"That would be my red line": An analysis of headteachers' resistance of neoliberal education reforms

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Abstract

In neoliberal times, marketization, managerialism and performativity suggest a values free approach to educational leadership. School leaders, tasked with driving educational reforms, have not always resisted the reforms they find unpalatable, such as a standards agenda, prescribed curricula, high stakes testing and the fragmentation of the education system. By virtue of their long service, it might be assumed experienced headteacher/principals are largely compliant having successfully managed a school's performance and secured its place in the market. Some have embraced reforms; others may not see education as values free, having entered the profession motivated by a desire for social justice and having developed inclusive educational philosophies. The focus here is on headteachers' resistance of the neoliberal reforms they opposed. I report findings from empirical research exploring ten headteachers' critical negotiation of English education policy reforms. Their resistance took many forms as 'everyday' or hidden and overt forms of resistance. Importantly, it could be seen in the semblance of compliance as *game-playing*, *selectivity*, *masquerade* and *reinvention*. Drawing on theories of 'everyday resistance' (Scott 1985, 1989) and Bhabha's (1994) conceptualisation of the daily resistance of colonialism as *mimicry* and *sly civility* taking place in a *third space* of ambivalence and ambiguity, I argue that recognition of headteachers' critical negotiation of policy reforms as resistance signal the potential for future collective action. These heterogeneous everyday practices are influenced by time, context and intersecting sources of power. Postcolonial resistance theory provides the tools with which to uncover what is often hidden.

7750 words

An attack on mind, body and soul

Neoliberalism is a problematic concept used variously to signify capitalist reform through free market economic and social transformation, as a marker of right wing politics leading to the dismantling of public services, and as a historical and heuristic device (Courtney, McGinity and Gunter 2017). Here, following Courtney, McGinity and Gunter (2017), I associate it specifically with the privatisation and marketization of the education system and the devaluation of professional knowledge.

Critical scholars argue the marketization, managerialism and performativity of neoliberal education reforms damage education on a global scale. Indeed, since the US (1983) *A Nation at Risk*, UK Education Reform Act (1988) and inception of Chile's charter schools, arguably the teaching profession has sustained attack on mind, body and soul. Prescribed curricula and pedagogies act as a "straightjacket" (Hill 2006, 22), the "vice-like grip" of marketisation and managerialism (Stevenson and Wood 2013, 49) control the profession, and teachers feel the "terrors of performativity" (Ball 2003, 215). A Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) colonises education systems in a biological sense, as a "viral spread" (Sahlberg 2011, 176). Detrimental effects include "institutional schizophrenia" (Blackmore 2004, 454), and surgery (or butchery) in "goug[ing]" out the heart of the educational project (Ball 2003, 225). The totalitarianism of dictated education policy, surveillance and punitive accountability destroys the soul (Ball 2003; Ball and Olmedo 2013; Stevenson and Wood 2013; Gunter 2014). Despite this, there remains a common sense attraction to measuring school effectiveness through student outcomes as "a way

through the infernal vagueness and untidiness of school management" (Smyth and Dow 1998, 301) for policy-makers, school leaders, teachers and researchers.

Arguably it is not accidental. Beck (2000), cited in Peck and Tickell (2002, 381), claims neoliberalism was rolled out as an ideological "thought virus". In education, neoliberal reforms have been spread by Edu-business (Hill 2006; Ball 2012), the publication of international comparison data (PISA) (Sahlberg 2011) and a transnational leadership package colonising professional practice across the globe (Gunter 2014). Discourses of risk and crisis have facilitated colonisation by engendering fear and precarity to perpetuate the ontological insecurity associated with changing constructions of what in education is, could and should be valued (Ball 2003). In the English context, former secretary of state, Michael Gove's "declar[ation of] war" (Hastings 2010) confronted teachers and educationists as "enemies of promise" (Gove 2013, no page) to alienate professionals who previously embraced reforms (Bell 2014). One headteacher described reforms as "bizarre" and inspection as a "regime of terror" (Jim Foley in Brown 2013, no page). References to war permeate the literature with battles, attacks, enemies and defensive response (Benn 2011; Ball and Olmedo 2013; Hill 2006; Hill et al 2015; Stevenson and Gilliland 2016) to suggest colonisation, in a political sense, as the establishment of control by imposing "regimes of truth" in education systems (Stevenson 2017, 10). The English case is of particular interest here, as an initial site of fermentation for the GERM and as a former colonial power with a legacy of influence across the English speaking world and beyond.

The aim here is to explore whether and how headteachers, as agents of education reform responsible for driving the reform agenda, critically engaged with education policy reforms. How far did reforms contradict their values, educational philosophies and professional knowledges to make their negotiation of them problematic? How clearly drawn were their

"red lines" which should not be crossed? How might their acts of resistance be theorised? I aim to contribute to the theorisation of headteachers' resistance of neoliberal education reforms by providing an overview of the English policy context and a review of literature concerned with headteachers' "everyday resistance" (Scott 1989; Johansson and Vinthagen 2014). Importantly, a conceptualisation of resistance as complex and fluid requires a nuanced analysis rather than a binarised approach that identifies headteachers as either compliant or resistant if its existence is to be recognised. There follows an overview of the research project. Discussion of the findings draws on 'everyday resistance' theory that posits there is hidden as well as overt resistance and, given the colonisation metaphor, includes postcolonial theory. Specifically, discussion of the semblance of compliance draws on notions of *third space*, *mimicry* and *sly civility* (Bhabha 1994). Examples of semblance here include *game-playing*, *selectivity*, *masquerade* and *reinvention*. This is of particular interest in contexts where a gap has opened up between headteachers' espoused values, educational philosophies and professional knowledges and neoliberal education reforms.

