Bridging the Gap:  
the personal within the policy implementation of the National Literacy Strategy

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Abstract

In 1997, a New Labour government swept into power promising to prioritise education. This paper presents an analysis of part of a policy trajectory of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE,1998), exploring how the ambitious large scale reform policy of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) was implemented in 1998. The success was such that ‘elements of the strategy appear in virtually all classrooms in England’ (Earl et al, 2003) and was supported in the period up to 2003, when the Primary National Strategy was launched, with the NLS at its heart. The focus of this enquiry is located with people working at the meso level between the macro (national policy) and micro (school) level on what has been referred to as ‘the bridge’ by the ‘critical friends’ of the strategy, from the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education(OISE), University of Toronto University of Toronto (ibid). This paper focuses on the following research questions:

- How did members of ‘the bridge’ mediate and (re)interpret policy into specific contexts?
- How were their professional identities changed by their role?

Transcripts of data generated with participants working at national, regional and local level were analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) and the words examined for the presence and absence of significant elements. Turning to Foucault for explanation of my findings, I argue that Foucault’s metaphor of a panoptican is helpful in understanding how disciplinary mechanisms held all within the structure of the strategy before power/knowledge.

Introduction

In 1997, a New Labour government swept into power promising to prioritise ‘Education, Education, Education’. Speaking to delegates of the National Association of Head Teachers in June of 1999, the Prime Minister Tony Blair claimed that: ‘Literacy and Numeracy Strategies are the two most critical educational policies of this Parliament… whose objective is nothing less that the abolition of poor reading, writing and maths skills among the generation of tomorrow’.

This paper presents an analysis of part of a policy trajectory of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE,1998), exploring how the ambitious large scale reform policy of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) was implemented in 1998. The success was such that ‘elements of the strategy appear in virtually all classrooms in England’ (Earl et al, 2003) and was supported in the period up to 2003, when the Primary National Strategy was launched, with the NLS at its heart. The focus of this enquiry is located with people working at the meso level between the macro (national policy) and micro (school) level on what has been referred to as ‘the bridge’ by the ‘critical friends’ of the strategy, from the University of Toronto (ibid). The location of the meso level was, in 1998, known as the Local Education Authorities (LEAs), of which there were approximately 150 throughout England, administering 18,500 primary schools (Stannard and Huxford, 2007:19).
My research is a policy trajectory set within the tradition of critical policy sociology (Ball 1994). This paper focuses on the following questions:

- How do the members of ‘the bridge’ mediate and (re)interpret policy into specific contexts?
- How are their professional identities changed by their role?

**Data generation**

The primary method of data generation was from in depth semi-structured interviews (Wengraf (2001) with participants whose location on the bridge between policy and practice are identified in the table below:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location on the bridge</th>
<th>Geographical location</th>
<th>Participants/pseudonyms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regional Directors</td>
<td>Regions/territories</td>
<td>2 directors</td>
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<tr>
<td>(between national centre and LEAs)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consultants and consultant line managers (between LEAs and schools)</td>
<td>Eastshire</td>
<td>Rebecca, Amy</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Normanfield</td>
<td>Debbie, Olwyn</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Barchester</td>
<td>Barbara, Louise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>Eastshire</td>
<td>Maria</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Normanfield</td>
<td>Hilary</td>
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The full data set from which analyses are drawn includes another four national directors and officers in local authorities together with former consultants and other advisers. The above people are the principal participants referred to in this paper. Most data were generated between 2004 and 2006 whilst memories of the implementation period were still extensive.

Consultants worked within local authorities which I refer to as Eastshire, Barchester and Normanfield. Eastshire is a large, mainly rural authority, Barchester, a small, unitary authority and Normanfield, a large, city authority which had been a pilot authority for the literacy project in 1996. These authorities were chosen for their contrasting natures as well as pragmatic reasons including access.

In presenting my arguments below, I use italics to indicate words used by my participants.

