictive evidenced based process to delivering the delivery! Tactical and pragmatic mediations of ELMA paradigms may occur in some countries, such as England, but in the main these inform and communicate vision and mission for localized implementation.

ELMA can now be understood as a transnational field of educational research, with a recognizable lexicon, key players and logics of practice. This is the case regardless of whether we are looking at the TLP, other ELMA scholars somewhat

separate from it, or socially critical scholars. Across ELMA generally the trend is towards both standardisation and normalisation as to what constitutes good leadership through the development of leadership training programmes and professional standards nationally – a shift away from post-occupancy professional development to leadership preparation, in some instances requiring certification. Scholars from the fifth and critical paradigm are also positioned by these developments and engage in the kinds of deconstructive and reconstructive work that is the purpose of this book series. Indeed, we have briefed our authors to engage in this process so that the problematisation of the field of ELMA and its relationship with the TLP are central to the engagement with theory and theorising.

The convergence of ELMA paradigms has also been actively produced by particular scholars and professionals through selective eclecticism and the appropriation of a set of concepts in response to both the multiple and complex challenges of school leadership and opportunities offered by anxious governments. This production, products and producers are what we refer to as the TLP.

The TLP is not the same as ELMA. It brings together concepts and practices that were formerly confined to particular localities and institutions into a particular ‘saleable’ and mobile form. The result is an assemblage of ideas and activities that focus primarily on the needs of educational systems and national governments. These do not necessarily meet the needs of individual schools, their students or their communities. The package is in fact constantly repackaged and contains a few genuinely new ideas but plenty of normative rhetoric about the urgency to buy and use.

The TLP consists of three mutually supporting strands:

- (1) a set of policy prescriptions based on the experiences of consultants working in contractual (and often informal) partnerships with governments and agencies in particular jurisdictions, mostly North America, Australia and New Zealand, England, and PISA success story, Finland. There are ready-made sound bites in this strand combined with the authority of ‘best practice’.
- (2) a series of meta-analyses and effectiveness studies, whose impressive statistical manipulations mostly boil down to saying that if you want to improve students’ learning then you have to focus on how teachers and classroom practice can ‘deliver’ higher outcome standards – and not on networks, teams or devolution of funding since these alone won’t produce the desired test result improvements.
- (3) a cultural professional deficit where the identification of problems, agenda setting and strategizing is often perceived as rightly located outside of the school, and where notions of professional agency are reduced to tactical localized delivery. However, some TLP manifestations have taken up the Finland exemplar to argue that a well-qualified and intellectually active teaching force is vital, and that too much emphasis on testing and league tabling is counter-productive. However, the role of leaders remains the same in both versions, as does the primary goal of meeting system needs.

The TLP provides a kind of (largely) Anglocentric, IKEA flat-pack of policy ‘levers’ that will produce the actions and effects that count in national elections and international testing. While modern but cheap, it is worth ‘buying into’ largely because to be seen as different is risky.

However, there is considerable debate about whether these objectives meet the needs of schools, communities, teachers and students in countries as diverse as Denmark, South Africa, Canada, Wales and Singapore. At a time when populations in many countries are also becoming more diverse and less egalitarian, it is not clear that the TLP is up to the challenge.

We are not arguing here that the international circulation of ideas and people is to be discouraged. Obviously, finding out what others are doing can be very helpful as means of generating new perspectives. The debate and discussion that occur when people with different positions come together are A Good Thing. However, we think it is ironic that at the same time as national governments and transnational agencies are concerned to maintain diversity of plants, animals and habitats, precisely the opposite is occurring with education policy ideas and practices. ‘Good’ leadership features prominently among one-best global prescriptions and representations. Many ELMA scholars not in the TLP, including those from critical paradigm, suggest that there is no one best way of leading or changing a school and that the models of transnational ‘success’ need to promote diverse approaches that are tailored to local needs histories and circumstances.

We take the view that what is needed in education is more than PISA envy and ‘what works’. Prescribing a set of steps that governments and leaders can take, regardless of wherever and whoever they are, eliminates one of the most significant educational resources we have – our capacity to understand, analyse and imagine within our local contexts. It is a fine irony that these intellectual practices are precisely the ones that education systems are designed to inculcate in the next generation.

In these times, those who are engaged in *educational* leadership need, more than ever, to think about their work – its purposes and processes as well as its effects and outcomes. Our emphasis is on the *educational* where the knowledge, skills and processes that constitute professional practice are located in teaching and learning; these provide the basis for leading and managing. This series of books aims to support this kind of reflective *educational* work.

