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Primary teachers' experiences of neo-liberal education reform in England: 'Nothing is ever good enough'

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ABSTRACT

As the global neo-liberal reform movement in education continues to evolve, so does the simultaneous transfiguration of the profile and status of primary school teachers in England. Reform continues to delineate the aims and purpose of primary education in increasingly essentialist terms. This paper explores English primary school teachers' perceptions and experiences of teaching, and of being a teacher, in a period of considerable change. Extending the existing research literature about primary school teachers, it explores the progressively strategic nature of policy enactment and the tactics employed by teachers to manage conflicting demands. The paper draws upon rich qualitative data from two sets of interviews with 22 primary teachers employed in the South-East of England. Thematic analysis facilitated findings about teachers' encounters with, and responses to, neo-liberal policy reform, notably in relation to accountability and managerialism. The view that 'nothing is ever good enough' reflects recurrent data affirming the relationship between school leadership and teachers' demoralisation, as well as perceived reputational decline more broadly. Findings highlight the emergence of the primary practitioner as 'tactician', and of a particular brand of survivalism necessary for a context that acts to pedagogically and philosophically constrain the purpose of primary education.

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Introduction

The global phenomenon of neo-liberal policy reform in education is on-going, provoking a significant body of research (e.g. Ball 2003; Apple 2004; Dahlstedt and Fejes 2019). Consequent to the 'policy epidemic' (Ball 2003) the aims, purpose and governance of education have been indisputably adjusted, most notably to meet the needs of the global economy (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). The market rationality in education is synchronised to economic driving forces and a central component for the neo-liberal 'trinity', that is the 'three interrelated policy technologies [of] the market, managerialism and performativity' (Ball 2003, 215). Inherent to the marketisation of education, competition – and the incentive to 'improve' – is underpinned by entrepreneurship, with the incumbent targets and data necessary for evidence and comparison, that is, publicised student performance.

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The global education reform movement (GERM) ‘aligns education systems to the operational logic of private capital’ (Sahlberg 2011, 103) and as such, ‘the market is perceived as a driver of quality’ (Keddie and Mills, 2019, 7). Thus, the commodification of schooling is portrayed through the language of business, with according structures of performativity, accountability and surveillance. The culture of managerialism is reflected in the remodelling of school management and through power relationships which privilege commerce and competitiveness over collegiality and pedagogy.

Sahlberg (2016) notes the variety in policy enactment in countries like the UK, USA, Australia and Canada. The ‘relational and locally negotiated’ nature of policy implementation and experience (Savage and O’Connor 2015, 610) is revealed in research which offers insights into the particular manifestation of the principles of marketisation, competition and accountability, in, for example, the USA, Australia and Sweden (Brathwaite 2017; Dargusch and Charteris 2018; Dahlstedt and Fejes 2019). Commonplace is the impact of reform on teachers (Ball 2003; Sahlberg 2016; Aderet-German, Segal, and Vedder-Weiss 2019), and significant for professional identity (Hall and McGinity 2015), pedagogy and practice (Bradbury 2018) and school leadership (Keddie 2017). My research specifically considers English primary teachers’ experiences and responses to reforms arising from the 2010 Schools White Paper (Department for Education 2010), and the increasingly strategic nature of policy enactment at this time.

In England, seminal qualitative research has depicted primary teachers’ experiences of reform, for example, the context of school restructuring (Troman 1996) or school inspection (Woods and Jeffrey 2002). Influential for my research, Nias’ important work (1989) on teachers’ experiences of earlier critical legislation — the Education Reform Act (Department of Education and Science 1988) — revealed the changing nature of teaching. In 2010 in England, the Government White Paper, ‘The Importance of Teaching’ (Department for Education 2010), heralded paradigmatic change (West 2015; Rayner 2017); consequently, ‘virtually every aspect of the English education system has been subject to reform’ (Worth et al. 2018, x) and the multi-faceted nature of these reforms warranted exploration. Preoccupied with the relationship between schooling and economic competitiveness (Department for Education 2010), the reforms signalled the increased politicisation of education. The pace and complexity of change made the time between 2010-2015 ‘a remarkable period of policy which ... altered the landscape’ (Lupton and Thomson 2015, 23) and my study portrays the consequent influences on, and threats to, primary teachers’ motivations and morale. Despite on-going policy reform, and the ever-increasing politicisation of primary education (Cunningham 2012; Murray and Passy 2014), research rarely, or exclusively, reflects the primary teacher’s experience.

Situated in the ‘crisis’ of teacher recruitment and retention in England (Allen 2015; Foster 2018), the remit of my study was to engage teachers in dialogue about the policy context, and of their perceptions and experiences of work during a period understood as a ‘policy storm’ (Bradbury 2018). It addresses the question ‘How is education policy reform perceived and experienced by primary teachers in England’, and offers original insights about morale, the effects of intensification, and of identity management for those continuing to work in the profession. It locates the strategic nature of policy enactment as central to the complex interaction between the idiosyncrasies of primary school teaching and the 2010 White Paper policy reforms. In the next section, I set the scene with an

account of primary education and policy reform in England before explaining the methodology of the study, and presenting and discussing findings.

Context

Primary education in England

The nature of primary school teaching in England is complex; historical legacies, traditions, organisation and purpose underlie the professional context. In that sense, primary teachers' perceptions and experiences of policy reform should be understood relative to the 'dynamic place that is the primary classroom' (Siraj et al. 2014, 11) and the professional landscape.

Internationally, primary and early childhood education has traditionally encompassed 'developmentally appropriate practices' (Gallo-Fox and Cuccuini-Harmon 2018) reflective of theories of child development and learning, curriculum knowledge and skills, as well as the broader requirement to socialise and nurture the child. In England, the 'traditional, caring and community-focused world of the primary school' (Braun and Maguire 2020) has reflected a professional discourse pervaded by notions of 'family' and 'care' (Forrester 2005; Murray and Passy 2014). Reinforced through school policies, as well as the formal inspection process, a 'family atmosphere' and 'sense of community' are commonly cited as strengths of a primary school (OFSTED 2017).

In the primary school, the 'aims of nurturing children intellectually, emotionally and culturally' (Hall and Pulsford 2019, 1) are threatened by ongoing political intervention (Cunningham 2012; Murray and Passy 2014). The Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander 2010) recognised the shift in the aims and purposes of primary education, and the move from the espoused child-centredness of the 1960s to the 'Standards' agenda prevalent in recent years. The primary sector in England has experienced significant and ongoing policy reform (compared to, e.g. secondary and early years education), and perceived as 'a problem to be fixed' (Alexander 2010, 1). Schools now necessarily enact a hybrid view of primary education, simultaneously influenced by child-centred education and the Government's social and economic progress and aspirations (Shuayb and O'Donnell 2008).

Accordingly, the primary school teacher is said to work within a 'politicised and pressurised environment, balancing . . . an instrumental approach to teaching with strong individual and communal desires to offer children the care and nurture' (Murray and Passy 2014, 499). The motivation to 'make a difference' is strongly linked to the incentive of working with young children (Cunningham 2012; Heinz 2015), although the continuing emphasis on basic skills and 'secondary [school]-readiness' (DFE 2013), further engenders the discourse about primary education as reductive. Thus, the landscape of primary schooling creates 'a policy enactment environment . . . notably different from the secondary school context' (Braun and Maguire 2020, 4), and worthy of scrutiny. Primary teachers' perceptions and experiences may shed light on hitherto concealed aspects of the 2010 reforms relevant to this sector.

