



Educational Leadership

*Ambiguity,
Professionals
& Managerialism*

ERIC HOYLE & MIKE WALLACE



*Educational Leadership:
Ambiguity, Professionals and Managerialism*

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Education Leadership: Ambiguity, Professionals and Managerialism

Eric Hoyle and Mike Wallace



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Preface

We have selected *irony* as the organizing concept of this book because it offers a link between our five main concerns.

Our first concern is to bring to the fore a perspective on organizations that has existed for some time but has remained marginal to the prescriptive leadership and management literature. This perspective acknowledges that organizations are characterized by ambiguities, dilemmas and incommensurable values. It recognizes that such characteristics are endemic. This is particularly so in educational organizations, on which we focus. The goals of educational organizations are both diverse and diffuse. They lead inevitably to the irony of unintended (as well as intended) consequences of well-intentioned actions. In the past, leaders and managers in state-funded schools have been content to live with the ironies of organizational life. They now have less of an option since the underlying purpose of educational reforms has been to eliminate ambiguity through tightly specifying the work of headteachers and teachers, coupled with equally tight surveillance and punitive measures for failure to meet this specification.

Our second concern is to engage with the unintended consequences of the prevailing approach to the management of change: policy initiatives promulgated by central government coupled with the expectation that they will be efficiently implemented through strengthened leadership and management at the school level. Policies may be designed to improve learning and teaching, or to strengthen organizational leadership and management as a means of improving the educational activity that leadership and management support. While the raft of policies has brought considerable changes in structures and procedures in the education system, the core of the educational enterprise – learning and teaching – has remained relatively untouched. The irony here lies in the fact that, as each successive policy initiative comes to be seen as having brought unintended consequences, the response has been to develop corrective policies – which have themselves generated further unintended consequences.

Our third concern is to suggest that the rhetoric currently dominating the discourse of policy and of leadership and management, encapsulated in the term ‘transformation’, is largely a myth. The irony here is that school staff are being urged to be ‘transformational’, implying the achievement of radical change, under conditions that actually constrain their opportunities for achieving change. Transformation at the school level means, in practice, finding more efficient ways of implementing government policy.

Our fourth concern is to suggest that most headteachers and teachers have not wholly rejected recent educational reforms nor offered overt resistance, but have mediated government policies to render them congruent with the needs of students in individual schools in particular contexts. The irony here is that headteachers and teachers, through a stance of principled infidelity, are implementing policies that would not have worked if their prescriptions had been faithfully followed. In the interests of their students, headteachers and teachers are moderating the negative unintended consequences of central government policies.

Our fifth concern is to suggest that perhaps a majority of headteachers and teachers are bringing to their work a scepticism towards government policies, a pragmatic approach towards their implementation, a sense of contingency in their relevance, and a constructivist approach to learning and teaching collaboratively pursued. These are some of the manifestations of what we have termed an ‘ironic orientation’, an approach that we endorse.

Having briefly set out our purposes, it is necessary to indicate some of the considerations that have gone into writing what is unapologetically a ‘position’ book. In no way do we pretend to offer a detached account of the contemporary educational scene. For this reason we have written in the first person plural throughout.

Our stance is sceptical but not cynical. There are no villains in the book. We believe that politicians, government advisers, inspectors, administrators, headteachers and teachers generally act in good faith and with a genuine desire to improve educational quality. However, it will be clear that our sympathies lie with those headteachers and teachers who persist, despite the power of external forces, in doing their best for their students as far as circumstances allow. We want to celebrate their efforts and to rescue these from their *samizdat* status.

The term ‘leadership’ has only recently overtaken the term ‘management’ in political and practitioner discourse as the main descriptor for what is entailed in running and improving public service organizations. We recognize the distinction between leadership (making new things happen) and management (keeping new and existing things on track). However, because of the ambiguity in meanings of leadership and management we

have throughout used the two terms in conjunction except where we are specifically dealing with differences. The conjoined terms equate to the single term ‘administration’ as used in North America over a long period.

