A study of the professional identities of senior school leaders in areas of economic hardship

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of

Doctor in Education

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School of Education
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Abstract

The University of Manchester

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Doctor in Education

A study of the professional identities of senior school leaders in areas of economic hardship

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This study makes a contribution to the body of work on the impact of education policy aimed at improving schools on the identities of school leaders. It uses the National Challenge as an example of how New Labour attempted to solve the perceived problem of school failure particularly in areas of economic hardship. The aim of the study is to investigate the identities of senior school leaders as they position themselves in relation to the discourses that arise from the neoliberal ideology that has dominated education policy making since the 1980s. These schools are often officially measured and labelled as failing.

A literature review locates the research in the political context of education reform over the last thirty years. A review of literature relating to the work of senior leaders in areas of economic hardship traces how knowledge claims and leadership development have shaped their roles throughout this period of post-welfarist reform. It is argued that the policies that have been enacted give rise to discourses which construct some schools as being successful and others as being failures and that the notion of failure is particularly prevalent in area of economic hardship. It is within this environment that senior leaders construct their professional identities meaning that they are required to balance their beliefs and values about the nature and purpose of education with those inherent in the dominant discourses. How these school leaders both shape and are shaped by the policies that they are required to implement is central to the effectiveness of attempts to improve their schools. The work has been structured around three research questions. What are the dominant discourses and models of change in education and how do these both impact on and define schools serving areas of economic hardship? How are senior leaders constructing their professional identity in relation to these discourses and models of change? What are the implications of senior leader identity for development and change in those schools serving areas of economic hardship?

The work is a policy scholarship which aims to place the research within its wider historical and sociological context. A discourse analysis of key documents which relate to the National Challenge was carried out and then interviews were conducted with twenty senior leaders. The analysis of the findings include a largely descriptive account of the main themes that emerged and then a more detailed analysis that describes identity in terms of dialogic interactions and conceptualises them using the thinking tools of Bourdieu. Findings from the study make a contribution to the body of knowledge relating to the interaction between education policy influencing school improvement and the identity of those who implement it particularly in areas of economic hardship. The research problematises and challenges some of the assumptions and some of the value inherent in the policies and provides a body of work that will inform future improvement strategies particularly if these are to fully engage and value those who lead these schools. The long term aim would be to ensure that improvement strategies are effective in specific contexts and that there is a shared understanding of both what effective means and what are the desired outcomes of education in these areas. The study reveals how school failure is a construct arising from neoliberal education policy strategy and describes the position of the school leaders using Bourdieu’s concept of hysteresis.
Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction to the study

1.1 Research Aims

The aim of this study is to provide a better understanding of senior leader professional identity and sense of self in schools serving areas of economic hardship and the implications for development and change in these schools.

The work is predicated on the notion that education reform under recent governments has been driven and shaped by the rise of neoliberalism and is based on the key constructs of globalisation, the knowledge economy and three management technologies i.e. the market, management and performativity (Ball, 2008). The study will contribute to the body of knowledge about school improvement by providing some insight into the way in which the discourses that arise from these constructs impact on a small group of schools and the senior leaders working in them in one area of socioeconomic hardship in the North West of England. The work will explore the meaning of ‘improvement’ in these schools and how education policy, particularly during the New Labour government (1997-2010), has generated texts, improvement strategies and media reaction that label some schools as ‘successful’ and others as ‘failing’. Much of the related literature and research is embedded in the notions of excellence and ‘Success against the Odds’ (NCE, 1996) and the resulting practice has pursued strands of typologies, classification, characteristics and performance data which might be regarded as rhetorical devices which ignore the complexities of individual schools and the context within which they exist. It is intended to better understand what messages staff internalise about themselves as they interact with the discourses that dominate education and how this in turn impacts on their role as ‘school improvers.’ It is my contention that the existing literature contains little material on the identity and professional practice of headteachers in schools of economic hardship and even less on other senior leaders. So it is my intention to problematise and to encourage some rethinking of what school improvement means in relation to schools in areas of
economic hardship and how senior leaders in this context go about designing and working on school improvement. Throughout this work the term senior leader is used to refer to headteachers, deputy headteachers and assistant headteachers.

The methodology to be used is policy scholarship (Ball, 1990) that places education policy in its wider historical, political and social context to identify how certain choices are made. It looks at the discursive nature of policy, the texts generated and the impact on those who interact with the policy. In adopting this methodology and reflecting on the likely impact of my work it is my intention to highlight the complexity of what it means to improve schools in areas of economic hardship and the implications for those teachers trying to bring about change. This is in contrast to much of the school improvement literature which appears to offer simplistic solutions and avoid discussion of the impact of teachers in these schools. Whitty (1997) reports similar sentiments expressed at a lecture he attended given by Gerald Grace:

Significantly, though, he went on to emphasise that policy scholarship would help to generate ‘complex hope’ rather than the ‘simple hope’ of the school improvement lobby – and thereby presumably justify a more realistic degree of optimism of the will. (p 21)

This work is a policy scholarship that gives voice to a group of group of oppressed practitioners whose professional identity is forged in an ‘enduring struggle’ (Holland and Lave, 2001, p 3) between their personal and professional beliefs and values and those of the discourses which have dominated education since the 1980s. It is also a reflexive study because as researcher I am attempting to better understand my own professional practice and how I have come to be positioned within the field that is being studied.

In the spirit of the aim and the methodology, I intend asking these three research questions:

1. What are the dominant discourses and models of change in education and how do these both impact on and define schools serving areas of economic hardship?
2. How are senior leaders constructing their professional identity in these schools in relation to these discourses and models of change?

3. What are the implications of senior leader identity for development and change in those schools serving areas of economic hardship?

An issue that is directly related to matters of the ‘complex hope’ embedded in these questions is language and labels. The words that are used to describe certain schools are labels that arise from the prevailing discourses and as Clarke (2005) points out the labels are of little importance but what is important is the day to day reality of the individuals who work in the schools and communities defined in certain categories. The description that I have adopted throughout my work for schools that I have focused on (‘schools serving areas of economic hardship’) is in itself problematic but one that I have judged preferable to other more widely used descriptions. The significance of labels in relation to the various discourses surrounding school improvement is discussed by Clarke (2005):

The contributions here pointedly suggest that in order to make sense of the ‘improvement’ we need first to examine the thinking that exists behind the labels that we use when describing educational challenge of this sort. (p 1)

Labels such as ‘failing’, ‘underachieving’ or ‘requiring special measures’ arise from policies driven by the discourses that dominate education and as Clarke (2005) says they will impact on all those individuals associated with certain schools. This is clearly expressed by Barker (1999) in talking about considering taking over as acting principal of a school that had just had a critical OFSTED inspection ‘Above all I thought of the teachers (66% were rated satisfactory or better) and families of Rowley Fields, labelled and shamed, their professional and human worth impugned and damaged by a passing juggernaut’ (p 83). How individual school leaders construct their professional identity as they interact with these discourses is fundamental to this work. It feels important to better understand and reflect on how conflicts relating to values and beliefs about the nature and
purpose of education might manifest themselves in the context of trying to ‘improve’ those secondary schools situated in areas of economic hardship. Ignoring these conflicts, combined with ignoring both the complexities referred to earlier and the impact of the labels which construct some schools as failing and other as succeeding risks us being caught up in a reductionist paradigm described by Wrigley (2003). Within this paradigm an impression is created that an individual can succeed in life as result of what they achieve in school and ignores the uneven distribution of social and economic capital. If the boundaries of the discussion are limited and social inequalities are ignored then Wrigley argues that only a very limited study of school ‘failure’ is possible.

In this study the ‘thinking tools’ (Wacquant, 1989, p 50) of Bourdieu are used throughout to provide the conceptual framework in order ‘to support and question thinking about the power structures in which we are all located (Gunter, 2001, p 151). Bourdieu’s thinking tools will be used to consider the interplay between professional agency and identity with the structuring of neoliberal education policy reform.

**1.2 The Rationale**

I began my career teaching science in a very large inner city comprehensive before moving as head of department to a school which could be described as being in the ‘leafy suburbs.’ I then became head of faculty and later senior teacher in a large, multicultural, inner city school. From this role I moved to a large local authority first to deputy headship in a small inner city comprehensive which had the highest index of social deprivation in the authority and then on to headship in a small, boys, multicultural school which had the second highest index of deprivation in the authority. I spent seven years in this role until September 2006 when secondary education in the town was reorganised under the government funded BSF (Building Schools for the Future)¹ program. This involved the closure of all eight secondary schools and the opening of five new ones and a sixth form all in new buildings.

¹ Building Schools for the Future (BSF) was launched by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair in 2004 with the aim of rebuilding or refurbishing all secondary schools in England and Wales over a 15-25 year period.
Following this reorganisation I was offered the role of associate headteacher in one of the new schools which is a large multicultural school in an area of social deprivation. The origins of this project go back a number of years to when the school at which I was headteacher was inspected by OFSTED and judged to have ‘serious weaknesses.’ Prior to my arrival at the school it had been labelled by the Local Authority as a school ‘causing concern’ and then as a school in ‘challenging circumstances.’ I started to feel that I was an outsider and it occurred to me that what I was experiencing might mirror something of the experiences of members of the community that the school served. That having been labelled could impact on my sense of self was highlighted in a dream that I had. I was at a meeting of headteachers in a room in which the walls were covered in mirrors. People were standing in groups talking and in the mirror I could see myself on the edge of groups excluded, shabbily dressed and also considerably shorter than anyone else. Whilst not claiming to be the most stylish dresser, I am of average height and reasonably socially adept. I offer this story, not because I know anything about dreams or their interpretation because I don’t, but simply because it resonated with me and made me think that perhaps the labels attached to the school were having an impact on me that I was not always aware of or open to. It is not my intention to explore the psychoanalytic literature in this study. My question then became, if as teachers we are establishing an identity partly in response to the labels attached to our schools and the wider response to these labels what is the impact on our self-esteem and professional identity and how does this in turn impact on the students we teach and our aspirations for school improvement? In my reading I found little that related to the stories of teachers in schools serving areas of economic hardship and the construction of identity in this context. What was written tended to be in the form of heroic individuals transforming schools using the tools of the discourse of school improvement (Stubbs, 2003, Clark, 1998, McNulty, 2005). I believe that by better understanding how teachers are constructing a sense of identity in response to educational discourses new avenues to approaching school improvement will be opened.
In October of 2008, whilst I was still a headteacher, Ed Balls the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families announced the National Challenge (DCSF, 2008a and b) with the aim of ensuring that there should be no secondary school from which below 30% of students leave at the end of KS4 with less than five GCSE grades at C or above including English and maths. The announcement of the National Challenge came as a shock to many schools as it took place at the end of an academic year in which some had obtained grades of good and outstanding from OFSTED\textsuperscript{2} only to then find themselves on a list which attracted negative newspaper publicity and the apparent threat of closure. A typical headline appeared on the BBC website ‘The “poorest-performing” schools in England are being threatened with closure if they do not improve’ (Richardson, 2008, unpaged). In the same on-line article Richardson (2008, unpaged) goes on to explore the question of why schools ‘fail’, which, whilst more responsible than much other coverage, does not challenge or reflect on the meaning or use of words such as ‘failing’ or ‘poorest-performing’ in this context. Brighouse (2008, unpaged) also highlights the destructive effect that the badly handled launch of the National Challenge had. ‘A pointless pattern of naming, shaming and blaming’ (Brighouse, 2008, unpaged). Tim Brighouse then goes on to compare the way in which the announcement of the National Challenge had many similarities with the launch of the London Challenge which created not only the same type of negative newspaper coverage but also involved a list of schools which were predominantly located in areas of economic hardship.

The National Challenge seemed to represent the distillation of concerns raised both by others (eg., Thrupp, 1999) and in my own research (Lythgoe, 2006, 2007, and 2009), relating to attempts to raise performance in schools serving the least affluent areas and reaffirm the motivation for first embarking on this research project. Firstly, the National Challenge represented a reversion to the use of raw attainment data as a measure of school

\textsuperscript{2} OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) was established under the Education (Schools) Act 1992 to undertake the inspection of each state school in England and Wales.
success, dispensing with the use of contextual value added (CVA) data, which is a measure of the progress made by students taking into account their ability, their starting point and other factors such as special educational needs status and economic circumstance. Whilst how much weight should be attached to different contextual factors can be debated CVA is at least a measure of the progress students have made at a school rather than of attainment which is primarily determined by ability. Schools of which I have current knowledge and certainly all the schools under the control of the Local Authority where I work set student performance targets based on ability and prior attainment at the start of KS3 (until recently adjusted at the end of KS3), using these to predict KS4 outcomes in line with the top 25% of performance. These predictions are derived using the Fischer Family Trust (FFT) data base. This makes the targets demanding of both the students and the school. However, schools exist where the overall target is less than 30% of students to obtain 5 or more A*-C grades including English and maths. The implication of this is that even if the school ensures that its students progress in line with the top 25% of students in the data pool (built up over many years with many thousands of students) they will still ‘fail’ the National Challenge. The impact of this will be greatest in schools serving economically disadvantaged areas, as via a range of socially driven factors these schools will have a disproportionate number of students who are at the lower end of the ability range and have special educational needs as well as being exposed to a number of contextual factors such as overcrowding that might have an impact on academic performance (eg., Barker, 2010). The measure of deprivation within a school has traditionally been measured by the percentage of students eligible for free school meals (FSM) even though it is recognised that this is problematic and at best only a crude measure (Clarke, 2005).

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3 The Fischer Family Trust (FFT) is an independent, non-profit making organisation and a registered trust that collates data on individual student progress at the end of each key stage over a three year period. They also produce a school accessible data base that will allow schools to estimate future performance based on different levels of progress.
Secondly the vocabulary that is used to describe schools implies values and is the representation of the values implicit in a particular discourse. So a ‘good’ school might be seen as one that has a high percentage of students who attain high examination grades. So in this value system a selective school is likely to be a ‘good’ school and a school in a more economically challenged environment a ‘poorly performing’ school. This might tell a person little about the relative progress made by students due to the quality of provision offered by the school and might then translate into a perception about the staff who teach in these schools. In a recent television documentary the broadcaster John Humphreys (2010) who was exploring the link between social advantage and educational outcomes interviewed a young male teacher working in a fee paying independent college who viewers had just seen teaching a seemingly highly motivated, small group of sixth formers. One of the questions he asked could be paraphrased as ‘should an outstanding, exciting young teacher like you not be working in a school with the most disadvantaged students in order to do the most good.’ Presumably John Humphreys knew very little about the teacher but because of his context labelled him good and by implication better than the teachers in other types of school. This is illustrative of the way that language is used carelessly to create meaning and assume links. A grammar school becomes a good school because it is high attaining (whilst it might not be high achieving with the students it has) and if the results are good it is assumed the teaching must be good. Thirdly the National Challenge strategy raises the issue of what is the evidence base that education policy over the last two decades has had any impact on improving schools in economically deprived areas for the benefit of those students attending them. Fourthly as a teacher in areas of social disadvantage in the North West of England for twenty five out of my thirty years in teaching I have concerns relating to the impact of labelling on schools in certain areas, on both attempts to improve these schools and on the professional identity of those staff trying to lead and embed change within these schools.
At the time the interviews for this study were carried out the school in which I was associate headteacher was in temporary accommodation prior to moving into the new building in September 2009. The reorganisation under BSF had involved all the teachers and non-teachers in the town applying for roles in any of the new schools. Whilst not many staff remained unplaced, a large number did not get the role or the school they would have wanted. This contextual data is important because all the senior leaders interviewed as part of this study had been through this process and at the time the interviews were conducted the majority were still in the temporary accommodation. It is also relevant that of the five schools included in the study three were also in the National Challenge (two of these were also given notice to improve by OFSTED) and a fourth was in special measures. This was the situation at the time of the interviews and currently none of the schools are in an OFSTED category. The fact that these schools move into and out of OFSTED categories indicates the transience of these labels but does not describe the impact that these have on the school and the staff. One school included in the study is geographically extremely close to the others but is in an adjacent town which underwent BSF funded reorganisation at the same time as the other schools included but the staff would have been in a different pool for post allocation.

It is recognised that this is insider research as I am clearly very much a member of the community involved in the study. My relationship with those interviewed is complex as it ranges from some who I would regard as friends to those I barely know and from those I work with daily to those I have never worked with. However, I was known at least by name to all those involved. This will be reflected on later in this work but whilst recognising the challenges posed by my location in the study there are also considerable advantages and I would share the view of Platt (1981) that ‘The weaknesses of interviewing are intrinsically bound up with its strengths as a specialised mode of social interaction’ (p 89).
The fact that in many ways I am a participant as well as researcher does throw up many potential difficulties but it also offers many opportunities and it is important to me that not only is this at heart a reflexive study but that it might also give me a better understanding of my own professional practice.

This research arises directly from my professional and personal experience as a senior leader in schools serving areas of economic hardship over the last seventeen years. During my time in education the pace of education reform has been rapid and the young teachers I work with today are in a very different world to that in which I began my career in the early 1980s. The starting point was the 1988 Education Reform Act which some such as Ball (1990) would see as establishing an education market involving choice, competition and diversity. League tables could be used to compare schools and thus label them according to their position within these tables. The establishment of OFSTED in the Education (Schools) Act 1992 meant that certain schools could be given labels such as ‘failing’ or having ‘serious weaknesses’. Many schools had to ‘improve’ with the definition of improve being very much linked to test and examination performance. In my management roles the core function became to implement school improvement strategies and I undertook postgraduate study to develop my understanding and knowledge of both school improvement strategies and research into school effectiveness in order to supplement my practical experience. This experience included leading schools through five OFSTED and HMI inspections and the removal of a school from the list of schools identified as having serious weaknesses. At the same time I became increasingly aware of the complexity of the relationship between schools and their social context. I recognised that schools could make a difference but that too often the complexities of the effects of school context were ignored by the use of simple output measures to judge performance. There existed a growing body of research that sought to develop differentiated approaches to school improvement (eg., Harris and Chapman, 2004), which is where my initial interest
lay. However, my personal experience of being a headteacher in a ‘challenging’ school and conversations with senior colleagues led me to reflect on how we were affected by the discourses of performativity (Ball, 2003), improvement and effectiveness that dominate education. I have long believed that the key to making a difference in schools serving areas of economic hardship is to raise student self-esteem and aspirations. My question then became, if as teachers we are establishing an identity partly in response to the labels attached to our schools and the wider response to these labels what is the impact on our self-esteem and professional identity and how does this in turn impact on the students we teach and our aspirations for school improvement?

There is an extensive body of literature and research relating to school effectiveness and school improvement and an increasing amount of this relates to schools predominantly located in areas of economic hardship (eg., Clarke, 2005, Harris et al., 2006, Stoll and Myers, 1998, Thrupp, 1999). The quantity of material that relates to the leadership and management of schools is vast and there is work which provides a critical overview of this in some cases arguing that there is much which is not of good quality and indeed that it might actually be harmful (eg., Thrupp and Willmott, 2003, Ozga, 2002).

What is missing from the literature are studies of the interaction between the political context, policy production and dissemination and the practice of senior leaders that place an emphasis on the impact on the professional identity of those in schools. Studies (eg., Ball et al., 2012) have made a contribution to this area by looking at the way in which policy is enacted rather than implemented in schools. Accounts of individual leaders are predominantly about headteachers judged successful (eg., Tomlinson et al., 1999) or if they are located in areas of economic hardship they take the form of heroic narratives as referred to earlier in this section.
1.3 Structure of this thesis

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the policy context in which schools have existed and teachers have worked since the introduction of the National Curriculum in the Education Reform Act of 1988. This section will focus on educational policy under the New Labour administration from its election in 1997 to electoral defeat in 2010 and trace the origins of these policies in those of preceding governments as well as bringing the overview up to date with the Conservative-Liberal Democrat alliance.

In Chapter 3 the research design and methodological approach is outlined. The methodology to be used is policy scholarship (Ball, 1990). This looks at the discursive nature of policy, the texts generated and the impact on those who interact with the policy.

Chapter 4 takes the form of an analysis of key policy documents and related texts. As a starting point it will involve a detailed analysis of a letter from Ed Balls the Secretary of State for Education (Balls, 2008a) to all the headteachers whose schools were to be involved in the National Challenge. There will be an attempt to place this letter in a political and historical context and analyse some of the earlier texts from which it arose. The analysis will be conceptualised using some aspects of Bourdieu’s work, primarily codification, doxa and misrecognition.

Chapter 5 will look at the work of school leaders and what it has meant to be a senior leader in a school serving an area of economic hardship since the late 1980s. In doing this I would share the view of Nias (1989) that in order to understand how teachers construct their professional identity it is essential to look at their concept of self: ‘.... they (teachers) exist as people before they became teachers and their work calls for a massive investment of their ‘selves’ (p 2).

In chapter 6 the transcripts of interviews with twenty teachers who hold leadership positions in schools serving areas of economic hardship will be analysed. In this section
the analysis will be primarily descriptive with an attempt to identify the major themes that emerge.

Chapter 7 will draw together the findings from the two previous sections and provide a conceptual framework within which these can be thought about. In this section identity will be thought about as arising through dialogic interactions and a conceptual framework will be provided using Bourdieu’s thinking tools.

Chapter 8 will present the conclusions along with suggestions as to further work and possible implications for the way that we think about improving our secondary schools, particularly those located in areas of economic hardship.
Chapter 2 – The context

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the political and the policy context within which this research has its origins and which has led to some schools in the early twenty first century being constructed as ‘failing’ and others as ‘succeeding.’ It also introduces certain individuals who have played a key role in policy formation and looks briefly at some of the research that has been used, albeit selectively, to inform this process. The key individuals include not only elected figures such as Prime Ministers and Education Secretaries but non-elected political advisers such as Michael Barber and Andrew Adonis who have played an increasingly prominent role in policy formation particularly under the New Labour government. It is not the intention for this chapter to be either comprehensive or analytic but simply provide the background to the environment in which this study is set and focus on the way in which ‘educational failure’ has been used as a policy strategy by different governments and their policy advisers. At times failure has been seen to be at an individual student level such as being unsuccessful and failing the 11+ examination. At other times the education system has been deemed to be at fault as for example following the introduction of the comprehensive school. More recently individual schools have been regarded as failing as when Blunkett (2006) named ‘failing’ schools so giving rise to a culture of ‘blame and shame.’

2.2 Political Context – the origins

The notion of school failure, whilst often regarded as being straightforward and as an easily understood concept, is rather problematic. Failure and success are often presented as a simple binary so that one school can be deemed successful whilst another is deemed to be failing but it is highly unlikely that any school ‘fails’ or ‘succeeds’ in all aspects of its work. Failure can be ‘measured’ by the use of performance data such as examination or test results, or it can be externally assessed by OFSTED carrying out an inspection and
making a judgement against predetermined criteria. So a school could be said to be
‘failing’ because its output measures are below a particular benchmark (this can be done on
the basis of raw attainment data or by the use of value added figures) or because OFSTED judge that it requires special measures or ‘requires improvement.’ However, Chapter 4 will
describe how the National Challenge (DCSF, 2008a and b) labelled schools judged
successful by OFSTED as failing, so demonstrating one way in which this simple binary
breaks down. Also the concepts of success and failure do not exist within a vacuum but are
politically negotiated. This is illustrated by OFSTED’s decision to remove the satisfactory
category and replace it with requires improvement (Coughlan, 2012). A further
complication occurs when the accuracy of examination grades is challenged as in summer
2012 when large numbers of students expected to obtain a C grade in English language
were awarded D grades (Richardson, 2012, unpaged). This resulted in a number of schools
falling below the benchmark of 40% A*-C grades including English and maths which
could be seen as the difference between success and failure.

Education policy has always been driven to a certain extent by the economic status of the
country and currently education reform is seen as being the only rational response to
‘globalisation’ that will allow the country to remain competitive. Delivery has become via
markets, so that competition determines that some schools are successful in recruiting
students whilst others are not and these might face closure as a company might go
bankrupt, and increasingly there has been more central regulation of the curriculum,
methods of delivery and management.

Linked to school failure is the question of who is held responsible for that failure. It could
be regarded as being due to government education policy, management of policy at Local
Authority level, the school itself (leadership or teachers) or the students who attend the
school. It could also be seen as an inevitable consequence of wider political and social
issues such as the uneven distribution of forms of capital within society.
Once failure has been identified then a political decision has to be taken as to how this is managed and this is linked to where the blame has been allocated. The action might take the form of changing how school services are provided (eg., by taking schools out of Local Authority control or by taking away responsibilities from the Local Authorities); by closing, merging or confederating individual schools; by removing leadership teams or blaming the teachers and/or their unions.

For some children starting secondary school in the late 1960s their first experience of educational ‘failure’ was being unsuccessful in the 11+ examination. Attending a secondary modern school rather than a grammar school led to a sense of failure which was very much located within them as individuals rather than the system within which they were educated. During this time the nature of schools and secondary education changed as the comprehensive school came into existence. The political debate about education initially about the process of comprehensivization, grew wider and education policy became linked to a wider discussion about the role of education in the economic prosperity of the country. In 1969 the first of a series of papers collectively known as the Black Papers (Cox and Dyson, 1971) were published which Ball (1990) describes as ‘... a series of right-wing, populist pamphlets which mounted a trenchant critique of all aspects of progressive and comprehensive education’ (p 23). One of the Black Papers launched an assault on the comprehensive ideology believing that it posed a threat to Britain’s ability to compete in the world and would lead to a lowering of quality (Maude, 1971). It was argued that the notion of equality was fundamentally at odds with quality:

The pendulum has already swung too far. It is necessary now to get very tough with the egalitarians, who would abolish or lower standards out of ‘sympathy’ with those who fail to measure up to them. We must reject the chimera of equality and proclaim the ideal of quality. (Maude, 1971, p 40)

Johnson (1971) in another Black Paper was highly critical of what he regarded as new approaches to teaching children to read: ‘Innovation that brings improvement is what we
all desire; innovation that impoverishes the mind and the chances of life is damnable’ (p 97).

These comments have echoes with those of Chris Woodhead (Chief Inspector of Schools for a time under both Conservative and Labour governments) some thirty years later:

I knew though that standards should have been higher. The penny ought to have dropped earlier. It should not have taken me the best part of ten years to understand that the problem was the progressive ideals that I had embraced so fervently. (Woodhead, 2002, p 41)

The Black Papers contributed to the political interest in the state of education which was particularly acute during the time that James Callaghan was prime minister in the Labour government elected in 1974 and there was an increasing focus on the shortcomings of the education system. There seemed to be a shift towards allocation of blame or ‘failure’ to the system rather than the individual but not to individual schools within the system. Ball (1990) states that the analysis of education policy grew rapidly from 1976 following James Callaghan’s Ruskin speech and the debate that followed this:

Whatever Callaghan’s intention the speech gave powerful encouragement and added legitimacy to the ‘discourse of derision’ mounted by the Black Papers. In discursive terms it marked the end to any possible serious opposition to the critique of comprehensivism and progressivism. It cleared the ground for a shift of emphasis on the Right from social deconstruction to radical reconstruction. (p 31)

It is clear that 1976 certainly represented something of a watershed for political interest in education and particularly in the notion of reform. From 1944 to 1976 there were only three Education Acts, whereas from 1979 to 2000 there were thirty, plus a plethora of circulars, regulations and statutory instruments (Chitty 2004). Chitty (2004) argues that the Ruskin speech can be regarded as an attempt to build a new educational consensus and to link education more closely to the evolving needs of the economy. From 1975 to 1977 the newspapers had created a growing sense of a crisis occurring in British schools which was exploited by the Conservative Party (Chitty 2004).
Prior to the New Right Conservative government taking office in 1979, Britain like most of Western Europe was dominated by a social democracy ideology (Giddens, 1998) which placed great emphasis on the welfare state. This social democracy was not the preserve of the political left or right but Giddens (1998) suggests that increasingly the left came to claim it as its own. From the end of the war to 1979 the education system in the United Kingdom, where this study is set, was based on ideology and associated languages, policies and practices that Gewirtz (2002) labels as a welfarist settlement:

The term settlement is used here to refer to the specific constellation of assumptions and arrangements – political, economic, social and institutional – which framed school provision during this period. The welfarist settlement was underpinned by a broad consensus amongst powerful groups – the major political parties, the trade unions and big business – and by a significant degree of popular support. (p 1)

The welfarist settlement was already under threat prior to Callaghan’s speech and faced increasing challenge from neoliberals due to the financial and economic problems that the Prime Minister’s (Margaret Thatcher who had taken office in 1979) government was contending with (Ball, 2008). However, whatever Callaghan’s intentions his speech and the ensuing ‘great debate’ about educational standards, the curriculum, teacher training and the standards of teaching started a process of apportioning blame to ‘poor’ teachers, ‘weak’ leadership and modern teaching methods. Despite opening the debate there was little action taken in relation to education for the remaining years of the Labour government.

2.3 The Conservative Government 1979 to 1997

Margaret Thatcher and her New Right Conservative government took office in 1979. The New Right was not a homogeneous entity in the sense that it had a coherent political ideology but rather a loose coalition of neoliberalism and neoconservatism with Thatcher a proponent of the former (Trowler, 1998, Chitty, 2004). Social democracy had been based on social cooperation and individual growth whereas neo-conservatives placed an emphasis on traditional values, hierarchical structures and the passing on of these
hierarchies and structures. Neoliberalism was ideologically committed to enterprise and placed an emphasis on competition in a marketplace both in this country and internationally. Chitty (2004) sees the New Right of Margaret Thatcher as a coalition of neoliberals with their agenda of free markets, competition and firm control over public spending and neoconservatives with intent to uphold 19th century notions of tradition, hierarchy and social order.

Giddens (1998) says that neoliberals who were strongly opposed to the notion of ‘big government’ (p 11), challenged social democracy with their free market philosophy and associated belief in tradition. ‘Neoliberals link unfettered market forces to a defence of traditional institutions, particularly the family and the nation’ (Giddens, 1998, p 12).

Education was not a priority for the Thatcher government who were more intent on bringing down inflation and limiting the power of extra-parliamentary groups such as the trade unions. Harvey (2005) traces the origins of the rise neoliberalism across the world at a time of, a ‘new economic configuration – often subsumed under the term globalisation’ (p 2). The mechanism was different so it might be via a democratic process in the United Kingdom or the United States or by military force in Chile or IMF pressure in the developing world but the role of the state was the same in that it had a responsibility to create and protect markets. Harvey (2005):

Furthermore if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. (p 2).

Docking (2000) says that the Conservative government of 1979 summarised its policies on education by five themes which were to provide parents with greater choice, allow schools greater autonomy, hold schools more accountable, improve quality and increase diversity. These themes reflect the dominance of the neoliberal thinking of the new government and
particularly of Margaret Thatcher. Perhaps the most significant single manifestation of neoliberal ideology was the 1988 Education Reform Act.

The 1988 Education Reform Act, introduced by the then Education Secretary Kenneth Baker transformed the British education system. It gave the government of Margaret Thatcher considerable direct control over what happened in each school, put schools in the market place and created new types of school. The purpose of the act is summarised by Chitty (2004) as:

To encapsulate its basic purpose, the 1988 Act sought to erect (or reinforce) a hierarchical system of schooling subject both to market forces and to greater control from the centre. As far as the creation of choice and diversity was concerned, much attention, both in the media and amongst academics, was focused on the creation of a new tier schooling comprising City Technology Colleges (CTC’s) and grant maintained or ‘opted out’ schools. (p 51)

The 1988 Act underpinned by neoliberalistic ideology was based on the assumption that all members of society are able to assess their own needs and desires and make informed choices about how to satisfy these. The introduction of market forces was seen as not only a good thing in its own right but also founded on the belief that competition will act as a driver for improvement (Whitty, 2002). Once markets are established some schools (those branded successful) will become winners whereas others will be framed as losers or as failing.

As soon as schools are placed in the marketplace the relationships between them change because the market will decide which schools succeed and which do not. So it becomes very much in the interest of headteachers and their governors to promote their own school whilst recognising that this will directly impact on neighbouring ones. A school faced with competition becomes very dependent on the way in which its performance is judged and the criteria to be used. Once these criteria exist they will start to determine, at least in part, both the nature and the purpose of education in schools. Ball (2007) says that in an
interview he conducted with Keith Joseph (Secretary of State for Education from 1981 to 1986) one of the positives of the privatisation of education that he saw was that it allowed for the possibility of bankruptcy or closure. Market effects will operate differently in different socioeconomic areas. Ball (1990) writing just after the implementation of the 1988 Education Reform Act says:

But some areas may find themselves denuded of schools altogether, and the most vulnerable are those poorer inner-city areas with older schools, with poorer facilities. Those parents with the money and time and ability to move their children to schools in the leafy suburbs will do so. (p 66)

Of course it is not only the buildings and the facilities that more affluent parents will flee. It will be perceived lower standards, poor behaviour and possibly ethnic mixes that encourage leakage from certain areas. So very quickly schools come to reflect their socioeconomic circumstances, meaning some are unable to compete when the criteria used to judge them are based on data and values that do not reflect their priorities or strengths. This is then reflected in the number of ‘failing’ schools identified by OFSTED that are located in areas of socioeconomic hardship. Ball (2007) believes that there are three key aspects to public sector reform, markets, performativity and new managerialism. New managerialism often described as New Public Management (NPM) represents the introduction into the public sector of management practices taken from the private sector which is characteristically more directive and assertive’ (Thrupp and Willmott, 2003, p 12).

New managerialism according to Clarke et al (2000) has the following features:

- attention to outputs and performance rather than inputs;
- organizations being viewed as chains of low-trust relationships, linked by contracts or contractual type processes;
- the separation of purchaser and provider or client and contractor roles within formerly integrated processes or organizations;
- breaking down large scale organizations and using competition to enable ‘exit’ or ‘choice’ by service users;
- decentralization of budgetary and personal authority to line managers. (p 6)
New managerialism is very closely linked to the concept of performativity which is described by Ball (2007) as follows:

Performativity is a culture and a mode of regulation. The performances of individual subjects or organisations serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’, or ‘moments’ of promotion or inspection. They stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement. Performativity is about driving out poor performance, inefficiencies and redundancies – it is about focus. It is about focus. It is insatiable. It is achieved through the construction and publication of information and the drive to name, differentiate and classify. (p 27)

If schools are judged on raw attainment data not the progress made by students and value judgements about ethos and culture are made against those traditionally associated with grammar schools those schools in poorer urban areas are unlikely to succeed in the market place. This is going to compound the difficulties referred to earlier, that are faced by schools in areas that are economically disadvantaged as in addition to having a disproportionate number of students with low ability they are more likely to have a culture that does not match that envisaged by more aspirational families.

The 1988 Education Act established not only a National Curriculum but also a national testing regime that could be used to measure the performance of schools and further data became available following the establishment of OFSTED in the 1992 Education (Schools) Act.

The role of OFSTED in the Conservative education policy of the time is described by Sammons (2008):

Conservative education policy in the 1990s had increased accountability via regular Ofsted inspection and high stake sanctions for poor performance to promote the ‘withering away’ of poor schools. Inspection was intended to identify weaknesses and schools required to take action to improve. (p 654)

The 1988 Education Reform Act is widely regarded as the most significant piece of legislation since the 1944 Education Act. In addition to setting up the notion of schools in
the marketplace, establishing a National Curriculum and associated assessment framework and diversifying the types of school available it also introduced teacher appraisal and delegated greater responsibility from the Local Education Authority to school governors for employing and dismissing staff. It also established the notion of the Local Management of Schools (LMS) which gave school governors greater responsibility for finance and buildings. Some aspects of the Act are seen by some (eg., Chitty, 2004) as signifying hostility towards the Local Authorities. Within the Act Chitty (2004) sees an illustration of the tensions within the New Right between the economic liberalism (eg., market forces) of the neoliberals and the controlling role of the state of the neo-conservative’s (eg., National Curriculum and central control) social conservatism.

The next significant piece of legislation of the Conservative government was the 1992 Education (Schools) Act which in line with neoliberal thinking effectively privatised the inspection process. This was followed by the 1993 Education Act which further weakened the role of Local Authorities by setting up the Funding Agency for schools, sought to provide a mechanism for managing ‘failing’ schools and set up the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority to replace the National Curriculum Council and the School Examinations and Assessment Council. The final legislation of the Conservative government was the 1997 Education Act which established the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and widened the role of OFSTED to include the inspection of Local Education Authorities.