The English education policy context

In England, the impact of neo-liberal policy reform is evident across all phases of education; in the early years (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017), primary education (Brown and Manktelow 2016), secondary education (Hall and McGinity 2015), post-compulsory education (Smith and O’Leary 2013) and higher education (Olssen 2016).

In England, the ‘modern era’ of reform in England (Ball 2013) is associated with the period subsequent to the Education Reform Act (DES 1988), itself a seismic event that changed the educational landscape (Levin and Fullan 2008). These unprecedented reforms (Mundy et al. 2016) stimulated global attention, and imitation, arguably positioning England as ‘the vanguard’ in this respect (Furlong 2013). The Act represented the ‘decisive step towards marketisation’, and increased centralisation, most notable in the specified national curriculum (Whitty 2008, 168). Indeed, standardised curriculum and assessment practices are recognised as the backbone of the necessary comparative (student performance) data for the consumer in the marketplace (Apple 2004).

Whilst ‘neo-liberal discourse has had a long and complex history in education policy in Britain’ (Wright 2012, 280), the reforms of the 2010 School’s White Paper embody a core ideological driver for change in English education (Jopling 2019). As a consequence, ‘efficiency, entrepreneurship, chief executives, audits, market share, value adding and performance indicators are all terms now readily associated with schooling in England’ (Keddie and Mills 2019, 1).

The English 2010 White Paper: ‘The Importance of Teaching’

The 2010 Schools White Paper¹ heralded wide-ranging reforms in what the English Government described as ‘the key elements’ of the education system, which included ‘the recruitment, training and practices of teachers and leaders, the standards being set by curriculum and qualifications and the autonomy and accountability of schools’ (DFE 2010, 18). A detailed overview and analysis of the White Paper reforms is beyond the reach of this article, but accounts of specific reform are usefully documented (e.g. Allen 2015; Lupton and Thomson 2015; West 2015). Further politicising education, it signalled far-ranging developments which were ideologically significant and structurally irrevocable (Rayner 2017). I argue that specific reforms were of greater consequence for the individual primary teacher, notably in relation to the curriculum, assessment and overarching accountability reforms. The disruptive potential of these changes was considered of particular relevance for those teaching young children, and are now detailed.

Primary School Reform: Curriculum, Assessment and Accountability

The reforms to curriculum and assessment were theoretically testing for a number of reasons. Reiterating the recurrent narrative in English primary education (Alexander 2010), curriculum revisions reflected the prescribed and heavily weighted teaching of ‘the basics’, or spelling, grammar, handwriting, more challenging mathematics and ‘facts’. Whilst the virtues of a broad and balanced primary curriculum are agreed as fitting, and advantageous for pupils (Siraj et al. 2014), they are made vulnerable by precedence to ‘secondary-readiness’ (DFE 2013).

Internationally there have been renewed drives for curriculum modification, for example, in the USA and Australia (Savage and O'Connor 2015). Across many countries, early childhood and primary curricula have been revised to further reflect a more formal pedagogy, with attendant standards (or competences), and enhanced assessment and accountability (Brown 2015; Nyland and Ng 2016; Gallo-Fox and Cucuini-Harmon 2018). Such reform necessitates administrative, pedagogic and political adjustments for primary teachers, and has repercussions for professional identity (Hall and McGinity 2015; Aderet-German, Segal, and Vedder-Weiss 2019). In England, curriculum change encompassed more demanding content (Lupton and Thomson 2015, 20) and 'a tighter, more rigorous, model of the knowledge which every child should expect to master' (Department for Education 2010, 10).

Whilst the curriculum is often viewed as political, and central to the exercise of control over teachers (Apple 2004), the correlating high-stakes assessment policies are also pivotal in this regard (Stevenson and Wood 2014). As part of the assessment reforms, the simultaneous dismantling of the assessment framework signalled as dramatic a 'sea-change' in primary education (Pratt 2016; Bradbury and Robert-Holmes 2017; Braun and Maguire 2020). Making excessive demands on teachers at the time, the Government's decision to abolish national curriculum levels as the mechanism for reporting attainment is now appraised as momentous (Roberts 2018). In primary education, changes to national summative assessment — and increased expectations for pupil progress and attainment — and the arrangements for moderation all contributed to an intensification of workload and increased teacher accountability (Elliott et al. 2016; DFE 2017). Fundamental for reform, the new and further refined national tests would 'further shape curriculum delivery — what is taught (and how)' (Stobart 2008, 118).

Finally — although as potent for the professional maelstrom in primary education — the associated reform to accountability measures were as 'important to shaping schools' day-to-day priorities' (Lupton and Thomson 2015, 16). External school accountability is considered to be essential for raising standards (Bew 2011), and one of the White Paper's over-arching objectives was to further establish the sector's responsibility to improve, as well as to reinforce accountability measures for the individual professional (Department for Education 2010). Escalated levels of accountability were positioned to become a pervasive part of teachers' daily lives (Day and Hong 2016, 118) with the attendant expansion of managerial systems necessary to audit, monitor and evaluate effectiveness. Central is the repositioning of the head teacher as 'manager' symbolising a distinct shift in the remit of school leadership and necessitating a corresponding 'entrepreneurial professionalism' (Keddie 2017).

The aims and purposes of primary education may be especially vulnerable to heightened neo-liberal policy reform; there are particular ramifications for those teaching children from five to eleven years old. Arguably, the principles and language, and enhanced emphasis, of accountability, marketisation, performativity and managerialism provoke discourses contrary to those historically associated with primary teaching. The competing tenets of determinism, vocationalism and accountability were envisaged as having potentially specific consequences for the traditions and values of primary education. Thus, the aim of this study was to explore English primary school teachers' perceptions and experiences of teaching, and of being a teacher, subsequent to the 2010 White Paper. Data were generated at the height of these policy 'translations'

which position the primary teacher in an unstable professional environment rife with potential to exert inimitable pressures.

Methodology

The paper draws on data generated from a qualitative study reflecting the principles of narrative enquiry to foster participants' 'storying' of experience. Historically, 'primary teachers have been given little opportunity to speak for themselves' (Nias 1989, 6), and my interest to narrate 'teacher-voice' reflects an interest in, and empathy with primary practitioners. The aim was to encourage participants' rich accounts, and to illuminate and construct meaning (Patton 2015). Narrative enquiry has been influential for understanding the rich detail of teachers' lives during reform (e.g. Nias 1989), and studies of policy enactment frequently emulate narrative principles to foster 'teacher-voice' (e.g. Smith and Ulvik 2017; Towers and Maguire 2017; Skerritt 2018).

Vital for the methodological decision-making and apposite to professional history, experience and relationships, acknowledging my position as a peripheral insider is essential (Adler and Adler 1987). I have previously worked as a primary teacher and now work in teacher education. My professional role entails a relationship with, and ongoing knowledge of primary teachers, schools and the broader profession.