We are not advancing a theory, constructing a model, reviewing a literature, presenting a body of research data, or offering a set of procedural recommendations. We are simply offering an invitation to engage in a discussion. Hence we draw on an eclectic range of data and on a range of personal experiences in telling our story. Our approach is one of informed speculation.

It must be stressed that we believe in the importance of school leadership and management. Schools need positive leadership and it is vital that they are effectively managed. We are concerned that school leaders and managers should have a suitable preparation for their difficult roles. But while we have no reservations about the importance of effective leadership and management, we do have reservations about managerialism – leadership and management to excess – because it is more likely to create problems for headteachers and teachers than to solve them.

We fully recognize both that central government has a mandate to improve state funded education, and that attempting to bring about the necessary large-scale change is highly complex. But in our view the prevailing strategy is flawed because it underestimates the importance of headteacher and teacher agency and limits room for manoeuvre in school settings.

Our approach is somewhat downbeat in that we do not prescribe what should be done. We offer no ‘magic bullet’ in the mode of many books to be found on airport bookstalls – most of which are probably abandoned by their purchasers on the arrival of the drinks trolley. In fact, our underlying argument is that the idea that there could be a ‘magic bullet’ for solving educational problems is wishful thinking. It follows that there is a need for a massive scaling down of the number and frequency of policy initiatives designed to eradicate ambiguity, and a complementary need to search for ways of reducing the press of leadership and management in schools.

We are very conscious of the forces that would have to be overcome in reducing managerialism. We identify two in particular. One is the decline of trust within society. What might be called ‘the tragedy of the professions’ is that they have clung to their self-interested practices for so long that politicians have over-reacted in their mistrust of professions, and clients have become over-ready to turn to litigation. Yet we do not abandon the possibility of sustaining a principled professionalism. The other barrier is the effect of career patterns favouring those who can display managerial credentials and fluency in the managerial discourse, which understandably makes it difficult for many to deviate from managerialist expectations.

Our 'case' is state funded schooling within the educational system of England and Wales, the source of most of our examples. But our account could equally apply to other public – and perhaps private – services in Britain and in other countries. Ambiguity is endemic in all organizations. Out of ambiguity arises irony. Overzealous attempts to remove ambiguities make life more difficult for front-line practitioners. An ironic orientation allows them to live with the external pressures imposed upon them. They continue to obtain job satisfaction, not from attending the ever-increasing number of committee meetings or completing ever-growing amounts of paperwork, but from doing their best for the people they serve in their contingent circumstances. We hope to contribute to the growing discussion of these issues.

The book is timely. There are signs of a growing recognition of the dysfunctions of managerialism, particularly in terms of its impact on the workload of teachers, growing work-dissatisfaction, and the consequent problems of teacher recruitment and retention. Some politicians are coming to realize that the huge expenditure on accountability is having at best only a marginal impact on learning and teaching. It is thus highly cost ineffective, since the investment is largely in structural change and in accountability procedures. On the other hand, we accept that many politicians may find it difficult to abandon the belief that yet another policy initiative will put matters right. We aspire therefore to offer reassurance to those headteachers and teachers whose method of coping with current pressures is through what we term an ironic orientation.

Our concerns are addressed in the book through a four-part structure. Part One introduces our approach to irony and demonstrates its generic applicability to education. Chapter 1 conceives irony in terms of unintended consequences and defines the key concepts of our ironic perspective. Chapter 2 explores diverse sources of endemic ambiguity, and their exacerbation by change, constituting preconditions of irony in schools as organizations. Chapter 3 adopts a complementary focus, showing how parallel sources of ambiguity stimulate equivalent ironies in the implementation of improvement policies across administrative system levels in education.

Part Two introduces the notion of managerialism as excessive leadership and management. It traces ironies generated unwittingly by the implementation of central government managerialist policies that militate against educational improvement, especially those connected with reforms. Chapter 4 looks historically at the early and more recent rise of managerialism in school education, portraying how its promise radically to reduce ambiguity has been belied by the resultant ironic consequences. Chapter 5

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critically examines how managerialism threatens to produce self-serving leadership and management at the expense of educational activity.