**Relationships between regional directors and LEAs**

At the launch of the strategy in 1998, the secretary of state for education required a national target of attainment be set: by 2002, 80% of primary school children would achieve a standard expected of their age, level 4, in English. This placed great importance on the outcomes of Standard Assessment Tests (SATs), particularly those administered by statute in year 6, the final year of primary schooling. SATs ensured children’s attainment was made visible. As Graham and Neu (2004) argue, such a system of testing also functions as a ‘mode of government control by helping to construct governable subjects’ (p.295). The authors remind us that Foucault uses the term ‘governmentality’, to explain how a modern government operates.

The setting of the headline, national target, which was in turn transferred to LEAs and to schools, was highly problematic. The two regional directors that I interviewed were appointed after 1998 for their knowledge of how local authorities had successfully implemented the NLS, yet one regional director responded to my challenge about the effectiveness of this target setting agenda with some hesitation:
Um.... no, I saw the targets as an essential, I saw them as, um, if we didn’t have the government targets we would never have had the literacy strategy, the schools wouldn’t have had the opportunity to CPD. The early stages of the target setting process weren’t ideal at local authority or school end. Because, you know, it was all a bit back of an envelope really. And shooting in the dark. Schools found it very difficult to enter that climate.

...and at that stage the target setting process at all levels in the system wasn’t sophisticated, it wasn’t as data rich as it is now, and also its more difficult because in the early stages you didn’t really have a clear view of what could actually be achieved, so the big distance between where we were and the 80% everybody in the system was very challenging. But in terms of did we have to have targets? Yes, I do believe in them and still believe in them.

Regional Director

Here, this director is not prepared to defend the targets themselves, but what they permitted. The government’s managerial, market driven approach required targets against which progress could be measured. The strategy was seen as having provided continuing professional development (CPD), as if none would have been forthcoming otherwise. The government’s requirement for normalisation technologies, with their corrective and disciplinary mechanisms, was unquestioned, despite the process being amateurish (back of an envelope), unfair (shooting in the dark) and unrealistic (the big distance). There was empathy for those working in a ‘difficult’ climate, but criticism was reserved for the under-developed nature of data gathering systems. Regional directors were compliant with the requirements of surveillance, at least in the answer to direct questioning. They both privileged the use of data:

Some local authorities had very sophisticated data systems. I learned quickly in the job at how much hold on, hangs on, the expertise of the data officers and the relationship between the data officers and the educationalists in service, so I’ll take an example of one authority (named) where the data manager has an absolute grasp of what the data’s for... he leads the conversation about the data not just in terms of numbers, but he understands the underlying issues and can articulate them, so he knows what it means to be below level 2 in reading. And that is a key issue in that the way data is held, owned and managed by at all levels in the LEA is key - and of course in schools it’s key and we still know in too many cases it sits in the Head’s office and isn’t owned by the staff and isn’t used as vehicle to actually look at who are the children we need to worry about and focus on.

Regional Director

The data systems and management were congratulated here with a data manager in a gendered role of statistician first and educationalist second. The validity of the data was unquestioned, yet it was based primarily on statutory and ‘optional’ testing regimes of self-surveillance. Furthermore, this director went on to question the ‘ownership’ of data within the hierarchy of the local authority, which failed to disseminate to ‘the people who needed it’ as ‘some people weren’t in the right place in the pecking order for getting the data’. Head teachers were accused of withholding data from teachers. Using a masculine metaphor of a ‘vehicle’ and a normalising gaze upon those children to be closely monitored (looked at, focused upon, worried about), the language of surveillance and dividing practices (Foucault 1977) was relentless.

Relationships between consultants and teachers

All consultants in my data set are women. There were common accounts of transition being ‘steep learning curve’, particularly in terms of subject knowledge and age phase pedagogical
knowledge. Consultants positioned themselves as bringing expertise in specific phases. Those consultants whose experiences were mainly in Key Stage 2 (7-11 year olds) named phonics as an important area of knowledge they had developed whilst Key Stage 1 experts (5-7 year olds) were more likely to indicate that grammatical knowledge had been their weaker area. In all cases, consultants talked about ensuring that they became experts across the whole primary phase.