Sampling and research participants

Appropriate to the research aims, all participants were qualified primary teachers. The sampling strategy reflected purposive or 'judgment' sampling, with a view to 'studying information-rich cases in-depth' (Patton 2015, 659), and both stratification and snowballing sampling techniques were deployed to depict career diversity. Day et al's 'professional life phases' (2006) were adopted with a view to enabling further comparison and contrast in the data; teachers were invited according to experience, for example, the novice (0–3 years), the early career professional (4–7 years) and the experienced practitioner (8–15 years). I contacted 45 primary teachers known to me through their initial teacher education and/or ongoing professional contact, and detailed my objective to 'engage teachers in dialogue about their experiences of being a primary teacher in the current policy context'.

Twenty-four out of the 45 teachers agreed to participate (although 2 were too late), 7 teachers replied and showed interest but declined to participate and 14 did not reply. In total, 22 teachers agreed to participate, all of whom were known to me, although there had been little or no communication with them since qualification (between two and fifteen years earlier). As detailed in Table 1, the participants reflected a diverse group as related to gender, professional biography and roles (and thus some applicability to the wider population) and represented three 'professional life phases' (ibid 2006).

Semi-structured interviews

There were two phases of data collection comprising semi-structured interviews. Conducive to an exploration of teachers' perceptions and experiences, the semi-structured interview was selected as the method of data generation, and sufficiently

Table 1. The 22 participants.

Professional life phase	Pseudonym	Gender and Age	Age phase/Year group	Role
Phase 1 NQT resigned	Eleanor	Female 20s	KS1/ YR1	Newly Qualified Teacher
Phase 1 NQT resigned	Fiona	Female 20s	KS2/ YR3	Newly Qualified Teacher
Phase 1 2nd year	Barry	Male 20s	KS2/YR6	Class teacher
Phase 1 2nd year	Lynn	Female 30s	Early Years	Class teacher
Phase 1 2nd year	Nina	Female 40s	KS2/YR6	Class teacher
Phase 1 3rd year	Sara	Female 30s	Early Years	Class teacher
Phase 1 3rd year	Ben	Male 20s	KS2/YR6	Class teacher
Phase 1 3rd year	Wilma	Female 20s	KS2/YR4	Class teacher
Phase 1 3rd year	Ryan	Male 30s	KS1/YR1	Class teacher
Phase 2 5 th year	Harriet	Female 30s	KS1/YR2	Class teacher
Phase 2 5 th year	Verity	Female 40s	Varied	Supply teacher
Phase 2 5 th year	Carl	Male 30s	Early Years	Class teacher
Phase 2 5 th year	Beth	Female 30s	KS1/YR2	Class teacher
Phase 2 6 th year	Shirley	Female 40s	KS2/ YR5	Cover and Class teacher
Phase 3 8 th year	Jimmy	Male 40s	KS2/YR5	Class teacher
Phase 3 9 th year	Glenys	Female 50s	KS2/ YR5	Cover and Class teacher
Phase 3 10 th year	Alan	Male 40s	N/A	Deputy Head
Phase 3 10 th year	Rose	Female 40s	KS1/ YR2	Class teacher and middle leader
Phase 3 10 th year	Bryan (pilot study)	Male 30s	KS1/YR1	Class teacher and senior leader
Phase 3 11 th year	Tony	Male 40s	KS1/YR2	Class teacher and middle leader
Phase 3 14 th year	Rae	Female 30s	N/A	Special Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO)
Phase 3 14 th year	Simon	Male 40s	N/A	Head Teacher

open for participants to shape aspects of the discussion, and to ‘unfold the meaning of their lived world’ (Kvale 2006, 482). Sensitive to the pressures and disruption inherent in the sector at this time, the etiquette of interviewing teachers warranted careful scrutiny.

42 individual interviews were conducted with primary teachers; pertinent to the research aims and sensitive to the demands of the school year, they were conducted six to eight months apart, between autumn 2014 (2nd half term) and summer 2015 (2nd half term). The interlude facilitated an initial contextual frame of reference, the opportunity for reflection, and to compare and contrast feelings and experiences between the start and end of the school year. As importantly, the scheduling corresponded with two major policy changes; the introduction of the new primary curriculum and the assessment reforms (Lupton and Thomson 2015). The interview was piloted with one participant who consented to data inclusion. This afforded a deeper understanding of interviewing known participants (McConnell-Henry et al. 2010), the demands of in-situ responses, question types and chronology, (my) identity-management and the potential sensitivities of interviewing teachers at a time of professional upheaval (see ‘Ethics’).

Teachers were informed of my interest to ‘know more about local and national developments that impact on the experience of being a primary teacher’. Interview questions were designed to provoke reflection on the perceptions and experiences of being a primary teacher at that time. One question referred to the Government’s ‘vision of the teacher as our society’s most valuable asset’ (Department for Education 2010) with a view to stimulating responses. ‘Grand tour’ and ‘watershed questions’ (Leach 2002) were instrumental in eliciting extensive and rich accounts, for example, ‘What does it mean to

be a primary teacher nowadays', and follow up prompts and probes were used to encourage discussion (ibid 2002).

Ethics

The research was approved by the University's research ethics committee and underpinned by the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines (BERA 2011, 2018). There are ethical implications of drawing upon an historical relationship for the sake of research, and the protocols are framed by my positionality. Teachers were invited to participate, and informed of the nature of the research, and of their right to withdraw at any time. Because of my professional role, measures designed to protect anonymity and confidentiality were reiterated in every contact (BERA 2018), and all teachers were assigned pseudonyms (Table 1). The historical relationship contextualised our interaction, and of the 'prime intent . . . (to) generate data' (McConnell-Henry et al. 2010, 5). Thus my role as a researcher, and the processes for data generation, storage, analysis and reporting were repeatedly made explicit.

As noted, researching teachers' (potentially emotive) experiences in the context of 'a policy storm' (Bradbury 2018), warranted particular protocols (Skinner, Leavey, and Rothi 2018, 6); the piloting of the interview underlined the emotional dimension of the discussion. Thus, interview preparation included consideration of the potential risks and strategies for managing distress or discomfort (McConnell-Henry et al. 2010; BERA 2018). Appropriate for sensitive topics, and in light of the timeframe for the two interviews, the adoption of 'on-going consent' would afford verification of participation ahead of both interviews (Farrimond 2013, 18) and further reassure and protect participants. Qualms about teacher workload, time constraints and safeguarding confidentiality shaped my decision to adopt a variation of the practice 'member-checking', namely, 'member reflections'. Ahead of the second interview, teachers were thus sent an *extract* of the transcript to afford a less time-consuming 'opportunity for collaboration and reflexive elaboration' of the emergent findings (Tracy 2010, 844), and corroboration of anonymity.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's approach (2006), and six phases of thematic analysis, was adopted; each interview was recorded, listened to and transcribed. The interpretive act of coding (Saldana 2015) was complemented by the use of captions (Syed 2010) and eighteen sub-themes were identified across the data. Specific themes arising from the coding, for example, *professional relationships, management and mis-management, trust and insecurity/uncertainty, politics and tactics of school life, and workload* were later re-organised into a theme that reflected the over-arching presence of managerialism, and entitled 'The experience of school life'. Congruent with the research question, four principal themes were categorised: What it means to be a teacher; the experience of teaching; the experience of school life; how it feels to be a teacher.