2.4 The Labour Governments 1997-2010

In May 1997 the New Labour government of Tony Blair came to power. They inherited a commitment to tackle school failure (Gunter and Forrester, 2008) as part of their modernisation of Britain agenda (Huckle, 2008). In contrast to the outgoing Conservative government’s first priority which was economic New Labour put education very firmly at the top of their agenda. That this was going to be the case was made very clear by Tony
Blair (1996) at his conference speech in the October before they were elected: ‘Ask me my priorities for government, and I will tell you: education, education, education’ (unpaged).

In developing their education policy it is clear that New Labour, as with the preceding Conservative administration promoted the notion that there was only one appropriate response to globalisation. This is summarised by Whitty (2002): ‘At times during the 1980s and 1990s, there was a tendency to regard neo-liberal policies as the only possible response to globalisation and the situation confronting modern nation states’ (p 126).

When New Labour came to power there was according to many writers little, if any significant change in education policy (Whitty, 2008, Chitty, 2004). This is expressed by Docking (2000):

> It is sometimes said that, for all the rhetoric, the present government’s policies for schools are fundamentally the Conservative’s dressed up in New Labour clothes. To a large extent this is true. (p 32)

Rather the policies of the Conservative government were retained and consolidated. This is expressed by Gunter and Chapman (2009):

> Hence whilst the language of New Labour is about ‘new’, ‘modern’ and ‘transformation’, we intend to show that there is much in common with the direction of travel set by previous administrations, not least through the dominance of neoliberal values, thinking and espoused practices. (p 2)

In his autobiography Blair recognises that he had supported the changes made by the Thatcher government and at the same time puts forward the same argument that the policies were an inevitable consequence of globalisation (Blair, 2010):

> In what caused much jarring and tutting within the party, I even decided to own up to supporting changes Margaret Thatcher had made, I knew that the credibility of the whole New Labour project rested on accepting that much of what she wanted to do in the 1980s was inevitable a consequence not of ideology but of social and economic change. (p 98)
Chitty (2004) again emphasises that despite the ending of nursery school vouchers and the Assisted Places Scheme and the prevention of grant maintained schools operating outside of local authority control little else of any significance changed ‘In virtually all other respects, both Conservative philosophy and Conservative measures were to remain intact’ (p 248). This continuity was not only in relation to education and has been maintained since the formation of the Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition (Hall, 2011). Hall considers that since the 1970s all governments have continued the ‘long march of the Neoliberal Revolution’ (p 11). The values of neoliberalism frame the context in which school leaders have operated under over the last thirty years:

Neoliberalism is grounded in the “free possessive individual”, with the state cast as tyrannical and oppressive. The welfare state, in particular, is the arch enemy of freedom. The state must never govern society, dictate to free individuals how to dispose of their private property, regulate a free-market economy or interfere with the God-given right to make profits and amass personal wealth. State-led “social engineering” must never prevail over corporate and private interest. It must not intervene in the “natural” mechanisms of the free market, or take as its objective the amelioration of free-market capitalism’s propensity to create inequality. (Hall, 2011, p 11)

How these values impact on individual leaders will be considered later but it was interesting to reflect on the language used by William Atkinson⁴ (2011) in a Radio Four interview in which he referred to raising standards in order to enable the country to compete in the global economy and of the threat posed by the emerging economies of the East. So he had assimilated, at least aspects of neoliberal ideology.

Blair (2010) also links the fact that both his and the Conservative policy in relation to the public sector were not only the only appropriate response but also fundamentally about the notions of performance and value for money:

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⁴Sir William Atkinson is the headteacher of the Phoenix High School in Hammersmith and is often feted for having taken over a school often regarded as being one of the worst in England and turning it into a centre of excellence. He was also used by New Labour as a role model for charismatic headteachers.
I had an increasing worry on health and education, which was that whilst the Tory reforms may have been badly implemented and badly explained, their essential direction was one that was in fact nothing to do with being ‘Tory’, but to do with the modern world. These reforms were all about trying to introduce systems where the money spent was linked to performance and where the service user was in the driving force. (p 262)

Blair faced considerable criticism from many quarters for having policies that were so reminiscent of those of the neoliberals (Giddens, 1998). The impact on schools in areas of economic difficulty was to increase the pressure on them as under New Labour OFSTED became more powerful and its role widened to include other areas of education in order to raise standards and eliminate ‘failure’ (Sammons, 2008). New Labour placed great emphasis on standards rather than structures (Hill, 2001):

With improvement through standards and control, the emphasis is on ‘standards not structures’ and on supposedly none ideological technical efficiency. Governmental and managerial control over education has been increased and reinforced by positive measures – for example, through increasing use of compulsory testing; setting measurable targets; centralised control of the school and ITE curriculum; surveillance and monitoring of pupils, teachers and those involved in ‘initial teacher training’; punishment of ‘failing’ teachers, schools, LA’s (LEA’s), teacher training departments and 16-18 year olds who do not participate in the ‘New Deal.’ (p 6)

New Labour built on the previously established regulatory regimes by directing their attention towards headteachers rather than teachers on the simple logic that it is easier to control small numbers than it is large ones. Gunter and Forrester (2008) suggest that this was done in three main ways. Firstly, by introducing national standards for headteachers that constructed them as transformational leaders with the remit of delivering national reforms. Secondly, by regulating knowledge production by funding research linked to policy production, setting up the National College for School Leadership (NCSL)⁵ as a forum for discussion and to make use of selective school effectiveness and improvement research. Thirdly, by developing a national framework for performance management.

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⁵ The NCSL is more recently referred to as the National College and this is the name adopted in most places in this thesis.
The position and role of OFSTED became stronger with the election of the New Labour government in 1997 as did a widening of its brief to cover eliminating ‘failure’ from all phases of education. The role of OFSTED is an interesting one regarded by some as a way of providing a report to be used by parents in making informed choices and by others as being the driving force behind school improvement. Others would say it is clear that it serves a variety of purposes but for me this gives rise to certain tensions that have never been resolved. Chris Woodhead, the controversial Chief Inspector of Schools under both Conservative and New Labour governments recognised that even within OFSTED itself there was some lack of clarity over their audience:

As Chief Inspector, I always felt that the parent was our main audience and our contribution to this new transparency our greatest achievement. My senior colleagues in OFSTED tended to disagree. They were more concerned with the contribution we were or were not making to school improvement than they were with the provision of hard information to parents. (Woodhead, 2002, p 100)

Perhaps the most symbolic link between the educational policies of New Labour and those of the Conservatives was the retention of Chris Woodhead as Chief Inspector of Schools (Head of OFSTED). Woodhead who seemed to relish his controversial and outspoken image was universally unpopular with teachers for his frequent references to poor teachers, trendy but ineffective teaching methods and failing schools. The reason he was retained is explained by David Blunkett (2006) who was Secretary of State for Education from 1997 to 2001. Blunkett was about to speak at the 1997 annual conference of National Association of Headteachers, which had just passed a resolution unanimously condemning Woodhead ‘-not merely for his vehement condemnation of the failings of the teaching profession, but also in protest at his scathing analysis of their training and their failure to respond to his call for a return to didactic teaching’ (Blunkett, 2007, p 19). In his diaries Blunkett (2007) says ‘..... and there is no way I could avoid appointing Chris Woodhead if I want to demonstrate rigour and toughness in achieving high standards’ (p 20).
This toughness in pursuit of ‘high standards’ was, according to Bottery (2007a) not successful and had a very negative impact on teacher morale:

It is now generally recognized – even if it is not always officially admitted – that New Labour educational policies of target imposition, of systematic inspections (accompanied in early days by a policy of ‘naming and shaming’, and of a rigorous pursuit of compliance to centralist dictates) have not only failed to generate the desired results, but have also had a very poor effect on professional morale and motivation. (p 156)

Whitty (2002) supports the view that ‘naming and shaming’ will have a negative effect on teachers and will have a disproportionate impact on those teachers working in more disadvantaged areas who are more likely to be ‘named and shamed.’ Whitty (2002):

It is certainly important for governments, LEAs, diocesan authorities and school governors to work with teachers to set challenging goals but it is important to be clear about the limits of school-based actions. Setting unrealistic goals and adopting a strategy of ‘name and shame’ will lead to cynicism and a lowering of morale among those teachers at the heart of the struggle to raise the achievement of disadvantaged students. Teachers who choose to work in these schools – because they are committed to the disadvantaged – need this commitment recognised and supported. (p 124)

It is interesting in the debate about standards how these standards are actually evidenced. As Chief Inspector of Schools, Woodhead should have been in a better position than most to offer an opinion. Woodhead (2002) asks the question ‘Can we agree on what we mean by ‘good’?’ (p 9) and then goes on to make a seemingly dismissive comment to say that we could not if we listened to the opinions of educationalists or politicians. His own view is that it is a question of common sense based on qualifications, discipline, the acquisition of appropriate values and the provision of sporting and cultural opportunities. However, Woodhead (2002) then goes on to question the reliability of the evidence of inspections and examination results:

There are problems, particularly with examinations. We cannot rely on the evidence and until we can we will never have the schools our children deserve. (p 11)
Gillard (2007) is another author who believes that with a firm belief in market forces and the need to respond to globalisation New Labour differ little in terms of policy to the previous Conservative government. Gillard also emphasises the rise in influence of non-elected individuals who are not only strongly involved in policy formation but also in policy delivery. He highlights the role of Andrew Adonis who was education advisor to Tony Blair and who went on be Head of the Prime Minister’s policy unit and later given a life peerage and a position as a junior education minister. It is Gillard’s contention that the role of Adonis within government led to the resignation of several Education Secretaries such as Estelle Morris: ‘It seems that their role was not to make policy but to promote the policies devised by Adonis and Blair’ (Gillard, 2007, unpaged).

Michael Barber was another very influential figure, a former academic who became an advisor to the DfEE and later head of Blair’s delivery unit. In his autobiography Barber (2007) claims credit for the influential phrase ‘Standards matter more than structure’ (p 23), which meant that it was teaching that needed to improve and not the structure of schools. This phrase was reversed in the second term of Blair’s government but Barber claims that by this stage it had served its purpose as it had been a central part of how standards had been forced up. Barber (2007) makes clear his own, and in turn New Labour’s stance on school improvement when he talks about the decision to close down Hackney Downs school:

The symbolic value of the announcement was the shock it gave to the system. Officials in the department tried desperately to block it; out in the system itself it conveyed the message that New Labour would be as hard as nails and a degree of disillusionment that never really evaporated set in. Since I often had to advocate this policy at teachers’ conferences, I had to feel confident of my case: ‘Zero tolerance is the reverse side of the same coin as success for all; you cannot have one without the other,’ I argued. (p 32)
Along with Tony Blair and Gordon Brown the other significant figure in the transformation of Labour into New Labour was Peter Mandelson who had a key influence on policy formation prior to the election win in 1997. In 1996 he endorsed Michael Barber as ‘a leading educational expert’ and went on to say: ‘The first point to be made is that there is no reason why any school should be a failure’ (Mandelson, 1996, p 93).

The education policy of New Labour was published in the form of the white paper *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997) which included the establishment of school targets for improvement, published performance tables that showed progress as well as attainment and introduced Education Action Zones (EAZs). The EAZs were groups of schools (primary and secondary) located in socioeconomically challenged areas that would work together to raise standards. Within the cluster was an ‘outstanding’ school that would offer guidance and support to the others. This is an interesting concept in an environment where one school is in competition with another and offers a number of fundamental challenges. If a school in the cluster had a problem recruiting qualified maths teachers whereas the ‘outstanding’ school had a high functioning maths department would one school second teachers and accept the impact that might have on standards and would any teachers seconded be equally effective in the other school? This seems to illustrate some of the assumptions within school effectiveness research i.e. that schools facing challenges do not know what they should be doing and that systems or individuals within one context will function equally effectively in another.

Education Action Zones were sponsored by the private sector which failed to deliver so ultimately they were replaced by the Excellence in Cities program which were overseen through the Local Education Authorities.
Business involvement in education was also a key aspect on the introduction of academies⁶ which were part of the strategy to eliminate ‘failing’ schools. Blunkett (2006) describes their function: ‘I had an agreement before leaving the Department for Education that city academies should not be the ‘cuckoo in the nest’ by knocking out disadvantaged schools, but by superseding them where they were failing and where other measures had not achieved substantial change’ (p 658).

School examination performance tables had first been published by OFSTED in 1992 as part of the Conservative’s Parent’s Charter in the form of an alphabetical list of schools and giving raw attainment data. This information was rapidly transformed by newspapers into school ‘league tables’ (Kelly and Downey, 2011). The implication of this type of table is that those at the top are ‘good’ schools and that those at the bottom are ‘failing’. This does not take into account the ability range within the school or the social context of the students. Within the New Labour administration Michael Barber (2007) had been a long time supporter of league tables:

> Not everyone in the public services likes league tables, but I love them. I have spent much of the last decade advocating them, usually in front of sceptical or even hostile audiences of headteachers. (p 96)

Barber goes on to say that when the use of value added measures became available the use of raw data still had a place to reveal where the greatest challenges exist whereas the value added figures show the contribution made by individual schools. He is firmly convinced of the role that the tables have had in both driving up standards and reducing inequalities:

> The fact that school failure has been much reduced (though there is still much more to do) and that the gap between the lowest-performing schools and the average has been narrowed owes a great deal to league tables. In fact, there is no more powerful driver of equity’ (Barber, 2007, p 96).

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⁶ Academies are self-governing schools run independently of Local Authorities as registered charities and receiving funding directly from central government. They were created by New Labour in the Learning and Skills Act 2000 but the program has been accelerated under the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat Alliance government via The Academies Act 2010.
In 1998 The School Standards and Framework Act was published which amongst other actions formalised arrangements for Education Action Zones and gave government the power to take over failing schools.

The 2001 White Paper Schools - *Achieving Success*, proposed new ways of allowing ‘excellent’ schools to partner or support ‘weak’ or ‘failing’ schools and for the replacement of the governing body in the latter. It also made way for the enforced use of Public Private Partnerships where schools or Local Authorities were deemed to be failing.

In 2007 New Labour published the Children’s Plan (DCSF, 2007) in the Foreward of which Ed Balls the Secretary of State for Education states ‘Our aim is to make this the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up’ (p 3). The Children’s Plan was a wide ranging document which sought to provide a new vision for looking after the welfare of young people in this country. Contained in the document were a series of ‘ambitious new goals’ that were to be achieved by 2020. An interim step towards this was that by 2011 there should be no secondary school from which less than 30% of students leave with less than five or more A* to C grades at GCSE including English and maths. To meet this interim, arbitrary target the National Challenge (DCSF, 2008a and b) was announced in 2008 which Ed Balls in the Foreward claims to be a school improvement strategy with the aim of spreading excellence to all:

Together we will spread the culture of excellence that is already strong in our schools system. Our approach is not to preserve excellence for some but to extend excellence in education for all. That way we can help all children to develop in their education and more broadly. By doing so, our School Improvement Strategy forms a central plank of the Government’s drive to improve the life chances of all children, and to support the life chances of all children, and to support all parents and families. (Balls, 2008, p 2)

The document Promoting Excellence for All (DCSF, 2008b) which sets out the details of the National Challenge and its underlying assumptions and values will be analysed in
detail in chapter 4. The list of schools which were included in the National Challenge was published in newspapers and became transformed into a list of ‘failing’ schools at risk of closure and replacement with academies. National Challenge is the most recent manifestation of an approach that has been adopted to school improvement starting with the 1988 Education Act. It is my contention that the approach adopted since the emergence of a dominant neoliberal ideology not only promotes the notion that there is one model that works to improve schools in much the same way that there is only one possible response to the economic challenges of globalisation and does not recognise the position of many of those leading schools in areas of socioeconomic difficulty. This is expressed by Barker (2010):

The leadership case studies discussed above confirm that despite the dominance of the neo-liberal policy agenda, many serving heads are passionately committed to social justice and adopt a progressive perspective in working with their school communities. They draw upon an eclectic mix of practical and theoretical insights to understand and resolve the difficulties that arise from inequalities and disadvantage. Their practice is a guide to the principles that should inform policy-makers as they work to transform education policy. (p 146)

There are other possible approaches not only to school improvement but also to the process of schooling itself (e.g., Wrigley, 2006, Fielding and Moss, 2011) which do not find themselves on the agenda for discussion. These will be returned to later when the discourses that currently dominate education are analysed.

2.5 The Conservative – Liberal Democrat Coalition 2010-

New Labour were defeated in the election in 2010 and replaced by a Conservative - Liberal Democrat coalition but in its early days there are few signs that policy in education will take a new direction or indeed the approach to school improvement. It is striking that Michael Gove the coalition Education Secretary hails Sir Michael Barber as ‘...another visionary educationalist’ (Gove, 2011a, unpaged) and promotes the collaboration between schools (a ‘weaker’ school and effectively an academy) as the central plank of his
improvement strategy. ‘The principle of collaboration between stronger and weaker schools, with those in a position to help given the freedom to make a difference, lies at the heart of our whole approach to school improvement’ (Gove, 2011a, unpaged)

Michael Gove is seeking to establish more academies either by convincing ‘outstanding’ schools to convert or by forcing ‘failing’ schools to convert. Thus is seems the circle of decline that many schools in areas of social deprivation have been stuck in since the 1980s and the position that their teaching staff find themselves seems set to continue. This is summarised by Yandell (2009) talking about the education policy of New Labour:

Regular schools, though, particularly if they are regular schools that have 30% of their intake achieving five GCSEs at grades A*-C, have been on the receiving end not of academy-style funding largesse but of massively damaging publicity. The arbitrariness of the thirty per cent threshold for so called National Challenge schools takes no account of local circumstances, no account of differing intakes or levels of student mobility. The effect has been to damage staff morale and student recruitment, and then to put previously thriving schools into downward spirals from which the most obvious escape route is for the school to cease to exist and to be replaced by an academy. (p 132)

2.6 The knowledge claims underlying current education policy

In the first part of this Chapter I have outlined how the neoliberal agenda has dominated education reform in this country since the late 1960s. During this time the location of perceived educational failure and the allocation of blame for this, has shifted from individual students to the introduction of comprehensive schools, new teaching methods and teaching unions to individual schools and school leaders. According to Thomson (2006) the post-welfarist reforms can be analysed using Bourdieu’s field theory (Bourdieu, 1990). The period of education reform can be seen as resulting from ‘a synchrony of crises within the economic, political and educational fields’ (Thomson, 2006, p 750). Thus countries such as the United Kingdom had to face the challenges posed by, and respond to the threats and opportunities offered by globalisation by making political changes and educational changes in order to compete, for example, by providing an appropriately
educated workforce. Thomson (2006) argues that a Bourdieuan analysis ‘emphasizes the synchrony of crisis in fields, which allows/requires agents in the dominant field to breach the borders of dominated fields’ (p 751). In this case the political and economic fields breached the education field and even though following the crisis, the fields revert to becoming autonomous again, the rules of the game (Bourdieu, 1998) have changed and the educational field remains vulnerable to further political intervention. So the education field was influenced by and forced to adopt the practices of other fields. This would include the adoption of new public management (NPM) and the associated shift towards audit, accountability and the use of data across fields.

Before the introduction of comprehensive education, schools were positioned within a social hierarchy based on the amount of social capital held by the families of the students who attended them. So grammar and faith schools were at the top of the hierarchy and secondary modern and technical schools at the bottom. There also existed a socioeconomic and geographical element to this hierarchy with economic and cultural capital unevenly distributed across different parts of the country. Thomson (2006) describes how the policy reforms of the New Right were ‘marked by new forms of codification of this ongoing hierarchy of positions’ (p 743). Codification (Bourdieu, 1990) ‘makes things simple, clear, communicable; it makes possible a controlled consensus on meaning, a homologuein: you are sure of giving the same sense to the words’ (p 82). So with the introduction of standardised testing and the publication of results, along with a national school inspection system came the assumption that there existed unproblematic ways of ranking and comparing schools that would allow parents to make informed choices as to the quality of the schools on offer. The result of this was to rationalise the hierarchies that already existed. Thomson (2006) also suggests that this codification also favoured certain epistemologies as the seemingly ‘objective nature of the capital involved (tests, data and reports) supports particular forms of knowledge and ways of knowing’ (p 744). The
importance of ‘experts’ who have the right sort of knowledge so allowing them to dominate senior political figures has already been referenced earlier in this section and I will go on to look at the emphasis given to a functionalist approach to knowledge production particularly in the area of school leadership. The evidence offered for post-welfare reform, where it exists, has been taken from the school improvement and effectiveness movements and their proponents have been the favoured experts.

Research and other writing on school improvement and effectiveness has dominated educational research and provided evidence for policy makers for the last twenty five years. Academics such as Fullan, Hargreaves and Hopkins (eg. Fullan, 1992, Hargreaves et al, 1995, Hopkins et al, 1997, Hopkins, 2001) have dominated the school improvement movement and they have been closely associated with the policy making process. So for example, David Hopkins has held a number of academic chairs and was also from 2002 to 2005 Chief Advisor on School Standards at the DFES and Michael Fullan is Special Advisor to the Premier and Minster of Education in Ontario as well as having a university post. School effectiveness research (eg.Mortimore, 1995, Sammons et al, 1994) was attractive to both the Thatcher Conservative government and New Labour. (Goldstein and Woodhouse, 2000). The appeal of effectiveness research according to Goldstein and Woodhouse was the inference that changing schools would impact on performance so educational policy links directly to standards. The role of Michael Barber highlights how close school effectiveness researchers are to the heart of policy making. Barber was a leading figure in academic studies in effectiveness and went from being an informal advisor to Tony Blair and David Blunkett whilst in opposition to become the Head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit when the New Labour government was formed. Goldstein and Myers (1997) explore the challenges that researchers face when they become so closely linked to policy formation and point to three main criticisms. Firstly that school effectiveness overstates its conclusions. Secondly that it inevitably focuses on
limited cognitive outcomes and ignores other important aspects. Thirdly that it is culpable for the shift towards the control of education and teachers by central government. They summarise their views on this third criticism as follows:

We disagree because we do not accept that SE researchers as a group have consciously supported such government moves, although would be prepared to concede that some individuals involved in SE may be culpable. Nevertheless, we do agree that the government and is quangos have ‘cherry picked’ what they wish to use in order to legitimate their policies. (unpaged)

I have previously reviewed the school improvement and effectiveness literature as it relates to schools in areas of economic hardship (Lythgoe, 2006) and it is not my intention to go through this extensive body of literature here but to simply recognise that it has been selectively used when an evidence base has been required.

As the neoliberal agenda has dominated the thinking of different governments over the last thirty years, rather than comparing and contrasting the role of school leaders over this period I will look at the evolution of what has been described as a functionalist approach to school leadership and the rejection of the possibility of adopting a socially critical approach (Raffo and Gunter, 2008). Policy based on functional knowledge claims is about creating efficient and effective systems and its narratives ‘are about delivery targets and accountability’ (Gunter, 2011, p 5). Gunter (2012) looks at knowledge production under New Labour and says that they ‘drew on functional approaches where the purpose of knowing was to remove dysfunctions from the system, and so the rationales were about targets, plans and data’ (p 2). Raffo et al (2011) say that from a functionalist stance education exerts a beneficial effect on society, benefitting both the individual and society as a body. The benefits are ‘economic development, social cohesion, and enhanced life opportunities for individuals’ (Raffo et al, p 18). If these benefits do not accrue for sections of society then a reason needs to be sought and action taken to ‘fix’ the situation. So if a school is failing to deliver on performance targets then it is a case of explaining why and
then taking remedial action. This might be appointing an inspirational headteacher who takes what is ‘known’ from the school effectiveness and improvement literature and applies it in that particular context. With a functionalist approach the opportunities for debating the nature and purpose of schooling do not arise and opportunities for fundamental changes do not exist. Smyth (2011):

The problem with the technocratic view of education and teaching is that the emphasis on ‘excellence’, ‘quality’, ‘efficiency’ and ‘effectiveness’ severely brings into question the ability of teachers to provide the kind of intellectual and moral leadership necessary to enable children to be educated. What are rehearsed are liturgical solutions regarding what is considered by some to be important in schooling. What is not opened up for debate and consultation are the fundamental deficiencies in the ways schools are conceived and organised. (p 22)

An alternative to the functionalist view would be the socially critical perspective. A socially critical perspective ‘assumes that education can both challenge existing power structures and enable democratic development’ (Raffo et al, 2011, p 41). An examination from this stance might suggest that not only can it not be taken for granted that current education policy and practice is the ‘right’ one and that its advantages cannot be assumed, but rather that it might actually contribute and perpetuate issues such as low attainment and lack of opportunity within certain sections of society. The issue might lie in existing power relations and vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

Prior to the New Labour government, Gewirtz and Ozga (1990) say that pluralist approaches to policymaking, that had developed after the second world war, and had a strong commitment to consensus and partnership were replaced by the centrally controlled and non-consensual approach to policy production and implementation of the New Right with its neoliberal agenda. Gewirtz and Ozga (1990) say that the contrast between the two approaches led to an increased sense of loss over the former approach:
The pluralist assumptions about policymaking through negotiations, bargaining and consensus are given increased status through the contrast drawn with the current dirigistic style. Lack of consultation, or derisory gestures in this direction, are hallmarks of education policy making under Thatcher, from TVEI to the ‘consultation’ on the National Curriculum. (p 37)

In their critical analysis of pluralism, Gewirtz and Ozga (1990) reveal the influence of the ‘policy elite’ (p 41) that took hold under the pluralist model of partnership and how this could lead to a degree of ‘class interest’ (p 47). The notion of, a policy elite is still very relevant in the post-Thatcher policy making processes that perpetuate neoliberal values.

Since the Thatcher government there has been a consistent emphasis on the importance of leadership in schools but Gunter (2011) says that there is no convincing evidence to support such claims and assertions are made without being referenced ‘it almost seems as if a belief system is being promoted in prayer like fashion’ (p 4). Gunter and Forrester (2008) describe the importance of the headteacher as single leader in current education policy and other models as rhetoric:

The model in play in education policy in England is that of the single person as organisational leader. This person is responsible for the delivery of national policy, and they are accountable directly to government for outcomes. While there has been rhetoric around and training provided for, hybrids such as ‘distributed’ and ‘total’ leadership, the primacy of the single person remains, with distribution coming downward, and used as a form of sophisticated delegation and technical job redesign. (p 159)

Gunter and Forrester (2008) state that, ‘New Labour public policy has drawn upon, sustained and developed a form of knowledge, a network of knowers, and a preferred approach to knowing, in order to bring about change in the public domain’ (p 153). The KPEL project (Gunter, 2007) ‘focuses on identifying and examining the types of knowledge, the ways of knowing and the legitimisation of knowers involved in framing,

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7 The KPEL (Knowledge Production in Educational Leadership) project funded by ESRC (RES-23-1192) was a project exploring ‘the relationship between the state, public policy and knowledge by focusing on New Labour’s investment in the leadership of schools as a central strategy of delivering reform’ Gunter, 2007, p 1).
promoting and securing leadership’ (p 1). The report shows how the interaction between the agency of the individuals involved with the structures and the constraints or freedom allowed by the structures that will frame school leadership in a particular way. These interactions are ‘mapped as regimes of practice’ (p 20). The regimes are based on the position of the individuals involved in policy formation and delivery in relation to the state in terms of power and the economy.

There are three regimes that Gunter (2007) identifies. Regime 1 is located at the extremes of political and economic power and constitutes a ‘school leadership policy network’ (Gunter and Forrester, 2008, p 114). In this regime are ministers, civil servants and advisers with close links to the private sector and those involved in Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPB). There are those involved in the new institutions created by New Labour such as the School Effectiveness Unit and the National College for School Leadership who are often linked to schools or the school improvement and effectiveness fields. It also includes freelance consultants on fixed contracts. Headteachers are also positioned within this regime. Gunter (2007) says that those in this regime share certain characteristics some of which can be summarised as:

- Believe in the single leader model.
- Work for a public institution delivering services, not likely to be employed by a university or local authority and if they do are often on short term contracts or secondment, supportive of the functional approach offered by school improvement and effectiveness, accept private sector knowledge and present as politically neutral.
- See centralised policy strategy as the way to meet standards and improve performance locally. Those headteachers who are seen to operate as transformational leaders are involved and given a high profile. Other groups who could also influence change are seen as part of ‘the problem’.

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• Have taken on board the neoliberal values and favour research that is in line with private sector models (particularly school improvement and effectiveness).

Regime 2 includes those taking a more critical analysis of policy. These individuals are away from the domination of both economic and political power, working within universities particularly in the area of policy sociology. Features of those within this regime include:

• Give consideration to ways that change can be more socially just and democratic.
• See their role as research.
• Challenge the dominant neoliberal values.
• Give consideration to the wider context and use social theories to describe and explain the interaction between policy and practice.
• Are unlikely to see leadership as the main purpose of their role.
• Are interested in thinking about how power, the economy and professional practice interact.

Emergent regime 3 overlaps with the boundaries of regime 1 and 2. Overlapping with regime 1 are members of the school improvement and school effectiveness movements either recent members or ‘insiders’ who find themselves on the ‘outside’. Also are those headteachers who whilst positioned by policy within regime 1 find this an uncomfortable position to be in. This positioning of headteachers will be returned to briefly later in this chapter and then in more detail in the research results section.

Overlapping with regime 2 are those such as headteachers with a record of project delivery.

Regime 1 is named as the New Labour Policy Regime (Gunter, 2012) and contains those individuals who dominate policy production and implementation on the basis of their
proximity to key government figures. Hence, there is a strong functionalist approach to both ‘evidence’ taken from the school improvement and effectiveness movements and delivery strategies via transformational leaders with some concession to notions such as distributed leadership. In this way what constitutes knowledge is controlled by those ‘in’ the New Labour Policy Regime who also dominate the transmission of this knowledge via National Standards and monopolistic training delivered through the National College for School Leadership. These issues will be returned to in more detail later on in this thesis.

There are a range of rewards for those school leaders at the heart of this policy regime, ‘The heroic head in modern guise is the saviour of failing schools, many of these heads recipients of Queen’s Honours’ (Bangs et al, 2011, p 141). The way that the beliefs are transmitted by others on the inside of the New Labour Policy Team is also illustrated by Bangs et al (2011):

Leadership, a politician’s obsession, said Philippa Cordingley⁸, pointing to the establishment of a National College, is symbolic of the belief that importing the heroic head, imbued with authority and charisma and equipped with a set of guiding principles and appropriate competencies, will sort out wayward staff and raise student performance. (p 141)

This influence of the New Labour Policy Regime has over the evolving concept of school leadership is illustrated by Gunter and Thomson (2008):

The slow creep of the label of ‘Principal’ is part of this process, along with the remodelling of ‘teacher’ as a member of a children’s workforce. We have shown and argued that these developments are based on a narrow form of knowledge, and are promoted by people from a range of institutions, who share similar dispositions and who have positioned themselves as policy entrepreneurs recombining old ideas about the normality of leadership into new packages of training and ways of working. (p 159)

Those at the centre of the New Labour Policy Regime were able to build careers and publish work in what had become a leadership industry. Leithwood et al (2006b):

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⁸ Phillipa Cordingly is Chief Executive of CUREE and was interviewed by Bangs et al as part of their study of the relationship between policy makers and schools.
Leadership is a high priority issue for many people concerned with education these days. Reformers depend on it. The public believes that it is what schools need more of. It is not surprising then, that so many people are trying to make a living peddling their latest insights about effective education leadership. (p 7)

This quote comes from a report that has been described as ‘a major study that began with the functional assumption that the headteacher is the causal origin of all that is effective’ (Gunter, 2012, p 49).

An example of an approach coming from regime 2 is provided by Raffo and Gunter (2008) in looking at social inclusion under New Labour:

In addition we show that there are socially critical possibilities in aspects of the general New Labour project that might enable more democratic leadership approaches to develop and that reflect a more bottom-up control of the education and social inclusion agenda. (p 399)

Grace (1995) said that alongside the commencement of the commodification of education in the 1980s there was a rapid expansion of Education Management Studies within the general area of the study of education. This was accompanied by the ‘language, assumptions and ideology of management’ (p 5) dominating the ‘language, consciousness and action’ (p 5) of those working in the education world. Grace said that this has implications for school leadership:

Within these broader developments, the study of school leadership runs the risk of being reduced to a branch of EMS, to a set of technical considerations about the school as a production-function centre, a devolved budget centre or a value-adding centre. Within this culture of enterprise education, a new discourse is generated in which school boards, trustees or governors become ‘stake-holders’ or ‘players’ and principals or headteachers become chief executives, market analysts and public relations specialists. (Grace, 1995, p 5)

To resist what could be described as reductionist tendencies or the commodification of education, Grace suggested that school leadership could be studied from the perspective of policy scholarship placing school leadership as a cultural, sociological and historical subject for study and not simply a technical one. Educational research has been criticised
not only for its quality (e.g., Ozga, 1992) but also because it is sometimes used simply to substantiate existing beliefs (e.g., Gorard, 2005). From a functionalist perspective management holds the key to school improvement:

The field of education leadership and management is doubly important for government policies of school improvement, because it is used as a standard explanation for differential school effects, and it is therefore the chief conduit for school improvement. The standard answer to the question why do schools with equivalent SES and prior attainment get different education outcomes and inspection results, is that management makes a difference. (Gorard, 2005, p 157)

The danger is that if the a priori assumption is made that what school leaders do determines success outcomes (as determined by the government at any particular moment in time) and then research simply measures the impact of aspects of leadership behaviour then the wider context in which schools exist and operate are ignored as are alternative approaches to schooling. I would argue that the functionalist approach has some advantages for politicians in that it places potentially more intractable problems such as poverty and social inequity in the background and allows blame to be located within a small number of schools and with a small number of school leaders. Challenging the dominant functionalist approach also holds challenges for those engaged in research:

The key issues for improvement are much more generic – such as the apparently basic requirement that research conclusions must be warranted by evidence. A cynic might even say that what ‘research’ needs is a lot more actual research, in the sense of empirical studies genuinely trying to find out something, rather than work that uses ‘evidence’ to sustain pre-existing theories and ideologies. (Gorard, 2005, p 162)

2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the structuring of the context in which educational professionals are located and the way in which success and failure have come to be constructed through the discourses of performativity and the market. This has been described as part of the neoliberal reform of education undertaken in response to globalisation. The same agenda has been followed by successive governments with only
minor adjustments. Bourdieu’s analysis of fields was used to explain how the field of economy breached the field of education resulting in the adoption of uniform practices such as audit, accountability and managerialism across different fields. New Labour ‘made the leadership of schools, in Bourdieu’s (1990) terms, the dominant game to play (Gunter, 2012, p 18). The process of codification started under the Thatcher government cemented and rationalised existing hierarchies of schools leaving those in areas of economic hardship ‘stuck’ at the bottom. In Chapter 4 I will analyse the National Challenge strategy as an example of how New Labour set out to improve ‘underperforming’ schools recognising that the majority of these are in areas of economic hardship as a way of reducing inequality. This will then be conceptualised used Bourdieu’s field theory via the notion of doxa (Bourdieu, 1998) working as misrecognition (Bourdieu, 1998). Chapter 5 will then look at the position of senior school leaders over the reform period and Chapter 6 will analyse the interviews that I conducted with the sample of school leaders in order to gain insight into how they play the leadership ‘game’ and how this contributes to their professional identity.
Chapter 3 – Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Introduction
In this chapter I will describe the research design and the methodology used and the rationale for these. It will also describe the context within which the research was carried out and my own position within the study and the potential issues relating to this. I will then address issues of validity and ethics.