Part Three takes our critique of managerialism further by deconstructing the rhetoric of educational crisis and the urgency of system transformation which underpins managerialist reforms. Chapter 6 reveals ambiguities and associated ironies engendered by the gap between aspects of the mythical discourse of transformation and externally imposed constraints which leave school staff with little scope for transforming learning and teaching. Chapter 7 similarly scrutinizes the discourse of organizational leadership as a means of promoting educational transformation and the ambiguities and ironies that in reality restrict leadership to the transmission of centrally specified reforms.

Part Four examines the ironies of school staff responses to managerialism and builds the case for more temperate approaches to educational administration. Chapter 8 looks at evidence that many, perhaps most, school staff are mediating reforms rather than endorsing them. Chapter 9 hypothesizes that most school staff have adopted an ironic orientation towards managerialism, which is actually highly appropriate for professional practice in relatively ambiguous circumstances. Chapter 10 sketches out what temperate educational administration and incremental improvement efforts might look like, supported by wise policies that are accepting of ambiguities and return professional practice in leading, managing and teaching to the heart of the service of education.

Eric Hoyle
Mike Wallace

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PART ONE: THE NATURE OF IRONY

1

Introducing the ironic perspective

Why do efforts to improve the quality of education via organizational leadership and management make matters worse in some respects as well as better? In what ways are education professionals responding to such efforts? Could the endeavour to improve education through organizational leadership and management be rendered more effective by accepting certain limitations in practice on what is desirable in principle? These questions are of considerable significance for education now and in the future, yet they are also contentious. Implicit in the first question is the assumption that contemporary efforts are producing negative as well as positive impacts. The second question raises the possibility that not all educational professionals are responding as would-be improvers might wish. The third question suggests that there are perhaps limits to the potential for improvement at the level of practice that need to be taken into account. These reservations rarely surface in current policy discourse – at least in its public expression, though we suspect that some might be acknowledged privately. For alongside the gains of reform, there is plentiful evidence of problems.

Here is just one indicative example. Heralded by the passing of the Education Reform Act in 1988, successive British governments have generated an extensive series of policies aimed at transforming English state school education as part of a wider strategy to reform, or to ‘modernize’, all the public services (e.g. OPSR, 2002). An unintended negative consequence has been to overload chronically the headteachers and teachers charged with responsibility for implementing the multiplicity of innovations entailed in these policies. Government-sponsored surveys between 1994 and 2000 revealed a steady increase in working hours of those

employed in schools (Table 1.1). As a result of pressure from representatives of teachers and headteachers, at the end of the 1990s central government instituted an initiative to reduce the level of bureaucracy in schools that had mostly resulted from its own reforms. However, subsequent surveys showed that the initiative had done little to stem the tide of paper and computer files. One comparative study showed that the annual working hours of headteachers – even after taking the length of school holidays into account – were still above the average for managers across a range of occupations. Weekly term-time hours of headteachers were much higher (PWC, 2001).

Table 1.1: Evidence from PriceWaterhouseCoopers teachers' workload study

Data from previous diary studies

<i>School and teacher type</i>	<i>Hours worked in a 'typical' week</i>		
	<i>1994</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2000</i>
Primary			
Headteacher	55	55	58
Deputy head	51	54	55
Class teacher	49	51	52
Secondary			
Headteacher	60	61	60
Deputy head	56	56	58
Head of department	50	52	52
Class teacher	48	50	51
Special			
Class teacher	46	49	50

Data from PwC study, 2001

<i>Teacher type</i>	<i>Hours' work per week</i>	<i>Primary school</i>	<i>Secondary school</i>	<i>Special school</i>
Headteacher	total hours	59	64	58
	hours spent teaching	5	1	3
Other teaching staff	total hours	54	55	51
	hours spent teaching	22	19	18

Table 1.1: Cont.