Findings express teachers' encounters with, and responses to neo-liberal policy reform, notably the interrelated policy technologies of accountability and managerialism (Ball 2003). They reflect the juxtaposition and conflict between being a teacher, and the

daily experience of teaching; teachers value and relish particular aspects of the work and are frustrated and compromised by others.

Findings

The first finding corroborates the buoyancy of altruism in primary teachers' perceptions of their work (Heinz 2015), and provides a contextual parameter for other findings that attest to the consequences of neo-liberal policy reform.

What it means to be a teacher

Biography, school setting and personal and professional values all contribute to the meanings teachers assign to their work. Congruent with existing literature, the ambition to 'make a difference' is construed as a main motivation for teaching and apparent in responses across both interviews. Against a backdrop of reform, and consistently mixed feelings about the work, notions of 'legacy', 'impact' and 'worthiness' are apparent in the narratives. The discourse of 'making a difference' appears to go some way to sustain and motivate:

If you're a teacher you are here to teach. Regardless of pressures you still have that opportunity to make that difference. You still have a choice and that opportunity (Ben, Phase 1).

Expressed in various ways across each 'professional life phase' (Day et al. 2006), there were similar motives for teaching, although nuances were evident. The multi-faceted responsibility of the teacher necessitates both academic and pastoral skills, and notions of 'making a difference' encompass pupils' knowledge and progress, as well as their emotional development. A commonly cited footnote is that 'the children aren't the problem' or that '*the focus doesn't feel like it's the children*' (Beth, Phase 2), and the challenges of teaching are couched in procedural terms which sometimes act to destabilise the aspiration to make an impact.

Maybe I should leave and should do something different, but at the same time I love working with children and helping them make progress. I think it's a gift I really do. But I just hate all the other stuff (Sara, Phase 1).

The children aren't the problem. I love teaching them. It's great. The problem is at the end of the day when they've gone home. That's the problem the — bureaucracy — it's the outside of teaching. And then the pressures. No matter how much I do, no matter what I think. It's endless (Shirley, Phase 2).

For more experienced teachers, 'making a difference' encompasses a broader philosophical position to engage in the work for the wider 'social good'. Rose (Phase 3) has a '*holistic view wanting to create happy pupils that are ready for the world – not just about learning – and to prepare them to be well rounded citizens*'. For some, the broader mandate is evident in the descriptions of decisions regarding the choice and 'type' of school, and where they work (and why). Working in an area of social and economic deprivation inspires a particular kind of commitment to social justice, or a '*civic responsibility*' (Tony, Phase 3). Working with '*the more difficult children, the more*

challenging children . . . goes back to my social conscience thing’ (Glenys, Phase 3); the challenges of ‘school life’ are compensated by the school culture and ethos. A newly established head teacher in a primary school in a disadvantaged area is galvanised by the local community:

It’s these types of children where the quality of education absolutely matters. And I know why I’m doing it and I know we will make an actual difference to life chances of some of those children (Simon, Phase 3).

Affirmative data about the rewards of teaching pointed to positive morale and the professional rewards more broadly. Acknowledging the satisfaction in teaching, seeing pupils develop, and recognising the teacher’s role in this transformation reiterate the intrinsic rewards of teaching.

You feel that you want a job where you’re helping people. It’s that having an impact on people and helping people rather than working in an office pushing paper from one desk to another. I wanted a job that was having an impact rather than working in a bank or making someone else rich (Bryan, Phase 3).

Much of these data were optimistic although overall, positive stories about pupils, teaching, and learning were negligible. Accounts of school life bore high degrees of similarity and negativity in the domain of ‘game-playing’, the strategic nature of policy enactment and of the culture of managerialism.

The experience of teaching: playing the game

In England, assessment and accountability reforms positioned pupil attainment as the ‘single most important outcome’ for schooling (Department for Education 2010). Teachers were not canvassed about ‘playing the game’ at school, but over half the teachers used the phrase, or the language of games, for example, ‘charade’, ‘playing a part’ and ‘hoop-jumping’. Participants deployed the phrase ‘playing the game’ to describe a variety of phenomena linked to the assessment and attainment of pupils, as well as to their associated accountability. In some cases, the phrase ‘playing the game’ denoted particular tactics for pupil assessment.

Certain assessment practices, for example, marking and moderation were commonly portrayed as nonsensical, unworkable and tactically performed to appear compliant. Some are described as ‘insane’, and enacted with a future inspection in mind:

It’s ridiculous. You’ve got a year 5 teacher who’s admitting to the fact that she’s writing on post it notes what she wants the kids to write underneath her feedback so that it’s there and it’s responded to (Harriet, Phase 2).

Teachers are portrayed as ‘*colluding in this [game]*’ and appearing ‘Ofsted-ready’. One perception of the assessment process was of a ‘charade’:

[The head teacher said] ‘Could you please submit a top, middle and bottom book for scrutiny?’ So, I sit and mark those; lots of key questions, lots of deep and spiritual thoughtful prompts and then asked the three children to go away and ‘respond to those questions’. And then we learn that every teacher has done the same thing. It’s a joke around the school. Even my team leader was doing the same thing and we had a chuckle about it (Jimmy, Phase 3).

The expectation to authentically engage with this level and type of marking is unrealistic and unnecessary, but the illusion appears perpetuated through agreed ‘engineering’. The workload generated by fulfilling the expectations of the internal surveillance by school leaders, or by retrospectively catching up, is experienced as unmanageable and demoralising.

Teachers’ accounts of marking were supplemented with narratives about assessment moderation activities. Whilst usual for teachers to jointly scrutinise pupils’ work, the perceptions of the necessary professional dialogue and shared interpretation of pupil progress was expressed as more tactical. Tactical engagement with numerical data, within the ‘pupil progress meeting’ (particularly), was experienced as central to ‘game-playing’. Findings point to this meeting as a pressured and stressful event, notably of senior leaders and head teachers querying and altering teachers’ judgments. The perceived pressure on teachers to account for and defend strategies for pupil progress is also evident:

The data, the levelling, it’s a game you play. I think it’s a game that the head and the deputy head play. [They say] ‘we want everyone to go away and just have a look at those children that you say have made 2 points of progress. Is it actually the case that some of them have made 3 [points of progress]? (Jimmy, Phase 3).

There are several connected ideas; firstly, the engagement with pupil data is a ‘game’ rendering alterations and modifications as strategic. Secondly, the necessity of ‘playing’ is not formally acknowledged by staff but intimated in the context of private meetings between teacher and head teacher. Thirdly, the teacher is positioned as an obligated mediator between the children and the data, whilst simultaneously managing the ethical dilemmas of the compromise and the pedagogic challenges of honouring ‘aspirational targets’ for pupils.