Consultants ages were significant – all were either in their fifties, enjoying a career which gave an alternative to senior management with the satisfaction of pursuing their interest in literacy, or they were in their early thirties, successful, class teachers with some experience and an ambition to return to senior management as school leaders. Specific knowledges accompanied them into their new worlds, and all became aware of political dimensions to the strategy, recognising constraints upon them, silencing their reservations as they remained ‘on message’. As Louise put it: You are working for the LEA and Primary Strategy and therefore you need to be towing the line to some of their things’. All consultants stated their ‘passion’ for literacy and altruism in wanting to ‘make a difference’ to the quality of teaching.

In their account of their relationships with teachers, consultants positioned themselves through the way they thought teachers perceived them. ‘They don’t think you are talking policies and paper’. Teachers respected consultants for what Hilary, a senior teacher, called the ‘practical’ advice given and for their expertise based in recent and relevant classroom experience. ‘Policies and paper’, on the other hand, was seen as an unreal and unrealistic discourse, decontextualised from a teacher’s own priorities in their classroom. Consultants were the personification of policy, policy re-incarnated in human terms, what Maria, a younger teacher, called ‘a real, live, human being’.

All consultants agreed that working closely with teachers was the most enjoyable part of their job and where they gained their greatest satisfaction, working to share their expertise. Teachers were positioned in deficit in relation to subject knowledge, most particularly their knowledge of grammar and of phonetics (specific, mechanical aspects of language) and in terms their pedagogical knowledge, as prescribed by the strategy. Longer serving consultants also accused teachers of rigid adherence to earlier messages with an inability to respond to changes in advice. Barbara positioned some teachers as victims. There was intense frustration in her voice and the emphases are hers in the two transcript clips below:

\[\text{It de-skilled a lot of people by making them think you completely stop what you've been doing.. (pause) I think that's where the damage was done. That initial damage.}\]

\[\text{I don't think it was ever intended to be that rigid (in the beginning) but some how the message that got through was that it had to be and I would say to people 'Who's saying that to you? You've never heard me saying that to you, how come you've got that impression,' well - however it came, that's how it came through.}\]

\[\text{Barbara}\]

Barbara’s point about abandonment of existing work held resonance in other accounts, including that of a national director, but her most intense frustrations were confirmed in a further exclamation: ‘what I don’t understand is how they haven’t heard of our message’. Barbara had ‘delivered’ national messages for several years but these messages had gone ignored or unheard by ‘them’ – generalised and distanced notions of schools and teachers who were deaf to her words. Teachers had become compliant and passive as a result of initial requirements, rigidly imposed, and Barbara was incredulous at their apparent inability to respond to changes in strategy messages.
Whilst Barbara’s frustration at teachers was clear, Rebecca positioned them as dependent children, acknowledging her over-protective tendencies in confessing her worries for teachers facing difficult OfSTED inspections where she needed to ‘back off and let teachers grow up’. Both these senior and long serving consultant/line-managers showed empathy with teachers whilst placing themselves as the ones to protect, to encourage and to inform. Their words were reminiscent of their previous lives as teachers of children. Their frustrations and their concerns for teachers parallel the emotions teachers might express for children in their care.

Rebecca and Barbara were ‘betwixt and between’, a phrase used by Victor Turner in the 1960s in developing his theory of liminality from the work of Arnold Van Gennep. Turner was an anthropologist with a particular interest in the rites of passage in tribal socio-cultural systems. He used the concept of ‘liminality’ to analyse a phase of transition, the space where this transition occurs and the state being experienced by the person making that transition. The liminal phase is one of separation from the previous state (Turner 1982) – a transformation process from one status to another – a ‘becoming’. There is ambiguity; the person is neither that which she or he was, nor what they would become. Traces of emotional struggles of consultants and regional directors, who all return to their previous worlds as changed individuals, reside throughout my data. There is loneliness and isolation as they work in others’ territories, which is assuaged by the intense team-bonding between consultants and between regional and national directors.