Each volume will focus on the conceptual tools and methodologies of particular social science theory and theorists. We draw on scholarship from sociology, anthropology, philosophy, politics and cultural studies in order to interrogate, interrupt and offer alternative ideas to the contemporary versions of TLP and the broader field of ELMA. The series provides theoretical and methodological options for those who are engaged in the formal study of educational leadership, management and administration. It provides alternative resources for naming, framing and acting for those who are engaged in the practice of educational leadership, management or administration, or who are providing training and policy for practising educational leaders.

## **The book series as critical thinking tools**

This series of books might at first glance seem to be very removed from the kinds of pressures we have described. However, our motivation for generating the series is highly practical. We take the view that now, more than ever, leading any educational institution requires intellectual work. Educational professionals must, in our view, be able not simply to follow policy prescriptions. In order to do the work of leading and leadership, educational professionals need to be able to: critically analyse policy directions, assess and evaluate their own institution and its local national and international contexts; not only understand how and why particular educational issues come to be centre stage while others are sidelined but also communicate this to others; call on a rich set of ideas in order to develop directions for the institution in particular and for education more generally. This requires, among other things, a set of critical thinking tools. These are not all that are required, but they are an essential component of professional practice.

This series draws on social and political theories from selected key thinkers and activists to develop some critical thinking leadership tools. Every theory has particular affordances, as well as lacunae and partialities. None is total and all encompassing. However, each of the theoretical approaches taken up in the books offers ways for both practitioners and researchers to approach ELMA problems, consider their taken-for-granted assumptions and to re-think how they might be probed, empirically explored and re-framed.

There are two kinds of texts in this series. The first are monographs, and the second edited collections. Each monograph uses the work of a particular theorist or theoretical approach, explains the theory, suggests what it might bring to the ELMA field and then offers analysis and case studies to show how the tools might be used. Each also offers a set of questions that might be used by individual leaders in their own practices and some possible areas for further research by ELMA scholars. Edited books are organised around a particular leadership-related topic and bring a range of authors from different parts of the world and a diverse set of theoretical resources. An edited book thus shows the benefits of different intellectual resources – rather than there being a ‘one best theory’ to apply to ELMA questions, the edited books embody theoretical possibilities, each of which offers particular insights and practical implications.

In elaborating the particular approaches, all of the books also suggest a professional and political agenda which addresses aspects of the tensions and problems created by neoliberal and neoconservative policy agendas and by the ongoing need for educational systems to do better for many more of their students than they do at present.

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Jill Blackmore, Helen Gunter, Pat Thomson  
Series Editors

# Foreword

The early years of the neoliberal makeover of schooling coincided with the re-emergence of rational control rhetorics in the management of education, rhetorics last deployed in the 1940s and 1960s when the writ of systems rationalism had run. Management by objectives (MBO) was one such example. Later, the mantras of the 1980s and '90s resonated with those of business process re-engineering, downsizing and outsourcing practices which were being imposed in the wider economy. The vocabulary was “robust”, even “macho”. It did not sit well with education professionals who, at the time, were regarding themselves as “reflective practitioners”; and this was especially the case for those academics within educational administration who had parked themselves comfortably within the paradigm of interpretivism, and who had followed the flag of phenomenology which had been unfurled by Thomas Barr Greenfield in the 1970s. In its early formulations, the reflective practitioner focused not only upon personal reflections on the technical aspects of teaching, but also – to a lesser extent – prompted critical reflection on the structural conditions in which that practice occurred. In the former endeavour, individual professionals reflected upon, and brought to the surface, the tacit knowledge which informed their professional practice. But the latter endeavour – critical reflection – was soon to be sidelined by the government-mandated pedagogical templates which were introduced in the late 1980s. Thereafter “best practice” superseded reflective practice.

In order to jar the educators from their reflective navel-gazing, right-leaning governments in the United Kingdom and the United States decided to inject them with a dose of Darwinism. Exposing schools to competition would “drive up” standards. In 1991, President Reagan declared that the United States was a *Nation at Risk*, and that schools were largely to blame, because their standards were slipping when compared to those in the emergent Pacific-rim economies. In the United Kingdom (or in England, at least), the education system was said to have succumbed to “producer-capture” and to self-serving interests. In the eyes of the neoliberal New Right, the education system was regarded as unnecessarily bureaucratic, and given to woolly minded progressivism. Viewed from the perspective of both economic neoliberals and traditional conservatives, these were dark days for education.