Novice teachers may be more vulnerable, and expected to interpret and respond to subtle though clear instructions about pupil data. The head teacher is portrayed as cajoling; the new teacher is positioned as compliant and cynical:

[The head teacher said], ‘Are you sure that ‘2B’ writer’s not ‘2A’? You’re sure you can’t squeeze a level 3 out of them?’ You go into the pupil progress meetings; you’re told that a child that was given a 2A needs to be a 4A [in their SATS]. On what planet? (Barry, Phase 1).

Advised by the head teacher to ‘*do whatever you need to do to make your data look good*’ (Jimmy, Phase 3), derision for the instruction may be compounded by disdain about the collusion. Compromising values is evident in the ‘game’ of strategically managing pupils with, for example, special needs who impact on a school’s statistics and ‘*take off the end of key stage levels*’ reducing the percentage of acceptable levels of attainment. Finding ‘*a special school for them before they hit the end of the key stage*’, (Alan, Phase 3) or ‘off-rolling’, adds another dimension to the complexities of data management.

Fundamental to gaming is the relationship between senior leaders and teachers, and the ramifications for relationships and trust. Related findings point to the relationship between the intensification of managerialism and the unfavourable consequences for primary school teachers.

The experience of school life: the impact of managerialism

The White Paper positions ‘school leadership (as) the most important determinant of pupils’ success’ (Department for Education 2010, 26), whilst also stressing the place of ‘formal external assessment as the basis of accountability for performance’ (ibid 67). Having previously explored teachers’ experiences of assessment practices, the broader accounts of ‘school life’ accentuate the rise of managerialism, locating the head teacher’s obligation to prioritise accountability and surveillance measures, and hold teachers responsible for externally imposed numerical targets. The influence of the head teacher and senior leadership team, and the impact of the style and approach of school leaders to motivate and value staff, (or otherwise), was explicit in the majority of accounts. The term ‘management’ was commonly used to describe these encounters.

School leaders’ acknowledgement and feedback appeared determined by teachers’ perceived performance. Senior leaders were frequently perceived as reproachful (*‘he said leadership didn’t do very well [in a school inspection] because the teachers weren’t doing what we were supposed to do’*), as unreliable (*‘he started to fall through on all the promises he’d made and then I got to see a different side of him’*), as divisive (*‘this is one of the issues I have with her. She pits people against each other’*) and as cut-throat (*‘for the managers to be successful, they had to show they were cutting off the dead weight of teachers’*). Teachers were cynical about leadership cliques and ensuing staff divides, and high levels of emotion were evident in the data.

The impact of negligible praise and perceived lack of acknowledgement led to low morale. Not feeling ‘good enough’ recurred, and the consequences of getting *‘something 95% bang-on but they want to unpick the 5%’* (Carl, Phase 2) served to anger and demoralise:

There’s always something that’s never right. We were never praised that much. How much we worked, how much we put into it and then it was never ever good enough (Eleanor, Phase 1).

Nothing you do is ever good enough. That’s the biggest kick in the teeth. It’s just permanent put downs. (Carl, Phase 2)

The issue of workload is made explicit, alongside a lack of recognition or approval. Whilst head teachers are guided by the protocols for performance management, the interpersonal skills and people-management vital for motivation and morale are less easily mandated for. As one teacher explained: *‘the praise part of the appraisal is lacking ... that’s teaching in general. [Head] teachers have not trained to be managers’* (Harriet, Phase 2).

The threat of ‘poor management’ was personified through experience of staff cliques and favouritism with leaders’ intentions to boost morale perceived as poorly executed:

You were kind of in [the head teacher’s] ‘good books’ or you weren’t. [We] were doing great stuff but it just wasn’t ‘our’ year. It didn’t matter what we did, we just got hammered the whole year. And then the next year we were ‘amazing’ (Verity, Phase 2).

Feeling ‘pitted’ against each other, not trusted, as well as alienated from colleagues, was attributed to unskilled and insensitive leaders. Lack of leadership may promote instability, uncertainty and unhappiness in a staff team, but negative relationships were

characterised by perceptions of mistrust, manipulation, threats and bullying. One novice teacher portrays the school's culture of 'backstabbing' and described feeling '*anxious, stressed, worried and annoyed*' (Barry, Phase 1); being in the '*firing-line*' prompted a professional and personal withdrawal from his work and resignation from the school.

The rise of managerialism was exemplified as poor management and symbolic of a more general shift in school ethos. One teacher described herself as a '*minion*' and the experience of employment relationships is highly negative:

For the managers to be successful, they had to show they were cutting off the dead weight of teachers. They had to identify the weak and poor teachers who are clearly 'holding us all back' and take measures to get rid of them. Certain teachers were rounded on, picked on and picked off. And we all know it (Shirley, Phase 2).

Teachers' perceptions and experiences of work are embedded in accounts of staff politics, management dynamics and morale. The experience of conflict is insinuated in many narratives, with contrasting or mixed emotions influential for the teacher's sense of identity. Fear and worry were evident in accounts that caricatured the head teacher as manipulative and threatening, with staff teams '*terrified to speak out or say anything*' (Wilma, Phase 1). In some instances the experiences of school life were couched in broader terms of well-being, anxiety and depression. The affective consequences are reinforced by an inferred resignation and powerlessness experienced by teachers, but also through occupational goals expressed as a coping mechanism.

How it feels to be a teacher: morale and tactics

Almost without exception, the morale of participants was low. Much of the data on morale were interwoven in narratives about pupil assessment, accountability and leadership, but also evident in more personal accounts of well-being and health. The relationship between morale and workload, and often in relation to the 'love - hate' dichotomy, was explicit. The over-arching effect points to a workforce constrained by the sheer weight of what is expected each day and the encroachment into personal lives:

Although I absolutely love my job, I also hate it. Sometimes I do get very depressed about it. About how much it impacts on my life. Since becoming a teacher I've been single. If I've got an evening free, the last thing I want to do is go out and try and meet someone because I'm just shattered (Rose, Phase 3).

The culture of increased accountability and appraisal, and feeling that 'nothing is good enough' reflects a recurrent theme of self-doubt in a culture that emphasises constant self-evaluation and improvement. The context (where anything other than 'outstanding' practice is unacceptable), has led to feeling 'exposed', 'de-skilled' and 'vulnerable', or as one teacher described it, '*one of failure. I can never get it right. I can never be good enough*' (Shirley, Phase 2).

Common in the narratives, the experience of adverse staff relationships is expressed in highly emotive language:

I've never, in any other profession, been treated the way I have been in teaching. Politics, backstabbing, nastiness. The stuff that just makes you feel rubbish (Barry, Phase 1).

The emotional dimension of being at work, and of the impact on life more broadly, is evident. Despite enjoying teaching the children, teachers were ‘*crying in the cupboard*’ (Beth, Phase 2), feeling reduced to a ‘*shrivelled crying mess in the corner*’ (Wilma, Phase 1) and ‘*waiting to see where the next blow is coming from*’ (Shirley, Phase 2). Depression, stress, feeling ‘shame’ and ‘the emotional toll’ was common in some accounts with teachers ‘*shutting down*’ (Harriet, Phase 2). Recognition of more serious mental health issues appeared to warrant action from some teachers, after withdrawing from friends and family, feeling stressed all of the time, becoming inaccessible and acknowledging depression.