Younger consultants had other concerns in their relationship with teachers, needing to appear credible, able to: ‘hold your own and deliver something well’ with older teachers ‘who are thinking she’s only been teaching for a short while’. Younger consultants, then, struggled to demonstrate their credibility with experienced teachers, echoed in the account of María, a younger teacher with similar concerns.

Literacy consultants worked with teachers on two sites. The first was centrally based training– a cascade model where teachers were expected to take their new found expertise from a one-day training event away from their school site and share it with their colleagues. Debbie called it ‘train and dump’. The verbs used by consultants indicated the passive nature of the learning. Training was ‘delivered’, ‘done’. Two consultants shared an intense dislike of their own role at these events, both questioning the adequacy of their skills in presenting to large audiences, as well as the effectiveness of the learning that had taken place.

In contrast, consultants’ language use changed when referring to work in schools. Shifts in pronominal and verb usage marked changes of positioning allowing exchange of power/knowledge. In Olyn’s account, ‘they’ and ‘them’ (teachers at training events, held at a distance) became ‘we’ and ‘you’. She used inclusive language which indicated that consultants and teachers were ‘working together’. ‘Working alongside’ was a common expression used; Rebecca talked about ‘working with’ and ‘sitting down with’ teachers. ‘We’ve looked at process... we’ve planned together’: ‘we’ve had the time to talk with people’. Consultants positioned themselves alongside teachers here and recognised that teachers needed to see them as partners, albeit unequal ones, negotiating and sharing a two-way exchange of knowledge-power, as teachers explained their context and their thinking and consultants mediated strategy advice to support them in their context. Explaining how a partnership of unequals worked effectively, all consultants identified the importance of building relationships which were based on mutual trust and respect. Rebecca gave an example where this respect was critical:

*I think there’s lots of those skills of being a consultant how do you give feedback when you know its got to be truthful, and... you’ve got to move that teacher on... how you do that, still keeping that teachers dignity but actually keeping your own integrity as well.*

(… indicates a short pause) Rebecca
Rebecca was struggling with significant tensions in this relationship, helping a teacher renew their professional identity within a changing context. She was the more active agent in 'moving' the teacher 'on', drawing on the lines of force and her own resources as a vehicle of power-knowledge. Only by succeeding in this was her integrity maintained. Permitting weak teaching and thereby denying opportunities for children to learn was not an option.

Other consultants illustrated how they overcame tensions in their relationships with teachers. One important account included gendered responses:

| There was a chap where didn’t want me to do and plan, he didn’t even.. who felt threatened because I’d had to go into his class he saw that as “what have I done wrong, why’s she got to come into my class? I don’t think I need to do any of these things.” |

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<th>JB - Age?</th>
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<td>Probably .. a bit younger than me - he was about mid to late twenties, and he was on the graduate teacher programme. He’d just been teaching two years and had been in another job, so I think that was a tricky one. And as an example we turned up for a planning meeting and I said “which unit have you picked, which text do you want?” He had his arms folded and he had a box of schemes and that was it – he didn’t want to.</td>
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<th>JB - And how did you get over this?</th>
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| The approach I describe. So I said “look I will sit in front if your class and do anything you want me to do”… and he’d said it is quite a rough school and the children were quite demanding particularly in his class so I think the fact that I was actually prepared to actually teach his children was quite good and I think he respected me for that, and he did come round. I think lots of things I was saying he knew about but at the time he wasn’t going to take it from me; but since then – this was in the autumn term- it sound like lots of things have been happening that I’ve actually suggested - but its taken a bit of time to get through. | Louise

The lack of contextual understanding of a teacher’s class is given as common argument from teachers. The fact that this consultant was ‘actually prepared to actually teach’, spoken very slowly and deliberately, with great emphasis, was said to be the key factor which had led to a resistant, inexperienced, male teacher to respect Louise for her expertise and begin to accept that she had power-knowledge to share. Yet his resistance and engagement continued; his practice changing over a longer term.