3.2 Rationale
The methodology and methods employed in this study were selected in order to look at the identity and work of senior leaders including headteachers who work in areas that are economically challenged as they engage with the discourses that have dominated education since the Education Reform Act. It is recognised that this is very much part of the story of a small group of educational professionals in a particular context at a particular period of time. It was my intention to gather data that would allow me reflect on how a group of individual school leaders establish a professional identity and a sense of their own practice as they interact with current educational policy working in schools located within an area of economic hardship so. Thinking about how individuals create meaning for themselves from the current educational discourses might offer the possibility of new approaches to school improvement or at least serve to problematise some of the current approaches. Both answers to questions and the relating of stories cannot be read as some form of absolute truth, they have to be seen not only as a construction of the interviewee, or a product of the researcher but as something that is created between the two. Like any other human interaction this will be a function not only of the individuals involved but also of the environment and the time. In my own case I bring my own stance to my role as researcher and in many ways research subject. This is an attempt to allow a group of ‘ordinary’ school leaders tell aspects of their stories about leading schools in economically challenging circumstances in a period of neoliberal reform and then to interpret these in the wider
policy context in order to better understand their professional practice. In my literature reviews for my earlier papers (Lythgoe, 1996, 1997, 1999) I found little work on the stories of ‘ordinary’ school leaders. What did exist were stories of ‘heroic’ school leaders (eg., Clark, 1998, Stubbs, 2003) which provided a pro-reform voice. There is virtually nothing written about leaders other than headteachers in this context. These are the professionals charged with interpreting and implementing policies and whose personal and professional identities will be closely associated with how external agents describe the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of their schools.

3.3 Epistemological Stance

This study is located within the interpretivist paradigm which ‘is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted’ (Mason, 2002, p 3). I see reality as a social construct and my thinking about how we come to understand and construct our social world has been informed by a number of texts (eg., Potter, 1996, Searle, 1996 and Hacking, 2000). This has developed what Gregory (2005) would describe as my ‘philosophy of truth’ (p 91) which along with the concept of reflexivity is a key dimension of my work. Who I am, and my political beliefs and values are central to my methodological approach:

Methodology, then is much more than the set of methods that are used to answer the research questions, more than a list of ways of doing things or a set of tools for collecting data. Your methodology is, in effect, a reflection of yourself and your values, the product of your decisions about how to act in a particular social and cultural situation in which you have identified a problem, a belief that doing something in that situation is better than doing nothing. (Gregory, 2005, p 97)

In the next section I will describe the methodology used and why it was chosen.

3.4 Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is a policy scholarship (Ball, 1990, Grace, 1995, Ozga, 2000, Whitty, 2002). Policy scholarship places education policy in its wider historical, political and social context in order to identify how particular choices are made.
It looks at the discursive nature of policy, the texts generated and the impact on those who interact with the policy.

Grace (1995) regards policy scholarship as an alternative to policy science which he sees as arising from the natural sciences and tending to ignore the wider context. So Grace (1995) uses the phrase policy scholarship ‘to imply a mode of analysis which goes beyond policy’ (p 2):

> Policy scholarship resists the tendency of policy science to abstract problems from their relational settings by insisting that the problem can only be understood in the complexity of those relations. In particular, it represents a view that a socio-historical approach to research can illuminate the cultural and ideological struggles in which schooling is located. (p 3)

Policy science has been the preferred way of studying educational management (Grace, 1995) with a particular intent of finding out what ‘works’, with a focus on implementation with a view to examining slippage between policy intent and actual delivery. Gunter and Forrester (2008) use policy scholarship to analyse the way that New Labour invested in certain ‘knowledge claims and production processes’ in relation to policy and school leadership. They describe the difference between policy science and policy scholarship:

> Hence the approach taken is different from research that aims to measure whether leadership is working and develop strategies for how it might work better. Instead, we aim to get inside the policy process to examine the assumptions, attitudes and approaches to examine the assumptions, attitudes and approaches of the people who make it and do it. (p 147)

Ozga (1987) outlined a similar approach when arguing that:

> The strong applied orientation of educational management, with its emphasis on improved performance, and the ‘development of capability’ is flourishing in a sympathetic political climate, and the tradition of detailed historical work, or work concerned primarily with politics or policy content is in danger of being squeezed out. (p 138)

The lack of influence of research that is not primarily positivist means that there is a lack of interest in the position of individual professionals in relation to education policy.
Ethnographic work has made little impact on school management because it is not obviously linked to school improvement and indeed reveals the contradiction and untidiness in any ‘system’. Literature on heads’ tasks and heads’ roles grows, but whatever happened to Wolcott’s ‘Man in the Principal’s Office’? Nor is there much evidence of consciousness of these problems. (Ozga, 1987, p 143)

Policy scholarship has been used in this study because it is the intention to try and improve understanding of the ‘untidiness’ in terms of how school leaders in areas of socioeconomic hardship interact with policies, particularly those relating to school improvement. By combining interviews with individuals with an analysis of the policy texts and the context within which their work is framed this study seeks to breach the ‘micro-macro gap’ (Ozga, 1987) between policy formation and delivery and working with individuals and groups. In this study twenty school leaders working in one area of economic hardship were interviewed about what constituted a good school and how this fitted with the prevailing policy perception of a good school. The interviews were intended to provide insight into these teacher’s assumptions, values and beliefs and then the text analysis used to identify the assumptions, values and beliefs embedded within current policy documents. The analysis would then look at the interplay between the two and the implications for the individual school leaders as well as for attempts to improve schools in areas of economic hardship.

So as a policy scholarship this study integrates research evidence with empirical evidence and its analysis and locates this within its political, historical and social context. Ball (1990 and 1994) has used policy scholarship to investigate post-welfare reforms integrating interviews with key agents and discourse analysis with the wider context. Both of these studies were very much in the model of policy scholarship described by Grace:

The aspiration to scholarship which is relevant here is a commitment to locate the matter under investigation in its historical, theoretical, cultural and socio-political setting and a commitment to integrate these wider relational features with contemporary fieldwork data. In this sense, policy scholarship is used as an essay in wider and deeper understanding. (1995, p 3)

It is my intention that this study is a further small contribution to this body of work. The conceptual framework for this study has been provided using Bourdieu’s theory of practice (1988, 1990, 1991 and 1998). The work of Bourdieu was chosen as it is concerned with the interaction between agency and structure and the working of power within a field. Bourdieu’s methodological approach fits well with policy scholarship as Grenfell (2008) describes it as operating on ‘three distinct levels’ (p 222). At the first level there is a requirement to consider the field in relation to other, predominantly dominant, fields. At the second level the field itself is analysed and on the third level ‘individual agents within the field are analysed; their background, trajectory and positioning’ (Grenfell, 2008, p 223).

3.5 Methods

Two main methods were used in this study, first a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) of primary documentary sources was carried out and secondly interviews were carried out with twenty school leaders in six schools in a small geographical area of economic hardship in the north of England and the transcripts of these analysed by discourse analysis (Gee, 1999).

3.6 Analysis of primary sources

Discourse analysis is a way of thinking about how spoken or written language will ‘enact specific social activities and social identities’ (Gee, 1999, p 1). In this study a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) was carried out of a selection of primary sources. Fairclough (2003) describes his approach to discourse analysis as being ‘based on the assumption that language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life, so that social analysis and research always has to take account of language (p 2). The primary sources chosen were documents issued to schools to support the introduction of the National Challenge (DCSF, 2008a and b) and a letter to the headteachers of schools designated as National Challenge schools explaining what was expected of them (Balls, 2008a). These documents were chosen as they were illustrative of
New Labour’s policy in relation to improving schools in predominantly economically disadvantaged areas.

Van Dijk (2001) argues that to carry out critical discourse analysis it is necessary to ‘understand the nature of social power and dominance’ (p 301) and then ‘how discourse contributes to their reproduction’ (p 302). Fairclough (2003) states that his version of discourse analysis can be regarded ‘as ‘oscillating’ between a focus on specific texts and a focus on what he calls the ‘order of discourse’, the relatively durable social structuring of language which is itself one element of the relatively durable structuring and networking of social practices (p 3). Fairclough (2003) offers a model of discourse analysis which involves asking a series of questions about a text that are prompted by twelve aspects of textual analysis. In any given analysis one or more of these aspects will be particularly relevant. In the analysis of the policy texts relating to the National Challenge in Chapter 4 a particular emphasis was given to six of the questions. The six questions which were used as a prompt in reading the texts critically are:

- What chain of social events do these texts fit into? So for example these documents were the current manifestation of attempts to raise standards in those schools serving areas of economic hardship and build on what had been in place before.

- What is happening in terms of intertextuality? These documents represent particular voices but not others and there are those who would challenge many aspects to this particular approach to school improvement both methodologically and in terms of its values and assumptions.

- What evidence is there of different discourses within the texts? These documents are located within particular discourses that relate to school improvement and to the purpose of education and its relationship to social equity.

- What assumptions are made in the texts? For example about the meaning of success or failure and whether there exists a shared and agreed understanding of these.
The texts are located in the context of education policy under New Labour and the historical antecedence of this so the themes that emerged in chapter two will be followed through. Central to looking at these themes and other aspects which emerge from the documents being analysed is what is regarded as the purpose of education. So for example school effectiveness is measured in terms of what outcomes are currently deemed important but then once a particular model is adopted it, in turn, starts to influence what is defined as the purpose of education. Wrigley (2006) says:

> It (school effectiveness) avoids a debate about the purpose of education. What do we really value most in a good school? Is it quadratic equations or environmental understanding, creativity or spelling? These are political and philosophical questions that are not solved by comparing test scores. (p 35)

The outcome measures will ultimately start to shape what schools do, in order that they be seen as effective or successful, in order to compete in the market place. It is perhaps ironic that after two decades of performance output driven education, with schools having striven to meet their targets that were externally imposed, they now stand accused of allowing these to distract them from delivering the qualifications required by universities and employers:

> More young people are achieving qualifications, but it is no coincidence that many of these qualifications which have grown in popularity recently are not those best recognised by employers and universities, but those which carry the highest value in school performance tables. Schools have become skilled at meeting government targets but too often have had their ability to do what they think is right for their pupils constrained by government directives or improvement initiatives. (DFE, 2010, p 8)

In this study the documents were analysed against five themes:

- In what ways are social events represented in the texts?
- What value systems are given priority within the texts?
- What messages are given about the purpose of education?
What constitutes success and failure in defining schools?
What particular model of school improvement is offered?
What is the relationship between government and schools and where do power, truth and knowledge lie?
What particular messages are given out about those schools serving areas of economic hardship?

These themes were chosen to firstly provide further evidence to answer the first of my research questions in terms of the construction of success and failure and how this is located predominantly in areas of economic hardship, the links of this to the given models of improvement and then to follow through some of the themes that emerged in Chapter 2 in terms of knowledge claims and how policy as discourse can define the purpose of education.

3.6 Interviews

Interviews were conducted with twenty senior leaders (headteachers, deputy headteachers and assistant headteachers) in five schools. All the five schools in involved in the study are located within a five mile radius of each other. Four of the schools are in the same town (Bridgetown) and one (school D) is in an adjacent town (Hastings) but has a catchment area bordering two of the other schools.

3.7 The physical location

Bridgetown is located in a former textile producing area and in 2010 had a population of 85,300 and there is currently a falling population due to housing renewal projects. Using multiple deprivation indices Bridgetown was rated at the eleventh most deprived of three hundred and twenty six local authorities. Hastings has a population of 30,000 and like Bridgetown is a former mill town. All of the four Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs10) in Hastings are found in the top 10% of the most deprived LSOAs in the country. Students

10 LSOAs are subdivisions of political wards that have a consistent size and constant boundaries.
from both towns frequently cross the borders between them to attend schools and the senior staff from the schools meet regularly in both formal and informal settings so in effect they are one educational community. There are six secondary or post 16 schools in Bridgetown and two were not included in the study and the reasons for this are outlined later in the chapter. All the schools included in the study were opened in temporary accommodation following reorganisation under the Building Schools for the Future scheme (BSF) in September 2006. Schools A and D were effectively formed by amalgamations of two schools and staff in Bridgetown had the opportunity to apply for any job within the town at an appropriate level. It was the case that most staff applied to the school which replaced their previous ones and all the headteachers appointed had previously been a headteacher within the town. School D went through the same closed system but with half the schools in Hastings. The church maintained school not included in the study was graded good by OFSTED between 2006 and 2010 but was placed in special measures in 2011. The other school that I could not get to commit to interview dates was placed in special measures by OFSTED in 2007 and after five monitoring visits by OFSTED was judged satisfactory in 2009 only to be served with a notice to improve in 2011. Brief descriptions of the schools included in the study are given below.

School A is an 11-16 college with a roll of 980 students of whom about 70% are Asian heritage. It has well above national average numbers of students eligible for free school meals and who are registered as having special educational needs. School A was judged satisfactory by OFSTED in 2008 and good in 2011. Attainment data at key stage 4 is well below national averages.

School B is a sixth form college that primarily admits students from Bridgetown and Hastings. It was graded good by OFSTED in 2008 and again in 2011.

School C is an 11-16 college with a roll of about 980 students. It has very small numbers of Asian heritage students but well above average numbers of students eligible for free
school meals and students registered as having special educational needs. School C was given a notice to improve by OFSTED in 2007 and following two monitoring visits designated satisfactory in 2011. Attainment data at key stage 4 is well below national averages.

School D is an 11-16 college with a roll of about 700 students. About 80% of the students are of Asian heritage and it has well above national average numbers of students who are eligible for free school meals and identified as having special educational needs. School D was judged satisfactory by OFSTED in 2008 and again in 2011. Attainment data at key stage 4 is well below national averages.

School E has a roll of around 970 students with very few Asian Heritage students but well above average numbers of students who are eligible for free school meals or who have been identified as having special educational needs. School E was given a notice to improve by OFSTED in 2007 and following two monitoring visits was judged to be satisfactory in 2011. Attainment data at key stage 4 is well below national averages.

With the exception of school A, all the other four 11-16 schools in Bridgetown have been placed in an OFSTED category of needing to improve (given a notice to improve or requiring special measures) at least once between 2006 and 2011.

3.8 The senior leaders

In the study the headteacher of each of the five schools was interviewed as well as at least one deputy headteacher. So the final sample consisted of five headteachers, nine deputy headteachers and six assistant headteachers with an average number of four teachers from each school. There were only three interviewees from school B as this is much smaller than the other so they represented the entire senior management team.

Details of the teachers interviewed are given the table below.
## Table showing the school, age range and job title of each interviewee

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Assistant Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Assistant Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Assistant Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Deputy Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darren</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>Assistant Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felix</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Deputy Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Assistant Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clair</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Associate Deputy Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Associate Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graham</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivan</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Deputy Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Deputy Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelvin</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Deputy Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Len</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Deputy Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Deputy Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florence</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Deputy Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neil</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Headteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olive</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Headteacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bridgetown and school C in Hastings were chosen as a suitable site for the study for two reasons. Firstly, it is a well defined geographical area that is of a size which would allow the inclusion of all the secondary schools in the study and the whole area, as described above, would fit the description of an area of economic hardship. Secondly, I work in the area (at school A) which means that I know the context within which the schools operate very well and I also know the headteachers of all the schools which I felt would mean that I would have a good chance of being granted access to conduct the interviews. The fact that this is insider research is discussed later on. The church school in Bridgetown was excluded from the study because it takes students from a very wide area including from outside the town and is to a certain extent selective. I originally made phone calls to all the headteachers of the schools in Bridgetown and school to C and explaining the reason behind my work, the criteria for the selection of staff and requesting their support. I originally asked for four senior leaders including the headteacher. At this stage all the headteachers pledged their full support and it was agreed that I would send out a letter (appendix 2) which they would circulate to all members of their senior management teams. Two weeks after this I e-mailed the schools asking to make arrangements to hold the interviews and for details of volunteers. The only school I dealt with differently was school A where I spoke to the senior management team individually and gave them a copy of the same letter as the other schools. The response from most schools was really pleasing with no staff refusing to take part and schools B, C, D and E sending me a schedule allowing me to conduct all the interviews on their site in the same day and offering me an office for the day. One school in Bridgetown replied to say that they would get back to me but despite several phone calls and e-mails and one face to face conversation with the headteacher it was not possible to make the necessary arrangements. This was a school under considerable pressure including falling rolls so would have been ideal to be included but unfortunately I was unable to gain access.
This was a purposive sample (Mason, 2002) of education professionals selected on the basis that they had all held senior positions in schools serving economically deprived areas for at least eight years so had been exposed to discourses relating to school improvement for a significant time.

3.9 The pilot interview

Prior to finalising the arrangements for the interviews I conducted a pilot interview in June 2009 using an unstructured approach to interviewing.

Main learning from the pilot interview:

- Even senior colleagues have little knowledge of policy issues that directly impact on schools so only interview leadership team members.
- It is difficult to discuss certain issues as no shared language, knowledge or understanding exists of wider issues so again only interview leadership colleagues.
- It is essential to use a room where privacy can be guaranteed.
- Even close friends respond to a formal interview setting and respond to questions in a serious and thoughtful way.
- Transcribing interviews is a very time consuming process for a slow typist.
- The unstructured interview resulted in a lack of focus, the interview over running and the generation of a lot of material that could not be used. A semi-structured approach was used for the substantive interviews.

3.10 The substantive interviews

The interviews were conducted between September 2009 and February 2010. At the start of each interview the purpose of the study was reiterated as was the fact that the names of all teachers, schools and towns would be replaced by pseudonyms in any texts produced. The interviews lasted for between thirty and fifty minutes and took place in an office in each of the schools involved. All interviewees were agreeable to the interviews being recorded (to avoid technical problems the interviews were recorded on both a digital
recorder and an I-pod) and consented to the use of anonymised quotes in the production of the thesis. A qualitative approach to interviewing was adopted, loosely structured around a set of questions (Appendix 3). This represented a move away from the unstructured approach taken in the pilot interview, as I would now share the view of Mason (2002) that the notion of the unstructured interview is a misnomer because even in the absence of any question structure I would still have a purpose and a set of preconceived ideas in my head. In adopting this approach I recognise that it has the features identified by Mason (2002). These are that a qualitative interview is an interactional exchange of dialogue. It is a ‘conversation with a purpose’ (Mason, 2002, p 62); it will have elements of flexibility and operates from the notion that qualitative research perceives knowledge as situated and contextual so that both data and knowledge generated are constructed as a result of the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. The questions were chosen to be very straightforward and to generate first of all a sense of what the interviewees regarded a good school to be like, how they would describe their own and then what they thought the Department’s’ view of a good school would be and how their school would be described. The next set of questions was intended to obtain an understanding of views on, and knowledge of current school improvement strategies particularly the National Challenge and the levels of support offered. These were followed by questions aimed at exploring the teacher’s sense of agency in terms of their career paths and finally questions about how they might be perceived by colleagues in schools working in schools in different contexts. I transcribed the pilot interview and those with Brian, Ann and Andrew myself but all the others were transcribed by a professional transcriber. I listened to all the interviews that I

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11 Throughout this thesis whenever the term department is used it is used to denote the government department responsible for education. Throughout the time period covered in this work it has been variously been named DES (Department for Education and Science 1964-1992, DfEE Department for Education 1992-1995, DfES Department for Education and Employment 1995-2001, DfES Department for Education and Science 2001-2007, DCSF Department for Children, Schools and Families 2007-2010, DfE Department for Education 2011-.
did not transcribe twice and went back to them to check and correct any errors in the
sections of transcriptions that were quoted directly.

3.11 Analysis of the interview transcripts

As with the analysis of the policy texts the transcripts were subjected to discourse analysis
loosely following the approach of Gee (1999) where a series of questions was asked of the
texts with particular attention given to the building of significance, identities and
connections (Gee, 1999, p 110-113). The questions suggested by Gee were used for the
analysis rather than those of Fairclough (2003) because having initially tried both sets of
questions I found Fairclough’s question more helpful in unpicking the policy documents
and Gee’s more useful to look at the interplay between identity and discourse. However, I
am not suggesting that a neat barrier exits between the two approaches and recognise that I
will have read both sets of data with both schema in my head. On a practical level the
analysis of the transcripts was done by reducing them to statements that were significant or
relevant and then rereading these to group them under a series of themes that were then
further sub-divided. The themes were directly related to the research questions given in
Chapter 1 but this time the focus was on the response of the senior leaders to the discourses
and a focus on their professional identity linked to the themes concerning the use of failure
as a policy strategy, managerialism and markets that emerged in the literature review in
Chapter 2. The themes that were identified were:

- Dominant discourses (subdivided into senior leader definition of good school,
description of own school, Department view of a good school, Department
description of own school, policy rationale, evidence of effectiveness of
strategies, use of labels)
- Identity (subdivided into personal priorities and values, obtaining a post in
another school, sense of agency, self-image)
- Models of change
- Implications of change
• Markets
• Managerialism

Having coded and then cut and pasted the statements into these categories the discarded sections of text were gone through to see if any could be attached under these themes. It was recognised that the categories were very loose and decisions sometimes arbitrary but it was a useful way of applying a structure to allow a vast quantity of data to be managed as well as facilitating some basic qualitative work such as how many times certain sentiments were expressed. The next step was to attach each of the statements to one of the four research questions which was a task made easier because of the earlier sort. When this was done a descriptive account was produced (Chapter 6) with illustrative quotes.

3.12 Methodological Issues

The methods employed in this study are similar to those used by Gewirtz (2002) investigating the notion of the managerial school which in turn has its origins in an earlier study of the effect of the market place on school choice (Gewirtz et al., 1995). A similar approach was used by Ball (1990, 1994) in looking at the process of education policy making and the impact that this has on the type of education that is delivered. The choice of methods was also influenced by the work of Court (2004) who was investigating the evolution of co-principalships in New Zealand:

During the early stages of my fieldwork I had become much clearer that, alongside producing case narratives of the co-principalship initiatives, what I wanted to attempt in this study was a bridging analysis that could illuminate the shaping/reshaping of individuals by discourses by individuals, I decided (following Foucault) that this could be done most usefully through a bottom up analysis that began with the spoken and written language and practices produced in local sites (the co-principal schools). I then carried out a discourse analysis of texts produced in institutional/state sites (academic texts on educational leadership and the ‘official’ state policy and review documents). After this, I returned to a closer analysis of the ‘micro’ level research ‘texts’ (the case narratives into which I had incorporated extracts from the interview transcripts, field note observations and local school documents). (p 591)

Discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001, Gee, 1999) was used in this study because I understand the world as being discursively constructed (Wetherell et al., 2001) so that it is
discourse that creates ‘reality’ for individuals. This sense of reality will arise from what we do together in our interactions in forming a social world. ‘All life is just a patchwork of thoughts, objects, events, actions and interactions in Discourses’ (Gee, 1999, p 7).

A fundamental aspect of this construction process will be how people communicate with each other both in writing and orally. Discourse analysis is one way into looking at how the person, as individuals and groups piece together reality:

Discourse analysis addresses both ‘how’ and ‘what’ questions in relation to the construction of reality – how reality is constructed and the institutions, modes of representation and cultural/material discursive regimes which emerge as a result. (Wetherell et al, 2001, p 393)

Throughout this work I see discourse as operating in two broad forms taking the definition from Gee (1999): ‘When ‘little d discourse (language-in-use) is melded integrally with non-language ‘stuff’ to enact specific identities and activities then I say that ‘big D’ Discourses are involved’ (p 7).

In using my data to think about the way in which teachers make sense of themselves and their roles from an understanding of reality as a construction within Discourse it cannot be my aim to produce an objective truth but rather to construct my own ‘story’ founded on my own beliefs, values, background and experience. If I accept this as being the case then I see reflexivity as central to the ‘story’ I relate. If I take my work to be a discursive construction of discursive constructions (Wetherell et al, 2001) then I believe that it is through reflexivity that my work has some purpose and validity in offering an interpretation that is transparent about its status and encourage debate about what are taken in education as a set of ‘truths’.

By looking at policy documents and the evidence base purported to underpin these I would hope to make explicit the discourses that dominate education, problematise these, seek examples of how they manifest themselves in the lives of individual teachers and investigate different approaches to improving schools based on a different set of values and embedded in a different view of the reality in which they exist. As indicated earlier my
intended approach has similarities with the work of Court (2001) who works with the interaction between ‘micro’ level texts (in my case the transcribed interviews) and ‘macro’ level texts (in my case policy and research literature). In her work Court adopts an openly reflexive approach, which provides a structure within which her work can be interpreted:

The case narratives cannot be read, however, as ‘true’ histories of ‘what happened.’ Not only are they constructions by the participants; they have been shaped also through the medium of this researcher’s eyes and ears, mind and heart, ‘washed’ through my subjectivity and coloured by my own interests and understandings. (Court, 2001, p 8)

Part of my own subjectivity is that I would like to open a debate about the values inherent in the current culture of performativity, and the impact that ignoring, not only these values but also the context within which schools are operating. Amidst the rhetoric of performativity, effectiveness and improvement I think that we have lost sight of our purpose and in doing so have perhaps disengaged a certain group of teachers. Somewhere I feel that we have lost sight of what we are trying to create by focusing on what it is that we can measure.

The work of Bourdieu has been used to provide the conceptual framework for this study as his ‘tool kit offers a particular way of theorizing the rules, narratives and self-held truths of social phenomena and of educational policy as a specific object of analysis (Thomson, 2005, p 741). It is particularly useful in this study because of the insights that it offers into the interaction between an individual and the field in which they exist:

One of the central themes which unifies Bourdieu’s work is the attempt to understand the relationship between ‘subjectivity’ – individual social being as it is experienced and lived, from the personal inside out, so to speak – and the ‘objective’ social world within which it is framed and towards the production and reproduction of which it contributes. (Jenkins, 1992, p 25)

3.13 Reflexivity

My position in the research is a central theme and as mentioned earlier I take that position to be as much subject as it is researcher. I first started to consider the impact of discourses on teachers in schools serving socially deprived areas soon after taking up my headship
around ten years ago. It is often said that teachers in schools with many challenges adopt a ‘siege mentality’ which prevents not only the capacity to think strategically but also allow time for reflection, as day to day issues dominate. However, in moments of reflection I began to think about my status and relationship with colleagues who were headteachers of other schools. This made me consider what role I acted out as I went about my job and whether this was affected by the perception of the school I managed. A major driving force behind embarking on this study was a desire to better understand my own professional practice and the field within which I was situated.

Reflexivity was central to the work of Bourdieu and he argued that only ‘subjecting the practice of the researcher to the same critical and sceptical eye as the practice of the researched is it possible to aspire to conduct properly objective and ‘scientific’ research’ (Jenkins, 1992, p 61). Bourdieu (2000) describes what it means to work reflexively:

To practise reflexivity means questioning the privilege of a knowing ‘subject’ arbitrarily excluded from the effort of objectification. It means endeavouring to account for the empirical ‘subject’ of scientific practice in terms of the objectivity constructed by the scientific ‘subject’ – in particular by situating him at a determinate point in social space-time – and so acquiring a more acute awareness and a greater mastery of the constraints that can be exerted on the scientific ‘subject’ through the links that bind him to the empirical subject, his interests, drives and presuppositions, and which he must break in order to constitute himself. How can one fail to recognise that the ‘choices’ of the ‘free’ and ‘disinterested’ subject glorified by tradition are never totally independent of the mechanics of the fields and therefore of the history of which it is the outcome and which remains embedded in its structures and, through them, in the cognitive structures, principles of vision and division, concepts, theories and methods applied, which are never totally independent of the position he occupies within the field and the associated interests? (p 119)

In this study I have recognised my position as both researcher and researched and that the study is located within a constructivist paradigm. The methods used and the form the analysis took has been described in a way that was intended to be transparent. Extensive quotes have been used to give a voice to the educational professionals who were interviewed so that readers can apply their own interpretations and question mine.
In thinking about subjectivity Heshusius (1994) recognises that once objectivity is no longer seen as possible researchers then become anxious about how their subjectivity is rigorously managed. She then argues that both these stances take the knower as separate from the known:

This common starting ground anchors both approaches in an alienated mode of consciousness which sees the knower separate from the known. (p 15)

Heshusius then goes on to offer ‘participatory consciousness’ as an alternative to subjectivity that removes the boundaries that we perceive between self and others. This is an approach I tried to adopt in the interviews in an attempt to avoid replacing the recognition of a lack of objectivity with a rigid approach to subjectivity that might constitute a form of alternative almost scientific objectivity. By approaching reflexivity in this way I might avoid how Pels (2000) interprets Foucault as seeing the danger of attempts at reflexivity:

Reflexivity often parades in a show of confessional virtues, such as the courage of ‘opening up’, the candour of ‘telling where you come from’, the correctness of ‘taking responsibility for your roots’ and the consistency of ‘not making an exception out of yourself’. (p 1)

In trying to be pragmatic about managing reflexivity in a way which not only puts it at the centre of the work I am doing but, also seeing it as representing an important aspect of validity I have tried to consider it at all the stages as suggested by Peshkin (1988):

Beginning with the premise that subjectivity is inevitable, this paper argues that researchers should systematically seek out their subjectivity, not retrospectively when the data have been collected and the analysis is complete, but while the research is actively in progress. (p 17)

Whilst being keen to avoid the pitfalls described by Pels possibly by adopting an approach based on Heshusius I think that my personal journey is one thread of the work which needs to be thought through carefully.
3.14 Validity

Working within a qualitative framework raises some issues that quantitative research deals with by criteria such as reliability, reproducibility and replicability. The issue of validity needs to be thought about in terms of the truths that the study is trying to generate. This means that the validity is very much tied up with the methodological approach adopted. Talija (1999) describes the starting point of discourse analysis as follows:

The starting point of discourse analysis is that meanings, values and ethical principles are not individual creations, but activities that people create together in communication and social action. (p 12)

This view is linked to the notion of dialogism and in thinking about validity the interview transcripts are scrutinised not only for the content or meaning but also for how different versions of reality are constructed and as such are ‘specimens of interpretative practice’ (Talija, 1999). As such validity comes from the consistency of the way in which the interpretations are made. This also has implications for factors such as sample size with even a single interview being sufficient to make interpretations. It is also possible that what is being looked for is contradictory or transitory. For this reason it might be argued that even the use of a word like validity is not appropriate in the context of an interpretative study and that it might be preferable think about questions such as does the work increase understanding (Guba and Lincoln, 1982)? If in an interpretive study it is recognized that the process of research is in itself an act of social construction, of which the researcher is just as integral a part as the researched, then it is clear that the methodology along with the epistemological and ontological beliefs that lie beneath it must be transparent. In this study I make no claim to be revealing ‘truths’ but rather acknowledge the complexity of the situation that is being investigated and make a contribution to knowledge through increasing understanding rather than making such claims. In taking this stance I have adopted the approach of being open in terms of describing the context; my own position within the research; my epistemological stance, my methodology and the forms of analysis
used. I have extensively used quotes from the educational professionals interviewed in order to ensure that their voice can be heard alongside my commentary and analysis. This openness should allow any reader to come to their own decision about the validity of any interpretations made and indeed form their own (re)interpretations.

3.15 Broader ethical Issues

In considering the ethical issues involved in this work there are a number of dimensions to consider. These are neatly summarised by Silverman (1993):

> Why are we researching this topic? Do we want to help and, at the very least protect the people we study? Or are we simply using them as research fodder? (p 315)

These issues are very much intertwined. I embarked on this study in the belief that the discourses of performativity, improvement and effectiveness were having a detrimental effect, not only on the emotional welfare of a particular group of staff but also on the career prospects of these staff. I recognise that this could be seen as paternalistic and indeed that my study may not provide any evidence to support my perceptions. I would justify carrying out the work not only to challenge what I see as the damage done to a particular group of teachers, students and schools but also because I consider that by better understanding the experience of individual teachers it might be possible to evolve new approaches to developing or ‘improving schools’. There is a clear link to the methodology as my motivation is very closely linked to the reflexive facet of my work.

All the educational professionals interviewed were invited to participate and fully advised both prior to agreeing to take part (with a letter of which there is a copy in Appendix 2) and at the start of the interview about how the process would work. This included the fact that whilst individuals and schools would be anonymous the study was taking place in a small unique context and others might be able to speculate about individual and school identities.
All participants were comfortable with having the interviews recorded and informed that they could request any comments that they were concerned about be deleted. It was also explained that once transcribed I would retain the right to use the transcripts in producing material in relation to the study and they were offered the chance to have copies of any such materials.

At the start of each interview each participant was told that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without needing to give any reasons.

It is difficult to envisage any way in which participants might be damaged other than by embarrassment if quotes were directly attributed to them. I have decided to anonymise the participants but it is inevitable that within a small geographical area it is likely that the individuals could be identified by their profiles or responses or even by the informed guessing of people who know them.

This study fully complies with both the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2011) and the University of Manchester’s Code of Good Research Practice (University of Manchester, 2011).
Chapter 4 – The National Challenge

4.1 Introduction

Chapter two looked at the way in which, as a consequence of educational policy over the last thirty years, some schools have come to be constructed as successful and others as failing. These policies define the purpose of education as to support the economic welfare of the country by producing a workforce that is equipped to compete in a global economy. A further result of these policies has been to define success outcome measures in terms of obtaining what are regarded as ‘good qualifications.’ Central to these policies are the notions of education as a market place, performativity and managerialism (Ball, 2007). It has been argued by Gunter et al (2010) that recent policy in education, particularly in relation to improving schools, has been closely associated with, and guided by, carefully chosen research manipulated by influential individuals. ‘New Labour policies are directly linked to selected school improvement and effectiveness research that has been recombined through the actions of policy entrepreneurs’ (Gunter et al, 2010, p 174).

This chapter will build on the arguments presented in chapter two that post-welfarist education policy has constructed some schools as failing; that these schools are largely located in areas of economic hardship and that failure is based on the inability to reach externally determined attainment targets. This will be done by examining the National Challenge (DCSF, 2008a and b) as a policy strategy for dealing with perceived educational‘failure.’ I intend to do this by offering an analysis of some key National Challenge documentation. Specifically I will examine policy ideas about failure and the strategies for the solution by focusing primarily on a letter sent by Ed Balls the then Secretary of State for Education introducing the National Challenge to headteachers (Balls, 2008a) and the associated guidance sent out to schools (DCSF, 2008a and b). The full text of the letter is provided in Appendix 1 of this thesis. These documents are important for two reasons. Firstly, because they represent the policy approaches to improving schools in
areas of economic hardship that were being used at the time that the interviews were carried out. Secondly, the National Challenge is a particular embodiment of policies and discourses relating to school improvement in areas of economic hardship that have evolved with successive governments over the last three decades and are continuing with the current coalition government. Since its formation the coalition government have clearly linked failure to the inability of a school to reach an attainment benchmark (that is increasing each year), regardless of the school’s context. It has been made clear that the price of failure is for the school to undergo conversion to an academy. As referred to in Chapter 2 the OFSTED category of satisfactory has been replaced by requiring improvement which overnight dramatically increases the number of schools which could be described as failing to provide an adequate standard of education for its students.

The National Challenge strategy will then be conceptualised using Bourdieu’s thinking tools to see how codification (Bourdieu, 1990) gives rise to a doxa (Bourdieu, 1998) of misrecognition (Bourdieu, 2000). In Chapter 8 this analysis will then be connected to the analysis of the interview transcripts to provide some insight into how this ‘doxa of misrecognition’ (Thomson, 2005, p 741) impacts on the professional identity and practice of senior leaders in schools in areas of economic hardship.

4.2 The background to the National Challenge

The National Challenge was announced in the 2008 budget when £200 million was allocated to support those schools in which less than 30% of students obtain five or more GCSEs at C grade and above. The government then provided an additional £200 million of existing resources to increase the level of support (DCSF, 2008a). The scheme was to run over a three year period to terminate with the publication of examination results in 2011. Each school in the challenge was allocated a National Challenge Adviser who replaced the
existing School Improvement Partner. A key aspect of the role of the National Challenge Adviser was to work with the school, the local authority and the department to produce an individual action plan. Each of the schools was described by a level of risk with high risk schools deemed to require the most support. The risk of ‘failing’ the challenge was of structural change such as conversion to an academy or being placed in a National Challenge Trust (DCSF, 2008) and even though it was recognised than many of the 638 schools faced significant difficulties it was felt that with cooperation between schools and effective leadership and advice these difficulties could be overcome. (DCSF, 2008a):

By 2011 we expect every school will be above the threshold of at least five or more good GCSEs including English and mathematics. If there are schools still stuck below the target, our expectation is that they will close or be replaced by an academy or National Challenge Trust. National Challenge schools and their pupils often face significant barriers to learning, both inside and out of the classroom. These must be overcome by excellent co-operation between schools and wider children’s services, working seamlessly together. Local authorities, working through Children’s Trusts, will play a key leadership role in this process. (p 1)

The implications of ‘failure’ were a personal threat to senior school leaders, particularly the headteacher, in that they faced removal from their post or at least the possibility of being accountable to another headteacher for their work.