Compounding professional morale, the public image of teaching may have had repercussions for the perceived pressures and scrutiny. The teacher is observed as subject to criticism, and sustaining positive feelings and optimism is challenged by the sense of disregard perpetuated in wider society. Feeling ‘bad-mouthed’, the perception of the public image of teaching provokes demoralisation and frustration:

The media don’t like us very much. I don’t think they understand. I don’t know what they think we do. You just want to say, ‘come in and do our job for one month and get the pay at the end of the month and see if it’s worth it (Rae, Phase 3).

The high profile of the ‘standards’ debate and the ongoing teacher ‘crisis’ positions the wider profession in adverse ways, and some findings indicate the undermining effect of professional instability and societal distrust.

The impetus to ‘shift’ out of full-time class teaching was common, and the variety in occupational modification reflected those who changed their role in the current school, those who left to work in another school and those who left for similar employment (in education). The potential of ‘*jumping ship*’ reflects some optimism that professional circumstances may be context-specific.

Changing positions internally, pursuing additional leadership responsibilities or specialist roles, may act to further challenge as well as energise and motivate. Staying in the same school but changing role appeared to offer a pragmatic career trajectory for less experienced teachers when considered alongside personal aspirations, for example, buying a house, getting married and considering parenthood. Moving from one key stage to another was positioned as a delaying tactic or compromise to leaving altogether:

It might be different in KS2. It’ll be nice to have a change of scenery (and) teach different things. Maybe that will come in useful in the future if I do move somewhere else. I think I will continue looking [for another job]. It’s second nature to me now (Beth, Phase 2).

Novice teachers are over-represented in those seeking a major occupational change. In one case, the move to a new school is the third since qualification, and borne from the departure of the ‘supportive’ head teacher:

When she told me she was going I was terrified . . . because she believed in me and supported and helped me and now she’s off. Everyone’s jumping ship [and] I don’t want to be the last (Wilma, Phase 1).

The analogy of ‘escape’ is equated with prolonged unhappiness at work. Sometimes expressed as an ongoing struggle, and often in the context of successful predecessors, the notion of ‘starting again’ acts to rejuvenate:

The day that (the new school) said I'd got the job, I fell to my knees and almost wept. I'm looking forward to September . . . and feeling a bit nervous as this is quite a big step (Shirley, Phase 2).

Occupational manoeuvres are couched in general dissatisfaction with main-scale class teaching or *'falling out of love'* with the job. The aspiration to teach is evident but the prospect of working full-time in a school has become impossible. This may be about work-life balance as well as the opportunities afforded by working part-time:

I want to find a way of carrying on being part of this profession because I love working with children. I have considered leaving but I guess it's just about finding way of not letting go of what is important to you and finding a compromise (Sara, Phase 1).

Leaving full-time class teaching evokes freedom and, for one teacher, *'getting my life back'* (Verity, Phase 2). A *'caged bird released'*, the experience has proved positive for her self-esteem and a renewed optimism about returning. Conversely, opting to 'stay put' is expressed in relation to the lack of perceived gains in moving, or fear about making the wrong decision. The adage, *'better the devil you know'* projected both fear and complacency. Positive staff relations and the collegiate environment appear to strongly impact on an individual's decision to stay:

My friends at school would say 'you always say you're leaving' — I think there's a real feeling of 'better the devil you know' (Jimmy, Phase 3).

Reasons for these occupational manoeuvres are varied, but for over half the participants were suggestive of a tenuous prolongation in teaching, with the spectre of 'leaving' common in accounts.

Limitations

Ahead of the Discussion, the limitations of the study must be briefly acknowledged. Some relate to the ethical challenges of the study, e.g. my prior relationships with participants and the sensitivities around the context and content of the interviews. Attention to the 'effect' I was having on the research motivated a strong interest in, and commitment to, the role of reflexivity at all stages of the research. The breadth of the sample reflected particular constraints and the absence of the more experienced and urban teacher should be acknowledged. That said, the transferability of the research is partially realised through the sample, and findings may resonate in, and be potentially transferable to, other contexts.

Discussion

This study extends the existing literature about primary school teachers, and the increasingly strategic nature of policy enactment. For these teachers, the positive influence and stability of the underpinning rationale to 'make a difference', contextualised to the principal outcome of 'raising standards', evokes overwhelmingly negative perceptions. In the 'politicised and pressurised' environment of primary education (Murray and Passy 2014), low morale appears enhanced or diminished by school leaders' values and practices that correlate with increased accountability and managerialism. The view that 'nothing is ever good enough' depicts the interaction between school leadership and

teachers' demoralisation, as well as perceived reputational decline more broadly. Simultaneously, particular occupational tactics possibly sustain an identity that can better counter, and cope with feelings of negativity. Does this denote the primary teacher as 'tactician', and of a particular brand of survivalism necessary for the new terrain of primary education?

Nothing is ever good enough

Whilst teachers continue to acknowledge the rewards and motivations of teaching (Jerim and Sims 2019), low morale is an enduring feature of teaching (OFSTED 2019). Whether provoked by a context where anything other than 'outstanding' practice is unacceptable, general workload, or the experience of staff relations and management, in my study, the feeling that 'nothing is ever good enough' was commonplace.

Positioned as 'society's most valuable asset' by the English government (Department for Education 2010, 7), a variety of potential threats affect participants' motivation and morale, both internal and external to school life, and possibly contextualised within a broader cultural malaise about teacher status and not feeling 'important'. In 2005, the OECD reported the international scale of 'concerns about the image and status of teaching' (3) and of teachers' feelings about the (lack of) value assigned to their work (OECD 2005). In England in 2018, only 34% of primary teachers (that participated) in the TALIS survey felt their profession was valued by society (Jerim and Sims 2019). In my research, reputational decline was a factor in teachers' discontent. Whilst public expectations may incline to an image of the morally robust and committed profession, notions of 'effective teaching' are governed by school performance made public in a variety of ways (Blackmore and Thomson 2004). The effect is of a 'public discourse . . . of 'good' and 'bad' schools . . . and consequently of teachers too' (Ball 2013, 187) and potentially potent for public perceptions. The 'Standards' debate is prone to increased mediatisation and influential for perceptions of the profession (Alhamdan et al. 2014), and not just in England (Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez 2014).

Hall and Pulsford describe the 're-engineering of the primary schooling terrain' (2019, 241), as a structural, philosophical and pedagogical shift in aims and purpose. Against the backdrop of perceived diminishing prestige, the conflict between the increasingly essentialist aims and the 'special moral worth' of teaching (Lortie 1975) generates a particular kind of 'values schizophrenia' (Ball 2003). 'Never feeling good enough' may be borne from the frustrations of a constrained and unbalanced curriculum and 'everyday educational practices (increasingly) geared to the transmogrification of students into data' (Thomson, Hall, and Jones 2010, 653). It may also be consequent to the workload generated by the demands of simultaneously balancing 'child-centred practice and . . . efficiency models of curriculum' (Gallo-Fox and Cuccuini-Harmon 2018, 475), and explain why primary teachers are thought to 'work consistently longer hours than their colleagues in secondary schools' (Walker, Worth, and Van den Brande 2019, 10); internationally, the primary teacher's working week continues to be amongst the highest (Jerim and Sims 2019). The interaction between workload, perceived reputational decline and the threats to child-centred practice may prove influential for diminishing efficacy, although as persuasive is the influence of the head teacher and senior leadership team to motivate and value staff.