Rebecca talked about the ‘excuses’ that teachers used. Consultants used other authorised experts – leading literacy teachers identified as exemplifying ‘good’ practice’. Arranging for a teacher to ‘work with’ a leading teacher in similar circumstances was a common example of ‘brokerage’ (Debbie’s marketing term). This ‘working with’ would include the opportunity to observe a leading teacher’s lesson with follow-up discussion either with that teacher or with the consultant. Amy’s account exemplified this further:

| I have several teachers I’m working with at the moment. Really starting off by talking to the teacher and identifying what they see as areas that they need to develop …. |

| and then generally my first port of call is leading teacher list, because if I can pair up a teacher with a leading teacher who’s in a similar school and circumstances within the classroom with strengths in those areas. I think it’s more relevant then for the teacher and for me to go with the teacher to watch the leading teacher and pick out the good practice that is needed and then come back to the classroom and work with the teacher within the classroom, either peer teaching or peer planning or observation to develop that skill and then go back and have a look later on, to see how well they are doing and how well they think they are doing with it. | Amy
Amy was able to gain confessions of weakness from teachers, which permitted some agency over those confessions to remain with teachers. This was followed by the use of peer planning and teaching; the consultant leading and therefore the more active agent of change. Self monitoring of change was expected of a teacher when the consultant returned later to review that teacher’s performance. In all these accounts, therefore, the teacher was an active, if unequal partner, even when they showed significant resistance. The engagement of the teacher was universally recognised by consultants as crucial for the success of their work, as they worked together. This is further reminiscent of Turner’s work.

Turner uses a concept of time/space called ‘communitas’ where the past is suspended and the future has not yet begun: a period of suspension, a moment of pure potentiality (Turner 1982). Turner defines this period by human inter-relatedness which is freer of social roles than elsewhere in society, the free individual liberated momentarily from social constraints where status and hierarchy are irrelevant. There is a blend of ‘lowliness.. of homogeneity and comradeship’ and ‘a communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders’ (Turner1969:96). Teachers and consultants all talk of this comradeship, of appreciation of working closely together, suspending structural power, however momentarily, and travelling forward together to new possibilities based on the power derived from knowledges that consultants bring.

These partnerships between consultants and teachers were mirrored in teachers’ accounts. Hilary reported on a series of activities, mimicking the consultant’s words in the extract below:

**Monitoring. In the early days I used to do it with her, so there’s been a lot of that and I think when she came in, because we used to have the day together and there was always that, well look what have you’ve done already, lets have a look at that and this is what we are going to do next, and how do you think you’re going to do it? This is what I’d suggest’. It was always very practical.**

Hilary

The consultant was positioned as encouraging, advising, supporting – never dominating. Power/knowledge was shared and Hilary, a senior teacher, enjoyed their professional working relationship. Maria, a younger teacher, also gave an account of mutual respect, despite having positioned herself as a novice in terms of her responsibilities in terms of leading literacy within her school:

**We looked at our results… then I would tell her what we do, or what we did, at that time and she would ask me did I have any ideas for improving it or developing it and if I did I would tell her and if I didn’t then she would suggest ideas to me and I would say whether I thought it was right for our school. I would tell her if I had any concerns about any particular areas - she’d make suggestions to help.**

Maria

Markers of the consultant working alongside Maria, sharing power/knowledge with her, are contained in the use of words such as ‘we’ and ‘our’ followed by the more confident use of the personal pronoun ‘I’. But in Maria’s case, there was also strong evidence of the importance of positioning within her school:
when you’ve got a person… also speaking with your head and saying ‘your school should be doing this’, it’s not just the literacy co-ordinator saying to the head we really ought to be doing this, it’s someone a bit higher saying to the head ‘the school ought to be doing this’ and things tend to get done a bit more