A substitution was needed: producer-capture should be set aside in favour of the consumer or user. Market forces should be applied to schooling, under the guise of “choice”, a term which associated easily with the expression “freedom to choose”, the allusion to “freedom” giving it an air of democracy. Choosing, moreover, is a pre-condition of consuming, of shopping, which was soon to become a national pastime for those who could afford it. In this way, the parent-as-consumer “bought into” the reforms. But it was not real ownership; it was merely a “sense” of ownership. Central control over education was to be re-asserted. In England (not Scotland), the legislative framework for all this was the 1988 Education Reform Act: it enshrined local management of schools (known in the United States as school-based management); school-choice for parents; and a national curriculum and national testing. The United States watched with interest, and policy-makers there subsequently coalesced around the ideas of John Chubb and Terry Moe whose *Politics, Markets and America’s Schools* was published in 1990. Lacking the power to pass nation-wide legislation in education, the United States was to set great store by state-legislated “school-choice” policies. But in England, the mandarins and the marketeers had cut a deal: more power for central-government mandarins to hold the reins of curriculum and pedagogy; more power for neoliberal policy-makers to sideline elected local government officials, and thereby to fracture and to transform educational structures, now conveniently renamed as “providers”.

At first glance, this alliance between government mandarins and neoliberal, market-driven policy-makers appeared to be contradictory. The former represented public-service bureaucracy, the latter espoused the free market; the former regarded education as a public good, the latter deemed it to be a positional good. Marketisation was supposed to “free” schools from bureaucracy but did no such thing. It increased bureaucratic accountability; that is to say, it demanded the standardisation of objective, recordable, comparable and easily communicated data on school performance so as to enable the informed parent to “choose” rationally a school in the local marketplace, provided that a place was available. We may note in passing that all this is a choice of schools. The consumer here is the parent, not the pupil. Put differently, simultaneously the forces exerted upon the education system became centrifugal *and* centripetal: centrifugal because, in addition to local-government schools, there has been a proliferation of other types – academy schools, for example – which are owned by a hodge-podge of faith groups, philanthropists and financiers (Courtney, 2015); and centripetal, because the hand of the government’s regulatory agencies, such as the then Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), weighed heavily upon the shoulders of school leaders and teachers. Whereas before the institution of schooling had structured a semblance of social cohesion in society, since 2000 it has spawned a stressed-out plethora of divergent (and unequal) providers, each seeking its market niche, each peddling its unique brand-identity, each mindful of its potential to be the prey or predator of other schools.

These new forms of accountability – to the market and to national regulatory agencies – have reduced profoundly the professional discretion which

headteachers had enjoyed hitherto. Some have argued that local management of schools – and later, academies – extended their financial control of school budgets and contractual arrangements. That limited financial freedom was the pay-off for their compliance. In order to retrieve some of their professional discretion (autonomy is perhaps too strong a term), teachers and headteachers (soon to be re-branded as “leaders”) had to meet regulatory standards and procedures. No longer were they invested with professional discretion; they had to earn it. No longer was the funding of education regarded as an up-front public investment which was entrusted to them; funding was to follow performance, as defined and monitored by government agencies. And the results were made public in the form of easily transmitted measures. Here emerges a “no excuses” mindset. Naming, shaming and blaming awaited “failing schools” and the leaders and teachers within them.

In sum, what emerged was an array of accountabilities whose component parts are incompatible. But somehow, they have to be reconciled with each other, and this task has fallen to school leaders to manage. First, there is *professional accountability*: that is, accountability both to themselves as individual professionals and to their teaching colleagues. Second, there is *market accountability* to the would-be “consumers” of their school’s “offer”; and in some cases, to the sponsors of those schools. Third – and in relation to market accountability – there is, increasingly, *corporate accountability* to governing bodies wherein financial, technical and legal acumen are highly prized, all at the relative expense of parental and community representation on boards of governors. Fourth, there is the imperative of *bureaucratic accountability* to government regulators who generate an increasing amount of big data by which school leaders can continually take the measure of both themselves (has there been “improvement” in the school over a period of time?) and of others (how does the school compare with other similar schools?).

Each of these modes of accountability has its own linguistic repertoire and symbolic code. Professional accountability may dwell on ideals to do with social justice and a concern for others, and with a sense of vocation and commitment. These notions reside easily within a discourse of humanism. Under market accountability, the published measures of a school’s performance are meant to be the basis of its rational appeal. The choice of a school by a parent is supposed to be made on the basis of the published facts about it. But notwithstanding the publication of measured school-performance data, a creative symbolisation of the school’s identity can form the basis of an emotional appeal to parents. A school’s identity is not simply data-driven: it has to be branded and marketed.

Bureaucratic accountability is the cool counter-weight to professional accountability. But not completely: schools are large and complex organisations wherein many reside in a confined space over a long period of time. Their management requires a degree of calculation and formality. They need to be predictable to some extent, which is why their “grammar” – their organising code – has remained remarkably constant. But a consequence of legislation which allowed for local management of schools and academies has been to expand and to