Hours worked according to different salary and associated responsibility levels (all schools)

<i>Hours of work per week</i>	<i>Salary and responsibility level of teacher or headteacher</i>				
	<i>Newly qualified teacher</i>	<i>Main pay scale</i>	<i>Management points</i>	<i>Upper</i>	<i>Leadership</i>
Total hours	53	54	54	53	58
Hours spent teaching	19	21	20	20	16

Hours worked during the school holidays

<i>Annual hours worked during the school holidays in different types of school</i>				
<i>Primary school</i>		<i>Secondary school</i>		<i>Special school</i>
<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Headteacher</i>	<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Headteacher</i>	<i>Teacher</i>
116	100	121	196	107

Source: Based on extracts from the interim report of the PriceWaterhouseCoopers teacher workload study (PwC, 2001)

In late 2002, another major survey of the responses of teachers to the demands of their work, sponsored by the General Teaching Council for England and the *Guardian* newspaper (GTC, 2003), found that:

- approximately one-third (35 per cent) of teachers planned to leave teaching in the next five years, just over half expecting to retire. But the remainder of those planning to leave (including 15 per cent of all newly qualified teachers) expected to secure jobs elsewhere;
- more than half (56 per cent) stated that their morale was lower than when they joined the profession;
- the longer teachers had been in the profession, the worse their morale. However, there was also a sharp dip in morale immediately after the first year of teaching;
- in nominating three factors which demotivated them as teachers, over half (56 per cent) identified ‘workload’ (including unnecessary paper-work), over a third (39 per cent) referred to ‘initiative overload’, about a third (35 per cent) the ‘target-driven culture’ (connected with central government-imposed improvement targets), and almost a third (31 per cent) blamed poor student behaviour and discipline;

- four-fifths (78 per cent) of teachers perceived that the government accorded them little or no respect.

An enduring staff recruitment and retention problem had emerged, created in large part by the heavy workload that was being experienced. Carol Adams, the chief executive of the GTC, commented (GTC, 2003):

Teachers in the 45+ age range constitute half the workforce and represent a significant and valuable resource of experience and expertise. Often, however, their potential contribution is overlooked for a variety of reasons:

- workload has increased to the point that they feel a proper work–life balance is impossible to achieve and some start to look at the option of early retirement or a change of occupation;
- seniority in the profession still tends to be associated with taking managerial responsibility, whereas some would prefer to remain in a teaching post;
- for women returners promotion involving an even heavier workload may not be attractive.

As a result of undervaluing the over-45s, we are not only seeing many experienced teachers go early, we are also failing to tap into their valuable experience of change management, behaviour management and as potential mentors for new recruits. Many of this group of teachers were involved in the school-based innovations which preceded the Education Reform Act of 1988 and they have been instrumental in managing substantial change through the past decade. But instead of valuing what they can offer – we are watching them go.

She noted that according to government statistics one-third of teachers retiring in 2000–2001 had retired prematurely.

If government reforms had produced such consequences for the morale and aspirations of teachers, one can assume that the impact on headteachers was even greater. However, notwithstanding all the reform efforts of policy-makers, and the increased workload of teachers and headteachers, educational outcomes based on qualifications across the UK as a whole have not kept pace with all of its international economic competitors. A recent league table published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2003) compared the proportion of students achieving good qualifications at the end of secondary school in 30 developed countries between 1991 and 2001. The UK had dropped from 13th to 20th in the league because improvement in the UK since 1991 was more modest than elsewhere.

We recognize that survey data are contestable and open to different interpretations. Nevertheless there is strong evidence from a variety of sources that two decades of reform have not led to anticipated levels of educational improvement, and certainly not commensurate with levels of investment in

education, but have led to widespread teacher and headteacher dissatisfaction. We regard the gap as ironic. For this reason we have taken *irony* as our key analytical concept. However, although one side of the coin of irony reveals the gap between intention and outcome in government policy, the other side of the coin reveals how headteachers and teachers have adopted an ironic orientation as a means of coping with the pressures which this gap has generated.