Maria

Maria positioned herself initially as impotent in the school’s hierarchy, the preposition ‘just’ is the marker of her subordinate position in the phrase ‘just the literacy co-ordinator’. The head teacher was positioned as resistant to her plea: ‘we really ought to be doing this’. The consultant, on the other hand, was ‘someone a bit higher’. The power and influence of the consultant on the head teacher was embodied in María’s account of what the consultant might say and the effect of her words: ‘things tend to move on’. In María’s view, the consultant was in a position of structural power, having a very different relationship to the head teacher than the literacy co-ordinator, isolated within the school and with less influence. María’s frustration with a highly experienced, male head teacher who might be unable or unwilling to embrace a change agenda together with her inability to impact on his thinking was visible in her account, her tone of voice and her body language. María’s powerful ally left a legacy behind as Maria reflected:

at the back of people’s minds, you know, when I say right it’s time for doing whatever we’re going to be doing, it’s not just me saying that’s what we should be doing. People will know it’s kind of come from a higher place so I’ve got back-up.

Maria

Here, María positioned herself alongside this (now absent) ally, giving her a sense of authority (knowledge and power) over the generalised ‘people’ - other members of the teaching staff and the head teacher. The authority of the consultant (and the strategy) had become embodied in María; she had become the personification of policy.

Both Hilary and María were literacy co-ordinators who had worked with consultants and both had similar accounts of resistance to their surveillance of teaching from their peers, an expectation placed upon them by consultants. As a younger teacher, María found this particularly problematic, especially when she was expected to give feedback to more experienced staff:

Some people didn’t really mind too much, or didn’t show they minded too much. It was obvious that some people weren’t happy about it at all, which I can understand because it’s not something that we’re used to here. In other schools it happens all the time and people probably don’t give it a second thought - (they) won’t be traumatised and stressed when it happens..

JB: did people say that was actually useful?
I don’t think people have actually told me whether they think it was a useful exercise or not to be honest. I don’t know that I’ve asked them whether they think it was a useful exercise for them or not. Perhaps I ought to, perhaps I’ve just assumed that it is useful because they will find something out about their teaching but I don’t think I’ve actually said ‘did you find it useful?’ I’ve asked them ‘was that OK? Did you find that OK?’ As in, you know, I hope nobody was particularly upset in any way about anything I’ve said and that was all positive, ‘yes, yes, fine’, so… but whether they found it useful…..I did! I found it useful.

JB Good - so tell me why you found that so useful?
Because up until that point I had no way of knowing if what I was doing was right or not and
now I can much more confidently do that by myself, knowing that I’m watching out for the right things and noting the right things down, that I’m feeding back in a...I don’t know, not just a positive way, it’s not always positive but well it’s valuable, what I feed back is valuable, hopefully

Maria

Maria’s use of general terms (people) to indicate her teaching colleagues may have indicated a desire on her part to hide from me the identities of those who ‘weren’t happy’, suggesting, by comparison with teachers elsewhere, they could be ‘traumatised and stressed’. In this, Maria was recognising the struggles, particularly of older and more experienced teachers, who were mimicked for being tired and cynical, saying of Maria’s generation – ‘oh, they’re young and keen...they won’t be like that in ten years time’. Maria was concerned to ensure that her monitoring did not give additional distress to her colleagues. She was taken by surprise when asked whether these colleagues had found the observations useful, not having considered the possibility beyond her own needs as a mechanism of surveillance whilst still protecting her own fragile relationship with other members of the teaching staff. Yet Maria was confident that she was able to give feedback which was ‘valuable’, having noted the ‘right things’, confirmed by her consultant/mentor. Certain in the skills of judgement that have been imparted to her, Maria had become the strategy’s enforcer, without, in her own account, the ability to listen and respond in turn to the reflections of colleagues she was monitoring. There was no expectation of any feedback to Maria from her colleagues about this process.