The structure, size and traditions of the primary school enables a more immediate relationship between the school leadership team and the primary class teacher, shaping professional interactions and relationships. Increased levels of accountability and managerialism further repositions the role of the head teacher from being (what I term) ‘pedagogue-in-chief’, to ‘manager’ overseeing school effectiveness and standards. Prevalent in my study, the dynamics between teachers and the head teacher had significant negative consequences for morale and well-being. Findings resonate with both Skinner, Leavey and Rothi’s work with primary and secondary teachers in England and Wales (2018) which echoes the issues of insecurity, deficiency and inadequacy consequent to heightened managerialism, and Skerritt’s work on Irish teachers working in England (2018).

Job satisfaction correlates with ‘feeling supported and valued by management’ (House of Commons Education Committee [HOC] 2017a, 15). In my study, the school management’s capacity to sustain (or limit) motivation and morale through acknowledgment, praise and trust most noticeably links to accountability. Noteworthy for the school teacher’s work, Stevenson et al emphasise the potency of ‘the pincer movement of markets and managerialism to re-shape experience’ (2014, 43). One teacher in my study described the lack of trust as ‘completely eroding’; not trusted to plan lessons, teach pupils or mark books without monitoring and observation. The effect is of an institutional mistrust and consequent professional debilitation, invariably correlating with burnout and teacher attrition (Van Maele and Van Houtte 2015). The Government’s own research with ex-teachers reiterates the relationship between workload, working conditions, the role of school management and professional recognition. Teachers reported that ‘feeling more respected and valued would have gone some way to retaining them in the sector’ (DFE 2018, 37).

Escalating demoralisation has resulted in teacher well-being featuring more explicitly in policy (OFSTED 2019), and a central facet of the current recruitment and retention strategy in England (DFE 2019). In my study, despite the overtly negative tenor of the majority of the interviews, it was not (yet) sufficient to prompt resignation for these teachers. The deployment of occupational tactics may sustain an identity that can better counter, or cope with feelings of negativity.

The tactical primary teacher

In my research, the emergence of the perceptibly tactical primary practitioner is evident in assessment practices as well as strategic career positioning. The White Paper assessment reforms were subsequently labelled as ‘chaos’ (House of Commons Education Committee [HOC] 2017b); participants’ accounts are a powerful testament of the ways the reform occasioned unworkable practices, and susceptibility to ‘engineering’. In England, the threats and ramifications of (what is termed) ‘gaming’ are well-documented, albeit mostly confined to secondary education (Astle 2017; Ingram et al. 2018); research in early years education has further extended the field in this regard (Bradbury and Robert-Holmes 2017). My findings add to an evolving field about ‘gaming’ specifically with regard to primary education where there is negligible research to date.

The term ‘gaming’ encompasses a variety of intentional tactics employed to manipulate pupil outcomes, and acknowledged as ‘an *understandable* response to the pressures

of data-driven accountability' (Harford 2019, 11). Whilst primary *schools* have been noted for their strategic management of the curriculum and end of key-stage tests (Department for Education 2010), my findings illustrate the ways that primary *teachers'* assessment practices are subject to gaming. Developing a tactical proficiency to, for example, engineer and stage-manage marking and feedback practices to pupils is consequent to the perceived unworkable and unnecessary assessment policies. Apple (2014) refers to this as 'intensification', denoting the growing demands of work specifically resulting from policy directives.

More specific to the context of the primary school, the emergence of the 'pupil progress meeting' is a potential site of contestation. Once positioned as an opportunity for staff to 'have an open discussion about the progress children are making and to value teacher judgment' (DSCF 2007, np), the pupil progress meeting may also be understood as a 'game' involving the negotiation and adjustment of pupil data. Significant for three reasons, the individual primary teacher's interaction with high-stakes data is usually mediated alongside the head teacher. In contrast to the various tiers of leadership and management in secondary education, the interface with policy is much more immediate than for secondary colleagues. Also noteworthy is the enhancement of the individual teacher's accountability for pupils' progress as well as for the strategies necessary to enhance both the pupils' performance and their own. As Torrance (2017) argues, neo-liberalism produces responsabilisation . . . and far over-emphasises the individual nature of responsibility (93). The added dimension of performance-related pay may also influence teachers' perceptions of the high-stakes in this context (Forrester 2011).

The competitive positioning of teachers in the negotiations about pupil progress may engender colleague comparison and further depress morale. Raising questions about data, or admonishment for lack of pupil progress can position teachers as threatened and defensive. In Scotland, such a meeting is positioned as formative, collegiate and learner-orientated reflecting a child-centred and professional dialogue around pupil outcome data (Adams and Anderson 2019).

Conceivably, gaming is made tolerable by the lack of repercussion for the pupil, and may enable the preservation of the 'core purpose' of teaching. Souto-Otero and Beneito-Montagut (2016) discuss the ramifications of teachers' engagement with data in a similar manner and assert a relationship between gaming and resistance. Simultaneously influenced by discourses of altruism, accountability and effectiveness, the individual teacher may experience gaming as a necessary professional requirement, and enact policy to 'play the game'.

For these teachers, whether the tactics perform as subversive, or a facet of a more pragmatic or strategic professionalism, may be further distinguished when viewed alongside more general occupational tactics and 'manoeuvres'. I argue that particular tactics may shed light on the ways in which primary teachers remain in the profession. In England since 2010, the rate of teachers both leaving the profession and moving schools has risen (Worth et al. 2018); the research on retention is well-documented (e.g. Santoro 2016; Towers and Maguire 2017). Less common is the phenomenon of teachers opting to stay in education but 'shift' roles, either internally or externally (Lindqvist, Nordänger, and Carlsson 2014; Vekeman et al. 2017). For some, the rationale to continue teaching may be viewed in the context of tactical behaviours that signal an evolving facet of

Table 2. Participants' occupational modifications.