Policy context

Since 2001, international comparative data such as the OECD's PISA findings have been used to influence education policy-making (Sahlberg 2011). The publication of school performance data is intended to enable school choice. It engenders competition between schools as a quasi-market and facilitated punitive accountability. Shifting measures of school effectiveness creates ontological insecurity making education professionals 'unsure whether [they] are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others, constantly looking to improve, to be better, to be excellent' (Ball 2003, 220). During the 30 to 40 year career of a school leader (1980s to 2010s), a headteacher in England has worked within different methods of measuring school effectiveness including

shifts from "value-added" (2002–2005) to "contextual value added" (2006–2010) to "expected progress" (2011–2015) to "progress 8" (value added measure of a secondary school pupil's progress in eight examination subjects) (2016–) (Leckie and Goldstein 2017). Since 1992, results were disseminated in the media in a format resembling a football league table. Leckie and Goldstein (2017, 193) argue school league tables 'should be viewed with far more scepticism and interpreted far more cautiously than they have often been to date'. This data informs or triggers school inspections where negative judgments lead to the "takeover" of the school by another school or multi-academy trust (MAT) (Mansell 2016, 22) in a process resembling colonisation.

This period was marked by changes of government as Conservative (1979-1997), New Labour (1997-2010), Conservative led Coalition (2010-2015) and Conservative (2015 ongoing). During the Coalition government the academies programme accelerated to remove local democratic accountability. Teacher education was moved out of universities into schools and overnight policy decisions regarding which student outcomes counted in measures of school performance were communicated via the media (DfE 2013). These impacted greatly on school leaders' decision-making (Fuller 2018).

Next, I review a selection of literature about headteachers' resistance to education reforms and outline work by resistance theorists.

Headteachers' policy resistance

The dearth of research into headteachers' policy resistance is attributable to a dominant discourse of resistance as negative, to be overcome by school leaders (Anderson and Cohen 2015). Nevertheless, studies focus on headteachers (Moore, George and Halpin 2002; Theoharis 2007; P. Thomson 2008; Niesche 2013; Ward et al 2016), include them in broader policy resistance research in compulsory (Smyth and Dow 1998; Blackmore 2004;

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Perryman et al 2011; Ball and Olmedo 2013; Anderson and Cohen 2015; Pinto 2015), further (Shain and Gleeson 1999) and higher education (English 2003). Resistance occurs in opposition to neoliberal education reforms as covert (Ball and Olmedo 2013; Niesche 2013), and overt actions (Theoharis 2007; P. Thomson 2008), counter narratives and discourses (Ball and Olmedo 2013; Anderson and Cohen 2015); is enacted by individuals (English 2003; Ball and Olmedo 2013) and as collectives (P. Thomson 2008). It is daily work in the lived reality of mediating emotions in school leadership (Blackmore 2004; Niesche 2013). Indeed, Anderson and Cohen (2015, 8-9) propose a framework for policy resistance that moves from the individual's Critical Vigilance "the careful introspection and critical thinking about competing interests", through Counter-discourses, Counter-conduct and reappropriation of policies as "increasingly collective actions" in new alliances. Concrete examples of Critical Vigilance include an educator or leader's questioning of norms, of Counter-discourses that deconstruct dominant discourses to reconstruct counternarratives or "new narratives" by changing the language used (Anderson and Cohen 2015, 12), of Counter-conduct and reappropriation in which educators and leaders reappropriate mandated initiatives for their own purposes and of collective actions by teaching unions or parents objecting to high stakes testing. Not all scholars recognise this potential; nor do they frame oppositional policy responses as resistance. Perryman, Ball, Maguire and Braun (2011) refer to policy evasion; Ward et al. (2016) to contestation. Pinto (2015) suggests resistance is localised, small and singular (Ball and Olmedo 2013). What they agree is headteachers *do* oppose reforms and there is ambivalence and ambiguity in their opposition. That makes resistance complex and messy, hard to see, and counters a binary approach to constructing headteachers' responses as either compliant or resistant (Shain and Gleeson 1999).

Covert and overt resistance

"Everyday forms of resistance" constitute "the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups" that fall short of "outright collective defiance" (Scott 1985, xvi). They include hidden acts such as silence (Niesche 2013), disengagement (Shain and Gleeson 1999), "foot dragging" or delay, false compliance, slander and flight (Scott 1989, 34). These alternative forms are used when overt forms prove dangerous. Whilst Scott (1989) proffers the concept as an alternative to more overt forms of resistance, I posit there is much overlap between covert and overt resistance. Thus everyday resistance includes ambivalence (T. Johansson and Lalander 2012), semblance (Moore, George and Halpin 2002; Blackmore 2004; P. Thomson 2008; Anderson and Cohen 2015) and accommodation through selectivity (Moore, George and Halpin 2002; P. Thomson 2008). A. Johansson and Vinthagen (2014, 418) argue "everyday resistance" is "historically entangled", "intersectional", "heterogenous and contingent".

Drawing on Foucault (2007), Rossi (2017, 342) posits that "the very truth that critique utters about power and resistance also simultaneously enacts a strategy aimed at upsetting the very order that it brings to description". The critical utterance, or speech act that expresses resistance is in itself an act of resistance. A headteacher's expression of bitterness at his metamorphosis from educator to policeman demonstrates his entrapment in "the contradictions of the social world" (Bourdieu 1998, 1); it is the expression of emotion provoked by his awareness of the contradictions as well as the mediation of them in his daily work that constitute an act of resistance. So too, a French train driver's observation that Algerian hijackers aboard his train were "people like us" (Bourdieu 1998, 21) resisted alignment with contemporary populist discourses of xenophobia and racism. As Anderson and Cohen (2015) point out, there is potential to move from the critical utterance expressing disagreement, an emotive expression of disdain, the private expression of emotions felt by the speaker (Shain and Gleeson 1999; Blackmore 2004), to public and collective action.