Taking irony seriously

Irony has no canonical meaning. It is a term with a long history in the English language and has diverse connotations. Some are intentionally playful, mocking or cynical, as in Mark Twain's dictum: 'To succeed in life, you need two things: ignorance and confidence.' We realize that taking this term as the centrepiece of our perspective risks us being interpreted as frivolous, and so not to be taken seriously. But we are very serious about improving education. We have chosen to employ this term as the basis for a new perspective because no alternative concept so incisively illuminates the phenomenon we believe needs exploring if government and organization-based improvement efforts are to become more effective. To minimize the risk of being misunderstood, we will below unpack the connotations that we have attached to *irony* for the purpose of our argument. However, before considering the concept itself, we offer two illustrations of irony by way of setting the scene.

The first is far from education. We have selected it as the most extreme of cases to show how irony is a concept that can direct attention both to coincidences and to unintended cause and effect linkages, including those of the most shocking kind. Perutz (1998) recounts the story of the 'ambiguous personality and career' of the German chemist Fritz Haber (1868–1934), a Jew by birth. In 1909 he became the first scientist to synthesize the gas ammonia from nitrogen in the air, paving the way for industrial production of nitrogen fertilizers that dramatically increased worldwide agricultural production, producing the very positive long-term consequence of improving life chances for millions of people.

However, Haber's discovery also enabled the German manufacture of nitrates for explosives to be continued throughout World War I, after the British naval blockade in 1914 halted supplies of Chilean saltpetre from which explosives had traditionally been manufactured. According to Perutz, without Haber's invention the Germans would have soon been forced to sue for peace. This invention thus generated the negative consequence of prolonging the war, robbing millions of people of their life chances.

Haber, fervently patriotic, was instrumental in developing poison gas for trench warfare. He helped to mount the first chlorine gas attack which caused some 15,000 allied casualties, a third of them fatal. That night Haber's wife committed suicide, shooting herself with her husband's service pistol. Her act was widely interpreted as a protest against his chemical warfare activities.

In recognition of his pioneering synthesis of ammonia, Haber received the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1918. He continued advising Germany's government on the secret production of chemical weapons until 1933, when the Nazis seized power. They forced him from his official position because he was Jewish, and he soon fled abroad, dying a year later. He never lived to witness the longer-term consequences of another of his inventions, in 1919: the poisonous gas Zyklon B, originally intended for use against agricultural pests. Nine years after Haber's death, the Nazi SS chose this gas for deployment at Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps, and among the millions of Jews who were killed in the Holocaust were Haber's own relatives.

But as Perutz (1998: 16) reflects:

By a terrible irony of fate, it was his apparently most beneficent invention, the synthesis of ammonia, which has also harmed the world immeasurably. Without it, Germany would have run out of explosives once its long-planned blitzkrieg against France failed. The war would have come to an early end and millions of young men would not have been slaughtered. In these circumstances, Lenin might never have got to Russia, Hitler might never have come to power, the Holocaust might not have happened, and European civilization from Gibraltar to the Urals might have been spared.

There is a horrific mixture in this story of the ironies of coincidence and the ironies of unintended consequences, often far removed in time from the actions that led directly or indirectly to them. We move on to a second example, of a very different order from such an utterly appalling case, but which could have serious enough implications for education.

Our second illustration is nearer to home: on 28 April 2003 it was announced that Jarvis, an engineering company, had been awarded a three-year contract from the British government to advise the 700 worst performing secondary schools in England and Wales, through its subsidiary Jarvis Educational Services Ltd. The *Guardian* (2003) newspaper reported that the announcement was condemned as 'shocking', 'extraordinary' and 'a joke' by teachers' leaders. Their angry reaction was provoked by the fact that Jarvis had been notably unsuccessful as the main contractor for the privatized national railway network infrastructure. The parent company was at that time under police investigation in connection with

the possibility of negligence in the Jarvis railway line maintenance work that might have caused a fatal train crash. It was thus deemed highly inappropriate for Jarvis to be commissioned by the government to ‘re-engineer’ failing schools.

By July 2004 the *Guardian* was reporting the Jarvis group to be close to bankruptcy. Its Accommodation Services Division was the biggest contractor in the country within the central government private finance initiative for refurbishing schools and universities. Underbidding to win new business had brought the dire unintended consequence of cost over-runs. Jarvis was forced to write them off, plunging the group into debt and threatening to delay much-needed improvement in the education building stock. In the same month, the parent company was heavily fined for negligence over a second rail repair incident described by a judge as ‘breaking basic rules known to every child with a train set’. A freight train had been diverted onto a line with a missing stretch of track.