With the Labour government led by Gordon Brown losing the general election in 2010 the National Challenge ended with Michael Gove as Secretary of State for Education in the Conservative – Liberal Democrat government holding responsibility. The Academies Program was accelerated under Gove but National Challenge was given no profile. Having searched the literature and as an Associate Headteacher in a National Challenge school I am not aware of any action being taken with National Challenge schools that did not reach the 30% 5 A*- C grades including English and maths benchmark by the 2011 deadline, nor can I find any documents relating to its ending.

12 School Improvement Partners were introduced by the DCSF under the New Labour government in 2005. Every school from 2008 had a SIP who appointed by the Local Authority to both challenge and support the school in delivering school improvement. SIPs were abolished in the 2011 Education Act.
A literature search and internet trawl did not reveal much prior notification of the launch of National Challenge. This would explain the surprise caused to headteachers across the country when it was launched, particularly to those schools who found themselves ‘named and shamed’ (Brighouse, 2008) having recently received good OFSTED inspections.

The first clear indication that National Challenge was to be introduced was in Alistair Darling’s budget speech in 2008, which in a few sentences links educational standards with economic success in a global economy, links underperformance with non-contextualised low attainment, reiterates school improvement rhetoric and underlines the ‘tough’ stance that will be taken if schools fail to meet their improvement targets:

If we are to compete in the future it is essential to do even more to drive up standards in education and to improve skills. Increased spending on education has benefited children across the UK. We have cut the number of underperforming schools dramatically in the last decade. And building on last year’s Spending Review we will, we will raise standards even further. To create greater opportunity for all children. And so the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families will be investing £200m to bring forward by a year to 2011 the Government’s aim for no school to have fewer than 30 per cent of its pupils achieving 5 A*-C GCSEs, including English and Maths. We will extend the successful London Challenge model, enable the best head teachers to turn round low performing schools, create new trusts and federations around successful schools, and in areas of greatest need drive forward a faster expansion of our Academies programme. And as a result, by 2011, we will ensure that every school is an improving school meeting the standards we have set. (Darling, 2008, unpaged)

The National Challenge had its methodological origins in The London Challenge (DES, 2003) which has been identified by OFSTED (2010) as leading to schools improving rapidly and faster than was the case outside of the London area:

Improvements in London schools, especially those in the most challenging circumstances, are outpacing those found nationally; clearly the investment provided by London Challenge is strongly associated with these improvements. (OFSTED, 2010, p 8)
The claims made for the success of the London Challenge meant that a very similar approach was used in the National Challenge strategy and in the Greater Manchester and Black Country Challenges which were also launched in 2008 (Hutchings et al., 2012).

4.3 What messages are given about the purpose of education?

In the opening sentence of his letter to head teachers Balls (2008a) makes two assumptions. Firstly, that he knows his ambition that all students secure good qualifications is shared with headteachers. Secondly, that there is a link between good qualifications and success in life and that one is likely to lead to the other. What is meant by ‘good qualifications’ is not defined in the letter but according to the National Challenge documentation the success criteria relate to the percentage of students obtaining five or more GCSE grades at C or above including English and maths (DCSF, 2008a). So in this one opening sentence Balls assumes/knows that all school leaders see success in terms of C grades and above at GCSE and that those students who achieve these grades will then go on to be successful in life.

In making the link between so called ‘good qualifications’ and improved life chances Ed Balls is then starting to define the purpose of schooling and the success criteria that are to be met in order to be a ‘good school’. So education is about obtaining high grades at GCSE and a ‘good’ school is one from which a high percentage of students leave with at least five high grades at GCSE. The need for ‘good qualifications’ has its origins in the belief held, not only by New Labour, but by the Conservative government that preceded it, that this is the only appropriate response to globalisation which requires us to compete in a global market. Over a period of time ‘...education is regarded less for its intrinsic value and more as an instrument for shaping the economy, ..’ (Docking, 2000, p 3). There has also been a persistent concern expressed that standards are low in the United Kingdom in comparison with the rest of the developed world. The National Challenge documentation makes use of the analysis provided in the 2006 Leitch report which was commissioned by the Labour
government in 2006 to look at the way in which adult skills in the UK equip the country to be prosperous in a global economy:

The UK’s challenge is to drive greater increases in prosperity as the global economy changes fundamentally. Emerging economies, such as India and China, are growing dramatically. In 2005 economic growth in China exceeded 10 per cent. By 2015, China is likely to have the third largest economy in the world. Technology is rapidly breaking down the barriers between what can and cannot be traded. All work that can be ‘digitised’, automated, and outsourced can increasingly be done by the most effective individuals or enterprises, wherever they are located. (Leitch, 2006, p 7)

The report praises the higher education system but is explicit in its criticism of failings within the education system whilst recognising ‘..... an increasingly effective school system; and a strong record of improvement over the past decade’ (p 1).

We also have very considerable weaknesses. Today, more than one third of adults do not hold the equivalent of a basic school-leaving qualification. Almost one half of adults (17 million) have difficulty with numbers and one seventh (5 million) are not functionally literate. This is worse than our principal comparators. (p 1)

This concern about standards being lower in this country than elsewhere in the developed world initially focused on the supposed failings of the comprehensive system. In his memoirs Kenneth Baker (1993) reflects on ‘...the genesis of my Education Reform Bill...’ (p 164) and states the following:

I had been amazed that Britain had decided to abandon the structure of its education system in this way, and as each year passed it became clearer that the high hopes of the comprehensive movement had not been fulfilled. We began to make comparisons with other countries, particularly Germany and France. In West Germany, nine out of ten sixteen-year olds got a Hauptschule certificate covering Maths, German, a foreign language and two other subjects. The equivalent in England was the Certificate of Secondary Education Grade 4, and only four out of ten English school leavers achieved this standard. (p 165)

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13 It is of note, that twenty two years later Michael Gove as Secretary of State for Education in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government formed after the 2010 general election introduced an English Baccalaureate so that students will study maths English, science, a language and a humanity subject.
With the New Labour government the supposed link between our economic failings as a country and the failure of the education system was laid out in *Excellence in Schools*:

These problems have deep and historic roots. We failed to lay the foundations of a mass education system at the end of the 19th century as our competitors – France, Germany and the USA – were doing. They recognised that a strategy for national prosperity depended on well-developed primary and secondary education for all pupils, combined with effective systems of vocational training and extensive higher education. By contrast, mass education was neglected, and governments were content to rely on private schools to provide the elite entry to universities and the professions. (DFEE, 1997, p 10)

In the same document there are views expressed about low standards of attainment and how standards to not compare well with other countries:

- over half of our 16 year-olds do not achieve five or more higher grade GCSEs, two-thirds of them do not achieve a grade C in maths and English, and 1 in 12 achieves no GCSEs at all; and
- international comparisons support the view that our pupils are not achieving their potential. For example, our 9 and 13 year-olds were well down the rankings in the maths tests in the Third International Maths and Science Survey, the most recent international study. (DFEE, 1997, p 10)

The linking of high student attainment to success in a global economy and the claim that Britain is failing to improve its schools at the same rate as its competitors carries on after the election defeat of new Labour in 2010 with Michael Gove in the Foreward to *The Importance of Teaching* (DFE, 2010) claiming that schools have become proficient at meeting government targets at the expense of doing what they think is in the best interest of their children:

As a result, our school system performs well below its potential and can improve significantly. Many other countries in the world are improving their schools faster than we are. Many other countries have much smaller gaps than we do. The very best performing education systems show us there need be no contradiction between a rigorous focus on high standards and a determination to narrow attainment gaps between pupils from different parts of society; between a rigorous and stretching curriculum and high participation in education; or between autonomous teachers and schools and high levels of accountability. (DfE, 2010, p 4)
It is clear that the National Challenge, as with policies implemented by different
governments over the last thirty years defines the purpose of education as being to raise
attainment to produce a workforce able to compete with other developed and developing
economies.

4.4 What constitutes success and failure in defining schools?
The National Challenge strategy is premised on the notion that it is a primary function of
secondary schools that ‘every young person will gain the skills for adult life and further
study’ (DCSF, 2008a, p 2). These aims, however, become translated into outcomes
measures so that not to be labelled a National Challenge school, a school must ensure that
no less than 30% of students should obtain five or more higher grades at GCSE including
English and maths (DCSF, 2008a). This then constructs a definition of a failing school as
one that falls below this benchmark. However, National Challenge does not define success
because it is clear that if a school exceeds the benchmark it is not necessarily successful.
So for example a school in which over 70% of students obtain five or more high GCSE
grades including English and maths might not be successful if over 90% of its students
actually had the capability to achieve this benchmark. The implications of this benchmark
are particularly harsh, for example in a school where only 20% of students are assessed as
capable of reaching it even if they make progress in line with the top quartile of students
nationally. Even if the school achieves 20%, indicating that its students have made good
progress due to what the school has done with them, the school would still have failed to
reach the National Challenge benchmark and hence be liable to closure or at best the
imposition of external support. This support could easily come from a head teacher whose
own school has not necessarily made a comparable level of progress but might have higher
levels of attainment.

The lack of an evidence based rationale for the benchmark also accounts for the
contradiction whereby a school can emerge from an OFSTED inspection graded as good
only to find that it has been identified as a National Challenge school (Riddell, 2008). A specific example of this was Waverley School in Birmingham which became the first National Challenge school to be rated as outstanding by OFSTED. This caused staff to question the impact of the National Challenge. ‘Teachers at the Birmingham school say their situation illustrates the paradox of the programme, which has so often led to schools being branded as failing’ (Maddern, 2010, unpaged). The National Challenge led to a significant number of schools in areas of economic hardship having a label of failing. The consequence of this could be extremely damaging, potentially leading to loss in parent confidence and the loss of the more motivated and able students. There is a clear expectation that the National Challenge will lead to success which is part of the improvement discourse within which there are expectations of a year on year rise in attainment. In the final sentence of his letter, Balls states ‘I wish you and your staff every success in the coming year and look forward to celebrating your achievement’ (2008a). For a head teacher in an area of economic hardship (as in any other school in any area) the predicted attainment of year group cohorts based on prior attainment and cognitive ability tests is unlikely to show a consistently upward trend. There is no reason why successive year groups should be more able. It is more likely, particularly in a large school that is not subject to great changes in intake, to remain around the same but there is no reason why it could not go down. So success based on actual student progress for a headteacher with one year group might represent a lower overall attainment figure. However, under National Challenge this could represent failure and that the ‘school will need radical change’ (Balls, 2008a, p 2). So the success, being celebrated by a headteacher might be interpreted very differently by Ed Balls. The possible impact of this paradox on school leaders will be explored in Chapter 7.

In summary, the definition of success for a school under National Challenge is clearly expressed by Balls within the National Challenge documentation. As stated earlier
National Challenge defines success and failure for schools with low attaining students but the same definition of success or failure cannot be applied to schools with more able cohorts of students. The fact that most schools with lower average levels of ability are located within areas of economic hardship would seem to imply a different level of challenge for teachers and school leaders in these areas.

The National Challenge and its associated documentation was selected for analysis in order to illustrate how certain discourses dominate approaches to improving schools. In a speech to the National College, Michael Gove (Secretary of State for Education in 2011c) neatly summarises a number of the current discourses relating to raising standards in schools.

Early on in the speech he pays tribute to some of those individuals who he regards as having had a significant impact on education policy:

Thanks to the pioneering work of thinkers such as Michael Fullan, Michael Barber and Fenton Wheelan,¹⁴ and the data gathered by the OECD through its regular survey of educational performance, we can identify the common features of high performing systems. (Gove 2011c, unpaged)

These three individuals and their work have been highly regarded by policy makers other than Gove within recent governments. The work of Barber has been described by Thrupp (2003) as ‘The best example of overt apologism in the school improvement area .....’ (p 99). Overt apologists are those that Thrupp regards as producing texts that locate themselves within post-welfarist reforms but assume a stance which is ‘.... uncritically supportive and barely acknowledges the social justice concerns associated with it’ (p 60).

Thrupp (2003) summarises Barber’s work in the following way: ‘Barber’s work both refutes the social limits of reform and uses school improvement arguments in support of managerial and performative policies (p 99).

¹⁴ Michael Fullan is Professor Emeritus of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto and Special Advisor to the Premier and Minister of Education in Ontario. Michael Barber is Head of McKinsey’s Global Education Practice and former Education Advisor to the government of Tony Blair. Fenton Wheelan works with governments around the world on school improvement.
Thrupp (2003) says that Fullan’s work (which is extensive) ‘.... extends and legitimates the neo-liberal restructuring of education globally’ (p 206). Whelan is a writer on school improvement and post-welfarist reform whose work is endorsed by Fullan and Barber as illustrated by their writing the foreward to his book *Lessons Learned: How good policies produce better schools* (Whelan, 2009).

Gove (2011c) goes on to justify the use of non-contextual benchmarks, emphasise the tough stance of governments, justifying high targets as a policy strategy by linking to international competitors and introduce the notion of schools making ‘superb progress’ without defining it. He also goes on to make a rhetorical statement about the challenge faced by certain schools and breaking the link between poverty and future life opportunities:

> So if we are to aspire to a world class education system then we need to raise our sights beyond 35 per cent. And in doing so we cannot allow ourselves to have lower expectations for more disadvantaged parts of the country. Of course I accept that schools in such communities face harder challenges but I also know that these challenges can be met. Deprivation need not be destiny. (Gove 2011b, unpaged)

In my reading and literature searches I have been unable to find any rationale or explanation as to the origins of the 30% figure of the National Challenge or the 35% and increasing figure of the Conservative- Liberal Democrat Coalition.

### 4.5 What particular model of school improvement is offered?

This section will look at what references are made to school improvement strategies and the underlying messages that these give out.

In his letter to head teachers, Balls (2008a) makes reference to a number of school improvement strategies. Firstly he indicates that the quality of leadership and high aspirations are significant factors: ‘... that many National Challenge schools are, with great
leadership and high aspirations, improving fast, and are not only on track to reach the benchmark but also to go far beyond it’ (p 1).

If these schools are improving fast it is not clear why they are on the National Challenge list and running the risk of being labelled as ‘failing’ schools. The evidence for great leadership and high expectations being significant factors in these improving schools is not given in any of the documentation so appears to be assumed. It is not explained anywhere in the text what many corresponds to or if it is the case that great leadership and high aspirations do not exist in the schools that are not improving fast. If this is read by parents and governors it could influence their perception of the leadership of a National Challenge school. It could also lead to a particular message being internalised by senior leaders themselves in both National Challenge and none National Challenge schools. Based on the evidence that is in the documentation linked to the letter it would appear that improvement relates to rapidly increasing the percentage of higher GCSE grades but there is no indication of what is meant by rapidly. This statement makes no attempt to analyse all the many other factors that would influence the attainment of schools or the context in which they exist. The apparently crucial role of leadership in improving schools is rooted in school effectiveness and school improvement literature and discourse:

However, it is well-known that school leadership plays an unprecedented role in determining a school’s success and there is a very strong belief in the ability of leaders to promote and generate school improvement. This is reinforced in the research literature, which consistently emphasizes the powerful relationship between leadership and school development. (Harris et al., 2006, p121)

What is not clear is the relationship between quality of leadership and a failure to improve. However, it is the case that the removal of the headteacher from a school and the appointment of a replacement is often ‘... seen as a key reason for their subsequent improvement,’ (Stoll and Myers, 1998, p 8). Stoll and Myers (1998) point out that support from the Local Authority is another key characteristic of schools overcoming difficulty and
reflect on whether if the original headteacher had been given support earlier they might have remained in post. Whilst it seems likely that poor leadership will not result in improvement in schools, particularly those in areas of economic hardship, it is also possible that good leadership will not always be enough to overcome the myriad of challenges that some schools face. It would also seem difficult to assume that if success is measured in terms of students obtaining a certain percentage of high GCSE grades good leadership would be required to be successful in schools with a disproportionate percentage of very able students. If there is an assumed simple correlation between effective leadership and school improvement then it will impact on all leaders in schools that are struggling to improve raw attainment figures. Leithwood et al. (2006a) carried out a literature review on the impact of leadership and came up with what they describe ‘as strong claims’ about successful school leadership’ (p 3). This challenges the notion that it is the quality of leadership which is the single most important determinant of the success of a school. Leithwood et al (2006a) formulate seven claims, the first of which is that ‘School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning’ (p 3). They go on to claim that leadership can make a 5 to 7% difference in student learning and achievement classroom factors can make over 33% difference. There is a complex relationship between what goes on in classrooms and leadership but these findings are at odds with statements within the National Challenge documentation.

Balls’ assertion of the impact of leadership is not without challenge elsewhere. Barker (2010) regards this as one of five illusionary propositions perpetuated by governments since 1988:

The leadership illusion is attractive because it seems to confirm the common sense belief that heads and principals make a crucial difference to the quality of school life. Whether this is true or not, no link has been established between leadership behaviour and student performance, as measured by tests and examinations. (Barker, 2010, p 10)
The second school improvement proposal is the appointment of National Challenge Advisers. These are school leaders, it is claimed, ‘...who will bring their experience of leading and supporting schools in challenging circumstances to ensure you get the support you need to help your school improve’ (Balls, 2008a, p 1). In the Foreward to The London Challenge (DES, 2003) Charles Clarke, the then Secretary of State for Education contrasts ‘world class universities’ (p 4) with the failings of parts of the secondary education system:

But there are still far too many schools which are failing to inspire and lead their communities and far too many areas where educational aspirations are low. Too many parents are anguished and fearful, rather than proud or confident, when choosing their child’s secondary school. And there are far too many who feel that either expensive private education or lengthy journeys across the city from home to school are the only satisfactory answer. (DES, 2003, p 4)

One of the strategies used in The London Challenge to ensure that schools overcame this failure to ‘inspire and lead their communities’ was the appointment of consultant leaders. These were described as ‘expert’ heads, who, it is claimed would be able to support other heads. Balls in promoting National Challenge, says that the National Challenge Advisers (these were modelled on the consultant leaders and in some cases could be the same individuals) will have experience of leading schools facing challenges which is not specified in The London Challenge. The National Challenge Advisers working in the cluster of schools in which this study was conducted do not have experience of challenging circumstances but rather of leading schools judged outstanding by OFSTED and located in much more affluent parts of the local authority. This sets up an interesting dynamic, which will be returned to in chapter eight, in which it is conceivable that a very experienced and potentially capable head is given support by a colleague who has no experience of working with the problems faced by those working in areas of economic hardship. The envisaged relationship between the National Challenge Adviser and the National Challenge head teacher is further illustrated in the National Challenge documentation:
In the lowest performing schools, this kind of external challenge and support is crucial to keeping the school on a secure improvement path, so we need the best and most talented people to work with schools below the floor target. (DCSF, 2008a, p 9)

The word ‘best’ is used repeatedly when the recruitment of, or the role of National Challenge Advisers is discussed. Nowhere is it defined. However, the message is clear that National Challenge Advisers are the ‘best’ and it is within them that the knowledge, skills and experience to bring about improvement are located. What advice is it possible to offer? This question is answered by the third approach to school improvement that is proffered. This is that the advisers will ‘be able to draw from a menu of tried and tested improvement strategies,’ ... (Balls, 2008a, p 1). The letter does not include what will be on this menu but this information can be gleaned by looking at the information provided in the accompanying documentation (DCSF, 2008a). The menu comprises a list strategies that are likely to already be in widespread use, but with National Challenge schools being given priority over other schools and the funding to buy in more. There is support, coaching and training for school leaders; additional support for teachers of core subjects; improving management systems; prioritising the deployment of Advanced Skills Teachers; study support; one-to-one tuition and support on behaviour and attendance. By using a combination of extra funding and these strategies the government want to make these schools attractive places to work:

We are committed to making schools below the floor target the best, most exciting and rewarding places for outstanding teachers, leaders and other staff to use and develop their skills and talents. National Challenge cannot succeed unless great people want to work in these schools, confident in the knowledge that they will be supported both locally and nationally. (DCSF, 2008a, p 12)

This statement might be regarded cynically by those working in these schools when all through the document the ‘best’ people will be coming in to advise, there is a policy of

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15 Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs) are a grade of teachers designed to reward the best classroom practitioners established under the 1997 White Paper (DfEE, 1997)
naming and shaming and the consequence of failing to reach arbitrary targets potentially is closure.

The fourth approach that Balls (2008a) refers to is that the school would undergo some structural change in the form of conversion to an academy or in becoming part of a trust and be linked to ‘strong schools’ (p 2).

In some cases, schools will need radical change. Some are already entering into innovative partnership arrangements, and others are moving to Academy status. (Balls, 2008a, p 2)

It is an assumption that these structural arrangements will lead to improvement, certainly this has to be the case for the ‘innovative partnership arrangements’ as clearly there is no evidence as these have not been in existence before. Academies encapsulate for Ball (2007) the aspects of competition within recent education policy along with the philosophical issues that competition raises:

The academies programme is a *condensate* of state competition policy with all its tensions and contradictions represented in a microcosm. (Ball, 2007, p 160)

Andrew Adonis, who Yandell (2009) describes as ‘the policy architect and chief propagandist of the academies programme,’ (p 129) in describing what he see as a Britain becoming ever more divided by social class ascribes the blame to the education system since the introduction of the comprehensive system:

Education, the meritocratic ideal and chronic inequality underpin class divisions in modern Britain. The three are closely interwoven. School segregation is the critical driving force: largely a reflection of birth (professional parents colonize the best schools, the inner-city poor the worst), it mints class divisions anew each generation. (Adonis and Pollard, 1997, p 19)

Yandell (2009) challenges the assertions of Adonis that the introduction of comprehensive schools has destroyed the excellence that existed within grammar schools without leading to a rise in standards across other schools and strengthened rather than reduced the link
between poverty and education. Yandell claims that, ‘a mass of accumulated evidence’ (p 129) is ignored in the claims that Adonis makes. This leads Yandell to conclude:

The New Labour programme is in essence, an ideological programme, based not on evidence but on *a priori* commitments. (p 129)

When they were established in 2000 there was a very clear link suggested between academies and areas of economic hardship:

The academies programme was established in 2000 to improve schools with persistent low achievement or schools situated in communities with little or no educational aspirations. Academies were also intended to become part of local strategies to increase choice and diversity in education, while continuing to be inclusive, mixed-ability schools. (NCSL, 2010, p 3)

Under New Labour the majority of academies were established, in many cases by the direct intervention of the Secretary of State for Education regardless of the views of the governing bodies, in economically disadvantaged areas with few other schools taking the opportunity to convert. The Conservative led government formed in 2010 has sought to accelerate the academies programme by providing financial incentives for ‘successful’ or ‘outstanding’ schools to convert as part of what has been seen as part of a shift in the white paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DFE, 2010), to reconfigure approaches to school improvement:

The white paper indicates the coalition government’s desire to move away from what it sees as a highly centralised strategy for improving schools. Examples of this centralised approach include centrally driven target setting, improvement initiatives, ring-fenced funds, targeted grants and national field forces. (NCSL, 2010, p 4)

What seems clear is that if a school, for whatever reason, is unable to reach an attainment benchmark it is liable to be forced to convert to an academy with the inevitable consequences for the leadership and other staff. Other schools, which are able to produce high levels of attainment regardless of the advantages they may hold due to the nature of
their intake, will be given incentives to convert. This approach very clearly positions the leadership teams as succeeding or failing without reference to context. It has been announced that academies and free schools\(^\text{16}\) will be able to select a proportion of their students on the basis of ability (Shepherd, 2011) and that ‘better’ schools will be allowed to expand. Michael Gove in a newspaper interview says that the latter is necessary to combat the failure of local authorities to reduce educational failure:

> I think it’s wrong to have a structure where the local authority says: ‘This is a good school, its full up, parents have to go to the less good school down the road’. Because as a result of the local authority’s failure to deal with educational underperformance, children continue to go to a poor school. (Gove, 2011a, unpaged)

The potential implications of these announcements could be very damaging to some schools with parents who have high aspirations seeking to get their children into already crowded schools. There is also the opportunity for schools to choose to take the more able students who are on free school meals therefore further reducing the capacity of other schools to raise attainment and thus maintain the vicious circle that some schools find themselves in.

An alternative structural change to conversion to an academy is to form some kind of formal collaboration such as a National Challenge Trust or a federation. It is stated that ‘These collaborations will transform standards through significant new investment and a lasting partnership with strong schools and ....’. In Fairclough’s (2003) terms it is a propositional assumption that these collaborations will transform standards as there is no evidence to base this on as they are a new concept. Also it is not defined what a strong school is and by inference the National Challenge school receiving the help is a weaker school though their circumstances and intakes might be very different.

\(^{16}\)Free Schools like Academies are funded directly by the Department for Education and were established in The Academies Act 2010. They can be set up and run by individuals, charities or religious groups.
In the next paragraph Balls acknowledges the adverse media coverage (Frean, 2010, Dunford, 2011) that National Challenge generated but does not take any responsibility for the way in which the launch was handled. What he does do is to say that, ‘....with great leadership and high aspirations, ....’ schools are ‘....improving fast, and are not only on track to reach the benchmark but also ready to go far beyond it.’ This has echoes of the school improvement rhetoric relating to how schools can be improved but also assumes that the benchmark itself (30% of students in a school obtaining 5+ A*-C grades including English and maths) is valid. There is no indication that other voices might have alternative views. It also ignores the fact that even in the period of time between the National Challenge being announced and the new set of examination results being published some schools had gone over this threshold. Nor does it discuss the anomaly that some schools had received good or outstanding judgements from OFSTED in the same academic year that they found themselves on the list of National Challenge schools apparently facing the threat of closure if they did not improve. If a raw percentage attainment is used as a success criterion it will clearly disadvantage those schools that have more students of lower ability which will be predominantly in areas facing economic hardship causing them to be labelled as ‘failing’. It will also result in schools moving in and out of the National Challenge criteria as the nature of their cohort change regardless of the impact of National Challenge or indeed any other strategies. This will be particularly true of schools whose predicted results based on CAT testing will be around the 30% figure. Again these are likely to be schools in less economically successful areas. It is also going to be the case that schools will start to adjust their curriculum and direct their efforts in a particular direction regardless of whether this meets the needs of their students as a whole. So for example it would make sense to focus on the teaching of maths and English and three other subjects at the expense of others. In much the same way it has been widely recognised that schools use certain vocational courses with certain groups of students in order to boost their average point score and thus their contextual value added score which until recently
was one of the key measures of performance to be published. This also raises the issue of what is meant by improvement and it could be argued that improving the overall percentage of GCSE grades in certain subjects is not necessarily providing an education that is more relevant or more appropriate for certain groups of students.

In the penultimate paragraph Balls uses the following sentence:

Finally, I would like to reaffirm that the National Challenge strategy is designed to help you achieve our shared ambition to ensure that all pupils are able to realise their potential, no matter how challenging the circumstances, and break the link between social deprivation and low educational attainment. (Balls, 2008a, p 2)

In this sentence it sounds as though he is trying to convince headteachers that they share a vision with him, that there is a common understanding of what realising potential is and how this would be measured and that it is possible to change the relationship between socioeconomic circumstance and attainment simply by altering or improving what schools do.

4.6 What is the relationship between government and schools and where do power, truth and knowledge lie?

The opening sentence in the letter clearly establishes where knowledge is claimed to lie. Balls (2008a), ‘knows’ that all head teachers share his ambitions, agree and understand what is meant by ‘good’ qualifications and ‘know’ that these will help children ‘succeed’ in life. He also knew what many head teachers felt about the media coverage of National Challenge perhaps not accurately reflecting what is happening in their schools but follows it up with sentences which imply that some of this criticism might be justified even if many National Challenge schools are improving rapidly. The ‘truth’ that this rapid improvement is due to great leadership is said to be seen in the improved examination results in the summer prior to National Challenge starting.
Further evidence that truth and knowledge are regarded as lying with Balls and DCSF is the provision of National Challenge Advisers who ‘will bring their experience of leading and supporting schools in challenging circumstances to assure you get the support you need to help your school.’ (Balls, 2008a, p1, my underlining). This seems rather paternalistic in that we know that you need in order to be helped and we know what the best form of help will be. The ultimate expression of where power lies is in the fact that if the DCSF decide that a school needs radical reform then it could be converted into an academy or forced into a collaboration regardless of the views of the leadership team, the governors or the Local Authority.

The tone and the style that the documentation take indicates very clearly that the DCSF know what schools need to do and that they know what is required to lead to improvement in individual schools. If a school does not meet the arbitrary targets of the DCSF they will simply be closed.

Headteachers in National Challenge schools were confronted with the notion that the ‘best’ people (DCSF, 2008a, p 9) will be National Challenge Advisers.

Balls then goes on to say he has visited ‘many’ schools and ‘see at first hand the work you are doing and the progress you are making’. He does not say how many schools he has visited and on brief visits it would not be possible to assess the impact of what is being done currently with the only way of judging progress being to look at the results of previous cohorts.

In this short letter Balls uses ‘you’, or ‘your’, twenty two times presumably in an attempt to ensure that head teachers feel part of the process but also to indicate where responsibility lies. He refers to himself as ‘I’ eleven times and never as ‘we’ or ‘us’ – the government, the DCSF. This sets up an interesting power relationship with, ‘I know that we share…’, ‘I launched the National Challenge, to boost ....’, ‘I am delighted...’ seeming to
indicate that knowledge and power rest within him and that schools, head teachers and their efforts will enjoy his approval if they meet his criteria for success. This might represent the fact that control of what happens in schools has become increasingly more centralised and policy more closely linked to individuals.

The letter contains assumptions some of which are of great significance in terms of the values that underlie them in addition to where they position truth and knowledge. The very first sentence sets the tone – ‘I know that we share the ambition to ensure that every pupil secures the good qualifications that will help them succeed in life’. Firstly, how does he know that head teachers share his ambition – has this ever been discussed with school leaders and if so which ones? Secondly it seems likely that although we might all like students to succeed in life it seems less likely that we would readily agree on what actually constitutes success.

The next sentence then builds on this supposed common sense of purpose by looking at the support that local authorities and government can provide in order to meet shared objectives. This support has not been negotiated or consulted on but rather ‘This is why – building on the success of the London Challenge – I launched the National Challenge, …..’. Again it is assumed that the London Challenge was a success and if this was the case it will be an approach that will work for all schools facing challenging circumstances. It is also assumed that this strategy will boost the efforts already made by schools regardless of what those might consist of in different schools. Funding of £400 million is to be provided but as a figure it has little meaning on an individual school level unless it is clear how this will be distributed, managed what type of spending will be allowed.

The National Challenge strategy gives no voice to teachers, the majority of headteachers, school governors, students, local authorities or researchers apart from those working within the fields of school improvement and effectiveness or those individuals and agencies promoting managerialism.
4.7 What particular messages are given out about those schools serving areas of economic hardship?

The letter sent out by Ed Balls (Balls, 2008a) recognises that schools are ‘sometimes in difficult circumstances.’ However, he goes on to imply that with his help National Challenge will be able to impact on the relationship between academic success and economic circumstances:

Finally, I would like to reaffirm that the National Challenge strategy is designed to help you to achieve our shared ambition to ensure that all pupils are able to realise their potential, no matter how challenging the circumstances, and break the link between social deprivation and low educational achievement. (DCSF, 2008a, p 2)

The reason for the confidence that Balls has that this link can be broken is that ‘We know from experience that success is possible even in the most challenging circumstances’ (DCSF, 2008a, p 1). This statement is firmly rooted in school effectiveness discourse (Mortimore, 1995) that claims that by identifying certain schools in socially disadvantaged areas judged to be succeeding lessons can be learnt that can then be applied in different situations. There appears to be a certain ambiguity in the thinking about what can be achieved in schools which is illustrated in the following extract:

Our first and most urgent commitment is to raise standards in schools with low attainment. This is vital if we are to meet our twin goals of raising standards across the school system; and to narrow attainment gaps, improve the life chances of children from deprived backgrounds and help to eradicate child poverty. We recognise that some of these schools have good rates of progress and high contextual value added (CVA), but are clear that young people need more than this – achieving good qualifications, including English and mathematics is central to improving their life chances and the prospect of progressing to further study and a successful career. (DCSF, 2008a, p 12)

This illustrates the position that schools in areas of economic hardship are in. Even if students make more than expected progress as measured by valued added, but still fail to get a C grade or above in English and maths it is not good enough and they will be seen as reducing the life chances of some children and perpetuating child poverty. An assumed
relationship is that between low attainment and underachievement. This is illustrated in a passage from one of the supporting booklets provided to schools in National Challenge:

There are currently 638 schools where achievement is below the threshold being set in the National Challenge. As Figure 1 shows they typically serve pupils who achieved less than average in primary school and are more likely to be from deprived backgrounds. The proportion of children identified as having special educational needs (SEN) is also above average, but none of these factors should be considered an excuse for underachievement. (DCSF, 2008a, p 3)

Student achievement is a combination, under the Ofsted framework of the attainment and the progress of students. In the passage about the 638 schools it is true, firstly, that these schools will contain a disproportionate number of students who leave primary school with low attainment based on whether or not they have achieved level 4 in English and maths or not (this is what Figure 1 shows). However, this would not reflect how much progress they made at primary school possibly from low starting points. Secondly, it will be true that the 638 schools will contain a disproportionately high number of students from deprived backgrounds. What is not made clear is whether the premise is that relative poverty leads to low attaining schools or that low attaining schools are a root cause of poverty. The third statement that these 638 schools will have above average numbers of students with SEN will also be true, but it is of interest, and it is not explained, why SEN as a degree of cognitive impairment should be more common in areas that are economically disadvantaged. The fourth statement is that SEN should not be an excuse for underachievement which again is true but only if underachievement is defined as failure to make expected progress based on starting point and cognitive ability. It is clearly nonsense if underachievement is related to attainment as the expectation must be that students with most types of SEN will not attain at the same level as students with greater ability. Figure 1 is based on attainment and not progress. So a picture is being painted of schools in economically deprived areas underachieving when there is no evidence that their students are failing to make comparable progress to schools in other areas. In a different graph it is
stated that there is significant variation in attainment in schools with challenging intakes. What is not said but can be seen from the same graph is that this is equally true in schools that have much higher attainment on entry. There is a statement on the same graph ‘Many schools achieve high standards at the end of KS4 despite low attainment on entry’ (DCSF, 2008a, p4). The chart shows that it could also be expressed that many schools achieve low standards at the end of KS4 despite high attainment on entry. This seems to perpetuate the discourse that underachievement is something that happens in low attaining schools ie., those schools predominantly located in areas of economic hardship. The links between poverty and low attainment are complex and I can find no complete explanation of why schools in areas of economic hardship should contain a disproportionate number of students of lower ability and have higher levels of SEN. It appears that National Challenge reinforces without evidencing the myth that underachievement resides in low attaining schools.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter the National Challenge strategy has been presented as a distillation of post-welfarist approaches to improving schools primarily located in areas of economic hardship. The analysis has been used to argue that the National Challenge strategy constructs many schools in areas of economic hardship as ‘failing’ because they are unable to reach an attainment based benchmark. The strategy takes no account of the context of the school and assumes that the expertise required to ensure improvement resides outside of the school. In addition to the appointment of externally appointed ‘experts’ the strategy represents the arguments of the school effectiveness research that by taking what is ‘known’ to work in a different context and then having the ‘right’ leader improvement is inevitable. The strategy links success and failure to attainment and not progress so constructs schools with low attainment as underachieving regardless of the progress that students have made. This in turn leads to a disproportionate number of schools in areas of
economic hardship been labelled as underachieving simply because they have less able students. The context within which these schools operate will also make academic success more difficult. The National Challenge strategy assumes academic success is the most important function of a school and that this assumption is shared and unchallenged. For the senior leaders in these schools the strategy lays blame for failure at their feet.