Professional life phase	Pseudonym	Gender and Age	Role	Occupational status
Phase 1 NQT resigned	Eleanor	Female 20s	Class teacher	Shift – Resigned
Phase 1 NQT resigned	Fiona	Female 20s	Class teacher	Shift – Resigned
Phase 1 2nd year	Barry	Male 20s	Class teacher	Shift – new school (<i>second teaching job</i>)
Phase 1 2nd year	Lynn	Female 30s	Class teacher	Stay
Phase 1 2nd year	Nina	Female 40s	Class teacher	Stay (change role*)
Phase 1 3rd year	Sara	Female 30s	Class teacher	Shift – part time/composite roles
Phase 1 3rd year	Ben	Male 20s	Class teacher	Shift – new school (<i>second teaching job</i>)
Phase 1 3rd year	Wilma	Female 20s	Class teacher	Shift – new school (<i>third teaching job</i>)
Phase 1 3rd year	Ryan	Male 30s	Class teacher	Stay
Phase 2 5 th year	Harriet	Female 30s	Class teacher	Stay (change key stage)
Phase 2 5 th year	Verity	Female 40s	Supply teacher	Shift– Supply teach and new school (<i>second teaching job</i>)
Phase 2 5 th year	Carl	Male 30s	Class teacher	Stay
Phase 2 5 th year	Beth	Female 30s	Class teacher	Stay (change key stage)
Phase 2 6 th year	Shirley	Female 40s	PPA cover/ Class teacher	Shift – new school (<i>second teaching job</i>)
Phase 3 8 th year	Jimmy	Male 40s	Class teacher	Stay
Phase 3 9 th year	Glenys	Female 50s	PPA cover/ Class teacher	Shift/out (new sector)
Phase 3 10 th year	Alan	Male 40s	Deputy Head	Stay
Phase 3 10 th year	Rose	Female 40s	Class teacher and school middle leader	Stay (change role*)
Phase 3 10 th year	Bryan	Male 30s	Class teacher and school senior leader	Stay (change role*)
Phase 3 11 th year	Tony	Male 40s	Class teacher and school middle leader	Stay
Phase 3 14 th year	Rae	Female 30s	SENCO	Stay (change role*)
Phase 3 14 th year	Simon	Male 40s	Head Teacher	Shift – new school (<i>third teaching job</i>)

professional identity, and one that helps to ‘weather the storm’, or what I describe as professional ‘hedging’.

Enabling new insights into the complexity of teacher retention, ‘hedging’ can be viewed as a strategy for risk management, a tactic to prolong employment and engagement with the rich rewards of working with children, and to protect a professional identity. It may comprise actions that mitigate losses in other areas or to protect mutual interests. For some, the short-term measures may illustrate tactical behaviours deployed to manage demoralisation and pre-burnout. [Table 2](#) highlights the proportion of participants who had ‘shifted’ schools, or stayed and adjusted their role.

The implications of this ‘shifting’ are most notable for the individual school (rather than the profession) (Lindqvist, Nordänger, and Carlsson 2014); in England, ‘school-to-school mobility is the biggest source of new entrants to schools’ (DFE 2016, 2). The ‘alterable characteristics of teachers’ work environments play an important role in attrition’ (Borman and Dowling 2008, 401) and teachers are incentivised by perceived strong leadership and collegiality. Teacher demoralisation is highly contextualised by schooling environment (Wronowski and Urick 2019) and the decision to change schools may renew or restore professional confidence, create a sense of optimism or provide sustenance to (re)invigorate. The decision to ‘stay put’ is borne from an equally tactical outlook.

If teacher resignation is construed as ‘resistance’ to reform (Smith and Ulvik 2017), or a conscientious objection to the work (Santoro 2016), the inference may be that ‘staying put’ equates with compliance. Potentially beneficial to understanding retention, the decision to adjust working conditions may indicate a tactical commitment to professional regeneration. Conceivably, the tactical teacher ‘games’ and ‘hedges’ to defend and preserve values and motivation.

Conclusion

The context of paradigmatic change in education in England (West 2015) was an important parameter for my research which examines the ‘relational and locally negotiated’ (Savage and O’Connor 2015, 610) nature of policy enactment, specifically for primary teachers in England in the second decade of the 21st century. It offers an original and critical insight into primary teachers’ responses to reforms, documenting vital issues of workload and morale, as well as tactics for surviving the ‘policy storm’. The manifestation of the principles of marketisation, managerialism and accountability are influential for teachers in primary education which is increasingly ‘grounded in narratives of efficiency, excellence and value-for-money’ (Hall and Pulsford 2019, 242). Internationally, the commodification of schooling is similarly portrayed through the language and values of commerce with according structures of performativity, accountability and surveillance (Brathwaite 2017; Dahlstedt and Fejes 2019).

Unexpected in the research was the juxtaposition between altruistic aspirations and the extent of negative perceptions and experiences, as well as the ways that coping mechanisms, ostensibly tactical in nature, offered insights into ‘surviving’ neo-liberal policy. Ball argues that ‘performance has no room for caring’ (2003, 224), and a counterpoint to the participants’ espoused duty, concern and principles. In the quest to ‘survive, or thrive . . . (teachers) need to reconstitute themselves as ‘neo-liberal professionals’

(Stevenson 2017, 10); perhaps the incidence of meta-work, ‘hedging’ and ‘gaming’ — congruent with the world of commerce — points to primary teacher identity in neo-liberal terms. I maintain that teachers in this study have not (yet) succumbed to the increasingly normalised tenets of neo-liberal education. Despite the re-positioning of child-centred, humanist ideology to the context of ‘raising standards’ (Department for Education 2010) — and potentially persuasive for teachers — my findings allude to the resilience of altruism and the over-arching and persistent commitment to child-centred primary education which acts to dislocate the discourse of the neo-liberal teacher.

Simultaneously, the concept of the ‘tactical’ teacher dislocates the traditional discourse of the primary teacher. Understanding the primary practitioner as ‘tactician’, and the ways that particular strategies point to low-level subversion, as well as further enable the teacher’s purpose and aspirations, may disorientate conceptions of primary teacher identity. There is scope for further research about such tactics, notably in primary school assessment practices. As Education editorials, teacher blogs and tweets continue to critically denounce and, on occasion, whistle-blow about deviations in assessment practices, the phenomenon of gaming merits further scrutiny, both locally and internationally. The practice of ‘resorting to gaming to boost accountability grades’ is also apparent in e.g. American schools (Braithwaite 2017, 435). The nuances of teachers’ experiences of tests and high stakes assessment, as well as everyday practices like marking and moderation need to be further researched.

In 2019, the English Government launched a high-profile retention and recruitment strategy and conceded the unnecessary workload consequent to earlier reforms (DFE 2019). Inherent in my research, teachers’ experiences of intensification, heightened accountability, the pressure of ‘raising standards’, and demoralisation are understood as the toll of policy enactment rather than the (so-called) ‘unintended consequences’ of policy reform (DFE 2019, 8).

Any deliberation about recruitment and retention must attend to issues of ‘workforce’, ‘workload,’ ‘retention,’ and ‘morale’ and warrant further critical evaluation. My findings about primary school leadership suggest the goal for the re-moralisation of the profession may be partially realised by ‘emotionally intelligent school leaders creating the necessary positive and collegial working environment in which staff feel supported, valued and listened to’ (OFSTED 2019, 9). The gendered nature of the workforce continues to be under-researched and under-scrutinised in policy; there is arguably little strategy to understand or maximise the potential of what is inevitably a diverse and complex population and one that is invariably female.

In 2018, primary provision in England was still rated ‘highly’ based on school performance (Jerim and Sims 2019), although the ramifications of an environment where ‘nothing is ever good enough’ has consequences for both teachers and pupils. Whilst the Government may propagandise teaching as ‘a highly valued and important occupation’ (OFSTED 2019, 9), policy directives must correlate, not least in the commitment to ‘establishing accountability systems (that) . . . evolve in a way that builds teacher efficacy and development’ (Education Support 2019, 77).

Note

1. White papers are policy documents produced by the English Government that set out their proposals for future legislation (<https://www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/white-paper/>)

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