The award of the advisory contract to Jarvis is emblematic of the ironies of unintended consequences besetting state education in the UK. We contend that such ironies have been generated by unintentionally inappropriate responses to alleged problems. Although greatly increased levels of funding have been allocated to education, it is not evident that members of the public perceive corresponding improvement. There is some evidence to the contrary – witness the OECD international league table mentioned earlier. Although government policy is to give schools greater freedom through policies of devolution and ‘cutting red-tape’, many headteachers and teachers perceive only greater bureaucracy. Although a policy of equality of opportunity is proclaimed, another government policy to create ‘specialist’ schools is creating new forms of selection, and although government ministers have confirmed their intention to recruit and retain high quality teachers, we have already noted evidence of a decline in the job satisfaction of teachers and a drift away from the profession.

These discrepancies appear to stem in part from a lack of understanding among policy-makers about the daily realities of schooling and how the multiple changes they introduce impact on what is already a difficult job. They arise especially from a misguided faith in leadership and management as a panacea. The discrepancy between intention and outcome in relation to policy has been widely discussed in the policy literature. But here we seek to explore the significance of this discrepancy in terms of the experience of headteachers and teachers and its implication for professional work.

The ironic perspective will help us to sustain the argument that the latent function of much recent policy has been to eliminate prevailing ambiguity from educational organizations even though, in our view, much of that ambiguity is endemic. This strategy has entailed the pursuit of greater

uniformity over the process and outcomes of education, to be achieved by establishing a much tighter link between official goals, school leadership and management, school structures, school cultures, the technology of learning and teaching, and measured learning outcomes. It is a strategy based on the optimistic Taylorist assumption (to be discussed further below) that the tighter the coupling the greater the efficiency. We accept that there are compelling reasons for reducing ambiguity in schools in order to provide a consistent and incremental education – but only up to a point. We consider that policy-makers have unwittingly tried to reduce ambiguity beyond that point, bringing the ironic consequence of generating increased ambiguity. We also accept that there exist in schools as organizations endemic ambiguities that can neither be ‘managed away’ nor ‘dissolved’ through a ‘shared culture’. Headteachers and teachers live with these ambiguities and cope with them on a daily basis. Over-reliance on managerialism, which seeks to resolve ambiguities in the interests of accountability and on the enforcement of ‘national standards’, has made life difficult for teachers and headteachers. Managerialism diverts teachers from their core task of promoting learning into an expanding range of managerial roles. Some are at best pseudo-managerial, and at worst, could be merely self-serving for their incumbents. Too much leadership and management could be constraining the very educational activity they are there to facilitate.

Despite the unacceptable pressures on headteachers and teachers, a majority remain committed to their vocation. By selectively reinterpreting policy they are continuing to do their best for their students in their immediate circumstances. In this way they are offsetting to some degree the unintended, and potentially deleterious, consequences of managerialism. Ironically this response often ensures that the intention of policy-makers is fulfilled to a degree that would not be possible if specified procedures had been followed to the letter.

An approach to irony

Our approach, then, is to adopt the notion of irony as affording a profitable perspective upon contemporary leadership and management in education. It is a modest approach. Our perspective has neither the rigour of a theory nor the neatness of a model. It has no pretensions to be more than one lens for bringing into focus the implications of the gap between policies and their effects. In using the term we seek to encourage reflection, provoke thought, generate discussion and thereby enhance understanding. Normal academic protocol would require us to define our key term of irony at the outset. Yet no single definition meets our needs. In fact, many

who have written on irony have noted the problem of defining the term. Enright (1984), in *The Alluring Problem: An Essay on Irony*, questioningly heads his first chapter: 'Definitions?' Here he cites a remark by Muecke (1969) that 'getting to grips with irony seems to have something in common with gathering mist, there is plenty to take hold of if we could'. Since there appears to be no canonical definition of irony, we feel at liberty to propose connotations which are appropriate to our purposes. In this spirit we draw an initial distinction between what we will call *situational irony* and *semantic irony*.