The National Challenge strategy can be seen as an example of codification in operation. ‘Codification makes things simple, clear, communicable; it makes possible a controlled consensus on meaning’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p 82). As Bourdieu (1990) states ‘it isn’t quite that simple’ (p 83) in the social world. In the case of schools it is apparently straightforward to rank schools in order of attainment so that the highest attaining are the best and the lowest schools are ‘failing’ and this is an easy message to convey. This gives the impression of logic only if a number of assumptions are made and other factors are ignored to avoid problematising this. So it is assumed that attainment is a good measure of the effectiveness of a school and not, for example, the progress made by students and that good qualifications are the desired outcome of schooling. It is necessary to ignore all the contextual factors that might impact on a school and its student population rendering this an unfair construction. Then it is possible to choose a benchmark for attainment and say that those schools failing to make this will be required to improve. Codification according to Bourdieu acts as a form of formalization. ‘Formalization is what enables you to confer on practices, above all practices of communication and cooperation, that constancy which ensures calculability and predictability over and above individual variations and temporal fluctuations’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p 83). Within the field of school improvement there is ‘a rationale for its existence and this explains the value of and legitimates the game’ (Thomson, 2005, p 746). This rationale held as a self-evident truth is described by Bourdieu as a doxa ‘a particular point of view, the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view’ (1998, p 57). So as doxa the
National Challenge links low attainment with underperformance, underperformance with schools in areas of economic hardship and underperformance with poor leadership. Thus if school underperformance (as measured by attainment) is to be rectified the leadership needs to be supported by the ‘best’ people who ‘know’ what is required and will be able to select from a menu of strategies that are ‘known’ to work or they need to be removed. As misrecognition (Bourdieu, 2000) making these links avoids investigating the relationship between poverty and educational standards and ultimately addressing social inequality. This is done by arguing that improving schools will provide students in economically disadvantaged areas with better qualifications allowing them to obtain well paid jobs and become more prosperous. Hence the problem is the schools and their leadership and not the political context in which they exist. However, this apparent logic also ignores that fact that raising the overall pass rates in English and maths will do nothing to adjust the original ranking of students so will do nothing to reduce the inequalities that exist due to the uneven distribution of different forms of capital.
Chapter 5 – The role of senior teachers in the post-welfarist era

5.1 Introduction

In their review of externally provided leadership development support within the public sector, Wallace et al (2009) observe that ‘the dominant metaphor framing coordination activity by senior staff has shifted from management to leadership’ (p 1). This transfer of emphasis has occurred in the political context that was outlined in Chapter 2. In this chapter I present the argument that education policy based on neoliberalist ideology and its associated functionalist strategies and knowledge claims has positioned school leaders as simply passive followers of a standard set of ‘recipes’ who will consistently deliver school improvement even in the most challenging of contexts as long as inspirational leadership is provided. Every aspect of their work needs to be measured against externally imposed standards which will be used to judge, ‘success,’ or ‘failure.’ If school improvement does not happen then it represents a failing on behalf of the leadership of the school and is independent of the context in which the school exists. I will also argue that educational reform underpinned by neoliberalist values could place some school leaders in a difficult position if their values and their beliefs about the purpose and the delivery of education are at odds with those of the policy makers and thus the policies they are required to enact. The beliefs about leadership that arise from neoliberalism and the current position of school leaders are scrutinised by reference to a number of texts that provide a socially critical view of the dominant discourses within education as well as using policy documents and the writing of those that Thrupp and Willmott (2003), describe as the ‘textual apologists’ (p 5). I will go on to look at how approaches to leading schools are controlled and standardised by centralised training and leadership preparation and how current school leaders position themselves in response to current policy and to what extent agency is allowed to operate. It will also be argued that there is little in the literature that relates to the work and professional identity of headteachers, even less about other senior leaders and correspondingly less that is set in the context of schools in areas of economic hardship.
many of which are constructed as ‘failing’ schools. What is published tends to be ‘heroic’
accounts of transformational change in newspapers or autobiographies and accounts in
newspapers of failure and resignation. Chapter 2 provided an overview of the political and
policy context over the last thirty years from which the National Challenge strategy has
evolved. Chapter 4 then analysed how this strategy positions senior teachers in schools in
areas of economic hardship. This chapter will provide an overview of how the role of
senior leaders in secondary schools has evolved over the same time period in order to
provide a context for analysing the professional identity and practice of the school leaders
interviewed in this study. Finally, the position of school leaders in schools in areas of
economic hardship will be described using aspects of Bourdieu’s field theory.

5.2 Researching senior leaders in failing secondary schools

In this study, school leaders were represented by headteachers, deputy headteachers and
assistant headteachers. I am very aware, from my reading of the literature, that there is an
overwhelming emphasis within this on the headteacher in terms of their professional
practice and impact. This emphasis on the role of the headteacher means that little research
has been carried out on the leadership roles of senior leaders other than headteachers, and
that little has been written about other senior leaders, particularly within secondary
schools. There is correspondingly even less written about senior leaders in schools in areas
of economic hardship. I hope to make a contribution to this area.

Nearly twenty years ago Wallace and Hall (1994) expressed surprise at how little study had
been done on the work of senior leaders other than headteachers during a period of reform
requiring more and more of leadership teams and a growing emphasis on teamwork:

Given the prevalence of SMTs in secondary schools for at least the last decade, and
the strong evidence of greater management workload for senior staff in all state
education institutions as a result of central government reforms, it is striking how
little work has been done on team approaches to management at senior or middle
management levels. (Wallace and Hall, 1994, p 194)
More than twenty years on the situation has little changed as Cain (2011) comments in her doctoral thesis ‘There is little current independent research evidence about how school leaders other than the Headteacher understand and talk about their development and I seek to make a contribution to this discourse’ (p 19). This lack of interest in leaders other than headteachers was highlighted by Thomas (2009):

Senior leadership teams seem to have slipped off the agenda in recent years. (p 4)
Given the prevalence of leadership teams across our schools, it seems remarkable that so little has been written about them. (p 6)

Cranston et al (2004) state the case for further study of the role of other members of the leadership team:

What has not been researched to any significant degree are other key players in administration or executive positions in schools, such as deputy principals (referred to in some education systems as assistant principals or deputy heads). (p 225)

Cranston (2007) also expresses surprise at the lack of interest in leadership team members despite the increased use of the phrases such as distributed leadership and the recognition of the importance of teams. According to Thomas (2009) much of what is written about leaders other than the headteacher is mostly related to distributed leadership and effective teamwork. Cardno (2002) says that with the strong focus on the leadership of the headteacher the potential of the rest of the leadership team is less likely to be fully realised. Whilst it might be ultimately the headteacher who is held to account it is highly likely that their individual impact will be in a state of equilibrium with other senior staff in each school and that this equilibrium will be different in each institution. Wallace and Hall (1994) conducted a very detailed study of the work of six management teams with a focus as how they operated as a team in the context of post-1988 Act education. In this study they commented on the potential conflict between the power vested in headteachers and
their personal beliefs about the value of teamwork and the rights of other senior teachers to contribute to school leadership.

Yet there lurks a booby prize for heads. Their legally enshrined power to operate unilaterally and direct colleagues is constrained by allegiance to beliefs and values about teamwork: all members have the right to participate in policy debate and the obligation to work towards consensus on important decisions. (Wallace and Hall, 1994, p 1)

Arrowsmith (2001) also illustrates this potential conflict between schools adopting approaches from the business world as part of the process of neoliberal reform and building a team of educational professionals all contributing to school development on the basis of trust and mutual respect by using the introduction of performance management as an example:

This issue – the managerialist underpinnings of the DfEE’s performance management model – will hit many schools where the management team is working well and in a spirit of friendship, mutual trust and interdependence. It will need yet another ‘trick’ for heads to bring a sense of purpose and worthwhile outcomes to planning, monitoring and review sessions with such close colleagues. The performance management approach perhaps works in some cultures outside teaching, but not in others. (Arrowsmith, 2001, p 37)

With the post-welfare reforms came the expectation that schools would behave as businesses and headteachers as managing directors which placed pressure on headteachers to behave in a particular way which might conflict with both how they carry out their role and what they regard as being the purpose of their role. Ball (1990) makes reference to headteachers in his work on the introduction and impact of the 1988 Education Reform Act but the focus is primarily on ‘key actors, participants in the policy process’ (p 2) and no senior leaders are interviewed. In his follow up book (Ball, 1994) does interview a number of senior teachers in the context of their role following the 1988 Act. Ball (1994) discusses the complex field in which they work and how their role is rooted in current educational discourses:
In all this the locus and meaning of school leadership seems to be blurred, to say the least. Rather than representing a new organizational paradigm, the ‘new headship’ is constructed by a set of powerful contradictions. And these contradictions are embedded in long-standing public and political discourses. Rather than offering a resolution or clarification, the current policies for school governance are a reorientation and obfuscation. They reorient the ‘economy of power’ within schools but misrepresent autonomy and authority. (p 100)

In Ball’s (1994) study the headteachers talk about the way that they have to make compromises between their educational values and what is wanted by parents in order to survive in the market. This has many parallels with my own study in that I am exploring how headteachers and senior leaders, particularly in areas of economic hardship position themselves not only to compete but also in order to survive and remain in post in the context of neoliberal educational reform. However, I am attempting to take this one stage further and look at how this conflict forges identity.

As described in the last chapter current and exemplified by the National Challenge documentation current educational policy places great emphasis on the importance of the role of the headteacher in improving schools in areas of economic hardship. Hallinger and Heck (1998) carried out a meta analysis of the impact of the school principal and conclude that ‘this review supports the belief that principals exercise a measurable, though indirect effect on school effectiveness and student achievement’ (p 186). Hallinger and Heck (1998) describe this impact as ‘small’ (p 186) but ‘statistically significant’ (p 186). Having read this study I remain unclear how it disentangles the impact of the headteacher from that of other senior leaders.

I have suggested that the particular context in which some school leaders operate could pose a threat to their values if they are to achieve outcomes that are deemed to represent success within the current discourse. An additional pressure on individuals arises from the notion inherent in current education policy that it is the quality of leadership offered by the headteacher which is the primary determinant of how successful a school is in overcoming
the challenges that its context might represent. Kenneth Baker (1993) in writing about his thinking as he was putting together the 1988 Education Reform Act recognises that the impact of its students’ background cannot be completely ignored but emphasises the role of the headteacher:

On the other hand even in these areas there can be very good schools with a high level of achievement. It depends essentially on the leadership of the Head and the quality of the teaching. (p 199)

This emphasis on the role of the headteacher has continued so OFSTED (2009) identify ten reasons why outstanding schools succeed in areas of economic disadvantage, one of which is outstanding leadership. It is clearly identified in National Challenge documentation:

Collectively, we know a lot about what makes a great school. It has an excellent head teacher focused on teaching and learning and with a good understanding of wider outcomes; it has good teachers who provide personalised support and carefully track pupils’ progress; it has robust management systems and a ‘can do’ culture of achievement. (DCSF, 2008b, p 5)

The concept of the charismatic, transformational leader is embodied by the much publicised, so called ‘superheads’ who would be very much part of the New Labour Policy Regime. The idea would be that if the ‘right’ individuals are selected and given the ‘right’ tools (based on ‘evidence’ from ‘right’ research ie. school improvement and effectiveness researchers) then school transformation will follow. Some well documented failures have led to the introduction of distributed leadership in order to fill in the gaps (Barker, 2009).

Under New Labour the preferred style of leadership was named as distributed leadership and this was the model adopted and delivered to aspiring leaders by the National College. However, I share the view expressed by Gunter (2012) and Thomson (2009) that this was a change in name only. Thomson (2009) analysed a sample of advertisements for headteachers placed in 2008 and concluded that ‘any celebration about the demise of charismatic leadership is somewhat premature’ (p 58). Following an analysis of New
Labour’s policies on school leadership Gunter (2012) states under New Labour ‘the commitment to the single person as the leader and their preferred practice as transformational leader has remained a constant feature, with rebranding taking place, the most virulent being distributed leadership.’

The newly appointed head of OFSTED Michael Wilshaw personifies the notion of the ‘superhead’ both within successive governments’ policy approaches to school improvement and the public psyche. With a Daily Telegraph (2011) online headline ‘Can superhead Sir Michael Wilshaw work his magic at OFSTED?’ going on to lead with ‘How the hero of Hackney aims to save our schools.’ Michael Wilshaw was until recently headteacher at Mossbourne Academy in Hackney which is widely viewed as being judged as being outstanding, a view shared by OFSTED (2010, p 4) ‘The academy is outstanding, but even within that category it is exceptional.’ Wilshaw took over as head of the school inspection service after attracting the attention of the Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove:

Wilshaw, who was knighted for services to education, is said to have been courted for some time. Michael Gove, the education secretary, has called him “my hero”. Guardian, 2011, unpaged)

There are other examples of headteachers who after being judged to have ‘turned round’ ‘failing’ schools are brought into the heart of the policy making process. Peter Clark who was, until recently, Senior Advisor on school improvement to the Department describes in his book (Clark, 1998) which is subtitled ‘Transforming the Ridings School – and our children’s education’ how he impacted on the fortunes of The Ridings School in Halifax which had in the past been described as the worst school in Britain. The account relates how under his leadership the school implemented the strategies widely advocated by the school improvement movement and the enforcement of traditional values on behaviour and uniform. This approach is very much in accord with the approach adopted by Wilshaw.
Interestingly, one of the first actions taken by Clark was to exclude large numbers of students who exhibited challenging behaviour which is a strategy not available to many colleagues in similar contexts on moral, legal or practical grounds. The success of The Ridings was short lived and it has now closed which could reflect the efficacy of short term solutions to deeply rooted issues. Another self written account of school improvement (Stubbs, 2003) was converted into a television drama and is very much a description of an individual with a strong personality who is an effective leader of a previously dispirited and disengaged group of teachers in order to transform the lives of young people as reflected in the book’s subtitle ‘How an inspiring Headmistress gave children back their future.’ It is interesting how the word headmistress is used to perhaps resonate with traditional views and standards. Another less dramatic story is presented by McNulty (2005) whose description of school’s transformation is very pragmatic and closely aligned to the thinking of the school improvement movement:

So we know what we do (not) want in a school, one judged as failing or weak and we know what constitutes ‘good’. It is a challenge to move from one state to the other. (McNulty, 2005, p 9)

The implications are clear that if you are a school leader in an area of socioeconomic deprivation who follows the school improvement code you will succeed if you are an effective and inspirational leader. It is not clear that there is the shared understanding of what constitutes success and what are not presented are the stories of those who have not succeeded or indeed the stories of the majority of senior leaders who work in schools in areas of economic hardship. There are alternative views that highlight the position that some schools find themselves in:

Many underperforming schools are caught up in a perfect storm with imperfect solutions. Contextual, compositional, cyclical, contingent and conditional factors all work against them at the same time. (Leithwood et al., 2010, p 39)
At some point it might be necessary to determine at what point good leadership is not enough. There are few accounts of those with headship experience who write from a critical stance outside of the dominant networks. Barker (2005) is able to provide a very detailed account of the experience of a secondary school, with a profile similar to many schools placed in the National Challenge, which had been placed in special measures following an OFSTED inspection. This account challenges many assumptions inherent in current educational discourse such as the clear link between strong leadership and improved examination results. It also makes clear the complex nature of schools and that improvement is highly context specific and an ongoing project. ‘Should the Hillside example encourage the belief that leadership can transform the system or should we conclude that all improvement is a continuous struggle in which success depends on unique combinations of people and circumstances’ (Barker, 1995, p 157).

Thomson (2008) says that the way in which headteachers respond to education policy ‘can be seen as a simple duality – resistance or compliance’ (p 85). Resistance could arise from choice based on understanding and compliance could stem from coercion (a fear of the consequences of non-compliance), corruption (the individual shares or has developed views in line with policy), cowardice or self-interest. However, Thomson rejects the notion that compliance is a straightforward concept and says that it is likely to occur as a result of both conscious and unconscious processes. The decision or the apparent decision to comply is rooted within the prevailing discourse:

And simulation might be an act of camouflage, the result of an image management exercise which aims to disguise from an external gaze what is actually happening. Equally it might contain elements of satire and mimicry. Either way, from this perspective, apparent compliance can be seen as more than simple obedience and as possibly rather more tactical and strategic than might be imagined at a superficial glance. Furthermore, following this line of analysis, no matter how constrained, compliance (like resistance) is also an act of agency: the person chooses what to do in the light of how they see the expected and desired results of their actions. But what are considered valid choices are not free floating, but are discursive; that is they are the products of specific cultural and historical conventions and ‘truths’. (Thomson, 2008, p 88)
Thomson seems to be suggesting that it is not a case of compliance or resistance but rather of agency within a discursively defined setting which will elicit many unique responses that are located within specific contexts. Gunter (2011) makes the distinction between policy science which endeavours to determine whether or not a policy has delivered its intended outcomes and policy scholarship which, ‘is concerned with the antecedence, experience and trajectories of policies and how they interrelate and are experienced by professionals’ (p 95). My study is rooted within policy scholarship as I seek to develop further understanding of how senior leaders position themselves particularly in response to the discourses relating to leading schools serving areas of economic hardship.

Thomson (2008) makes it clear that the positioning of headteachers in relation to policy is complex and involves both conscious and subconcious processes but studying the positioning of other senior staff adds a further layer of complexity and there is little written about this to build on. Bottery (2007b) having interviewed headteachers to assess their response to policy recognises this complexity but says that it is not recognised in the training that is provided:

First, the large variation in response to the questions asked, due to both personality and context, demonstrates that there is no simple clear pattern of headteacher responses to centralist legislation. The population of headteachers is not filled either with those who are all able to manage in a principled manner, centralised incursions into their practice, nor is it filled with those who feel they simply must comply with steerage. Moreover, it seems also very clear that such variation will and must remain, for it is precisely the interaction of personality with context which is the reality of headship, and which is a major factor in a school’s success. Of course, it will also be a principal cause of any failure. Thus, addressing headteachers’ professional development through the imposition of a standardised one-size fits all model of headteacher competencies makes no sense at all, because the problem lies in precisely addressing these contexts, these personalities. (p 106)

New Labour has evolved a leadership industry working through the National College which determines ‘what is to be known about professional practice, what could be said, what words and tone could be said, what words and tone could be used, and what
dispositions could be displayed’ (Gunter, 2012, p 5). Within the current discourse where functional approaches to knowledge are preferred, taking school effectiveness and improvement research data to identify and quantify leadership impact the impact of agency can be debated. Hence, headteachers are positioned as relatively passive deliverers:

They are tactical implementers and deliverers, not strategic decision makers. Their agency is limited. (Gunter and Thomson, 2011, p 478)

There are also issues of self preservation which may lead headteachers to abide by their principles but do this quietly and not sticking their heads above the parapet:

David Hargreaves had slightly different take on the issues. Survival as a head in England, he says, means ‘flying below the radar’. He referred to successful heads as subversive, following their own instincts. (Bangs et al, 2011, p 141)

Gronn (2003) sees a key outcome of education reform as the focus on leadership and on the ‘production of leaders by design or the idea of designer-leadership’ (p 7). Gronn sees transformational leadership as creating the ‘superhead’:

Heroic individualism goes to the heart of what it means to be a transformational leader. In the new world order of the restructured, learner-centred, self-managing school the official assumption is that principals will be transformational leaders because transformation is the extent of the change and level of engagement demanded by school systems and principals’ employing authorities. A corollary of transformation in the field of leadership, is that a hero figure will ‘turn around’ a poorly performing or underperforming organisation. (p 17)

One risk of establishing heroic individualism as the preferred model of leadership linked to high levels of accountability is that it might reduce the number of applicants for vacant headships or more worryingly put off those who might best meet the needs of an individual school in a particular set of circumstances. Thomson (2009):
It is therefore quite likely that, in putting together and putting forward a representation of headship as a job which requires a heroic leader capable of holding the Dumbledore\(^{17}\) of charismatic leadership together with the Umbridge of bureaucratic conformity, the writers of headteacher advertisements may very well deter the very person who ‘fits’ their real needs and desires. Great expectations may well produce great disappointments for all concerned. (p 61)

In identifying ten evidence based claims about successful school leadership Day et al (2011) suggest ‘Headteachers’ values are key components in their success.’ and ‘Differences in context affect the nature, direction and pace of leadership actions.’ (p xix).

The challenge for some school leaders is when their values, their context and their data do not fit the current view of a ‘successful’ school and the question is then how does this manifest itself in their professional identity?

5.3 School leadership in the post-welfarist era

In this section I will provide a brief overview of the professional role of senior leaders over the last three decades. For the reasons given above this will mainly make reference to the role of headteachers. I will then go on to look at the way in which the tools of reform delivery ie. managerialism, performativity and markets impact on the roles of senior leaders particularly in areas of economic hardship.

Between 1944 and 1988 school leadership was the province of middle class managers and governors (Grace, 1995) as in a society dominated by class anyone from more humble origins would not be trusted to run a school. Within the state structure moral leadership was given a high priority often coming directly from the church. This moral leadership was also an important function of the headteachers of public schools:

In all schooling systems, headteachers as school leaders were defined by their moral qualities and their capacity for giving moral leadership. Such leadership in the elementary school sector was, however always given under class-cultural surveillance whereas in the grammar and public school sectors of English education, the moral leadership was exercised in conditions of greater cultural autonomy. (Grace, 1995, p 10)

\(^{17}\)Dumbledore was the headteacher of the wizardry school Hogwarts in J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books and Umbridge was a Ministry of Magic bureaucrat who appears first in The Philosopher’s Stone.
In what Grace (1995) refers to as the social democratic period, corresponding to the welfarist settlement of Gewirtz (2002), following the end of the second world war schools were given far greater autonomy and the role of head teacher was invested with more power even if this was not formally recognised within the structures that existed. This shift in power allowed head teachers to exert much more influence over what happened in schools and led to a change in their professional identity:

Head teachers in English state schooling, especially in the secondary sector were able to establish a measure of ideological and professional dominance over other local agents in the schooling process. This dominance, at the local site level, was encapsulated by the use of ‘my school’ in headteacher discourse at this time. (Grace, 1995, p 12)

Many headteachers today would use expressions such as ‘my school’ or ‘my staff’ but the reality is very different. It is ‘their school’ until externally imposed benchmarks are not met and the possibility then exists that the school could be closed or reconstituted despite the views and wishes of the head teacher, governors, parents or local authority.

Until the late 1970s the reality was that the majority of decisions relating to teaching and the curriculum were taken by individual school leaders with the theoretical if not actual oversight of the governing body (Chitty, 2004). From a leadership perspective up until the 1970s during the welfarist (Gewirtz, 2002) or social democratic (Grace, 1995) period the prevailing model was one of professional and administrative leader with little notion of management (Grace, 1995). In the latter half of the twentieth century the nature of schools started to change with the introduction of the comprehensive school which were often large and complex organisations. Models of leadership changed but Grace (1995) says that many facets of the traditional ‘headteacher’ were retained:
While new models of democratic headship were developed, the continuing influence of the ‘headmaster tradition’ should not be underestimated. Official reports and policy statements were marked by contradictions between a predilection for strong and effective leaders in schools and a formal commitment to the value of consultation and participation in decision making. It seems likely that one of the ways in which this contradiction was resolved was by a reconstitution of the headmaster tradition within the new consultative approaches to school leadership. In other words, that the headmaster tradition was recontextualised within modern management culture rather than being abolished. (p 17)

The installation of a Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher in 1979 saw the start of a period of education reform during which the power of school governing bodies was (at least in theory) significantly increased whilst simultaneously reducing the influence of the local authorities (Grace, 1995). Throughout the 1980s the transformation of schools was led by a central government with a clear neoliberal agenda which positioned headteachers as managers and leaders of organisations that share many features with medium sized businesses. Grace (1995) says that the response of headteachers to these changes depended on the relationship which they had had with the local authority previously and upon how individuals perceived themselves and their role. So headteachers ‘who saw themselves as modern, progressive, dynamic and enterprising in education leadership and management’ (p 90), would be more inclined to have a negative view of the ‘restraining’ influence of local authorities. Other headteachers who had valued the support provided by the local authorities regretted the removal of their power ‘often ‘on the basis of a past loyalty rather than a principled defence’ (p 91). Grace (1995) regards the former view as being the dominant one due to the policy context ‘After a decade of sustained central state ideological and material support for ‘liberated, school-site management’ this is perhaps not surprising’ (p 91).

The increased responsibility given to governing bodies and therefore by default to headteachers was against a backdrop of very active government intervention mediated through a National Curriculum and performance targets and later external scrutiny via OFSTED. These reforms which whilst presented as providing school leaders with the
opportunity to lead and manage free of the restraints imposed by local authorities were regarded by Ball (2003) as re-regulation rather than de-regulation. This re-regulation was achieved, in addition to centrally imposing performance targets, by establishing a culture in which schools became marketable commodities whose success depended on how they were able to compete in the market place. The changes were introduced in the 1988 Education Reform Act. Ball (1994) sees the act as the ‘primary policy framework’ (p 84) for establishing a new role for English headteachers. Ball emphasises four aspects of the act in relation to this new role. Firstly, the formal governance of schools being given to governing bodies which in principle (this power is not necessarily enacted in practice) reduces the autonomy of the headteacher. Secondly, the headteacher assumes the day to day responsibility for the school budget (in principle acting on behalf of the governing body). Thirdly, as headteachers or governors assume the responsibility for budgets and personnel issues they become the employers of teachers (a responsibility previously held by local authorities). Fourthly, as budgets are largely determined by student numbers and parents are able to operate free choice (in theory) of schools ‘heads are now in a market-driven, client/consumer relationship with parents’ (Ball, 1994, p 85). Ball (1995) also notes the uncertainty over the lines of responsibility that I alluded to above and ‘an underlying lack of clarity relating to the ‘new headship’ in general terms – and in the definition of the Headteacher’s role and powers’ (p 85) which returns us to the issue of where power and control over schools actually lay within the new framework proffered by the 1988 Act. The act in giving greater responsibility to governors and via parent governors to parents permitted the government to claim greater parental control over schools but the reality was very different. Headteachers were reluctant to transfer power and parents in many cases unwilling to put themselves forward as governors:
In practice change is superficial. Parental governors are typically recruited rather than elected. Their relationship to the main body of parents is vague and distant. And most governors lack the time, information and will to take their apparent responsibilities seriously. Headteachers work hard to ensure this is the way that things stay. Governance is therefore reduced to a ritualistic and symbolic but potentially unstable process. As far as headship is concerned, it is the change in relationships and in culture that is most significant in redefining head’s roles and self-conception. (Ball, 1994, p 101)

As headteachers were cast in the role of leaders of businesses they faced a potential dilemma in that as markets were part of the strategy to improve schools through competition their vision that might have previously simply related to educational issues or values now had to take into account the need to survive. It was also necessary for them to acquire a new vocabulary:

Markets, on the other hand, if used as a means of raising performance among educators, can constrain their vision to the necessity of surviving within a competitive paradigm, and to the apparently necessary – and then monopolistic – use of business language. (Bottery, 2000, p 62)

Bottery (2000) argues that management language exerted a significant influence over the development of schools such that it compared with the influence of the state and of the application of market forces.

To survive a headteacher might have to compromise their educational vision. So, for example, a focus on the academic might need to take priority over pastoral care and personal development or the curriculum distorted to deliver the maximum number of academic qualifications. This dilemma remains with school leaders at the present time as strategies are adopted to raise average point score at GCSE, increase the percentage of students obtaining a C grade in maths and English or seek to obtain the maximum value added by adjusting the special needs register. These strategies might increase the chances of the school surviving or not attracting the attention of OFSTED but might at times conflict with the educational philosophy of the school leaders and their colleagues. So pragmatism and survival take precedence over idealism as well as perpetuating the current
discourse as to what a successful school looks like and the outputs from it. This dilemma will clearly impact on the identity of individual school leaders to varying degrees and this will be discussed later.

Along with reducing the influence of local education authorities, the establishment of grant maintained schools, the introduction of local management of schools, open enrolment and formula funding the 1988 act introduced the National Curriculum and statutory testing with the intention of measuring the effectiveness of schools. This would lead to the introduction of performance tables in 1992 which were intended to present the results in a form that parents could use to make informed choices about which school to send their children to.

In accord with the notion of schools as businesses, if the funding of schools was known and the output in terms of student test performance can be measured then an overall judgement could be made about the effectiveness of the school or its ‘value-added.’ The location of schools in a market place under the dominant neoliberal ideology gave rise to the notion of the performing school (Gleeson and Husbands, 2001) and framed school leadership in a particular way:

> Leadership is being framed as particular tasks and behaviours that enable those who are responsible to be accountable for learning outcomes and measures of school improvement. This move is an attempt to structure professional identity through mandating and training the particular social relationships needed to sustain technical job requirements. However, it does not float free of organisational and personal histories that also shape and enable agency, and how real people with real lives struggle within and through the contradictions that challenge their values. (Gunter, 2001, p 31)

It is how this struggle with these contradictions and the impact they have on the identity of school leaders in areas of socioeconomic hardship that is at the heart of this thesis.

Grace (1995) says that the 1980s and 1990s saw a new discourse of school leadership come into being linked to the increased marketisation of education.
The transformation of both culture and discourse has arisen from the New Right ideological attacks upon the weaknesses of social democratic schooling, followed by rapid implementation of education reforms designed to bring the discipline of market forces into the insulated and protected world of state schooling. The cultural autonomy of English education has been radically changed. (p 39)

For senior leaders in schools in areas of economic hardship the challenges are particularly acute in that, not only might they disagree with the assumed purposes of education or the relevance of the required outcomes that the current discourses demand, but they are considerably disadvantaged in the market place as their strengths might not represent marketable commodities. This will be returned to later as I discuss the impact of policy technologies (Ball, 2003).

5.4 Delivery through policy technologies
As discussed in chapter 2 the neoliberal reform agenda has been delivered through three policy technologies (Ball 2003), the market, performativity and managerialism which Ball (2003) says offer ‘a politically attractive alternative to the state-centred, public welfare tradition of education provision’ (p 1). Ball argues that these replace professionalism and bureaucracy as the 1988 Act established schools as businesses which needed to compete in a quasi-market place and liberated from bureaucratic controls. I will now look at the impact of managerialism, performativity and the market on the role of school leaders, particularly in areas of economic hardship over the period of education reform since the 1980s.

5.5 Managerialism
Neoliberalism had a direct impact on the role of the school leader with a shift from lead professional and administrator to a much more industrial or commercial model construct of a leader which involved targets, productivity and outcome measures. This new approach which has been described as managerialism (e.g. Bottery, 2000), coincided with the disillusionment towards the welfare state and embraced the perceived need to compete in
the global economy. The notion of managerialism is, according to Bottery (2000) more than simply a change in the description of the job that managers do:

‘What, then, is managerialism’? It is more than just the ‘work of managers’, for managers can and do work in a variety of ways, depending upon what they are asked to do, as well as to the value and political framework within which they operate. Their changing role has been alluded to already. In the early days of the welfare state school ‘managers’ were among other things, administrators, facilitators and wise counsels on the purpose of education. (Bottery, 2000, p 62)

Bottery (2000) says that the role of school leaders under managerialism represents an approach to leadership and management that has its roots in policies carrying assumptions that:

- social progress lies in the achievement of continuing increases in economically defined productivity;
- management is a distinct organizational function which plays the crucial role in planning, implementing and measuring the necessary improvements in productivity;
- such productivity increases will come about through the creation of a labour force instilled with this productivity ideal, who are vigorously tied into such corporate aims;
- to perform this crucial role managers must be granted the right to manage proactively available resources, both material and human. (Bottery, 2000, p 63)

This shift towards a managerialist approach had profound implications for the role of school leaders not only because of its economically driven agenda but also because of how it positions people:

It is important to note the value – the ideological – orientation of this approach. It is economistic, it is directive, it is controlling, it sees human beings as resources for its defined ends. (Bottery, 2000, p 63)

The period of education reform since the 1980s is a period which is described by Bottery (2000) as seeing ‘the rise and rise of managerialism’ (p 65). Managerialism clearly represents an example of a functionalist approach to education in which input and output can be measured, along with the associated costs, allowing overall decisions to be made.
about productivity and efficiency. If an organisation can be regarded as being efficient in these terms then the argument would be that it is well placed to compete in the market place that has been created.

The conflict that exists for some headteachers between managerialism and how they might envisage their role is commented on by Thomson (2009) in reviewing the results of studies on well-being in the workplace:

These results clearly indicate the kinds of role conflict that is the everyday experience of English heads, and in particular, the tension between caring and managerialism that is produced by contemporary policies and organizational arrangements. (p 139)

It is plausible that this conflict is likely to be greatest for those teaching and leading in schools serving areas of economic hardship because it is likely to be the case that the staff in many cases made a positive decision to work in a school that caters for students with a wide range of social, emotional and behavioural issues.

Bottery (2000) acknowledges the positive aspects of the managerial discourse in supporting economic well-being, making the best use of resources, organisational benefits and the location of decision making at a local level. However, Bottery (2000) identifies a number of negative aspects. Firstly the danger that it will encourage the pursuit of short term quantitative aims at the expense of long term qualitative ambitions. Secondly that it is anti – humanitarian in the sense that targets set by government official put stress on teachers trying to achieve them and on those students who will never attain them. Bottery’s (2000) third concern ‘is that it creates an amoral leadership which has the genuine potential to become immoral’ (p 78). This is because managerialism sees education as being free of values and not set within an ideological framework. Bottery (2000) argues that if the ideological framework is not continually questioned it becomes by default immoral quoting as an example aspects of education causing students and teachers unnecessary
stress. The fourth concern is that it ‘deprofessionalizes’ (p 79) those delivering education by removing ethical considerations and places the emphasis for classroom practitioners on delivering short term externally set objectives. Bottery’s (2000) fourth concern encapsulates the concerns of many of those critical of the current school improvement discourse in that it ignores any discussion about the purpose of education:

Finally, then, through this process it creates high potential for the destruction of democratic thought, and for a critical citizenry, for it designs educational systems in which critical participation and dissent are not only seen as undesirable, but it goes further, for by means of league tables, targets, outcomes, performance appraisal, managerial surveillance and external Ofsted inspections, it designs them out of the system. It becomes a system for delivering government policy, not for discussion of what the aims of education might be; and when governmental policies are so clearly predicated upon economic ends, managerialism is doubly controlling. (p 97)

Bottery was writing in the early stages of the New Labour government but his concerns are echoed very recently by Fielding and Moss (2011) who write following the electoral defeat of New Labour and the formation of a Conservative led alliance government:

By crying for a return to fundamental questions of human purpose and to envisioning social, political and educational spaces where these matters can once again be discussed, understood and acted on in the search for an inclusive, elusive common good we have sought to contest the dispiriting and destructive obsession with an overly-instrumental, reductionist form of schooling that distorts the present and betrays the future. We have sought to contest the dictatorship of no alternatives by feeding the emaciated politics of education and in doing so rekindle hope in the possibilities of education in its broadest and fullest sense. The recent election in England only confirms for us the urgency of this task. (Fielding and Moss, 2011, p 171)

In addition to impacting on the ethical element of leadership and the direction to the pursuit of short term, externally imposed, measurable goals, Bottery (2000) also argues that managerialism also starts to determine the language that school leaders use to talk about their work, adopting the discourse and associated language of teaching and learning. This will be returned to later in this thesis when analysing the interview data because I think the way that the school leaders who were interviewed use language is interesting and
I suspect that it is also to the audience and what they regard as being appropriate for that audience.