Discussion

The word ‘liminality’ is a metaphor, meaning to ‘carry across’. The liminal nature of the work of consultants and regional directors explains much of my data. Further to this, my data resonates with Foucault’s frameworks of power-knowledge and with panopticism (Foucault 1977). By using critical metaphor analysis (Charteris-Black 2004), which traces metaphors back to their source domain, it is Foucault’s metaphor of panopticism within an army camp that my analysis reveals. There are many conflict metaphors in the data generated from national and regional directors. They spoke as if war had been declared on the underachievement of some pupils with many ‘battles’ fought against intransigence. Insurgents, spies, were inserted into the enemy ‘camps’ at local authority level, in the form of consultant teams who formed ‘little empires’. They came with allies in the form of funding and authority services turned, as if a front going into battle, towards them. Those who joined were sometimes called ‘traitors’, yet they were disciplined against attack. Another metaphor type was that of movement. These metaphors resonated with overwhelming force – this was an army, advancing at speed. There was ‘revolution’, a ‘sea-change’. The strategy was ‘driven’ – the project ‘pushed on’, ‘changing up a gear’. In this maelstrom, there were points where control was lost, there were ‘knock-backs’, there were ‘disasters’, ‘casualties’ and ‘panic’. There were also ‘barriers’ to be ‘swept aside’, ‘capacities’ to ‘build’ and ‘pressure to bear’ – all metaphors rooted in containment, recognising there were boundaries to the education system.

Consultants and teachers, on the other hand, experienced the ‘rigid’ and ‘heavy handed’ nature of the strategy; they were constrained. Training was ‘cascaded’, hierarchically imposed; orders were expected to be passed down and obeyed without question. Control metaphors ‘dictated’, ‘fixed’ and ‘prescribed’; there was ‘rigid’ application, ‘straitjackets’ from which escape was impossible. People were ‘puppets’, ‘dancing to their masters’ tunes’. There were emotional responses of ‘howling’, of ‘screaming’ and of ‘fear’. Where there was movement, it was small scale, localised and personal – ‘moving people on’; the overall sense of a journey was missing. At this level, the troops had little idea where they were going.
As this army force-marched at relentless pace, its recruits were disciplined, held within the panoptical device. When the army camped, so the troops and their officers were visible, ‘the camp is the diagram of a power that acts by means of general visibility’ (Foucault 1977:171). Foucault described the relationship between army tents in minute detail. These relationships were designed to:

permit an internal, articulated and detailed control – to render visible those who are inside it…. An architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to alter them (Foucault 1977:172).

This army, this strategy, was led by a general and his chiefs of staff, clear, charismatic, firm in their leadership and their direction. The army’s momentum began to slow as the first general retired. Its progress towards its goal was proving challenging – the targets set were elusive and some chiefs of staff began to realise the targets were a mirage, ‘plucked out of the air’, and the initial certainty about the direction of their march was lost. Furthermore, the army fractured, divided as it moved towards the enemy of underachievement in key stage 3, the secondary curriculum, and the forces arranged against the challenges within primary education were depleted. Eventually, the army changed direction and adopted new symbols, new flags, combining the battalions of numeracy and literacy to become the Primary National Strategy in 2003.