Private and personal forms of everyday resistance provide the context for apparently compliant policy responses. Developing and sharing a counter discourse or narrative that reappropriates the policy discourse might lead to overt acts of resistance such as rejection, refusal and/or collective action. Countering political discourses to influence policy-making means speaking back to political power collectively through headteacher unions, individually through the media (P. Thomson 2008) or in person (Jim Foley in Brown 2013).

So, resistance, like power, is everywhere (Foucault 1981). All these forms are worthy of further exploration. They overlap and are interlinked as: the 'everyday' less visible resistance of *critical reflections*, *critical utterances*, *mediation of emotions* and *semblance of compliance* in the accommodation of reforms; and the public *counter discourse* in and outside school with colleagues, peers, the wider community and politicians, the *counter conduct* of professional disobedience (Wraga 1999) and *collective action* locally, nationally and internationally.

P. Thomson (2008) and A. Johansson & Vinthagen (2014) draw on postcolonial scholarship to problematize what constitutes resistance (Bhabha 1994). Scott (1989) demonstrates how the imposition of regulations on colonial societies, through land and resources appropriation, led to the criminalisation of everyday traditional subsistence practices. The continuance of such practices became everyday resistance. In the context of education reforms, the recalibration of what constitutes success leads to the reconstitution of who or what is 'failing', what once was 'satisfactory' becomes unsatisfactory (Gunter 2014).

Colonisation of the field

Various education related fields have been colonised. The language of business has colonised the public sphere (Anderson & Cohen 2015), education policy has been colonised by economic policy imperatives (Ward et al 2016 citing Ball 2008), state schooling has been

colonised by neoliberal definitions and values (Ball and Olmedo 2013), professional practice (Gunter 2014) and teachers' lives have been colonised (Ball 2003) and the middle class colonises the best schools (Hill 2006).

Gunter (2014, 24) argues knowledge production in the field of Educational Leadership, Management and Administration (ELMA) has been "colonised, used and developed by and through the TLP (Transnational Leadership Practice) as a globalised and globalising leadership industry, where members of ELMA have variously willingly or unwillingly collaborated". Key features are the domination of organisational efficiency and effectiveness; attempts to develop a canon of 'best' practice; and removal of control from the profession and universities. Gunter (2014) demonstrates how governments in England, themselves influenced by PISA results, have invested in the TLP to retain status in the global education marketplace and broader economy. Policy travels, via experimentation in technological and functionalist practices in different parts of the world to and from India, for example, in ways that colonise and/ re-colonise England by introducing them to the materially impoverished in post-colonial contexts (Ball 2012; Gunter 2014).

So too, the fragmentation of state education in England, through the escalation of academisation from 2010, served multiple purposes i.e. the reduction of the state, the removal of local democratic accountability, the marketization of the system and the development of a 'divide and rule' approach isolating schools only to demand their re-formation into colonies of multi-academy trusts (MATs) (DfE 2016).

Key to the process of colonisation is language change. Schools become academies or oxymoronically independent state schools (Charter schools in the United States); headteachers become principals; leaders of academy trusts become chief executive officers. Mansell (2016) critiques the rhetoric of academisation i.e. promises of increased school

autonomy and teacher freedom and claims of academies' success and the decline of the state education system. Gunter (2014) goes further to call this policy rhetoric lies.

A 'third space' for mimicry and sly civility

Given the colonisation metaphor, I look to a postcolonial theorisation of resistance. Bhabha's (1994) notions of *sly civility* (Vinthagen and A. Johansson 2013), *mimicry* (P. Thomson 2008) and the *third space* (A. Johansson and Vinthagen 2016) enable thinking about ambivalence and ambiguity. Headteachers might not comply with reforms simply because of coercion, corruption, cowardice or self-interest (P. Thomson 2008). These tools offer a way to think about resistance within accommodation or policy evasion (Perryman et al 2011); an alternative way to think about the apparent cognitive dissonance in the conflation of incompatible school leadership discourses described elsewhere as leadership polyglossia (Fuller 2018).

The notion of a *third space* (Bhabha 1994; A. Johansson and Vinthagen 2014) acknowledges complexity and fluidity avoiding a binarised discourse (P. Thomson 2008; T. Johansson and Lalander 2012). Bhabha (1994, 56) identifies this *third space* as an "in between space" that "elude[s] the politics of polarity". It is marked by ambivalence, ambiguity and hybridity. It is where *mimicry* and *sly civility* occur. *Mimicry* incorporates camouflage, trompe l'oeil, ironic compromise, repetition and ambivalence in being "a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha ibid, 122). Thus mimicry "emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (ibid, 122). In postcolonial terms it "articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority" and partially reverses it (ibid, 126). That is its double vision. It is almost the same but "not quite/not white" (ibid, 131). It is discourse "uttered between the lines" and "both against the rules and

within them" (ibid, 128). *Sly civility* can be seen as the ambivalent colonial rhetoric itself, "To be the father and the oppressor; just and unjust; moderate and rapacious; vigorous and despotic" (ibid. 137), and that which resists it as a façade of compliance concealing complex and multiple forms of resistance beneath. There may be varying degrees of resistance depending on the nature of the discourses, the source and temporality of their power. Hence the importance of historical, social and political context, intersectionality regarding the sources of power, heterogeneity and contingency (A. Johansson and Vinthagen 2014).

Drawing on these concepts, I contribute to the theorisation of headteachers' resistance of the GERM's colonisation of education systems and professional practice. Here follows a description of the research project.

The research

This exploration of headteachers' negotiation of neoliberal education policy reforms was constructed from self-reported responses from ten headteachers, with 147 years of headship experience between them, ranging between 7 and 21 years. They had successfully negotiated changing measures of school performance and complied with education policy. They agreed with reforms they constructed as successful. Between them they valued reforms concerned with: the political priority afforded by New Labour (five headteachers); teacher education, development, pay and conditions and aspects of performance management (four headteachers); curriculum and pedagogy (four headteachers); management and organisation (four headteachers); children's safety and welfare (three headteachers); and aspects of school performance measurement (two headteachers). I do not want to understate their compliance with some reforms. However, positive effects of reforms were weighed against the cost,

At what cost, because the pressure that's put on the profession means that this

year was the hardest year that we've ever had to recruit staff. […] but people

are not coming in to the profession, and in particular many people are not

wanting to go on and be head teachers (Rosie).