For school leaders in areas of economic hardship leading a school within the managerialist discourse potentially poses particular problems. These problems might include ideological differences about the purposes of education such as social development balanced against academic development or ideological differences in the way that relationships are constructed. Linked to differences in views about the nature and purposes of education could be a lack of agreement as to the priority that should be given to, and the relevance of, output data that is measurable, measured and reported. It is highly likely that school leaders in areas of economic hardship might have a concern about the way in which the data that is used might unfairly position the school within a market that is in itself contributing to the construction of the school as ‘failing’ or ‘underperforming’

### 5.6 Performativity

Intrinsically linked to the discourse of managerialism is the notion of performativity, which Ball (2003) states ‘involves the use of a combination of devolution, targets and incentives to bring about institutional redesign’ (p 3). In the educational context Ball suggests that this manifests itself in the plethora of texts relating to self-managing schools and school improvement. Performativity is interlinked with managerialism both as a method of delivery and as a measure of outcomes. It is also a key component of schools in the market place and impacts on what is understood as success and failure as well as on the sense of purpose and ethical position of school leadership:

> That is to say that survival in the market place becomes the new basis of common purpose – pragmatism and self-interest rather than professional judgement and ethics are the basis for new organisational language games. (Ball, 2003, p 3)

Performativity has an impact on all school leaders. For those who ‘believe’ in the discourse of managerialism and the desirability of competition between schools as a vehicle for
delivering school improvement, targets and associated outcome measures represent a quantitative way of measuring success and progress, of monitoring staff and assessing the impact of staff. It is an interesting notion that there must always be progress and success, even when variables change in a way that might mitigate against improvement. For those who remain to be convinced and question the way that the purpose of education is unchallenged and even distorted, performance measures are in place as a day to day measures to allow external others to make judgements on how they carry out their role. One option for the more doubtful school leaders is suggested by Bottery (2004) as an addition to a tongue-in-cheek list of rules for good management, leadership and teaching in a performativity based culture:

The cynical might want to add one further rule to this list: ‘The good teacher/manager/leader is the one who is able to convince external observers that he/she is doing what is externally demanded while managing to get on with the real job. (p 92)

There could well be a point at which school leaders stop being able to distinguish between what they do because of what they believe is the purpose of education and what they are doing simply to deliver ‘success’ that is externally defined and based on simple quantitative measures. In order to ‘play the game’ school leaders may have to make curriculum decisions such as increased time for English and mathematics at the expense of other subjects or to enter large number of students for vocational qualifications in order to increase their average point score and hence value added. They might have to make staffing decisions to appoint core subject teachers thus losing subjects such as drama, art and music. They may be driven to concentrate on certain groups of students such as those at the C/D GCSE borderline rather than on the most and least able. It could lead to the whole ethos and value system of the school changing. So an inclusive school might question the negative impact that those students with significant social and emotional needs have on its attainment figures or the way that they might direct resources away from
needy students in order to focus on external targets. External audit via OFSTED also leads to changes in the way that teachers carry out their work:

The pressure to perform also leads to impression management by way of fabrication. For instance, prior to Ofsted inspections, teachers create artefacts and ritualistic displays of their work and have begun to internalise a new set of teaching and assessment values and practices led by Ofsted requirements. (Thrupp and Wilmott, 2003, p 41)

School leaders may believe that they have to achieve the best possible outcome measures or gain the best possible OFSTED report even with a degree of ‘fabrication’ in order to succeed in the education market. Performativity might lead to senior leaders in areas of economic hardship devoting time to ‘playing the game’ by establishing systems and practices to ensure that the school presents to the outside world as discourse demands rather than meeting the needs of the students. This in turn could result in conflicting value systems operating within the same institution as teachers adopt different ideological positions. There will be pressure to adjust the curriculum and student choice to improve outcome measures that are not actually valued or most closely matched to the students’ needs but do assist the school in meeting external demands and benchmarks. Schools in areas of economic hardship will also be under pressure to go against core values and beliefs and review priorities such as the balance between inclusion and performance. For the senior leaders themselves there will be a pressure to behave as the discourses demand in terms of leadership styles in order to deliver what is required and be seen to do so when subjected to external scrutiny. For many school leaders in areas of economic hardship it will be necessary to consider and review the between the social welfare of students and the wider community and the requirement to meet attainment benchmarks.

5.7 The education market

The notion of ‘impression management’ (p 51) is seen by Ball (1994) as arising from the context in which schools have been operating since the 1980s:
The introduction of market forces into the relations between schools means that teachers are now working within a new value context, in which image and impression management are becoming as important as the educational process. (p 51)

Ball (1994) regards the market as ‘a disciplinary system and within it education is reconstructed as a consumption good’ in which ‘children and their ‘performances’ are traded and exchanged as commodities’ with the work of the teachers ‘increasingly viewed and evaluated solely in terms of output measures (test scores and examination performance) set against cost (subject time, class size, resource requirements) (p 51).

The market place puts school leaders in a position whereby they have to appeal to the consumer (parent) even when that might involve compromising personal beliefs and values. Ball (1994) quotes from an interview he conducted with a secondary school headteacher who describes a discussion about the content of a speech to be given by the headteacher at open evening in an attempt to ‘reorientate the values of the institution and subvert and reorder the priorities and purposes through which it presents itself (p 53). The deputy headteacher describes how the headteacher intends to emphasise the traditional and conservative aspects of the school such as a focus on hard work and discipline which is regarded as what parents want. This message was to be reinforced by referring to high exclusion rates for bullying and fighting but this ‘tough’ stance could be at odds with effectively managing inclusion. This is further illustrated by the decision not to place great emphasis on the strong pastoral side of the school or its success with students with special educational needs in case it deters the parents of more able students or encourages the entry of more students with special educational need. The more able students a school has the more equipped it will be to meet attainment targets and hence attract more able students. It was also intended to illustrate the trend of improving examination results which would be perceived as a good thing regardless of context.

In Ball’s terms what is happening here is:
In crude terms, the important thing is to reflect back to parents their prejudices, setting aside experience and judgement. Traditionalism and academicism are accentuated; expertise in special needs provision is underplayed for fear of giving the ‘wrong’ impression. (p 53)

So school leaders find themselves in a market place, adopting a business-orientated approach to management and their success or failure based on simple quantitative outcome measures. For school leaders in areas that are economically disadvantaged the challenges are exacerbated. How do they market a school to attract those parents whose children would start to improve results but who do not want to send their children to that school because of the perceived ‘poor’ exam results or behaviour, the school’s expertise with low ability children or the wide range of ethnicities within the school? It is not necessarily helpful to point to impressive value added scores when headline attainment figures are well below national averages. The ability to manage and retain students with challenging behaviour or special needs is frequently not an attractive selling point. In a class ridden society, aspirational parents will generally want their children to mix with the ‘right people.’

5.8 Preparing for school leadership

From the perspective of a school leader their leadership training and the prevailing dominant discourse about school improvement will position them and the way in which they carry out their work as being the primary determinant of whether a school ‘succeeds’ or ‘fails’. Whilst there might be sympathetic noises about the level of challenge that school leaders face in certain schools in particular contexts, they must face the current ‘evidence based’ understanding that other schools in ‘similar’ circumstances succeed. The literature available for aspiring school leaders is vast but it is the view of Thrupp and Willmott (2003) that much of it should be ‘permanently retired’ (p 3):
Yet despite the apparent popularity of education management texts, in this book we argue that this literature is harmful because of the way it fails to challenge existing social inequalities and the way in which it chimes with managerialist policies that will only further intensify inequality. (Thrupp and Willmott, 2003, p 3)

However, the voice of academics such as Thrupp and Wilmott who write from a critical perspective is not heard and instead it is those who work fit in with and validate the current discourses who find favour with policy makers and leadership training organisations.

Current leadership training and related writing tends to perpetuate the issues and dilemmas illustrated in this section. What is being presented as educational leadership is summarised by Gunter et al (1999):

- The emphasis is on leadership which seems to float free of educational values, and professionalism is being reconstructed as management processes rather than an ethical commitment to children and their development.
- Leadership is presented as a consensus and unitary process in which the culture is managed, rather than a professional relationship in which the realities of dilemmas and contradictions are revealed.
- Effective leadership is strongly normative and tends to be based on a construction of what ought to be rather than what we know about the day-to-day experience of headship.
- Leadership methodology is often ahistorical (the past seems to begin in 1988) and the biographies and narrative stories of headteachers tend to be marginalised as being deficit to the acceptable model of school improvement.
- The agency of headteachers is emphasised at the expense of the structural context in which their work is located. It seems that generic headteachers can bring their vision and mission to the school in which an insistence on the right to manage is legitimised as a means of marginalising the structural injustices within the community.
- Children and teachers are constructed as objects to be managed; they are relegated to follower status. It seems that children and teachers are to be dazzled by the heroism of the leader in taking them to a better future, while simultaneously they are integrated into accountability mechanisms for educational standards which are under-resourced. (Gunter, 1999, p xx)

As outlined in chapter 2 under the Thatcher government the role of senior leaders in schools were constructed on the business and industry model with the ‘chief executive,
secularised, entrepreneurial headteacher’ (Gunter, 2012, p 7) running a medium sized business with students a commodity and needing to compete in the market that had been created. Headteachers were allowed to free themselves from what was perceived as the restrictive control of the local authorities. Around this reconstruction of the headteacher developed a leadership industry with training being delivered by individuals or organisations both inside and outside of the public sector (Gunter, 2012). National Standards for Headteachers (TTA, 1997) were introduced by Gillian Shepherd (Minister for Education 1994-1997) on the basis that the role of headteacher was demanding so it was only appropriate that they were properly trained and provided with support. Orchard (2007) says that there were other motives behind Shepherd’s introduction of standards:

She insisted preparation should be mandatory, subject to regulation by central government rather than Local Education Authorities or headteachers associations, Her insistence was double-edged too: the purpose of ‘training’ headteachers was partly to provide professional development but the critical function was to create a mechanism through which headteachers could be held publicly accountable, demonstrating their competence against prescribed criteria. (p 1)

Once criteria are in place it is possible to define what a headteacher ‘does’ and how they should ‘do it’ and then to use the same criteria to determine if they are effective or not. Orchard then goes on suggest that the use of standards would have ‘particular appeal to those approaches rooted in a concern with ‘effectiveness’’ (p 2). Orchard links the notion of a standards based training to an industrial model of efficiency which contributes to defining the purpose of education and privileges particular claims to knowledge:

Better still, if headteachers could be ‘trained’ to meet appropriate ‘standards’, minimising the possibility of mistakes, optimal numbers of students would leave school ‘fit for the purpose(s)’ intended by their schooling. If those standards could be deduced from what is known about school leadership by experts, no time-consuming pontificating around the endless preferred possibilities would be needed. Energy could be devoted instead to the delivery of ‘quality’ services. (p 2)

18 Teacher Training Agency
Establishing a set of standards implies that it is ‘known’ what good leadership looks like in practice. It also ignores the recognition that context plays a significant role in how leadership gets played out and what might be perceived as being successful. There is also the danger that the outcome measures used to judge school performance might not necessarily be appropriate in measuring the efficacy of leadership in a particular context.

When New Labour established the National College for School Leadership in 2000 it became the primary deliverer of school leadership training in the country including the National Professional Qualification for Headship. The government was thus directly involved in the provision of school leadership training and there was an huge growth in the production of guides and manuals of all aspects of how to ‘do’ school leadership and management (Gunter, 2012). In this climate ‘Rational lists of what makes an effective school, head and teacher together with models of change could easily be communicated through consultancy meetings and training sessions, particularly through the development of electronic computer-based presentation software (Gunter, 2012, p 8).

In addition to delivering leadership training The National College commissions research to provide evidence to underpin what is being delivered ‘NCSL’s research aims to capture actionable knowledge of what works’ (NCSL, 2006, p 3). In a 2006 report NCSL sought to summarise what is ‘known’ about effective leadership ‘after five years of active investigation and knowledge creation, the decision was made to collate the findings that had emerged, summarise them and communicate them in as straightforward way as possible (NCSL, 2006, p 3). In describing what is known about leadership The College talks about the improvement in school leadership and links this to government investment including in The College itself:

19The National Qualification for Headship was established in 1995
Ofsted estimates that around four fifths of school leaders are doing a ‘good’, ‘very good’, or ‘excellent’ job at leading and managing their schools. The quality of school leadership has been improving consistently since the mid-1990s, when according to Ofsted, only half of all school leaders were ranked as ‘good’, ‘very good’, or ‘excellent’. Government has also made considerable investment in developing school leadership through the creation of the NCSL and support for the National Qualification for Headship (NPQH). (NCSL, 2006, p 4)

What is meant by good or excellent is therefore defined by OFSTED which means that the government is directly involved in defining what leadership is and what it looks like in practice; delivering leadership training and monitoring the effectiveness of leadership. The National College established a Think Tank in 2001 in order ‘to assist the process of drawing up a new framework for developing school leadership’ (NCSL, 2001, p 2). The Think Tank came up with ten propositions to summarise their findings. The second of these propositions related to the importance of the context in which school leaders operate. The report states that:

Basing school leadership on the distinctive and inclusive context of the school implies that:

- School leadership must embrace the context of the school in all its complexity as a first step to utilising proven practices from elsewhere.
- The particular mix of skills of school leadership will differ, often dramatically from context to context. (NCSL, 2001, p 9)

The findings in the report recognise context as being important but imply that there are a proven set of practices that can be picked up and used in any context which is very much in the school effectiveness orthodoxy. The College’s research produced a list of seven components of what is known about school leadership:
1. Context matters
2. The core tasks of school leaders are clear
3. Learning-centred leadership is critical
4. Distributing leadership matters
5. School leadership is hard work and rewarding
6. Leadership in schools is changing
7. Leadership development and succession planning have never been more important (NCSL, 2006, p 4)

There are some clear assumptions and claims to knowledge in this list and there could be conflict between some of the components such as are the core tasks for school leaders in areas of economic hardship the same as for their colleagues in other contexts. These issues will be returned to in chapters 7 and 8. The list has much in common with the ‘seven strong claims’ of Leithwood et al (2006) and both state the importance of distributed leadership. For schools in areas of economic hardship a new model of favoured leadership training in the form of the Future Leaders scheme has emerged which is based on the heroic and transformational model of leadership. Future Leaders (2012):

Future Leaders is founded on the premise that every child can succeed regardless of background. Evidence supports that effective, inspirational school leadership can stamp out educational disadvantage – school leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions. School leadership is therefore the most determinative factor on pupil outcomes and even more so in challenging schools. (unpaged)

The National College was one of the founders of the Future Leaders training scheme and some of the claims made by the scheme seem to be at odds with some of the research that the National College has commissioned and published. The Future Leaders scheme is very clearly premised on the notion that the ‘best’ people with the ‘right’ training can improve the most challenging of schools and thus lead to a reduction in social inequity. This is clearly illustrated in their mission statement. ‘Our mission is to address educational

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20 The Future Leaders scheme was started in 2006 by the childrens’ charity Absolute Return for Kids (ARK), the National College and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) to ‘improve the life chances of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds’ (2012, unpaged).
disadvantage by transforming outstanding current or former teachers into effective, inspirational school leaders for challenging schools’ (Future Leaders, 2012, unpaged).

5.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to describe the model of leadership that has been constructed within the discourses that currently dominate education. The emergence of the ‘heroic’ head epitomises the notion of the charismatic, strong and expert leader who is able to drive through what is known to work. In Bourdieu’s terms the field of education has given rise to a doxa (‘an, orthodoxy, a right, correct, dominant vision which has more often than not been imposed through struggles against competing visions (Bourdieu, 1998, p 56), which acting as misrecognition will label some headteachers as failing. Within school improvement the doxa says that it is ‘known’ what needs to be done to improve a school and it is ‘known’ that ‘heroic’ individuals can transform even the most problematic of schools. Therefore it follows that with the strong and effective leadership and the adoption of the appropriate strategies improvement will follow. If improvement is not judged to have occurred then the blame rests with the leaders of the school. This doxa means that the context of the school and wider issues of inequality do not need to be considered as the source of the failure has been located. For school leaders in areas of economic hardship it is very difficult to challenge the apparent logic of this doxa because as agents within the educational field they are also subjugated due to lack of social capital. In playing the school improvement game there is no level playing field and it could be argued that in terms of power relations within the field it suits most players to have certain schools and their staff to be set up as losers as it takes external pressure away from them.

The next chapter will give a voice to a group of senior leaders in one area of economic hardship in order to start to analyse their professional identity as they work to make sense of the rules of the field and ‘how to play the game’ (Thomson, 2005, p 742).
Chapter 6 – Senior Leaders at Work

6.1 Introduction

Following on from the previous analysis, in this chapter I will present the results of the analysis of the interview transcripts using extensive quotes from the interviews in order to give the senior teachers a ‘voice.’ The next chapter will then present a deeper analysis of the material and locate it within a theoretical framework using Bourdieu’s thinking tools. In this chapter, and the subsequent one, the three research questions will be directly addressed. Chapter 2 provided the political and historical context which has positioned the schools in this study, as with other schools in areas of economic hardship at risk of being labelled as ‘failing.’ Chapter 4 illustrated how this discourse of failure is articulated within current educational policy by taking the National Challenge as an example and Chapter 5 traced the origins of heroic leadership. This chapter will explore the professional identity of senior leaders in areas of economic hardship as they position themselves in response to the dominant educational discourses and the everyday context within which they work.

6.2 Research Question 1: What are the dominant discourses and models of change in education and how do these both impact on and define schools serving areas of economic hardship?

6.2.1 Aspects of a good school from the perspective of school leaders.

It is clear from the interviews that all those interviewed had very student centred views of what makes a good school and that the overwhelming majority (18 out of 20) of them did not see the description of a school as good as being intrinsically linked to success in examinations.

The student centred views expressed are perhaps more resonant with those of the teaching profession prior to the ‘neoliberal vision of the education system’ (Ball, 2008) becoming a reality.
In response to being asked how they would define a good school only two (Felix and Kelvin) of the twenty senior teachers started off by talking about examination results and ten of them made no reference whatsoever to results. Apart from Felix and Kelvin, who started off with achievement, the majority gave fairly lengthy answers to the question and those who saw results as part of a balance only mentioned them towards the end of their answer. Kelvin was one of the two teachers who started off with the importance of results:

A good school is one that achieves well because most schools don’t achieve well.

Kelvin was in a unique position as he was waiting to take up headship in a different authority and as such having recently had an interview was likely to have given consideration to some of the questions raised in the interview. The tone of his comments caused me to speculate if the harshness was associated with the prevailing data driven education discourse which would cause schools to demand a particular stance from aspirant headteachers. However, he did not elaborate on why he felt that most schools fail to achieve or what constituted success. Kelvin then went on to emphasise a much more child orientated aspect:

I think it’s one that has the child at the heart of it ……

Similar sentiments are expressed by Ivan and these conflict with the discourses which value success only in terms of reaching national norms or certain, and constantly rising, percentages of students reaching a certain attainment benchmark. In measuring success their personal circumstances of the students is not considered to be relevant. In a similar way Felix opens with attainment but in the same sentence balances this with the notion of the whole child:

Right well a good school is one that’s focused on the attainment of its students but also tempers this with a strong sense of inclusion and the whole person.
Of the seven teachers who refer to results towards the end of their answers three of them including Olive and Neil clearly relate these to the students they have in their own schools and distance themselves from comparison with national averages and raw statistical data.

…. exam results showing value added but maybe don’t have to be that outstanding level of meeting national averages. (Olive)

I don’t care necessarily about getting the best GCSE result as long as every kid gets what they are capable of getting …… (Neil)

With three others (Mike, Len and Eleanor) who mention results seem almost exasperated about doing this.

…. but obviously clearly issues around standards and attainment and a good school you would expect for every student to be able to achieve their maximum potential, not only academically but also socially, so in a sense it’s that umbrella of achievement… (Mike)

Yes it is about examination results, it’s more than that, it's about developing the whole child. (Eleanor)

The teachers seem to be stating that they know and recognise that they know that examination results are important but that there is much more to their vision of ‘good’ education. There are many words and phrases that the school leaders use to describe a good school. These can be grouped under three broad headings relating to the students, the teachers and aspects of the school.

*The students* (a number after the word or phrase indicates how many respondents used a similar expression if more than one):

Happy (2), engaged (2), love learning (2), want to attend (3), behaving (2), at the heart of the organisation (3), prepared for life (2), have sense of belonging (2), enjoying, safe (2), leave with high expectations, leave as good citizens and have a voice.

*The teachers* (three individual comments):
Know students, have a sense of belonging and are innovative.

*The school* (seventeen individual comments):

Consistent, a culture of nurture and challenge, offering more than just classroom experience, inclusive, where all can succeed, caring, has positive relationships, celebrates success, offers stability, has shared values, has a clear ethos, has a sense of community, has an ethos of trust, has a wide curriculum, is perceived to be good and has a culture of respect.

There are a number of recurring themes in terms of defining a good school. Inclusion is one mentioned by four teachers including Andrew:

> Well I think a good school is all about inclusion.

The other themes are about community, working together, the students feeling safe, secure and happy and putting the students first:

> As far as I’m concerned it’s a school where students feel supported and are part of the whole school community, everybody treats them with respect. (Brian)

> All staff and students are working together towards the same aims. (Barbara)

> A good school is where all the students feel safe, secure and through feeling safe and secure feel happy. If they feel safe, secure and happy they will learn effectively. (Graham)

> I would suggest that a good school has innovative teaching areas, it’s bright, it’s welcoming, the practice of the staff who work in the school would always aim towards the child, they are putting the child first. (Len)

> For me a good school would be seen to be good by the stakeholders within it. (Edward)

The overwhelming majority of those interviewed are clearly not only defining a good school but are also making a clear statement about their values and illustrating something of their professional identity and this will be looked at later in the next chapter. Whilst the definition of a good school varies, in nineteen of the interviews there is a strong child
centred focus and not one on measured outcomes or quality of leadership. Perceptions are alluded to and this can be considered against the position of schools in the market place.

6.2.2 The creation of significance

From their responses to the question what is a good school three particular aspects seem to emerge:

- That they see a good school as providing students with a wide range of support, making clear their own child centred values and the fact that they want what is best for the student.
- That they do not see the success of a school as measured by the percentage of A*-C grades.
- That they recognise that not being focused on A*-C grades is at odds with external expectations.

All three of these aspects are well summarised by Neil when he talks about his view of a good school in the context of the previous year’s examination results:

I don’t care necessarily about getting the best GCSE result as long as every kid gets what they are capable of getting and that’s the driving force so if that means you get lots of starred A’s because your kid is very bright that’s what it should be and if somebody is going to get five G’s then that is an absolute miracle that some of those make me feel really good. We had two last year who I should have permanently excluded. One of them got 7 D’s and the other one got 5 A-C’s including English and maths and both of them I had 20 different reasons for permanently excluding them. We set up alternative curriculum in here on sufferance and every single one of them said to me that was great, those were our successes last year whereas we also got from that year group about a dozen kids that got better results than ever been achieved on this site which was quite phenomenal and we also got 90 Ds. We missed the 5 A-C’s including English and maths by about 25 kids who missed it by 1 C and that would have taken us well over the 30%.

It is interesting that this interview was carried out nearly five months after the examination results were published and the retention of detailed figures, possibly, reflects how
important output data is to schools even when staff, are not convinced that it should have such a high profile. Neil clearly values other aspects of the schools performance other than the number of students obtaining higher grades so is highlighting what has been achieved by a group of students who could easily have been permanently excluded from the school. Keeping these students in school represents a challenge that many schools would either not face or would manage differently. To retain students who have challenging behaviour is a value choice and is a choice likely to be made at the risk of increasing the chance of not meeting externally set performance targets. In this quote Neil is also clearly illustrating the fine line between ‘success and ‘failure’ by describing how twenty five students missing the benchmark of 5+A*-C grades by one grade prevented the school from meeting its target.

The discourse model within which the majority of these school leaders are located in terms of their value systems seems to be that of post-war welfarism (Gewirtz, 2002). This is not surprising as given the age profile of those interviewed it is likely that they entered the profession in the early late 1970s or at some point during the 1980s. There were two late entries into the profession, Kelvin and Diane. Kelvin had been in teaching for fifteen years when the interviews were conducted, coming from industry into teaching and starting at a school which had just become Grant Maintained under a head teacher who is now a senior government policy adviser. Kelvin was one of only two teachers who started with the importance of examination results and at the time of the interviews as indicated earlier had just accepted a headship in another authority. Diane had been in teaching longer but also entered from industry, however, very early on had got involved with teaching PSHE and taken on a pastoral role so her values are likely to be more aligned with more child centred colleagues. A number of those interviewed had completed NPQH during very early phases of the scheme but none had been involved with more recent schemes such as Future Leaders or Fast Track.

6.2.3 How do school leaders think that the Department would define a good school?
In stark contrast to the wide opinions expressed by school leaders about what constitutes a good school, when asked about how the Department would define a good school there is very common agreement. Of the eight individuals asked directly six said that the Department would make a judgement about what constitutes a good school based only on outcome measures with the remaining two referring to OFSTED judgements.

Oh, some sort of statistical nightmare that I wouldn’t have much interest in. (Felix)
One that has lots of results, no exclusions, perfect attendance, very statistically driven. (Neil)
Ultimately it’s about out turn. (John)
On whether or not you meet your targets. (Mike)

Ann also mentioned that they might want quiet classrooms and Len mentioned quality teaching and learning. Colin stated that he did not know what the department meant by a good school:

Haven’t got a clue. I don’t know, I honestly haven’t read anything about what the DCSF would describe as a good school.

Ivan said that he thought the department expressing a concern over aspects other than achievement was simply rhetoric:

I think that what they are after is some achievement without a doubt and I think that is the big driver. I’m not sure for all their rhetoric that they really do see children being at the heart of the school.

With one exception (Kevin) there is a clear distinction between how the teachers define a good school and how they think the Department would define a good school but only Olive makes reference to this mismatch of views:

Probably very different to what the DCSF says what a good school is.
Other teachers do not comment directly on the difference between their views and those of the department but a number seem to feel they know they should be putting more of an emphasis on results.

….. not necessarily with just straight academic performance. (Colin)

……. not just academically but in all areas, sporting, within our community all areas like that. (Darren)

……. the results might not look blindingly good but if the people or stakeholders believe it’s a good school then that has got to be the most important element I think. (Edward)

Diane acknowledges that there might be an expectation that there is a ‘right’ answer.

You get caught up in giving the correct answer.

It seems clear that the teachers know what they ‘should be saying’ which is primarily a judgement based on examination results but this is at odds with their personal values.

6.2.4 The way in which school leaders define their own school.

Olive, Ann, Darren, Eleanor, Mike and Edward regard their school as good in comments either direct from OFSTED or using the language of OFSTED which is illustrated by Olive’s comment:

I think we have got a good school, in fact I think that parts of our school are outstanding, the work that we do with challenging students is exemplary in some ways…..

The responses can again be grouped under three headings – the school, the students and the teachers.

The school
Striving to achieve, lots of different levels, achievement going up, good attendance, good behaviour, low exclusions, quality pastoral care (3), inclusive, split site, had a shift in culture for learning, rising standards, quality lessons, traditional and coasting.

The students

Want to succeed, have low aspirations.

The teachers

Have high aspirations.

Interestingly ten of the teachers use descriptions which describe movement in all cases implying for the better or improving:

I think this a good school getting better. (Mike)

From the point of view of the children I think it’s getting better all the time in the sense that achievement levels are going up. (Ivan)

The development of the current school in 3 years of existence has been vast. (John)

This one. It’s certainly moving. (Diane)

This seems to fit with the current discourse that everything must continually get better and there is no acceptance that for some schools simply to retain current levels of performance represents a considerable achievement and that school performance might dip depending on the ability and attitudes within a particular cohort.

6.2.5 The way in which the senior leaders think that the Department would currently describe their school.

Five teachers were not asked this question so there were only fifteen responses and these divided into three broad categories which were as defined by OFSTED, improving and underperforming. There were also a small number of comments which would not fit these categories.
**OFSTED related**

As the judgement in a recent OFSTED inspection or HMI visit (2), special measures, no longer special measures and satisfactory (2).

**Improving**

Rising curve of attainment, improving (4)

**Underperforming**

Low attainment compared to national averages (6), has weaknesses currently, has capacity to improve, may class us as a failing school, underachieving/underperforming.

**Other comments**

Other individual comments related to recognising a shift in culture for learning, hopefully recognise the challenging circumstances, caring supportive school with inclusive ethos and not understanding how long change takes. Some examples are quoted below:

In difficulties, in special measures and a school that is improving. (Florence)

No longer special measures. (Len)

They would describe it as satisfactory because of our low attainment levels or their interpretation of low attainment levels in not securing national averages for examination results at GCSE. (Olive)

Well we are national challenge school, we are in special measures so they would say probably that the school has weaknesses at this time. (Len)

They probably wouldn’t class us as a successful school because of our results, our GCSE results because they are so focused on our 5 A* to C including English and maths and we just got below 30%. (Clair)

It is clear that the teachers consider that the government would not see their schools as being successful because of their examination results and that this judgment does not take into account the strengths that they see the school as having.
6.2.6 The contrast between how leaders see their own school and how they think the Department would see it.

When asked to describe their own school there is some variation in responses within the whole group but the teachers in the same school tend to be more similar in their responses. This is perhaps not surprising because all the schools involved had been through a major reorganisation which left many staff unhappy for a variety of reasons. Some were in temporary accommodation including split sites. The comments would also reflect relationships within the school and be based on that particular moment in time. However, a consistent pattern that emerges when staff answered the questions directly is the discrepancy between their view of their school and how they thought it might be seen by the department. School B is in a different position to the others being a sixth form college and having recently had an OFSTED inspection and been graded as good. In school A the staff’s opinions are quite varied with Andrew seeing it as inclusive and pastorally strong, Brian as coasting and Colin as developing particularly in making the shift from an emphasis on pastoral aspects to one on academic aspects. Ann thinks it is a good school. The most positive view comes from Olive a headteacher:

I think we have got a good school, in fact I think parts of the school are outstanding.

In contrast there is a majority view that the Department would see school A in a different light.

Unfortunately I think that what they would do is, is that they would look at the raw statistics and what we have for examination results, particularly examination results and attainment figures and they would tend to categorise it as a school that is underachieving. (Andrew)

I suspect the DCSF would see us as an underachieving, underperforming school. (Colin)

I think they would describe it as satisfactory. (Olive)
In school C all the senior leaders make reference to the school moving forward and changing whereas Eleanor the headteacher is unequivocal about the strengths of the school whilst sharing the notion of making progress:

I would say it is a good school. We are still not happy, we still want it to improve further, we have had a huge shift so that we now definitely have a culture for learning and achievement. (Eleanor)

As with the staff in school A there is a common view that the department would take a less positive view of the school:

They probably wouldn’t class us as a successful school because of our results, our GCSE results because they are so focused on our 5 A*-C including English and maths and we got just below 30%. (Barbara)

They would say we are satisfactory and improving. (Eleanor)

In school D the staff tended to focus on the challenges involved in bringing two schools together and on the achievement of carrying this out successfully but its impact on staff morale. It is relevant here that when the interviews were carried out school D was in the process of making some teachers redundant following the overstaffing after reorganisation. In asking how the department would see the school Graham the headteacher chose not to answer directly:

I think the DCSF would hopefully recognise the challenging circumstances within which we work and live and would describe it as a caring, supportive school with a very positive ethos.

The responses from school E were more varied:

Well, we are a National Challenge school, we are in special measures so they would probably say that the school has weaknesses at this time. I think they would also, I would very much hope if they came in and looked at this school now they would realise that the weaknesses they described when we were inspected in 2008, in fact the vast majority of those have gone, that we have turned the school around ……. (Len)
A school in difficulties, a school in special measures and a school that is improving. (Florence)

It is clear that in all cases the staff interviewed see current educational policy as defining a good school in terms of reaching certain benchmarks which take no account of the school context or other dimensions that a school might have. This is a view that is very much at odds with their views of what constitutes a good school. It is of note that this does not appear to be challenged, with senior staff striving to demonstrate they will eventually meet these figures. There was no sense of anger or of great injustice more of a resigned acceptance that this is how schools are judged and that it is the job of school leaders to improve results by whatever method regardless of whether that meant ignoring other aspects of education that they feel personally are important.

It is evident that a number of those interviewed regard their treatment as being unfair with the Department looking at the data and dismissing the context.

I think that someone sat in an ivory tower would simply look at a list of schools and they would look at the Bridgetown area and they would look at a school such as G and they would compare that with us and they would want to know why there are differences. (Andrew)

The government constantly labels grammar schools as being good schools because they get good results. It’s a very simplistic, very naïve attitude. Schools in challenging circumstances are called bad, poor, underperforming schools even if they achieve value added for the children and that’s wrong. (Colin)

It takes no notice of the realities of a culture of an area of the socioeconomic background or the history of the place or the quality of the teaching and learning that goes on in the school. It suits them to have kids that go to a school that is labelled. They need crap to actually keep the quality schools good. If you have an average GCSE result you’ve got to have a below average GCSE performance haven’t you and if you don’t have a below average GCSE performance you are not going to get high achieving schools and so it’s always going to happen. (Neil)

Andrew, Colin and Neil are outlining how they regard the Department as labelling schools as being successful or failing on the basis of basic output data that makes no attempt to make reference to the context within which the school is operating. Neil also makes the
point that if some schools are labelled as good then others are being positioned as being poor and that this positioning takes no account of what is going on in the schools.

6.2.7 The impact of labels

A number of labels have been applied to schools in areas of economic hardship such as schools in challenging circumstances or social priority areas. With the introduction of OFSTED a new set of labels crept in such as ‘in special measures’ or having ‘serious weaknesses’ and most recently National Challenge schools. Whilst it is unlikely that there was any intentional link it has transpired that these labels are primarily associated with schools serving areas of economic hardship. In the interviews all the school leaders were specifically asked both why they thought these labels were used and what the impact was on teachers, students and parents. David didn’t answer the question directly but talked about the fact that many parents send their children out of Bridgetown to be educated as a consequence of parental perceptions of the schools in the town:

Well unfortunately the fact is no matter what you do, we’ve still got this leakage out of the more able students and maybe the slightly better behaved students who got more settled family backgrounds

The implication of this is that the schools having labels over a significant period of time has had and is having a significant effect on the balance of the ability of students. There is currently no school in Bridgetown that has an average CAT (cognitive ability test) score of 100 (the expected average) for any year group.

Graham and Mike saw the labels as an attempt to direct resources to where they were most needed:
The rationale was intended to be a way of attempting to adequately reflect and value the progress made by the students within that context and through that the performance of the staff and the school and the leadership in general with a mind to not handicapping or prejudicing or judgments premised on outcomes but rather to begin to hopefully understand and respect and value and ascribe a value to the processes and the relationships that are developed within it and therefore you know the ethos and the success or failure of these soft, qualitative qualities as they impact upon hard edge outcomes. (Graham)

It’s perhaps a group of schools that perhaps need additional support or perhaps are not doing things quiet as they should do or perhaps need additional supervision or whatever. I think it’s to categorize them. I mean we put our kids into categories, we put them into ethnic minorities we put them into children with attendance problems, we put them into children who are regularly excluded and that allows us to focus attention on those children, perhaps it’s the same allowing them to focus attention on schools which are not ticking the boxes in relation to achieving the targets and standards that are expected of us so to some extent you are not ticking the boxes therefore you are put into a category. (Mike)

Graham’s response is difficult to unpick but appears to indicate he regards the use of labels as part of a wider process to understand and make judgements about what is happening in a school. Graham’s comments reflect the inability of all of the senior leaders to clearly articulate the underlying rationale behind initiatives such as the National Challenge. Mike clearly says that labels are part of the mechanism for directing resources to schools that might need greater support and seems to regard them as part of a rational process without reflecting on the wider implications that they might have.

Kelvin does not have a problem with labels as a way of directing support but says that the labels should be for use by educational professionals and that they become dangerous when presented to the media or to parents:

I do feel that labels should be for the professionals and not necessarily for general consumption and that’s where we often go wrong and I think it should be something that’s kept within the profession because as soon as you label a school in the world the media get hold of it and do what they do with it and they don’t understand and not interested in understanding, parents get hold of it and don’t understand it and the danger is that you are stuck with the label and that can work at both ends.……..[few words inaudible] so labels in themselves if they have things attached to them which help the school its better. (Kelvin)
Kelvin is articulating the dangers that labels can have when they are used to describe schools in very crude ways based on information that gives the impression of being easily understood and interpreted.

Diane gave probably the most positive response about the potential benefits of labels feeling that they provide a challenge to which teachers respond but she also expressed a recognition that the expectations are constantly shifting. However, it was Diane’s view that this would benefit the students:

Being a National Challenge, again it’s another challenge isn’t it, it’s another goal to say right we are challenged and it’s something we will get out of so it’s always offering us the next step to prove ourselves and it doesn’t scare us, it doesn’t make us crawl up under the carpet and curl up and die and we just think blinking heck this is another challenge to rise to and we will rise to it. I’m sure, without a doubt, once we’ve done that there will be something else. It’s the goal posts moving, isn’t it, like with the A* to Cs and then it becomes English and maths and once we’ve hit our 30 then it will be put up won’t it to 40 and then to 50 so it’s always……and that’s not a bad thing nationwide is it? It has to be otherwise you are doing a great disservice to the children. (Diane)

Diane does not challenge the notion that standards as measured by examination results can continually rise. Diane does not appear to consider that as performance in examinations rises nationally there will always be schools who remain at the bottom of the performance tables and that her school is at risk of being one of those schools. In readily accepting ‘the goal posts moving’ Diane does not comment on the way in which the school curriculum is liable to come distorted by the measures that are used to measure performance. So she mentions including English and maths being included in the targets but not the impact this could have on other subjects.