Situational irony refers to those ironies that are part of the reality of social life. The major manifestation of situational irony is the unintended consequence: when good intentions lead to unfortunate consequences and also where apparently unfortunate occurrences have a happy outcome. The term 'ironic' is often applied to a coincidence. But some writers on English usage warn against this: 'Recently all seriousness seems to have departed from the word. The slightest and most banal consequence or point of resemblance or even just-perceptible absence of one, unworthy of a single grunt of interest, gets called ironical' (Amis, 1997: 113). Two close friends, both professors of politics in different universities, dropped dead within a relatively short space of time of each other within the precincts of the Houses of Parliament. Some would interpret this unusual circumstance as irony, but presumably Amis and others would regard it as simply coincidence.

We are concerned with the serious aspects of irony. In the next chapter we will discuss how situational irony is endemic in all organizations, and members have to live with it through making repeated adjustments and negotiating frequent compromises. However, policies embodied in the educational reform movement of the past two decades have brooked little compromise, relying on the excessive resort to leadership and management that we will term 'managerialism' to ensure implementation. This reliance, coupled with the increase in ambiguity intrinsic to change connected with reforms, has considerably increased the potential for situational irony. We write in support of headteachers and teachers as they find ways of coping with the high level of ambiguity. But we also argue that managerialist attempts to remove ambiguity can have deleterious consequences. Many could be avoided if there was a greater recognition of the endemic nature of irony and a consequent refocusing on effective leadership and management – which may mean *less* leadership and management than are demanded of headteachers and teachers today.

Semantic irony we use to connote the ironic use of language, which comprises a variety of linguistic and literary forms. We suggest that semantic

irony may be either intended by a speaker or writer, or unintended but still detectable by an observer. A common *intentional* strategy was noted by Samuel Johnson in his dictionary definition of irony: 'A mode of speech of which the meaning is contradictory to the words.' There are many forms of wordplay which are ironic. When the late Daniel Moynihan allegedly observed that 'there's money in poverty' he was presumably using irony intentionally to indicate that poverty was becoming a well-funded area of research. In response to the news that Jarvis, the railway engineering company, had been offered the contract referred to above, The *Guardian* newspaper reported that the Liberal Democratic Party spokesperson on education derided the fact that Jarvis 'had no track-record' in education. Was this intentional or unintentional semantic irony? On hearing of the coincidence that two professors of politics had died in the Houses of Parliament, a colleague responded: 'No professor of education would be found dead in a school.' Irony was thus expressed through multi-level ambiguity.

We suspect that ironic humour has a considerable role to play in schools whose staff members are confronted by managerialism. But little of the banter we hear in school staffrooms has reached the public domain, for obvious reasons. A rare example of published ironic humour is the spoof account by Davison and Kemshall (1998) of a school inspection under the auspices of the central government Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED).

Ironic humour is widely recognized as a defence mechanism for those who find themselves in difficult circumstances. The Soviet logician Alexander Zinoviev (1979) wrote a novel poking fun at the ironies entailed in the unintended consequences of Soviet bureaucracy – before wisely escaping to the West, and Powell and Paton (1988) have discussed the role of humour in relation to conflict and resistance. We suspect that it is a common response to the current pressures of school life, but we cannot document this.

It is usually clear when a writer or speaker is being consciously ironic. However, we are intrigued by the possibility that there also exists, in the context of educational leadership and management, a form of indiscernible 'inward' or unarticulated irony. Careers in educational leadership and management are now dependent on having mastered what is usually dubbed *managementspeak*. Today's everyday discourse of school leadership and management simply did not exist 30 years ago. Consider terms like 'curriculum delivery', 'mission statement', 'development priorities', 'achievement targets', 'budget-setting', 'incentivizing' or 'deliverables'. Managementspeak is an international phenomenon. Fullan reports a North American school principal as saying: 'If I had said twenty years ago