Of the five women and five men, three were school headteacher/ principals in a local

authority maintained school, sponsored academy (pre 2010 New Labour initiative) and a

converter academy (post 2010 Coalition initiative) (see Courtney 2015 for a discussion of

types of school in England); four were executive headteachers of two or three converter

academies; two were chief executive officers of groups of eight to fifteen secondary and

primary academies, and one had a dual role as executive principal and chief executive

officer of a multi-academy trust. For reasons of anonymity pseudonyms are not matched to

roles or organisations. Women and people of Black and Global Majority heritages might be

identifiable due to their underrepresentation in such roles. Instead, I provide their total

length of service as headteacher and beyond: *Aileen*, 13 years; *Cathleen,* 14 years; *Chandra*,

21 years; *Daniel*, 15 years; *Joanna*, 7 years; *Joe,* 14 years; *Moira*, 15 years; *Patrick*, 15

years; *Peter*, 14 years; *Rosie*, 19 years. All but one had led more than one school

simultaneously. All had led 'outstanding' or 'good' schools as defined by school

inspections; almost all had led 'failing' schools. Between them they had worked in rural and

urban contexts, including London Boroughs, from the south-east to the north of England.

At the time of interview none had plans to leave their positions but at the time of writing

five are no longer in post; three have retired, two have been promoted.

Nine self-identified as British/white British; one as European/Asian dual heritage. Among

those identifying as white/British there were accounts of arrival in England, Irish and central

European heritage and marriage into Irish and western European heritage. Six were in their

fifties; four aged sixty or over. One described a working-class background; another had been cared for by the state; three had teachers in their family backgrounds though parents were not necessarily university educated. Six were grammar school (selective) educated; one privately; one in a comprehensive (non-selective) school; two in secondary (modern) schools. These headteachers do not constitute a homogenous group. They are not necessarily typical of headteachers in English secondary schools.

I present my construction of participants' perspectives (Morrison, 2012). A variety of roles working in secondary schools (1991-2007) as teacher, head of English and deputy headteacher; as initial teacher educator (2007-14); as school governor, and following academisation, director of an independent state school (2008-16) has provided me with first-hand experience of education reforms.

Face to face semi structured interviews, as purposeful conversations lasting over an hour, took place in participants' schools in 2015. Participants received questions in advance to enable thinking about responses. They were recorded and transcribed. I asked questions about their education, personal values and priorities in education. They identified and discussed key education policies associated with successive governments. Two had reminded themselves of key policies. One provided extensive notes detailing thoughts about policies ranging from Local Management of Schools implemented under the Education Reform Act (1988) to reforms currently underway. Most focused on reforms from 2010. They were asked about school effectiveness, the impact of school performance tables and what sustained them in headship. Full informed consent was given on the understanding that names, schools, or their locations would not be revealed. They were informed that the findings would remain confidential and about the right to withdraw up to the point of

publication. The ethical approval protocols of my institution were followed. All the men and one woman made minor changes to the transcripts.

Transcripts were coded and re-coded. For the purposes of this paper, specific examples of headteachers' resistance and transgression of reforms were located. Drawing on the literature reviewed above, transcripts were re-coded to identify acts of everyday resistance (Scott 1985, 1989) as *critical reflections* (Anderson and Cohen 2015), *critical utterances* (Rossi 2017), *mediation of emotions* (Blackmore 2004; Niesche 2013) and of overt acts of resistance as *counter discourse* (Anderson and Cohen 2015) in and outside school, *counter conduct* (Wraga 1999) and *collective action* (P. Thomson 2008). Finally, examples of *semblance of compliance* (Moore, George and Halpin 2002; Blackmore 2004; P. Thomson 2008; Anderson and Cohen 2015) were located. I present examples of each.

Headteachers' resistance

Headteachers' resistance is categorised as everyday resistance and overt resistance. This separation is a heuristic device; in reality, there is overlapping and interconnectedness. Semblance of compliance has been presented separately though I suggest this is an example of everyday resistance.

Headteachers' everyday acts of resistance

Headteachers' *critical reflections* were evident in connections made between upbringing, values, educational experiences and the development of an educational philosophy and headteacherly habitus (Fuller 2013), their predisposition to enact or resist education policy in particular ways. Classed, gendered, raced and religious heritages had been questioned, accepted or rejected. Some had first-hand experience of social mobility; many crossed gender, class and/or race boundaries to achieve headship. Each saw education as

emancipatory, a process of socialisation and identity formation as well as a place for the acquisition of knowledge, understanding and skills (Fuller 2012). Each was committed to the comprehensive ideal of inclusive education. Attention to curricular breadth and balance, alongside children's safety and happiness, aimed to develop children as contributors to society, in and outside the workplace, as decent, caring, confident, moral and happy people. These priorities were articulated alongside the performativity discourse headteachers had negotiated as successful, long serving headteachers. These *critical reflections* enabled reflection on the impact of reforms on pupils and staff (Theoharis 2007; Ball and Olmedo 2013; Niesche 2013; Anderson and Cohen 2015).