A theme that emerged in the interviews was that a number of the teachers felt that labels such as National Challenge were a ‘blanket’ (Brian) approach based on limited understanding of the area:
It’s about raising standards and I think it’s a crude measure as a way of trying to raise standards right across the board. I think the money’s there, the ideology and the support is there but it came I feel from central government and they do not have the knowledge base or an understanding of local circumstances and I think the sort of blanket approach may work in more areas then it doesn’t work and they’re looking at the end product and if they achieve that by what they’re doing that’s success and other situations like that in Bridgetown is a casualty of not fitting into the norm and maybe, maybe at a later stage they might start tweaking the blanket approach and directing it to the needs of other communities and circumstances you get into politics don’t you the blanking of the minds is another thing, if this is what we’re going to do and there are casualties and we were a casualty of that! (Brian)

It was common across the interviews that strategies were seen as being imposed and not based on a knowledge of the local context in which they would be implemented. The same sentiments are expressed slightly differently by Andrew who sees the labels as being simplistic and not recognizing the considerable variation between schools and their contexts:

I think they have to deal with the unemployment figures if I’m being cynical but I do feel that the National Challenge is maybe in some instances it probably is, they probably do feel that maybe there are decisions being made that are black and white and I don’t think that there are situations in schools that are black and white and I think that for whatever reason we fall into a black and white category. I think we are a school of grey and I think more towards the positive shade of grey than the negative. (Andrew)

Andrew is making reference to the fact that schools are complex and difficult to neatly define as are the contexts within which they operate.

Other themes that emerge are the links between labels and economic circumstance; the potentially damaging effects of the labels and the connection between these. John links disadvantage and labels and makes the point that the benchmarks introduced with National Challenge whilst seeming low are in line with Fisher Family Trust targets for those particular students. The implication of this is that the school would have to be performing at a very high level just to achieve these apparently low targets:
Now it’s very difficult to sort of just label a school because of a specific circumstance. There are some fantastic schools in disaffected areas within the country but it’s taken a lot of work and it’s taken a lot of input as regards funding and finance because you do need those things to make changes and we need to have an impact and that’s the only way you can do that through that resource. The label of National Challenge I think is an unfortunate one because it's a benchmark that was just suddenly imposed and I think when we start looking at sort of taking the wider view of what National Challenge is telling us, basically it’s about underachievement but when you start digging down into things on Raiseonline and Fisher Family Trust and you start looking at the data and you start looking at individual students and taking it at that level and then when you start realising that actually the threshold for national challenge is only shall we say the suggested target that is identified by Fisher Family Trust. (John)

John is starting to challenge the rationale behind the use of simple benchmarks and recognises that what might be a low target for one school could be a very challenging target for another school.

Clair makes the point that the labels attach to areas and do not recognize the work that schools are doing:

I think they use those only because of where we are, where we are situated really on the map and the deprivation and things like that. I understand why they call us National Challenge because we are not meeting the national criteria. I don’t think they actually see it for what it really is and how we are moving forward with a lot of children that are even below that and we work very well with some of the really deprived children but they are kind of judging us with those. (Clair)

Eleanor makes a similar point, but also highlights the impact that the labels are having on those staff already contending with many issues that would not arise in other types of school:
If I’m very honest I think the government have no understanding of the challenges, different areas or pockets of society that we face. They just expect children to come to school and all get 5 plus high grades including English and maths despite any challenges they may have. I mean the children coming into different schools with all sorts of baggage and what we try and do is take that baggage off them so that they can achieve and there are very different challenges to that. In some schools there is huge parental support, in others there aren’t and I am sick and tired of being labelled as underachieving, national challenge and the pressure put on, particularly the senior leadership team is crucifying at times. You wonder why you carry on doing it and I think it takes a certain type of person to actually commit themselves to be part of a senior leadership team, particularly in a very, very challenging school. (Eleanor)

Eleanor very clearly expresses the impact that labels can have on senior leaders in certain schools and the pressure that they can exert on these individuals. The potentially damaging effects of the labels are also described by Florence who sees these as an unintended outcome of policy:

It can feel punitive and I don’t think to be punitive is the intention but I think it’s very hard for somebody designing a system to ever be able to comprehend the impact on individual members of staff, students, communities and weigh up whether the methods are the best methods I think it takes some time but it certainly has had an impact over all and certainly it’s given schools the chance to really evaluate what they do and try to focus on teaching and learning and I think that’s been an improvement that has definitely come about, I think there are real improvements in teaching and learning. (Florence)

Florence takes a very balanced view of the use of labels but clearly feels that they can be perceived as being punitive. Neil feels that the motives behind the labels are more cynical and that they are being used to demonstrate that the government is taking a tough stance on schools that appear to have low examination results. He also introduces the notion that in any norm referenced system like examination results there will always be schools below average and that the schools with these below average results could well be performing well within the constraints of the context in which they operate and the ability of the students in their schools:
For political purposes. It suits them down to the ground to do it. It means that they can be seen to have criteria by which they direct funds which, is a positive, but they can be seen to be being tough with schools that are underachieving and that are rubbish in inverted commas. It takes no notice of the realities of a culture of area of the socioeconomic background or the history of the place or the quality of the teaching and learning that goes on in the school. It suits them to have kids so a school is labelled. They need crap to actually keep the quality schools good. If you have an average GCSE result you’ve got to have a below average GCSE performance haven't you and if you don’t have a below average GCSE performance you are not going to get high achieving schools and so it’s always going to happen.

This is expressed in a different way by Olive who says that in her long teaching career in schools that she would regard as effective these schools have never achieved national averages in examination results:

Well I suppose the cynic in me would say that that’s to show some of us up politically to move schools on and they’ve done it for years haven't they and I don’t think I’ve never ever worked in a school that’s achieved national averages and when I look back at the schools that I’ve worked in now, not one of the schools I’ve worked in over 32 years still aren’t achieving national averages and I feel that the schools that I’ve worked in during my career have been great schools and I’ve certainly felt that I’ve made a difference. (Olive)

The most cynical view of all was expressed by Ann:

To make other schools feel good I think it would, ……

Barbara sees the labels whatever they might be as becoming transposed as ‘failing.’

I don’t know really. So they can be seen as doing something but it’s giving a school a label isn’t it as a failing school so I really don’t know why they do that. (Barbara)

Both Mike and Andrew saw labels as being linked to ways of directing money to those schools that needed it most and there was an acknowledgement that funding had been directed to the schools in Bridgetown:
I think they’ve poured more money into education. I can’t really see practical things that they’ve done, I think resources have been upped I’m not aware who has put all the strategies into school, support assistants etc.. (Andrew)

Whilst recognising that schools in Bridgetown have been given additional financial support Andrew is unclear as to what practical support has been provided and as with the vast majority of the other senior leaders makes no reference to any support from the National Challenge Advisors.

6.2.8 A focus on English and maths

A feature in many of the interviews was the emphasis that was placed on the importance of English and maths within the National Challenge and school improvement agenda. The focus has been on students obtaining a GCSE C grade or above in English and maths because there have been a variety of ways such as BTECs that the other three GCSEs or equivalents can be obtained. Many schools now devote time and resources to increasing grades in English and maths. Those interviewed discuss issues arising from this policy but do not question the thinking that underlies it. Clair describes how this strategy is enacted and sees the pressure that is placed on the teachers of these two high profile subjects:

For us at the moment, we’ve put a great deal of support in maths and English. It’s very high profile across the college. Every member of staff is aware of their responsibility to contribute to maths and English, the students are aware of it. I know the maths and English staff are feeling quite a great deal of pressure because they’ve got to achieve but the other staff I think are supporting them in that and they are now understanding how important the maths and English is so we do have a lot of activities based around maths and English and we try and incorporate those in lots of different lessons, not just maths and English. (Clair)

What is unclear in Clair’s answer is why maths and English have become so important in her school. They could be regarded as important simply because they are required to reach externally set benchmarks and not because they were a priority for the school in addressing the needs of the students. Ivan seems to feel that whilst the focus on English and maths has had an impact it is part of a short term approach and that whilst improving grades in those
subjects it is not necessarily improving the overall quality of education that a student receives:

Well I suppose to some extent challenge status has made schools sit up and think, right we’ve got to get our English and maths results up, we’ve got to get kids getting both English and maths, it’s had an impact and I think what it’s done it’s made schools look at tactics, short term tactics to get the figures up, you know things like every school is now doing early entry for instance, does that really make a difference to the quality of education the kids receive, no but it does make a difference to the grades they get at the end. (Ian)

Two potential implications of the approach are raised by Barbara and Andrew. Barbara sees that other subjects might start to feel as though they are not important and Andrew that those students who are outside the ‘target’ group (those on the border between grades C and D) might lose out as attention is so narrowly focused:

 Especially last year, the year before when it was all 5 A to Cs and staff worked so hard and students worked really hard and say we got it at 50% and it was 64% and then all of a sudden that doesn’t even matter because we don’t really have a 5 A to C target now do we. Also with the emphasis on maths and English I know the whole school should be focused and that but I think some subjects get a bit oh its always English and maths, like the science department as well because that is a core subject but with focusing so much on English and maths that some staff may think that they don’t count, it doesn’t matter what they do. (Barbara)

When I do think it will impact on them in the is the pressure that we as a staff will put on them identifying groups of students we think will achieve this or achieve that. Some of it is good to home in on certain students to raise attainment some students could do well out of it but there is a danger and I think the danger is maybe those students who don’t come under the RAP\(^{21}\) category might get bypassed they will get an diluted curriculum and diluted care to achieve optimum results. (Andrew)

This could result in more students not being supported to obtain the top grades and less able students not being supported to get lower grades than a C. If schools start to support certain groups of students in order to avoid being labelled as failing and this is at the expense of working with the rest of the students it will have serious implications for the ethos and culture of the school and risk compromising the beliefs and values of some staff.

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\(^{21}\)It was a requirement of the National Challenge that the schools had a Raising Attainment Plan (RAP)
In this way initiatives such as National Challenge could start to define the nature of schooling in areas of economic hardship and even lead to the most able students not being given the opportunity to realise their full potential.

6.2.9 Building Schools for the future (BSF)

During the interviews I was struck by the fact that generally there was not much emphasis placed on the fact that all the schools involved in the study had undergone a massive reorganisation under the Building Schools for the Future program with three of them still being in temporary accommodation when the interviews were conducted. The exception was school D where all staff made comments about the trauma caused by the process and its lasting legacy. This is illustrated by responses from John and Kelvin:

> Bringing two previous schools together, bringing a cohesion, a cohesiveness to both students and staff was a challenge. There was a lot of disruption and a lot of disaffection in both staffing and students and hankering after the past. (John)

> I think that happened when we merged. I think for the first year we lost that student centred because people were very bothered about what had happened to them (Kelvin)

Clair also mentions BSF in the context of the pressure that teachers in Bridgetown are constantly under as they cope with a constant stream of school improvement strategies:

> I think we are in special situation because BSF caused a great deal of damage as you are probably aware anyway and the pressure on staff has been vast. The last 3 years we’ve not had a let up and staff have been extremely pressurised.

BSF was used in Bridgetown as an attempt to eradicate not only educational underperformance but racial tension within the town. Felix is very doubtful that these aims had been met:
No I think a perfect example. I use it with my students actually as an example the history of unintended outcomes. Both the cohesion and the inclusion objectives that were trumpeted loudly at the beginning of the project as far as I can see the project so far has actually had a counterproductive effect on both which is hushed up, denied and buried bland, optimistic, achievement, style by our lords and masters. (Felix)

Whilst not specifying who ‘our lords and masters’ are Felix seems to be alluding to a culture which demands that things always get better and chooses to ignore problems that might exist and conflict with this constant improvement model.

6.2.10 The advantages of pressure

A number of those interviewed said that the pressure of policies such as National Challenge had some advantages. These included bringing staff together:

….state the negative, it’s extra stress, it’s extra workload, it maybe disengages staff, it maybe makes them feel undervalued but I think there are some positives in there in many ways, it all sounds, it’s obvious to feel undervalued etc., but in my experience it does also galvanise them together as a group of people in facing the challenge of being considered not worthy. (Brian)

Neil said that it had forced staff to improve their practice and really focus on teaching and learning:

I think there has been a genuine improvement in what we do at schools and where it’s come from I don’t know, I think because of the pressure we’ve been put under to meet targets and to have school improvement and some of things that have gone with that, I think we all raised our game. I think it’s also because of all that pressure and all of the sitting down and analysing it, I think, I’m convinced because obviously as a school in special measures I’ve spent a hell of a lot of time dissecting teaching and learning and how we can improve it and the different strategies you can use in a classroom. (Neil)

It is interesting that Neil regards the pressure as being the reason for the improvements in his school and does not mention external advice and support. Florence expressed the view that it gave the leadership team a ‘mandate’ to force through improvement but also that change in schools can be a long term process:
There comes a point where that’s difficult and yet in other ways it gives you a mandate to get on with the job so in one sense it can help you unify your staff to be behind that improvement and we have come through a period where our staffing has changed quite significantly to a staff that are definitely behind the project. How long that can be sustained in the face of the length of time it’s taking to move things on is a concern. From a personal point of view, having been on this journey that’s also involved building a new school as part of the school improvement and being part of that change and then to see the school go into special measures and then to see the school picking up and improving, that whole process has been at times exhausting. It challenges you in your own beliefs about school improvement to believe that you are still doing the right things and yet there aren’t any other things to do other than what you truly believe in but when it’s not happening as quick as demanded then you feel a little bit of the pressure there but it has been the possibility to work together with staff, look at the staffing, look at responsibilities and establish a strong and effective team really in the sense that it can do the things a school should do, an effective system in terms of delivering the results and is yet to do that and it can be very hard and it can feel a slog and to present the optimism that a senior leader needs to present all the time can be quite a challenge sometimes. (Florence)

Florence’s comments cover many of the issues that have been raised earlier such as the pressure from external demands and the focus on examination results. She also raises the issues that the beliefs of individuals can be challenged. It is in this mix of pressure, externally imposed challenge, the complex needs of the students, individual beliefs and values possibly at odds with the prevailing orthodoxy that these school leaders are constructing their professional identity.

6.2.11 What drives government policy?

A number of those interviewed regard education policy as being driven by political motives and a desire for the government to be seen to be taking action:

It’s the politics of being seen to take action and being able to demonstrate by some anarchic method that that action is successful or that there is due retribution where it isn’t. (Felix)

I think you can’t take the political element out of government. I think unfortunately for whatever reason our particular game education is a political football and I think there is accountability at their level and I think they do have to feel that they are doing something to drive standards up (Andrew)
Felix also expresses the view that by focusing on taking a ‘tough’ stance on a small number of schools in challenging circumstances the government is avoiding the underlying problems such as poverty:

Because the government fails to take proper cognisance of the effects of relative social economic deprivation. It’s dead simple. The reason they do that is because they prefer to purvey the notion that the problems that they experience can be solved at a socially superstructural level through things like schools whereas they can’t be. (Felix)

It is not immediately clear what Felix means by these comments and how schools operate at superstructural level but what is clear is that he thinks that educational policy does not take into account socioeconomic context and that by focusing on certain schools deep rooted problems are seen to be being addressed.

Summary

The analysis of the National Challenge in Chapter 4 showed how a good school as defined by the dominant discourses is one that has attainment above a predetermined benchmark. For a school to be judged inadequate by OFSTED in terms of student achievement it has to meet the criteria that ‘Attainment is consistently below floor standards or is in decline and shows little, fragile or inconsistent improvement’ (OFSTED, 2012, p 33). So a school with low attainment starts an inspection at a disadvantage to many other schools. The school leaders in this study did not see attainment as the most important measure of an effective school and were much more interested in developing the students socially. They know that they are judged on their outcome measures and appear resigned to this. The vast majority of those interviewed had a very positive view of their own school but believed that this view would not be shared by the department because of their performance measures. They recognise that educational discourses construct them as failing and that this leads to labels being attached to them, placing them under pressure and stigmatizing them. A couple of individuals saw the advantages of labelling being that resources could be
targeted and that they might bring the staff together. It was very clear that there was a considerable mismatch between the values of, and the beliefs about the purpose of education of the senior leaders and of those inherent in neoliberal education discourses.

There was evidence in the interviews of how the schools were changing their curriculum in order to boost their English and maths results in an attempt to get closer to the benchmarks. This could reduce the breadth of the students’ curriculum and place more value on certain subjects. Another possible consequence is that the school directs its efforts and resources to students on the C/D borderline or at the expense of more able or less able students.

6.3 Research Question 2: How are senior teachers constructing their professional identity in these schools in relation to these discourses and models of change?

The interviewees were asked to talk about their career, the choices they had made and how they had reached their current position in an attempt to gain some insight into how they understand their roles and how much agency they see themselves as having had in arriving in their current positions.

6.3.1 The interests and values of the senior leaders

At various points in the interview the interviewees make it very clear that they are very pastorally orientated and enjoy working with students on a lot more levels than simply trying to maximise academic performance. So Andrew makes very clear his commitment to the ‘whole child.’

I think yes, I think over the years I’ve realised that every single pupil is of value and every single pupil can achieve and be helped in what they want to do and also I’ve also realised that quite often it is the development of the person as a whole that matters and not academic progress that matters. (Andrew)

When asked if she would like to work in a high achieving school Clair makes clear the level of challenge that exists in working in schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged
areas but is very clear that she wants to work in a school where she feels that she can make a difference to the lives of children:

I don’t think I would know. I am aware that high achieving schools have obviously got very different challenges but I’m really, really interested in the backgrounds and the pastoral care of children and that’s why I do it so even though it is very challenging and things I wouldn’t change it. (Clair)

A very similar point is made by Graham when he reflects on being asked by a member of his family why he does not apply for headships in schools in more socially advantaged areas:

My mother in law is constantly saying to me I just don’t understand why you work in these schools and I think part of me would love to go to work in a school that had supportive parents but you know the reality is probably not to be honest with you, the reality is that the challenges and rewards of working within a school in challenging circumstances and to actually enable young people to succeed and exceed attainment wise and prospect wise and indeed life chance wise as against what would naturally be assumed by their circumstances at birth are phenomenal.

Throughout the interviews there is a sense of the vast majority of those interviewed having a strong commitment to social justice and a belief that in their professional role they can make a difference to the lives of young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

This is well illustrated by Barbara:

Just the students because I think they deserve good teachers don’t they because they don’t have, I’m not saying all our students because some of our students come from very quite well off families and it is changing but there is a majority isn’t there that do come from less affluent families and they haven't got the best start in life and if we can give them that then I think they deserve good teachers and a good school. (Barbara)

The only people interviewed without direct experience of working in schools that have been given OFSTED or National Challenge labels are Edward and Felix but they do work in a sixth form which is located in the same catchment area as the other schools but is a post-16 provider. Felix is of the opinion that schools are very much a product of their context:
Schools are social institutions and they reflect the societies that produce them.

So Felix also has a strong empathy with the teachers in the other 11-16 schools in the area and strong views on the potential impact of current improvement strategies such as labelling as National Challenge:

I think it must be thoroughly demoralizing and crushing.

Edward is the only other teacher without direct experience of schools that are categorized as challenging but has a view on the pressure that some of his colleagues are under:

Extremely debilitating for all staff within those schools. Whether it is the head of course, whose head ultimately can be on the block right down teaching support systems and so on, it’s not nice with that label.

On being asked if he would consider taking on a challenging school Edward is quite ambivalent and reflects on whether or not he has the right sort of experience or not but is clearly unsure about whether or not he would relish the opportunity:

Whether or not, being very self-critical, whether I’ve got the steely edge to sort of be really hard nosed about totally transforming an 11-16 school that had major difficulties. I’m not sure it’s a challenge I would necessarily relish. He says!

This is an interesting comment in that Edward talks about ‘steely edged’, ‘hard-nosed’ and ‘totally transforming’ which appears to construct the headteacher as transforming, business minded, heroic leader which mirrors the construct within the current discourses. Edward works closely with all the other headteachers in the study and has done so for a number of years. It is my opinion having known the headteachers for a similar length of time that none of them fit that model of leadership and I would speculate that Edward would share this view. However, he does not compare himself to his colleagues but to a constructed model.
Another theme that emerged was that the majority of teachers interviewed felt that working in schools in socially disadvantaged areas fitted their personality and skill sets:

I have just ended up in this school because I wanted to, I’ve always been clear about the type of school I wanted to work in and I’m a comprehensive school through and through person in terms of the best opportunities for children and what I could do with children. (Colin)

The notion of being in the right environment was there even for Mike who had recently had been forced to take time off work because of the impact that being in special measures was having on him personally. He reflected on whether he would like the opportunity to work in a school in a different context:

…….so I would love to experience working in a school which is perhaps not as challenging but I think my strengths lie in working in schools that are challenging. Does that make sense? (Mike)

So despite the enormous toll that his current situation has taken on his psychological well-being (it was a lengthy period of time that he had been away from school and he was currently on a phased return) Mike still says that his expertise is in working within a challenging environment. This could be interpreted in a number of ways. It could represent an enormous, and indeed selfless, dedication to the work that he does or it is possible that Mike is not sure how his application to a different sort of school might be received. It is likely that what he is saying results from the interaction of a host of factors both conscious and unconscious.

In terms of professional identity, there was no sense of any of the school leaders fitting the model of heroic, transforming school leader as described in Chapter 5 nor was there any sense of heroic struggle in coping with the challenging circumstances that threaten their health and possibly their career progression. There was no indication that any of the school leaders, despite many years of experience of leading schools in areas of economic hardship had any sense of being the holder of expert knowledge or of solutions. None of them
would fit the profile of a National Challenge Adviser. The overwhelming impression was of a group of professionals who cared about the welfare of their students and community who believed that they had chosen their particular career paths but were positioned within the discourses as being unsuccessful and not to have the skills and knowledge to function in different circumstances.

### 6.3.2 Sense of agency

Mike is making a strong claim to agency and to making a decision that others might find hard to understand. It is clear throughout the interviews that the school leaders interviewed had a strong sense that they were in their current positions by choice having made a number of decisions throughout their careers. It is also clear that they regard themselves as wanting the challenges that certain schools bring and share a sense of doing something that they see as worthwhile:

> As a general rule for myself I could never see myself in that position, that situation, I think I could do it, I don’t think I could see it as the same sort of challenge or the challenge would be different I think horses for courses isn’t it, I think I’m where I should be or where I feel comfortable or where I think I make the most difference or by choice or I could have gone many different ways or other places logically, I’ve chosen to be here and do what I do. (Andrew)

Ann and Colin clearly illustrate the acknowledgement of the level of challenge that exists and the fact that this is something they relish:

> Well I like to pick schools that are seen to be challenging. (Ann)

> I personally made a decision a long time ago to work in challenging schools because I came into education to make a difference not because I wanted a job. (Colin)

Olive, Diane and Ian clearly illustrate the sense of choice, desire for challenge and having a role which suits them:
I’m not a complacent person and I would find it very frustrating I think to go away or maybe I could make a difference and say you’re all complacent, you’re just resting on your laurels that these children are going to get your A to Cs. They should be getting A* across the board not falling to Bs, you know dropping from A* to B so I can’t see me ever wanting to go to a more academic school to be honest it’s always interesting here. (Diane)

It makes me much happier in myself. I made a deliberate choice to come out of a leading edge specialist training school, high achieving school to come and work in a school in challenging circumstances and that was because in my life before teaching I’d worked in inner city areas. (Ivan)

I don’t know, I think you might turn that the other way round because I’m not the sort of person that would work in a grammar school. I’ve never applied to work in one and I wouldn’t see myself working in one or fit in myself in my personality fitting in one. I think the sort of person I am I like to think that I make a difference with students. (Olive)

As illustrated by Diane’s comments there is a sense running through the interviews that these senior leaders see some colleagues in other types of school as being complacent.

There is also a sense that other colleagues are having an easier time, are more secure and place greater value on examination performance.

Andrew, Len and Florence are the most ambivalent about the fact that they work in a school that is regarded as challenging but even they claim contentment with the position they find themselves in:

I could have had a rewarding career in a very high achieving school and enjoy teaching children who present a different kind of challenge so in terms of choices as much as you ever have a choice I am content with the way things have fallen out. (Florence)

Neil and Len are the most effusive despite being in a school that has undergone the experience of a headteacher resigning following an OFSTED inspection that placed the school in special measures and a series of follow up visits by HMI.

In my personal case no it doesn’t because purely and simple I’ve made my bones and I don’t need to do anymore I just do it because I enjoy doing it, I do it for the love of it not because I’ve got to prove anything. (Neil)

While it’s very difficult it’s still very, very enjoyable, I love my job I really do enjoy working here, I love doing what we do here, ……. Len)
6.3.3 Perceptions of others

It was of interest to me how those interviewed would perceive they would be regarded by colleagues in schools that might be regarded as more ‘successful’ and how they would be regarded if they decided to apply for roles in these schools. This was in an attempt to see if they thought any stigma might be attached to the fact that they led a particular set of schools.

Brian talks about the stigma associated with being labelled as having serious weaknesses:

> Initially when those labels came out it wasn’t something I’d readily accept to say to someone I work in a school that got special measures because it’s got stigma attached to it and that stigma impacted on you that, however hard you worked or however good you were at your job someone else was telling you you’re no good at it and you took that to heart as individuals. (Brian)

There is also the notion in a number of the interviews that the labels are inappropriate in that they are often a reflection of the status or context of the school rather that the quality of what the staff offer. This is illustrated by Colin who also links the type of school to how teaching staff are described:

> You are assumed to be a poor teacher. The government constantly labels grammar schools as being good schools because they get good results. It’s a very simplistic, very naïve attitude. Schools in challenging circumstances are called bad, poor, under performing schools even if they achieve value added for the children and that’s wrong. (Colin)

Barbara makes reference to the way in which labels become misinterpreted so that notion of a school being in National Challenge became conflated with it being a failing school as was the case in the newspapers:

> I feel it’s a bit unfair sometimes that they do label us, you are a failing school, you are a National Challenge and I don’t see us as a failing school at all. (Barbara)
There are other examples of the sorts of messages that leaders assimilate because of the context of their school:

I think that it made an impression at first and I think that it certainly had an impression on me because I felt like that I’d been a naughty school girl and I think that some of the ways in which we had been treated as a school especially by a big authority like Lancashire which has got a full range of schools. (Olive talking about her school being put into National Challenge)

I think as regards my….it’s difficult to put it into words. I feel as though that I always have that sense of failure or fear of perception of failure at the back of my mind. In the sense of that I have looked to big brother watching. (John)

It is apparent that the majority of those interviewed would see external perceptions of them as professionals as being negative and in some ways as failures or second rate:

Others who haven’t been there will probably think we are as personally challenged as some of the kids and the parents within the community. They probably think if we were any good as senior leaders we would be leading a high attaining school rather than one in challenging circumstances.

It’s not going to be much of a label if a deputy head from a school that’s been in special measures or something applies for a headship in leafy Surrey. Some vulgar oik from a failing backstreet. (Felix)

I probably think some staff in a successful school may think we are second rate. (Barbara)

Diane is of the opinion that other teachers might see those in challenging schools of almost playing rather than delivering academic teaching:

They are probably thinking that we are jumping through hoops and trying to make learning too much fun. They are probably thinking we are Blue Petering it a bit when in fact we are extending our skills. (Diane)

There is a strong sense running through the interviews of labels being linked to stigma and negative public perceptions. So it was of interest how the interviewees responded when asked about how their experiences in schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas would be regarded if they applied for jobs in high attaining schools. Florence comments that she feels her application would not be looked upon favourably and makes reference to
the fact that she regards her current position as insecure because of the position the school is in:

I believe that it would not be positive. I also believe that my position here is insecure because of being associated with a school that over a period time has not proved itself in their view to be successful. (Florence)

Darren and Ann are doubtful they would be taken seriously as candidates in a ‘successful’ school:

I don’t think I would have had much chance of getting in there really because I’ve been in said schools for quite a long while and they might have thought I couldn’t cope with the more academic I don’t know. Once you’ve been in certain schools for over a certain time, once you look at the applicants you soon go to the bottom of the list. (Darren)

Probably not no, they probably wouldn’t even take me because they’d think I couldn’t handle, well I couldn’t deliver what they wanted me to deliver unless it was to support a behaviour support unit. (Ann)

If there are concerns relating to job security it could potentially lead to difficulty recruiting in some schools.

Summary

There was a strong sense in all the interviews that the senior leaders were very pastorally orientated, wanted to make a difference to the lives of young people and wanted to work in areas of economic challenge. This could be interpreted as meaning that they were in the sorts of school that they wanted to be in and that matched their skills and personalities. They expressed a strong sense of agency in terms of the choices they had made over their career paths but at the same time appeared less confident about the possible outcome if they applied for jobs in different schools. It was evident that they felt very much under pressure to the extent that in some cases this pressure was having a detrimental effect on their health but they still claimed to relish the challenges that they faced. There was no evidence of the ‘heroic’ leadership described in Chapter 5 and if read without names it
would be very hard to determine the roles of the school leaders as there was a strong sense of teamwork and ownership. The importance of leadership in educational discourse is not reflected in these transcripts and none of those interviewed make any significant reference to it. However, Edward who has no experience of working in a school that has been labelled as failing has a clear construct of what sort of leader and leadership is required to ‘improve’ these schools. There is strong evidence that labels are seen as punitive, stigmatizing, unfair and likely to damage careers if not lead to ill health.

All of the responses are very much located at a school level apart from vague references to policies being politically motivated or in one case schools bring a product of their context. None of the senior leaders attempts to offer any analysis of the wider context in which the schools are positioned by policy or ideology. Nor could they offer any coherent understanding or rationale behind the policies they enacted. I also found it very surprising that there appeared to be little anger or resentment expressed despite a sense of them being unfairly treated.

6.4 Research Question 3: What are the implications of senior leader identity for development and change in those schools serving areas of economic hardship?

6.4.1 The effects of pressure

It is evident that for the significant majority of the twenty senior leaders interviewed the pressure of leading and managing a school in challenging circumstances was proving to be considerable. Andrew said that many staff had not yet fully realised the amount of pressure that they would be under:

I think certainly I, I don’t think it’s impacted yet, I think that will come particularly when the next set of GCSE results come in and they realise the full implications of what NC actually can lead to. I think it will put more pressure on, and I’m not sure, I can’t see the benefit to the teacher in the classroom. I can’t see them.
A number of senior leaders commented on the way in which the constant pressure and criticism was having a negative effect on staff morale, increasing the sense of job insecurity and undermining staff confidence:

Well, probably yes because I think at the end of the day, these days it is, it seems to be going payment by results, we seem to have an element of maybe if you don’t get the results within 2 or 3 years it could be that the management in particular are under threat. (Andrew)

They have a negative effect on staff because staff work hard, the majority of staff work hard, the majority do the best they can and students achieve reasonably well, not as well as they probably should do but when you look at the starting point and where they end up with something and I think it’s very negative giving us a label because it’s a kick in the teeth isn’t it? (Ann)

Do I need to answer that after the letter came from Mr Balls saying we would sack heads and deputies who don’t achieve 30%, no, you can’t possibly feel as though you are secure. That piece of information that came through 12-18 months ago saying that people’s jobs are under threat if they didn’t perform at a certain level is the one thing in all my teaching career, it has made me consider moving to a high achieving school simply for job security because there is no security, there is less security in a post where you’ve gone for I think the right moral reasons. (Colin)

It can be very negative one in a lot of cases if they are continually bombarded by these statistics that bring them below a certain level. You just get over one hurdle that you’ve got above one target and they suddenly say, well yeh great but you are below this one and it is difficult to get the staff’s confidence back along the way I think, certainly within our establishment we do very well but if you keep being told that you are not performing well within your establishment then you start to think well what can I do about it and there is that many strategies going on here to overcome I’m sure in the end they might well run out of strategies. (Darren)

Graham expresses the sense of vulnerability that was mentioned by others not only in terms of concerns over losing their jobs but also about being placed in difficult situations on a daily basis that are beyond the experience of teachers in other schools:

I don’t know whether it’s job security or whether its vulnerabilities because I think that working in schools with challenging circumstances there is far more likelihood of you being placed in a situation that is outside or is in a no man’s land area between what is absolutely normal and prescribed and which is potentially unacceptable and that within that area you need to make professional judgments to be able to deal with situations in ways that potentially make you vulnerable. (Graham)
Eleanor made it clear that she thinks that headteachers are particularly exposed within the current improvement discourse:

Yes, I don’t think anybody understands the pressure of being a head. I was deputy for 2 or 3 years and thought well going to a head looks a heck of a lot easier. I had no idea. Yes the workload is different but it’s that responsibility at the end of the day the buck stops here and when people make mistakes, yes we sort it but we support them but at the end of the day you bear the brunt of it no matter what. If you achieve and do well, everybody wants to take the responsibility, yes we’ve done fantastically, we don’t do well and they look to the head. (Eleanor)

One aspect that I became very aware of during the interviews was that whilst generally positive about their own schools the teachers were generally much more negative about external perceptions of their own school. So Barbara who was very positive in relation to her school when asked what it would be like to work in a successful school said:

I’ve not had that much dealings with really successful schools. (Barbara)

It is interesting that Barbara sees the notion of being successful as not applying to her school. The long term effects of staff well-being are well illustrated in comments from Mike, Florence, Len and Eleanor:

It has yes. You know have been off recently. I have personally been off, I think it was 2 ½ weeks before Christmas, I just got to the point where I couldn’t do it anymore. It wasn’t anyone thing. (Mike)

However, it’s quite an interesting question that because head teachers I have worked with in the past have seen me as a potential head teacher and had my career been different that may have been a clear thought of myself, it’s a rather muddy thought for myself now and having seen headships not succeed with people, and this is over a long time, with people who I have huge regard for in their professional role and seeing the human misery, not just caused to heads but other senior people, part of me is less desirous of putting myself in that position and as I realistically understand that if I were to put myself forward for headship, I could only sensibly do it with schools that in challenging circumstances because why would somebody appoint somebody with my experience to a school that didn’t need it so it would be a case of putting myself with even more responsibility into an uncertain difficult challenge and you have to ask yourself why would I want to do that and is my desire to lead a school enough for the self doubts and the knowledge of the workload and those are questions that I say are quite muddied. (Florence)
It doesn’t happen now, it happened when we were in ….. a couple of times and it was really was getting to a mental issue but I am not somebody who can, I can never take time off. I’ve got a job to do and I’m letting everybody else down if I’m not there, I’ve got to go in and I’ve got to go and do it and you go in and you get on with it. It hasn’t always been easy. (Len)

I would say, I mean I’ve been in this building now for 13 years and we’ve always been labelled as some sort of underachievement and congratulations you are the bottom 12 in the county or the bottom 6 in the county for years and years now. Personally it has changed me, it has changed my personality. It puts massive pressure on my family life, luckily my husband is a teacher as well so understands the challenges. I’ve had to change as a head very, very much particularly over the last 3 or 4 years as the challenges have got greater and greater. The pressures are unrealistic. Work/life balance is impossible because you can’t put things aside but what I have learnt to do over the last 3 or 4 years is to build a very, very strong team around me so that pressure eases. (Eleanor)

The long term risks in terms of not being able to recruit staff to certain schools are expressed by Eleanor:

I think the more pressure is put on the most challenging schools the best quality staff would eventually have to get out before they break, including head teachers and senior teams. You know at the moment we are loving the challenge but as they keep turning the screws on this is what you’ve got to do, at what point do I as a head say I can’t do this anymore, I will go and work somewhere else, why would I stay here. I want to be here but how much pressure will they put on before they say right I can’t cope anymore, my work/life balance it’s not right and then other senior staff, to try and keep your very, very best staff in challenging environments is probably the toughest job I have and we don’t look at paying people to stay or anything like that but people do get a kick out of being here in a very sick bizarre way. (Eleanor)

6.4.2 The market

As schools are considered to be in the market place it is vital that they attract students. Part of the mechanism for supporting parents in making informed choices is the published data relating to the performance of schools. The majority of those interviewed felt that the mechanisms for comparison are unfair in that the school context should really be taken into consideration:
If it’s a blank piece of paper and we are comparing like schools with like schools I don’t think it’s fair. I still stand by the fact that I do agree that it should be accountable on 5 A to C’s including English and maths. I’m not sure if it has to be GCSE English and GCSE maths. I think there needs to be look at maybe becoming literate and numerate but I do not think it should be all schools I do think we’ve got to take into account deprivation factors as well even though I’ve said before it doesn’t matter what postcode you come from it doesn’t mean you can’t achieve it’s just that they’ve got huge barriers to get over before they do achieve. (Eleanor)

I think it’s totally unfair. The only piece of data to me that is fair is contextual value added, the rest of it is of no use whatsoever for anyone statistically, it can’t be. I can’t compete with a selective grammar school, I can’t compete with one of our local faith schools that takes students from all around Lancashire, I can’t compete on a level playing field and therefore I shouldn’t be compared to them so unless its contextual value added then we shouldn’t be compared. (Eleanor)

Under Michael Gove contextual value added measures have been removed so that current measures are based on attainment and progress based on prior performance.