Conflict and movement metaphors in my data give life to the metaphor of an army, explaining the strategic directions of the national strategies. For further explanation of the disciplining technologies and the exchanges of power/knowledge between people in my research, I prefer the analogy with Bentham’s asylum rather than the prison in returning to Foucault’s notions of panopticism. This is because a secure prison in Bentham’s architecture does not permit escape. Yet people have escaped from the panoptical machine that was the literacy strategy. They left, they resigned, retired, changed careers or hid in the very few darkened corners they found or created for themselves. Furthermore, the inmates of a prison are incarcerated for their misdeeds. This was not the language of my data; instead problematising was set in the language of concern, of worry, of altruism. The education system had served children and their teachers badly – the system was sick, it needed treatment. Subject knowledge was weak – medicine was available to cure this. Pedagogical knowledge was outdated – new exercises would improve the health of the whole system. Education had suffered from years of stress – from the pressure of high accountability together with gross underfunding. A panacea was proposed, a ‘pure’ message, ‘filtered’, ‘clear’, which brought with it significant funding and support. The system was designed to ensure the mental and physical health of all.

At the centre of the panopticon were the medics, the national directors creating and prescribing medication. They were driven by the demands of politicians who, on behalf of a wider society, demanded the health of the education system be improved in order to create high quality products, literate and numerate citizens, fit and able to serve society’s needs in the globalised, competitive market place. This was an un-natural edifice, it did not grow or evolve. There was no evidence of herbal remedies - metaphors from nature were rare in the data. The example of a ‘seed’ was isolated amongst the mechanised tools and equipment, the ‘leverage’ and the ‘tailoring’.

Moving within the central edifice of the panopticon were the regional directors, taking the prescribed medications towards the outer sections of the central tower. There they were joined by local authority strategy managers and consultants, who carried the panacea to each school and to each teacher. Yet their attentions were unequally shared with the many peripheral locations. Whilst the normalising gaze was everywhere, some cells were of greater concern. The panopticon ‘makes it possible to draw up differences: among patients, to observe the symptoms of each individual, without the proximity of beds’ (Foucault 1977:203). In some cases the patients appeared particularly sick and additional measures were put in place to
improve their condition. Local authorities that were ‘cause for concern’ had greater attention from regional directors. Schools with identified weaknesses were similarly targeted and, within schools, members of staff were singled out for particular support from consultants. Yet the panopticon was more than a device to measure the health of the system: the panopticon was also a laboratory; it could be used as a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour… to experiment with medicines and monitor their effects (Foucault 1977:203).

The strategy was unformed – it was the largest experiment of its kind world-wide, yet it was very rarely acknowledged by my participants. At national level, confidence in the leadership of Stannard and the power-knowledge exchanged and thereby increased in the shared expertise of the small team, together with their altruistic intentions, swept aside the many doubts and uncertainties. At all levels, those caught up in a period of rapid change experienced many emotions, including those of insecurity and uncertainty, excitement and adventure. But whilst the centre of the panopticon may have seemed a place of privilege, it was also a place where its own mechanisms were supervised:

An inspector arriving unexpectedly at the centre of the panopticon will be able to judge at a glance, without anything being concealed from him, how the entire establishment is functioning (Foucault 1997:204).

It was the directors’ own fates that were tied to the mechanism, and in this way it was the national directors of the strategy who became subjected to relentless pressures whereby the performance of the whole system reflected upon them, requiring them to create new experiments, new medications to improve the health of all in the system. Some medications may have been needed simply because of the imposed changes in the system – many had stumbled with the speed of the army’s march. Some health regimes were suggested for all to adopt whilst others were devised for those who had specific ailments. Little or no attempts were made initially to encourage systems which ensured healthy lifestyles to be developed in the periphery – those at the centre were constrained, feeling obliged to ‘cure’ the apparent sicknesses themselves.

Yet this panoptic mechanism became a ‘transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole’ (Foucault 1977:207). By subjecting the machine to inspections, ‘not only by appointed inspectors, but also by the public, any member of society will have the right to come and see’ how the school system functioned (ibid). The media and politicians followed the outcomes of pupil attainment closely and, in 2002 when the target of 80% of primary pupils attaining level 4 was missed, Blunkett’s successor as secretary of state for education, Estelle Morris, resigned, becoming another casualty of the panoptic device. It was later that year that the course of the army’s march began to change direction towards the Primary National Strategy.
References

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