Between them, headteachers' *critical utterances* demonstrated opposition to reforms concerning

1) the *Misalignment of policy with the core purpose of the school* including the hierarchisation of subjects and narrowing curriculum including at post-16; the prescription and micromanagement of curriculum content; and inappropriate assessment regimes (nine headteachers);

2) the *Measurement of school performance* including the misuse, abuse, misunderstanding or misinterpretation of data; the revalorisation of student outcomes, which entries count (the first entry) and subsequent devaluation of subjects and qualifications including vocational education; the arbitrariness of 'floor' targets i.e. proportion of children in a school gaining the grades that count regardless of the context and circumstances; the relationship between performativity and pedagogical autonomy; the purpose, arbitrariness and regrading of school inspection; and the use of school inspection to enforce structural change (ten headteachers);

3) *Structural change* leading to fragmentation of the system specifically relating to specialist schools; academisation and free schools; school-to-school improvement; the remoteness, lack of expertise and educational philosophy among academy leaders; the mistaken desire for increased headteacher autonomy; and school governance arrangements that exclude the community (nine headteachers);

4) *Policy-making and implementation* regarding rapidity; the quantity of reforms; and their foundation on one person's view of education rather than sound pedagogical principles (six headteachers);

5) *Wider education policies* affecting initial teacher education; and higher education (four headteachers); and

6) *Broader political change* in reducing the public sector leading to the devaluation of education; and reduction of local government, its authority and capacity to support and challenge education (five headteachers).

Headteachers explicitly challenged and questioned reforms (Anderson and Cohen 2015; Ball and Olmedo 2013). Joe's "red line" was the expansion of selective education; he saw school segregation as wholly inappropriate in a democratic society. He would not adopt the rhetoric to say, 'I'm glad [name of school] is a grammar school'; he had 'to look at [him]self in the mirror in the morning'; the alternative would be for him to leave the profession.

Disparaging remarks used highly emotive language to describe reforms and their effects as: "madness", "wicked", "appalling" (Aileen), "ridiculous" (Cathleen), "rubbish", "hare-brained" (Joanna), "sill[y]" (Moira), "alien" (Rosie), a "fiasco" (Patrick) and "nonsense" (Moira, Patrick, Peter) indicating lack of deference to power (Scott 1989). They echo Jim Foley's earlier remarks (Brown 2013).

So too, headteachers' language was peppered with military imagery to describe reform activity as a "big push" (Aileen, Chandra, Daniel, Patrick, Peter), "blitz" (Joanna), "purge" (Chandra), "existential threat" (Peter), "empires battling" (Patrick); people as "troops" (Joanna, Patrick), "little Hitlers" (Chandra); weaponry (Joe, Patrick) and other equipment such as "parachut[es]" (Peter); responses such as "fighting" (Aileen, Joanna, Peter), being in a "bunker" (Joe), "claw[ing]", "tear[ing]" (Moira), raising one's head "above the parapet" (Patrick, Peter); danger and the need for protection or defence (Aileen, Cathleen, Chandra, Daniel, Joe, Patrick, Peter); and damage, injury, trauma or death (Aileen, Joanna, Rosie, Chandra, Daniel, Joe, Patrick). There was "toxic rhetoric" about education in the media (Joanna). These headteachers felt under attack (Hastings 2010; Hill et al 2015). Their language warrants that of scholars highlighted earlier as an attack on mind, body and soul.

Their articulation revealed the mediation of emotions such as worry for themselves and others (Aileen, Cathleen, Joanna, Moira, Chandra, Daniel, Joe, Patrick, Peter), fear (Cathleen, Joanna, Daniel, Peter), vulnerability (Chandra, Daniel, Peter) and discomfort (Patrick); sadness (Moira, Rosie, Daniel, Joe, Patrick), annoyance (Aileen, Cathleen, Joe) and suspicion (Joe); pressure (Aileen, Cathleen, Joanna, Rosie, Joe) and frustration (Joanna, Joe, Patrick). Experiencing and mediating these emotions signals the often hidden resistant political work of education (Shain and Gleeson 1999; Moore, George and Halpin 2002; Blackmore 2004; Theoharis 2007; P. Thomson 2008; Niesche 2013; Ball and Olmedo 2013). Cathleen regretted her "paternalistic" approach, Rosie protected staff from reform "turbulence" and Daniel protected staff from the businessification of education (Hill et al 2015). Joanna acted "as a filter" whilst openly sharing her disdain of contemporary education policy. Sarcasm and shared jocularity at his expense expressed collective resistance difficult to achieve openly with the former secretary of state, Michael Gove (Scott 1989).

Headteachers' overt resistance

Counter discourse took place in and outside school. Joe and Patrick openly resisted reforms in external meetings; Patrick was treated like 'the village idiot'. Chandra was asked by Michael Gove to provide a "different view" from that of other headteachers. In a public meeting with parents, Aileen declared her refusal to be drawn into competition with local schools; instead, there was cooperation for the benefit of local children (Fuller 2018). Local networking was a form of *collective action* as a means to articulate policy resistance (Aileen, Joanna, Rosie) (Ward et al 2016). Several were affiliated with headteacher and teaching unions as former union representatives (Cathleen, Joanna, Moira, Daniel) though Daniel acknowledged the failure of the profession to lead a national debate about the purpose of education. Nor had they spoken up collectively against game-playing that secured a school 100% success in terms of student outcomes by taking vocational courses equivalent to four passes (Wilson, Croxson and Atkinson 2006), that "completely devalued the whole bloody process" (Daniel) and had been a "Pandora's Box" that schools were under pressure to imitate (Joe).

Counter conduct was in response to rapid policy change regarding what counted in school performance tables i.e. the revalorisation of student outcomes, which examination entries count and subsequent devaluation of subjects and qualifications including vocational education (Muir 2013). Three changed school policy on early examination entry to comply; Cathleen regretted it,

> That was the wrong decision. […] it was morally the wrong decision because morally, it didn't matter to the children when they got it. It mattered to us. […] The maths exam was much harder in the summer. We didn't do very well in

maths. So we paid the price and it's the moral bit in me that thinks, you know,

you paid the price, [Cathleen], because you didn't do the right thing (Cathleen).

Two headteachers resisted. Each recounted their reasons,

> … it was fairly clear that what mattered to a child was the best entry and
>
> therefore, if you like, we took a hit on first entry scores […] It was interesting
>
> that we were left with that dichotomy really, you know, for a school's
>
> performance tables you might want to go in and say, "Right, no, we're not
>
> doing early entry, you're all going in late because it's better for us," but for
>
> them it wouldn't have been. (Daniel).

> Our children [at School 1] got 76% […]. First entry they didn't. It hasn't hit
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> my [admissions] figures at all. We've got more children than ever wanting to
>
> come in, so for our community because we're an outstanding school it didn't
>
> mean anything. Here [at School 2] they didn't do it because they hadn't even
>
> twigged it. At [name of School 3] is … now if I was at [name of School 3] I
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> probably wouldn't have done it and I'd have taught it in a different way
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> because that was in your [failing] category. It can't afford to play the game
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> and that really is the sad thing. Here they entered everybody in B-Techs
>
> [vocational courses]. Historically that was great, that's the game playing, but
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> now they didn't realise it had all changed and if they did realise they didn't do
>
> anything about it. So it is impossible for results to go up so high. (Moira)

Peter resisted by default: children had already taken some examinations. The recalibration of

success and failure left the school vulnerable (Ball 2003; Gunter 2014).

Four continued to offer and value vocational and subjects that no longer counted (Aileen, Moira, Rosie, Daniel). Rosie's confidence to resist came from experience,

> I'm quite bloody minded and sometimes say, 'No, we're not doing that,' or, 'Go away,' or, 'Yeah, we'll do that but we'll subvert it.' And I think experience does give you that bit of extra confidence to say, 'Oh blow it. What can they do, sack me?' You know, 'I'm not going to do this, it's wrong,' or, 'Yeah, we'll do it, but not now,' or, 'We'll do it, but we'll do it in our own way'.

Headteachers' semblance of compliance

Rosie's summary of counter conduct demonstrates the range of policy resistance available to her from outright refusal or rejection of policy to the accommodation of policy that includes subversion, delay or policy reappropriation. The ambivalence or *semblance of compliance,* whether unwilling or strategic (Shain and Gleeson 1999; Moore, George and Halpin 2002) included behaviours that emerged from the data as *game-playing*, *selectivity*, *masquerade* and *reinvention*. Analysing the assimilation and accommodation of policy in juxtaposition with everyday and overt resistance enables a nuanced and non-binary approach to policy resistance research (Anderson and Cohen 2015).

Game playing

Game-playing was inherent in managing school performance tables to present the school favourably. Moira's account recognises schools were not in equal positions in this game. She spoke disparagingly of staff for not realising rules had changed. Moira was a consummate player; indeed, she was open about allegations of breaking rules. Media accounts alleged

headteachers "cheat" the system (Daniel). The headteachers here calculated the impact of reforms on school performance tables. Joe questioned this,

> ... so we're making these calculations all the time, and you wonder about the moral imperative of all of that. Because if you think, 'Well should that child go on that [curriculum] pathway or that pathway?' the pressure of the league table may decide which way you go or you think, 'Well, better give them a chance to get [the qualifications that count] or whatever' (Joe).

Peter considered entering children for the European Computer Driving License that counted in the school performance measures (D. Thomson 2016),

> We printed off the list of qualifications that counted in basket three and, 'Any easy ones here?' […] but the reason they do it is just to bank some GCSEs, and even though it's like tax changes or whatever, they change the regulations and schools try to, 'Okay. Where are the gaps here?' (Peter).

Peter thought this was morally questionable but within the rules.

Nevertheless, rule changes narrowed the curriculum to mitigate against unforeseen consequences, "you often find yourself narrowing down because it's that whole thing of really not understanding what it's going to look like until it happens and being frightened that you will have misinterpreted and you'll have done the wrong thing" (Cathleen).

Selectivity

The quantity of reforms meant there was "cherry pick[ing]" (Moira) of policies to align with existing organisational priorities (Aileen, Rosie) (P. Thomson 2008; Fuller 2018). Policy resistance was also associated with school performance,

The ones around internal change and curriculum, well actually they never ever

did anything about those unless you were failing when they came to Ofsted

[inspect], so you didn't do them. Just didn't do them (Chandra).

Like game-playing, selectivity was enabled by school performance (Shain and Gleeson

1999; Moore, George and Halpin 2002; P. Thomson 2008).

Masquerade

Cathleen articulated the gap between espoused values and action as 'me trying to match

things up in my head' about academisation. Politically a democratic socialist and lifelong

member of the Labour party, Cathleen regretted academy conversion,

the academy programme was actually a Labour programme. But this was a

very different interpretation, so I could kick myself, but that's all I was doing

[securing additional school funding]. There was no self-justification there,

really (Cathleen).

The system had fragmented and Cathleen saw no coherence. Her task was to "weave my

way through a system to try… I'd like to influence that system, but I also need to make it

work". She aimed to influence politicians from inside the system by masking her opposition

with compliance.

Reinvention

Headteachers established multi-academy trusts to support local schools and avoid

incorporation into large academy chains,

22

so we then watched these Academy Trusts being set up. We were asked to join several, 'Can we join your party?' you know and, 'Well let's do our own' (Moira).

Refusal to take on another school led Chandra to insist,

…we've resisted because we're not a chain, and we're not trying to do that. So it's really local, working with local primaries and secondaries. […T]hey [the DfE] keep pestering […] Ours isn't a chain and it isn't about trying to replicate things, it's about what's needed locally. So it's about developing, coaching and mentoring the local headteachers so that when I stop doing this it all succeeds and it isn't dependent on any one person (Chandra).

The trust was established to support primary children's literacy and numeracy to help them prepare for secondary schooling,

the only way the government would let us support that school was to sponsor them. So I wasn't particularly a fan of academisation. I'm still not really, […], but we had to do it in order to be able to support them (Chandra).

Similarly, there was resistance of incorporation into a large trust,

we're not trying to become a massive conglomerate or we're not going to try and change our admissions procedure so we steal children from other areas, the idea is we are a school for our area, we're not going to do a [name of school] model and have five different phalanxes of children from different intelligences or whatever else, we just want to work with that community as best we can (Daniel).

The system was developing,

> we're going to be, I think, expected to reinvent some form of local authority
>
> cluster for ourselves. Now, whether that's going to be called [name of school]
>
> and... you know, there's three secondary schools, or whether we're going to go
>
> reaching across the border into [county] and try and find... What I don't want
>
> to be in is a top down MAT, I don't want to be the boss of a MAT nor do I
>
> want to be bossed by somebody in a MAT. But I think what I would be
>
> interested in looking at is some sort of cooperative model where you say four
>
> or five secondary schools come together and say, 'We can work together with a
>
> central committee to function,' but that we've got a capacity and an expertise
>
> across a patch (Daniel).

These examples provide a glimpse of counter discourses and the reappropriation of reforms by headteachers (Anderson and Cohen 2015). In the section that follows I discuss the findings by drawing on Bhabha's (1994) concepts of *third space*, *mimicry* and *sly civility*.

Headteachers' use of *third space*, *mimicry* and *sly civility*

The *third space* enables headteachers' critical negotiation of education reforms. It is a space for ambivalence, ambiguity and compromise. It is necessarily both confusing and creative (Fuller 2018). Headteachers read between the lines of reforms to play, re-appropriate, mask and reinvent; to interpret and translate policy reforms in the context of a particular school or group of schools. Those interpretations and translations were affected not only by the disposition of the headteacher to question, challenge and otherwise resist, but also by the status of the school determined by its position in the school performance table and school inspection judgement. What was possible in one school was not in another. Reading between the lines, headteachers' sense-making of seemingly incompatible discourses

concerning their personal values, professional knowledge about leading education and neoliberal and neoconservative education reforms can be constructed as resistance demonstrated in a broad range of acts including *mimicry* and *sly civility* (Bhabha 1994). Questions remain as to who or what mimics whom or what? And who enacts *sly civility* in relation to what?

Mimicry occurs at multiple levels. Internationally, the UK and US have led the global colonisation of education systems via the GERM (Sahlberg 2011). Globalisation enables the Transnational Leadership Package to be dominated by North American men (Thomson, Gunter and Blackmore in Gunter 2014, vi), the GERM is perpetuated in and by Anglo-Saxon settled countries (Sahlberg 2006, 2011). It is a form of neo-colonialism.

At macro level, in the removal of schools from local authority maintenance, the English education system has been fragmented and colonised by successive governments. As Cathleen and others noted, the Labour government introduced academisation that was accelerated by the Conservative-led Coalition government. She embraced academy conversion because it was begun by Labour. Patrick's Labour MP declared he should "go with the flow" of academisation; there was no political opposition to this fragmentation and privatisation of the education system being "[run] as private businesses" (Patrick). Multi-academy trusts mimic local authorities without the accompanying democratic political processes; their functions are limited to management and organisation despite a promise of increased autonomy. They are "the same but not quite" (Bhabha 1994, 122).

Whatever the ideology behind it, academisation mimics the English private education system. Academies are independent state-funded schools. They mimic private education in not being compelled to teach a national curriculum or to ensure teachers are qualified to teach. The privileging of particular academic subjects mimics a traditional academic

education at a private or selective school. The ideal of a broad and balanced curriculum focused on areas of experience as the aesthetic and creative, ethical, linguistic, physical, mathematical, scientific, social and political/human and social, spiritual and technological (DES 1977; HMI 1985) has been abandoned precisely because schools in areas of disadvantage are under pressure to ensure children, teachers and leaders perform in the same narrow range of subjects. So the *mimicry* in some schools/academies is a case of "almost the same but not quite" curriculum (Bhabha 1994, 122). Daniel was providing music education outside the school day. Aileen had argued with a school governor who thought the curriculum should be narrowed further i.e. "'more arrows and less wood' was the phrase and you said, 'So no art, no drama'" (interviewer repeating earlier conversation with Aileen). Aileen's governor had so embraced performativity that nothing else mattered in a functionalist approach to education; she had to argue to keep an arts curriculum. In both cases there was insufficient family cultural capital for children to succeed without the curriculum needing "to be leavened to make it palatable for some pupils" (Daniel); nor would they get an arts education outside school.

With respect to headteachers' *mimicry*, they were "almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha 1994, 122) far enough 'right'. Several held left wing political beliefs; none acknowledged right wing politics. Their difference lay in comparison with academy leaders they described leading "empires [that were] battling' in a 'dangerous game" (Patrick) who were "little Hitlers" wanting "to take over the world" (Chandra). Despite apparent compliance with many neoliberal education reforms and the restructuring of the education system, headteachers' disavowal of the neoliberal rhetoric of education reform demonstrated resistance of it. The alterity and liminality that accompanied their not quite rightness was felt when they crossed other boundaries. Patrick felt the "discomfort" of a grammar school

education; Chandra experienced racism and poverty in his upbringing, he had engaged in anti-racist politics.

These, and other headteachers were further 'othered' in discursive spaces as "village idiot" (Patrick) or in policy-making consultations,

> I think the only reason I was there, [Michael Gove] used to say, '[Chandra], I'm sure you've got a slightly different view?' Because I'd keep my counsel as long as I could and then almost want to explode and say, 'These people, they're just egos on legs, what's going on?' (Chandra).

This demand for a different narrative (Bhabha 1994) resulted in Chandra's resistance of policy rhetoric. Control was evident in the briefing of headteachers not to refer to policies from the previous government,

> you can't even use the same language that the previous regime used. So certain key phrases are out, so you're specifically briefed beforehand not to use those phrases in any way, shape or form (Chandra).

Chandra's contributions could be constructed as examples of *sly civility* (Bhabha 1994). Here he remained silent for as long as possible; on another occasion he spoke up only to have his voice misappropriated and misrepresented. Following a conference contribution a media story aligned him with current education policy,

> I've just been quoted as praising the current Secretary of State in the [name of local newspaper]. […] I didn't say that at all. Not at all. I wouldn't praise any Secretary of State publicly, do you know what I mean? I wouldn't want to be seen to be trying to curry favour, but it's just made up. […] So, in any case, it

came out that I was in favour of all the secretary of state's policies and I was a

big fan (laughing) (Chandra).

Headteachers were 'othered' by being coerced into colonising other schools; Chandra's

refusal opened him up for criticism. If they did colonise, their symbolic power as leaders of

successful schools was undermined as soon as they took over 'failing' schools. Peter was

silenced, he would not raise his head 'above the parapet' until he had something i.e. a

successful school, to defend.

Finally, children in non-selective state schools mimicked children's achievements in private

and selective schools. The use of vocational qualifications, equivalent to four passes, to

maximise school performance was 'the same but not quite' (Bhabha 1994, 122); it had been

allowed to continue by a government desirous to show school improvement (Wilson, Croxson

and Atkinson 2006). Some headteachers had played that game to raise self-esteem in the

school (Cathleen, Moira); others criticised it (Daniel, Joe). At the time of writing, former

secretary of state for education, Justine Greening, has advocated contextual recruitment

designed to recognise that "If you get three Bs from Eton, you're probably not as impressive

as somebody who gets three Bs from the school in a part of the country where the school

wasn't doing well" (Busby 2018). Children needed confidence to believe they were equally

able,

> I think education should give people the confidence to believe that all things are
>
> possible, and the line that I always use with the children at schools that I'm at is
>
> that, 'Look. Whilst you're thinking to yourself, "Oh no. I'm not sure I could do
>
> that", there are some people thinking, "Well of course I could do that. That's
>
> my right. My right is that I'm going to be accessing these wonderful jobs and
>
> I'm going to be running the country because that's what I've been brought up to

do". You're just as smart as them but you've got to get into your heads that you need to believe it and push yourself and challenge them, otherwise they'll just keep taking the best jobs' (Patrick).

In an attempt to reverse the discourse, Justine Greening acknowledged the *mimicry* that resides in children's academic attainment; their grades "are the same but not quite" (Bhabha 1994, 122).

Sly civility prevailed in the semblance of compliance: in Cathleen's masquerade of weaving through the system to make it work and her clear disagreement with it; in the mimicry of Moira's game playing; in Rosie's selectivity; and in Joanna's sarcasm, jocularity and lack of deference. Each of these women had crossed gender boundaries to achieve secondary school headship; they too have experienced alterity and liminality. Bhabha (1994, 136) argues that an interpretation of responses to colonial rhetoric such as these as duplicitous is to "fail to read the specific discursive doubleness" that exists between the lines.

These headteachers were simultaneously the colonised and colonisers. Patrick demonstrated awareness of that,

> I've used that as quite a weapon I think to say, 'Look. If you're uneasy about academies, becoming an academy or being part of an academy group, you're not as uneasy as I was three years ago.' I spoke to the [LA county] Heads. I was one of the very few people that put their head above the parapet and said, 'Look. Should we not question, reflect, upon this first before we jump into it?' The NUT [teaching union] know about that. So actually they're quite warm towards me whereas some academy heads are quite vitriolic. So it's worked to my advantage bizarrely and sometimes I feel a little hypocritical because I'm still in the same place anyway [laughter] (Patrick).

The thickness of this façade of semblance might vary but in these interviews it took little effort to expose the lived reality of headteachers' resistance beneath. The repertoire of resistance practice related directly to particular reforms at a given moment in time (A. Johansson and Vinthagen 2014). Headteachers responded to multiple power relations with entities and individuals such as the Department for Education, individual politicians and civil servants, boards of school governors and trustees, and, in Aileen's case, teachers objecting to her compliance with overnight policy changes regarding student outcomes, and families. The range of resistances demonstrates their heterogeneity and contingency in response to changing contexts and situations (A. Johansson and Vinthagen 2014).

Conclusion

This paper shows headteachers do resist education reforms with which they disagree. It shows how they critically engaged with and resisted neoliberal education reforms; and how they might do so in other contexts at other times. Where former research into policy resistance has focused on a binary model of compliance and resistance, this paper draws on theories of everyday and postcolonial resistance to enable the exposure of headteachers' resistance.

Headteachers' resistance practice included everyday resistance that needed to be uncovered and more overt forms as counter discourse, counter conduct and collective action. The combination of these forms provided a context that enabled interpretation of *semblance of compliance* as resistance. This juxtaposition of a repertoire of resistance enabled a reading that might otherwise be missed.

In this third space of ambiguity and ambivalence "red lines" are not clearly drawn (Bhabha 1994). Even if they are, the ultimate resistance for headteachers appears to be flight (Scott 1989). Headteachers' confidence to resist came with experience, Rosie commented, "What

can they do, sack me?" Headteachers knew others had retired before the next school inspection or set of results redefined their schools and careers as 'failing'; several indicated they could retire if and when they wanted.

In particular, the paper sought to theorise how resistance of the GERM might be enacted. Postcolonial studies offer a way to theorise about the colonisation of educational systems on a global scale. Here, it could be seen that headteachers' status and power was dependent on how convincing their *mimicry* and *sly civility* might be (Bhabha 1994); how far they played the game, how far they masked their resistance with a semblance of compliance. Ultimately collective action is needed if neoliberal reform rhetoric is to be reversed. Further research that draws on histories of collective colonial resistance might enable critical scholars to draw together threads of disparate accounts of resistance to advocate for collective action (Anderson and Cohen 2015) such as professional disobedience. *Mimicry* marks "moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance" (Bhabha 1994, 172). Eventually, professional disobedience could re-establish the professional 'independence' of education systems, too precious for political interference. Either that, or another government will come along to recalibrate the rules again.

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