Also the majority of teachers saw labels as having a negative effect on attracting students:

I think it’s more their parents if schools are labelled then parents are less likely to send their children here or until they actually get through the door and see what’s going on the labels have a very negative effect. (Ann)

I think parents would see the categories in well I don’t know, maybe I am a bitter old cynic but I imagine that a lot of the parents would see the school in fairly tabloid terms that it would be seen like a lepers bell. (Felix)

Felix makes the point that certain schools attract negative labels even if their contextual value added is good:

Schools in challenging circumstances are called bad, poor under performing schools even if they achieve value added for the children and that’s not right. (Colin)

Brian expresses the view that when parents look for what they would describe as the best school they would define this in terms of the school with the best examination results:
To get in the best place possibly which means a church school with the best results possible regardless of the needs of their child. There are some people that look at it differently but I would say that it’s a general view that parents aspire to get the best for their children irrespective of if it’s what they need and the best is judged by the highest numbers. (Brian)

Eleanor appears to offer a contradictory view saying that many parents do not pay attention to examination results or OFSTED labels:

I don’t actually. I think when the lowest ever examination results we got in one year we had the highest intake of year 7s ever. I think even when we had a notice improve label it didn’t have any effect on children leaving the school, in fact more children came to the school. I actually think the parents don’t look at labels really, some do but the majority talk to children and families. The bottom line is they want to know their child is going to be safe and happy and they are learning in school and I actually think when children arrive socialise at weekends they are the role models as well, never mind whether they’ve got their uniform on and that’s something it’s out of our control but I don’t think parents particularly look at labels. (Eleanor)

6.4.3 Managerialism

It is interesting that in the interviews there is little evidence of the heroic leadership model of headship and all the senior leaders talk about teams and use the word ‘we’ rather than ‘I.’

I’ve had to change as a head very, very much particularly over the last 3 or 4 years as the challenges have got greater and greater. The pressures are unrealistic. Work/life balance is impossible because you can’t put things aside but what I have learnt to do over the last 3 or 4 years is to build a very, very strong team around me so that pressure eases. (Eleanor)

I think one of the things that I’ve learnt is the absolute necessity to take advice from others before taking significant decisions and to not be arrogant and to assume that you know it all whilst at the same time having the self confidence so it’s the difference between being self confident and believing and having self belief and being arrogant and headstrong and I think whereas earlier in my career I could have been described as being well probably arrogant and headstrong I would like to now feel that people say that I have a core self belief and that I am strong without being ruthless and being consistent and the absolutely necessity to be consistent. (Graham)
Graham’s comments are probably the closest to those that might be associated with the ‘superhead’ construct but it seems that his experiences have resulted in him turning to seeking the support of others.

Summary

For the schools in this study one of the implications of the dominant educational discourses is that they may struggle to recruit senior leaders due to the pressure of the roles, the potential risks to career progression and the possible effects on health and well-being. There is the danger that schools in areas of economic hardship will be unable to recruit leaders or that those they do recruit will have a different ideology which is more linked to the leadership style and educational philosophy favoured by current education policy. The risk of this is that the loss of leaders who might be regarded as having their origins in welfarism will mean that the nature of these schools will change and I am aware of no research which indicates that these changes will better meet the needs of students who face enormous disadvantages arising from a lack of all forms of capital. Indeed I am not aware of any evidence that current policy will result in improvements in attainment that are sustained over a substantial time or that raising attainment will make any difference to overcoming the socioeconomic disadvantages that the children in these schools and their families experience.

It was strongly felt by those interviewed that labelling leads to increased difficulty competing in the market place as parents will want to avoid schools that are ‘failing.’ This effect is on top of the implications of performativity which leads to the production of outcome measures that will describe schools in areas of economic hardship in a very negative way so reinforcing the existing hierarchy of schools.
6.5 Summary

In this chapter I have attempted to identify some of the themes that emerged from the interview transcripts and presented some extracts from the interviews to illustrate these. I recognize that some of the material could equally well have been matched to another heading. In the next chapter I will attempt to interpret some of the data within a conceptual framework using Bourdieu’s thinking tools. Some of the key issues that have emerged are that the senior leaders:

- Have a strong child-centred philosophy and want to focus on a range of outcome measures.
- Would regard their schools as successful.
- Believe that the Department would not see their school as successful because only measurable data in the form of examination results is valued.
- State that they have chosen to work in their current schools and relish and enjoy the challenge.
- Feel stigmatised and that they would not ‘fit’ or would not be employed in schools with higher attainment levels.
- Feel under pressure in terms of job security, workload and day to day challenges.
- Feel that they have had little support other than financial.
- Believe that the drive to meet external, shifting targets is determining how schools organize themselves and what they value.
- Suggest that they are constantly improving.

In the next chapter I will link together the issues arising from the interviews and from the analysis of the policy documents within the historical, political and social context described in Chapter 2 and against the model of professional practice as it has evolved over the last thirty years and was described in Chapter 5.
Chapter 7 - The Discourses of Failure

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will set out a conceptual framework within which how senior leaders of schools in areas of economic hardship position themselves in response to the structuring context imposed by the discourses of managerialism, performativity and markets can be investigated. I will reflect on how their agency and professional identity interact with these discourses and how they might in turn reframe these discourses. The theoretical framework will be provided by Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tools’ (Wacquant, 1989, p 50). Identity will be conceptualised as arising from the interaction between various processes of self-construction from both internal states and external forces (Frosh, 2010) and discussed in the framework provided by dialogism (Holquist, 1990).

Evidence used to support the developing arguments will be provided from the analysis of the policy texts in Chapter 4 and of the interview transcripts in Chapter 6. The wider political context has been provided in Chapter 2 and the professional practice context in Chapter 5 in order to reveal how educational discourses have come to position schools in areas of economic hardship as failing and then define the model of leadership and the ‘knowledge’ required in order to ‘improve’ these school.

7.2 The construction of success and failure

Gewirtz (2002) described how the discourses of performativity and markets construct some schools as being a success and others as being a failure. The successful school will be one that is perceived to perform well in national tests and examinations, is popular with parents and which OFSTED would describe as good or preferably outstanding. A school that is failing is one which is perceived to perform badly in the same tests and examinations, is unpopular with parents and is placed in a category (or described as satisfactory in the new OFSTED framework) by OFSTED (2012). National Challenge illustrated that this construction is problematic with schools judged good by OFSTED being placed in the
National Challenge, due to relatively low attainment. In this study all the schools existed in an area of economic hardship and all except school B would meet at least one of the above criteria for a failing school. As a sixth form college school B has different output measures from the others and students who have chosen to stay on for post-16 education. However, a significant number of its staff are part time and spend the rest of their time teaching in the other schools in the study. Whilst the vocabulary might have changed the positioning of schools in a social hierarchy is not new. Thomson (2005) states that prior to the era of neoliberal reform grammar schools and faith schools were more highly regarded than comprehensives. Prior to the introduction of comprehensive schools the same type of hierarchy existed between grammar schools, technical colleges and secondary modern schools. Thomson (2005) uses aspects of Bourdieu’s field analysis (Bourdieu, 1990) to consider this hierarchy:

Before the policy changes were effected, schools and agents working in them were already positioned in a social hierarchy, differentiated by their cultural capital. This was clearest in the secondary sector, although the same kind of differentials existed in the primary sector. Grammar schools and faith schools had more status than comprehensives by virtue of the cultural and social capital that was the inheritance of the bulk of their pupils and they tended to produce more of these capitals for their pupils, marked by their generally better examination results. There were also geographical markers of capital differentials, comprehensives in areas of high poverty being at the bottom of the pecking order in the field. And within each school, regardless of their position, there were clear sorting and selecting practices at work (e.g. setting, assessment, subject choice, examinations) which positioned pupils for the next stage of their education, training or work. (Thomson, 2005, p 743)

I would argue that comparable hierarchies still exist within the field and that whilst the mechanism for the positioning of schools is different the same group of schools remain at risk of being at the foot of this hierarchy. The distribution of capital remains equally distorted and that this has implications for the professional identity and practice of leaders of schools in area of economic hardship. Removing a well defined two tier classification from the system implies a shift towards equity and a redistribution of capital. However, in British society all forms of capital are disproportionately located within certain social
groupings and this leads to an ‘unofficial’ two tier system based on this uneven distribution of capital. In this restructured field, however, the rules of the game are now the same so to ‘win’ a school has to ‘perform’ in terms of the quantitative outcome measures it produces and is judged independently of the capital it holds. Thomson (2005) describes this as a ‘policy shift marked by new forms of codification of this ongoing hierarchy of positions’ (p 743). Whereas in the past the senior leaders of a secondary modern school would not be expected to ensure that their school ‘performed’ as well as the grammar school next door the expectations of those in schools in areas of economic hardship are no longer any different. From a Bourdieuan perspective misrecognition arising from this process of codification acts as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992) against the senior leaders in the schools in areas of economic hardship. Here misrecognition is ‘the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder’ (Jenkins, 1992, p 104). Symbolic violence ‘is the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity’ (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992) causing them to perceive that their position in the hierarchy legitimate and serving to hide the power relations behind the structuring that is taking place. So once a system has been established that allows schools to be compared using the attainment data of their students it has the appearance of scientific rationality. To those outside of the school a simple relationship is assumed between results and the quality of teaching and leadership. Those working in the school will be aware of all the factors that will impact on the relationship between results and what the school and its staff do but get drawn in to the need to improve attainment in order to avoid falling below benchmarks of being vulnerable during OFSTED inspections to attracting a label. Even though the senior leaders in schools in areas of economic hardship ‘know’ that comparisons are ‘unfair’ they cannot escape the apparently rational evidence, and so start to doubt their own capability and suspect that their fellow professionals will see them as being inferior. There is clear evidence in the interview transcripts of how the senior leaders come to perceive themselves
and believe that they are perceived by others. The analysis of the National Challenge documents illustrates how policies reinforce these messages by constantly referring to the ‘best’ people being brought in to help improve their schools and further reinforced by the high profile given to ‘heroic’ headteachers. It is an aim of a study like this to expose these power relations which are based on the unequal distribution of capital including the valuing of particular claims to knowledge as exemplified by the analysis of the National Challenge documentation. In towns such as Bridgetown and Hastings poverty and ethnic mix result in the schools being populated by those with little economic, cultural, social or symbolic capital as those whose parents have a greater share of capital choose to send their children out of town and so perpetuate the hierarchy. Thus it seems that certain schools are destined to be unable to compete and so to being defined as ‘failing’ and so are those who lead them.

Within the neoliberal context that all the schools exist and intrinsically linked to the discourses of performativity and markets the role of school leaders is constructed within the discourse of managerialism. As described earlier this defines the purpose of education in terms of improving results as measured by external tests to enable students to provide a workforce equipped to contribute to economic success in a global economy. Key dimensions are quality, measurable improvement and effectiveness. The school leaders interviewed work within this new managerialism but were young teachers towards the end of the welfarist era and the impact of this will be returned to later in this chapter.

7.3 Defining success and failure

I have argued that the National Challenge as a distillate of policy to improve schools in the era of post-welfarist reform defines the success of a school as the reaching of an attainment based benchmark and the primary determinant of whether or not a school achieves this success as being the leadership of the school. So within these constructs the success or failure of a school is intrinsically linked with the success or failure of the senior leaders,
particularly the headteacher. I would also argue that the nature of the benchmarks not only reflects the values inherent within the neoliberal reform agenda but also starts to determine both the purpose of education and the way in which education is delivered. In the analysis of the policy documents I have shown that it is assumed that the values held by the policymakers are the same as those held by the policy deliverers in school in areas of economic hardship.

Eighteen of the respondents clearly articulate welfarist values when they describe their view of a good school with an emphasis on care and student welfare, a sense of belonging and stability. The other two also articulate the same values but placed greater emphasis on performance based outcome measures. These welfarist values are also illustrated by the breadth and diversity of factors that come within the definitions of a good school provided by these senior leaders. For example the range of values expressed is well illustrated by Ivan:

A good school for me is a school that offers opportunity to young people to give them a real sense of belonging, a real sense of opportunity to engage with learning, opens doorways for the future and one that really celebrates a young person’s successes no matter how small or how large they are. That’s a sort of all encompassing one, a school that offers a stability in life to some that don’t necessarily get that from home, in the sense of a safe haven, a place where we create a sense of I want to be there so again that ownership and that belongs important, that value of having a respect for a specific environment, one that they see as a value that actually contributes to their life so it has a pull towards them and obviously even reaching out to those modestly engaged students, the school refusers, eventually turn those around and make sure that they feel as though need to be there so quite a lot of things really.

The values espoused by Ivan are based on care, equity and social justice. The clashes with the discourses arising under neoliberal reform are evident if Ivan’s personal views are seen against his view of the Department’s view of a good school:
Ultimately it’s about out turn. Again, it links to opportunities for the future, it’s a stepping stone to the next level of education or employment. It’s to make sure that students have somewhere to go in the future. It gives them an opportunity and builds life skills. I would suggest more focus on a return of an outcome such as value, value for money in their sense may well not be in relationships and just purely achievement and attainment.

This view is about out turn in terms of results, links to employment and value for money which would be defined by test performance. In his current role he must position himself and his personal values within the context constructed by the discourses of managerialism, markets and performativity. In talking about their personal views of what constitutes a good school the respondents were expansive and broad in their responses. In talking about how the Department would describe their schools the school leaders were brief and used limited vocabulary primarily relating to data based performance giving the impression that the response was aimed at a different audience and that it was ‘known’ what was the correct response. They all regarded their own schools as being successful but none thought that the Department would share this view. So it seems that not only do the values of these school leaders differ from those that they are assumed to have they but they also understand that the schools they lead and regard as being good are judged differently within the framework arising from the post-welfarist discourses. In describing their own schools a common response was the notion of improving and this was also a theme within what was regarded as being the Department’s view. Continual improvement is a construct arising from current discourses and so it seemed to be offered as an aspect that would endorse their own view of their school as being a good one because of their impact of leaders. Such are the power relations within the educational field that rhetoric is accepted and dissenting voices are not heard. The National Challenge documentation illustrates how using phrases such as ‘we know’ gives legitimacy to notions that the ‘right’ leadership using ‘proven’ strategies will lead to continual improvement as measured by rising examination results so making ‘failing’ schools ‘successful’ and improving the life chances of young people in the most disadvantaged environments. Earlier in this thesis alternative
readings have been expressed. A model of year on year improvement measured by examination results has no logic if it is accepted that different year groups might be of different academic ability or that the examination grade boundaries might shift. No matter what the overall improvement in examination results for all students is, there will always be schools with the lowest ones. These will always be at risk of being labelled as failing by the current discourses particularly if the criteria used in OFSTED inspections remain unchanged. It is also likely that those students starting school with the least capital will always be the least successful in examinations. To overcome this would require a major redistribution of capital across society. It would also require a major shift in the economic fortunes of the country to establish job opportunities for all young people and again.

According to Webb et al. (2002) in terms of competition within fields ‘agents adjust their expectations with regard to the capital they are likely to attain in terms of the ‘practical’ limitations imposed upon them by their place in the field, their educational background, social connections, class position and so forth’ (p 23). They then argue that ‘those with the least amount of capital tend to be less ambitious and more ‘satisfied’ with their lot’ (Webb, et al, p 23). If individuals increase the capital they hold by obtaining better examination results then according to Bourdieu this would simply result in a shift in the value of different forms of capital via the field of power (‘the relations of force between the different forms of capital or, more precisely between the agents who possess a sufficient amount of one of the different forms of capital to be in a position to dominate the corresponding field’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p 34) to ensure the reproduction of the field (Bourdieu, 1998). Thus it might be postulated that apparent attempts to resolve issues of social inequity by increasing the levels of attainment in examinations of certain groups are naive or more cynically, simply rhetoric to divert attention away from more deep rooted problems.
7.4 Professional Identity

The tension between their own and the Department’s view of a good school is conceivably likely to be greater for those longer serving staff entering the profession prior to neoliberal thinking becoming so dominant. At this time the definition of a ‘good’ school was more varied and context was considered relevant. In the new educational world of academies, federations and a reducing role for local authorities the training routes that exist for aspirant headteachers will identify and select individuals who will fit the specifications demanded of the discourse of managerialism. Their training such as that under Future Leaders will be based on a functionalist perspective on knowledge production and they will ‘learn’ that their success is measured on their students’ results.

One issue throughout the interviews was that the teachers did not appear to have a sense of the wider political context as it impacted on them and their schools or indeed to have given it any consideration. It seemed that they responded to initiatives such as National Challenge by simply accepting them and working with them as best they could. There was no sense of systematic questioning or challenge rather a sense of unfairness and of resignation. If school leaders in areas of economic hardship had an understanding of how they and their schools have been positioned as the neoliberal reforms have unfolded then they might be better able to participate in a wider debate. Earlier in this section it was suggested that the school leaders possibly enact a number of different identities depending on the audience. These could include one that is played out internally (into the school) and one that is played out externally (in front of OFSTED inspectors for example). These are not incompatible because a senior leader needs to both lead and manage their school in what they regard as the most appropriate way and then to present to outside agencies such as OFSTED and the data gatherers from the Department in a way that will result in them being judged most favourably and these might not always be consistent. These processes will be carried out on both a conscious and unconscious level. In terms of the interviews it
is likely that consciously I was regarded as an ‘insider’ who would judge the schools in much the same way as them but I think it is likely that those interviewed responded in such a formal way to the interview situation because they are often in a position where they have to ‘perform’ and present their school to an external agent. A difficulty in the interviews was that the senior leaders did not have a language for talking about some of the issues. This meant that some of the answers could be seen as superficial, or questions eliciting a response such as ‘I don’t know’ or in some cases responses being difficult to unpick. The latter seemed to happen more frequently with the headteachers who more than the other staff seemed keen to produce more in depth responses. Graham in particular gave some very elaborate answers that were not always coherent. This is evident when he almost seems to be trying to convince himself that the department has an interest in wider aspects of a school and not simply the final test outcomes:

The rationale was intended to be a way of attempting to adequately reflect and value the progress made by the students within that context and through that the performance of the staff and the school and the leadership in general with a mind to not handicapping or prejudicing or judgments premised on outcomes but rather to begin to hopefully understand and respect and value and ascribe a value to the processes and the relationships that are developed within it and therefore you know the ethos and the success or failure of these soft, qualitative qualities as they impact upon hard edge outcomes. (Graham)

Graham’s comments seem to express a concern about the performance of staff, including leadership being closely linked to outcome measures. The price of ‘failure’ for headteachers can be high and includes removal from their posts or ill-health. The ‘cruel irony’ (Thomson, 2009, p 130), of judging headteacher performance simply on test results is that the changes which are supposed to improve the life chances of children from more disadvantaged backgrounds cast out individuals many of whom would say they went into teaching to make a difference to the lives of these same children. Thomson (2009):
The risks for headteachers that are produced through the new forms of accountability are created by policies intended to remove the risks of underachievement for disadvantaged children. The cruel irony of achieving equity at the cost of some of the people who are most committed to achieving this outcome seems lost on policy makers. Their eyes are fixed firmly on the kind of measures that appear to show that a difference is being made. Time will tell whether these are indeed the measures which actually do make a difference for vulnerable children – and whether they were worth the costs of haemorrhaging headteachers from the schools in the most needy neighbourhoods. (p 130)

This issue will be returned to again later in this chapter in looking at the professional identity of the school leaders who were interviewed and also in looking at the implications for school development and change because as certain teachers are lost potentially so to are certain values and belief systems.

What is clear from the interviews is that, with the exception of the three sixth form college teachers, the seventeen teachers in the other schools all consider that the Department would consider that at best their schools are satisfactory. This is well illustrated by Darren (who is an assistant headteacher whose time is divided equally between school A and school B) when talking about school A:

If they are looking at all the statistics and things that come out, they might describe us as a satisfactory school with bringing all the things together. Unfortunately if they look at raw scores of educational passes and things at the end of it, we are at the bottom end of satisfactory but they have to look at the other side of things. Pastoral, all the other areas that we work at, move it up a little bit but we’ve still got to overcome this big bend towards the fact that they want wonderful results at the end even though they are still part of what it’s all about.

School leaders such as Darren seem to be trapped between two competing sets of values. The educational discourse, within which they currently work defines their schools as, at best satisfactory and quite likely failing whilst they regard them as successful. However, it is possible that under the welfarist discourse their school might have been thought about in a very different way. The fact that these teachers are trapped between different values i.e. their own and those of the discourses is further evidenced by the different identities which
they enact as was discussed earlier. To be in this position will have implications for the professional identity of these teachers.

The three teachers based in the sixth form college recognised that they were in a different position but Darren is in a particularly unusual position in that he could be a school leader in a good school and a satisfactory school simultaneously. Therefore, he could be an effective school leader and a failing school leader simultaneously.

All of those interviewed have a very strong sense of being in a school in economically disadvantaged circumstances by choice. It would be very difficult to establish whether this sense is a true reflection of reality. School leaders who I interviewed say that they are carrying out a role that suits who they are as people and that they want to make a difference to the lives of young people. Olive expresses this sense of being the ‘right sort of person’ to work in a school in economically challenging circumstances and seeing the role in a wider social context:

I think you might turn that the other way round because I’m not the sort of person that would work in a grammar school. I’ve never applied to work in one and I wouldn’t see myself working in one or fit in myself in my personality fitting in one. I think the sort of person I am I like to think that I make a difference with students, I like to think that I can embrace the community spirit and work with parents.
(Olive)

Olive’s views are similar to a number of the other teachers who often express a strong sense of vocation, ‘It makes me happier in myself. I made a deliberate choice …’ (Kelvin), or of relishing the challenge, ‘I started off at a sixth form college in Birkenhead and hated it because it was far too easy and dull and not challenging’ (Eleanor). At times I had a sense that some teachers were presenting a rather romanticised view of their position which conflicted with comments made later by the same individuals who talked about the almost crippling pressure. The concern over pressure is still balanced against commitment to what they are doing. ‘There are times when I’ve said I’ve had enough of this you know
National Challenge comes along, this comes along and I say I’ve had enough but if somebody offered me a job at ……… Grammar no thank you, it would not fit right with me, it would not suit me’ (Eleanor). These teachers constantly live and work with external demands to improve and the possible imposition of the label of failing looming over them as well as the sense that despite their best efforts their schools are somehow never good enough. Andrew who had been teaching for nearly forty years puts this very succinctly:

I think I said I’ve been at a good school for about six weeks in my career and that’s it. I have never ever been identified as a teacher in a good school, only in that interim period where we were looked at because of the OFSTED inspection that we had and then all of a sudden you know satisfactory is not good enough anymore it’s, it’s got to be good and there satisfactory is the new poor.

Andrew is referring to the fact that school A was graded satisfactory in an OFSTED inspection and then a few weeks later OFSTED was reported in the newspapers as saying that satisfactory was no longer good enough. This is a sentiment that has been expressed very clearly by Michael Wilshaw the new head of OFSTED.

The interviewees conduct their professional practice, in the context of discourses that are liable them to construct both them and their schools as failing yet they appear to be in positions of their own choosing. So at first reading, the interview transcripts appear to give a strong sense of agency regarding active choice of school with strong statements such as:

It’s probably nothing like that at all but I wouldn’t want to go and teach at a school like (……… grammar school). I enjoy it here and I love our kids. (Barbara)
I wouldn’t change it. (Clair on her current school)
I’ve chosen to be here. (Brian)
I like to pick schools that are seen to be challenging. (Ann)
I’ve ended up in this school because I wanted to. (Colin)

Similar comments are made by all those interviewed conveying a passion for the role they have and that they would not wish to work in any other type of school. However, when asked how they would be perceived if they applied to a high attaining school their replies
indicated a sense that they would not be looked at favourably because of their association with a school that was not recognised (within the prevailing discourse) as being successful.

Ann and Barbara state that they would be thought to not even have the subject knowledge required to teach in certain schools:

I don’t know really. I would hope that they would think that if I could succeed at a school such as ours that I would be quite a successful teacher to be successful here but then on the other hand they may think I may not have the subject knowledge to teach at a school like theirs. (Barbara)

I could imagine some staff might feel that the staff in a school like this may not be good enough to teach in that type of school….. (Clair)

Yes I think where you’ve worked in a school that has a negative, rightly or wrongly, a negative label that it has a distinct effect on your career and always will do. (Brian)

Probably not no, they probably wouldn’t even take me because they’d think I couldn’t handle, well I couldn’t deliver what they wanted me to deliver unless it was to support a behaviour support unit. (Ann)

You are challenged in the fact that because the students don’t perform as well as others, you are assumed to be a poor teacher. (Colin)

Florence is one teacher who clearly articulates her child centred training. In contrast to all the other respondents apart from those at the sixth form she states that she could have happily worked in a range of different schools. Florence also expresses a sense of agency:

Well I have already told you that my background is very child centred in that I trained as an infant teacher. Well it was primary middle, but you know, and veered towards special needs and English as an additional language so in a sense temperamentally it’s probably where I might need to be. However, I could have had a rewarding career in a very high achieving school and enjoy teaching children who present a different kind of challenge so in terms of choices as much as you ever have a choice I am content with the way things have fallen out. (Florence)

She then goes on to express as with the others how her application to a high attaining school might not be well received but also express a sense of both insecurity over her current position (as did others) but also that what she had seen of the reality of headship in schools serving areas of economic hardship made her think that she perhaps did not want
the trauma associated with the role. This is an individual who had been identified as a potential headteacher at different times in her career:

I believe that it would not be positive. I also believe that my position here is insecure because of being associated with a school that over a period time has not proved itself in their view to be successful. However, it’s quite an interesting question that, because headteachers I have worked with in the past have seen me as a potential headteacher and had my career been different that may have been a clear thought of myself, it’s a rather muddy thought for myself now and having seen headships not succeed with people, and this is over a long time, with people who I have huge regard for in their professional role and seeing the human misery, not just caused to heads but other senior people, part of me is less desirous of putting myself in that position and as I realistically understand that if I were to put myself forward for headship, I could only sensibly do it with schools that in challenging circumstances because why would somebody appoint somebody with my experience to a school that didn’t need it so it would be a case of putting myself with even more responsibility into an uncertain difficult challenge and you have to ask yourself why would I want to do that and is my desire to lead a school enough for the self doubts and the knowledge of the workload and those are questions that I say are quite muddied. (Florence)

In terms of their professional identity teachers such as Florence are caught between what they value and what is valued by the current educational discourse. Their notion of a good school is at odds with that described by neoliberal reform and thus even though they believe that they are leading good schools, they know that this is not how their schools are portrayed or judged. These individuals are committed to the work they do and to the children they work with but feel that their jobs are at risk and that they would not be regarded as ‘capable’ professionals even by some other members of their profession. The way that education policy is being implemented means that particular skills and values are no longer deemed to be appropriate and these will be replaced by the skills and values held by a new ‘breed’ of leader emerging from the managerialist discourse. This shift is taking place without debate and has repercussions not only for how schools are led and managed but also for both the purpose and the desired outcomes of education. One reading of this belief that the skills and expertise that they have is of limited value in schools other than their own is a recognition that welfare capital has little exchange value in the education field as it is currently operating.
The position of the senior leaders in this study can be analysed using Bourdieu’s (1998) concept of field. Grenfell and James (1998) describe a field in the following way:

Field is therefore a structured system of social relations at a micro and macro level. In other words, individuals, institutions and groupings, both large and small, all exist in structural relation to each other in some way. (p 16)

A field was regarded by Bourdieu as working as a form of game. ‘We can indeed with caution, compare a field to a game (jeu) although, unlike the latter, a field is not the product of a deliberate act of creation, and it follows rules, or better, regularities, that are not explicit and codified’ (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992, p 98). The stakes being played for in the game are different forms of capital (Thomson, 2005, p 742). All the agents in the field have an investment in the game which Bourdieu describes as ‘illusio’ (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992, p 98). Individuals or agents learn to play the game in a semi-conscious way and this ‘learning is literally embodied as habitus, a set of dispositions to know, be and act in particular ways (Thomson, 2005, p 742). So habitus ‘expresses, on the one hand, the way in which individuals ‘become themselves’ – develop attitudes and dispositions – and, on the other hand, the ways in which those individuals engage in practices’ (Webb et al, 2002). If the school leaders in this study built their careers during the welfarist era they would have developed the habitus of a school leader that was adapted for the field at that time and so had ‘a feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p 80) and so be able to able to play the game successfully and accumulate capital that was valued at the time. So for example welfare capital could have been exchanged for other forms of symbolic and social capital that would have allowed them a ‘voice’ and some control over the way the game was played. With the onset of post-welfare reforms the power relations within the field rapidly changed as did the doxa ‘how those who occupy positions in the field hold the rationale as a self-evident truth and as the justification for their involvement and active participation’ (Thomson, 2005, p 746). This meant that their habitus was no longer perfectly adapted and they would no longer be able to play the game so effectively and consequently would lose
capital and thus power and status. The doxa of the field would now start to conflict with their own personal values and beliefs. Bourdieu (1977) uses the term hysteresis to represent the period of crisis when an existing habitus no longer fits or is not yet adapted to a shift within the field and its new doxa. I would argue that the senior leaders in this study are in a state of hysteresis and are at different stages in adapting their habitus. However, because of illusio ‘being caught up in and by the game, of believing the game is “worth the candle,”’ or, more simply, that playing is worth the effort’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p 76) they carry out their roles without questioning the underlying doxa. The hysteresis effect can be used to explain the position in which the school leaders in this study find themselves. Kerr and Robinson (2009) argue that changing the habitus can be a conscious process if individuals ‘have acquired academic capital as part of their habitus’ (Kerr and Robinson, 2009, p 848). They go on to say ‘that , when social agents with a differing habitus (discordant to the organization as field) come together within an organization, they are able to use each others’ hysteresis effects in order to interpret the practices of domination as such’ (Kerr and Robinson, 2009, p 848). This would seem to offer further validity to studies such as mine which enable practitioners to better understand their position within a field.

For all the school leaders in this study ensuring that their school remains viable is a key aspect of their role. In area of economic hardship this can be every challenging and Edward whose school is constructed as good expresses concern about how he can recruit sufficient post-16 students when there is a pattern of more able students leaving Bridgetown and Hastings to be educated whilst still in the primary schools. It is perhaps the case that those schools led and managed by teachers who would be more comfortable within a welfarist discourse are less well equipped to thrive in the current educational market. It is clearly important to school leaders that their schools survive and to do so it might be the case that whilst believing in one discourse they act out another. This is likely to be particularly true.
during OFSTED inspections or when making statements to the press. A typical headline in the local press (Bridgetown Express in December 2011) is:

Bridgetown secondary schools which were ranked amongst the worst in the country for GCSE results have massively improved with the number of students getting five GCSEs increasing by 15%.

In response to the questions from journalists, Eleanor released the following quote which was published in the article which had the headline above:

Headteachers have had a relentless focus on raising standards across the town and improving their schools. Headteachers work very closely and this is reflected in the rapid improvements in GCSE results.

The newspaper headline is illustrative of the performativity discourse in its crudest form in which figures without any context or interpretation are used to describe the performance of an organization and those associated with it. In responding to the article Eleanor does not attempt to challenge the underlying value assumptions but instead tries to demonstrate that schools in the town are doing what they can to conform to what is expected by current policies. Eleanor has a broad view of a good school as ‘… where students leave with high expectations of themselves with a future as being a good adult, a good citizen in our community but also with qualifications which are going to enable them to achieve and to be the best they could.’ In the market place Eleanor is forced to compete using the same data to demonstrate that the school is fit to survive and is unable to celebrate her school’s success in terms of the number of students at risk of exclusion they have managed to retain or who have overcome great difficulties with a cohort and are pleased with the results despite the fact that they are well under national averages. Instead headteachers ‘play the game’ and if overall results seem unlikely to impress they quote the performance of a few individuals or an alternative figure that is high such as the overall pass rate. If all else seems unsuitable then ‘good’ results for next year are promised.
It might be thought that retirement might free senior leaders to express their opinions but loyalty or reputation demands that you compete within the rules of the game. Neil who was very animated in his view as well as being cynical of much that is imposed on schools talked in the interview about a good school in the following way:

I don’t care necessarily about getting the best GCSE result as long as every kid gets what they are capable of getting and that’s the driving force so if that means you get lots of starred A’s because your kid is very bright that’s what it should be and if somebody is going to get five G’s then that is an absolute miracle that some of those make me feel really good. We had two last year who I should have permanently excluded. One of them got 7 D’s and the other one got 5 A-C’s including English and maths and both of them I had 20 different reasons for permanently excluding them. We set up alternative curriculum in here on sufferance and every single one of them said to me that was great, those were our successes last year whereas we also got from that year group about a dozen kids that got better results than ever been achieved on this site which was quite phenomenal and we also got 90 Ds.

Having retired in September 2011 Neil returned to school E to deliver a speech at the celebration evening (on 17.11.11) for the previous year 11. The following is the extract reported in the Bridgetown Express:

Don’t forget, you are the first group of students solely educated at school E, the first whole year group who were truly motivated to do well and your success is the measure of the reason why BSF happened. 40% five A* - Cs is the start of continuing achievements that this college is going to produce in the coming years. So well done.

It is not possible to ascribe motives to another person but there is a sense that it is necessary to define achievement even as a headteacher in the language of the performativity discourse possibly because this is the only language that is valued by policy makers and understood by others because it is the only one that is used. This notion of conforming to the discourse seems evident in the number of interviewees who describe their schools in terms of ongoing improvement despite the fact that it is unlikely that improvement can be continual.
There is clear evidence throughout the interviews that the respondents were driven by a desire to serve the local community but little evidence of any consideration being given to providing a work force equipped to support the economic prosperity of the country in the global economy. The respondents are doing what they can to meet the needs of a local population because they are aware of its needs. However, this does not necessarily conflict with the demands of the neoliberal reformers. It is a strong argument that if students have five or more good GCSE grades it will support their future employment and further education opportunities. This will apply equally on both a local and a wider level so that views on the purposes of education overlap. What is different is what else is valued as an outcome of education. Currently it is the emphasis that is placed on attainment data and the dismissal of ‘softer’ measures of school performance that is currently shaping the experience that young people have at school in this country. In this model it is not necessarily possible for school leaders to shape their schools as they would wish in their particular context because they have to survive in the marketplace.

In talking about their role the teachers interviewed, all of whom claim to be concerned with increasing the opportunities in life for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, seem driven by a set of values rather than by the belief that what matters is that all students obtain five A* - C grades including English and maths. These teachers position themselves within the welfarist discourse in terms of their values but they are actually working within a system dominated by the managerialist discourse and so are required to ‘walk the walk’ and ‘talk the talk’ required by this. It seems increasingly likely that as leaders with these ‘welfarist’ values leave they will be replaced by a new breed of ‘Future Leaders’ and the nature of schools in economically challenged areas will change (Gewirtz, 2002) but there is no forum for the discussion of these changes and no discourse of resistance. Kelvin was the only person to raise the issue of teachers having a voice:
Does the government really honestly think that every school is going to implement every little bit of strategy or policy it puts out, if they do then they are on a different planet, if they don’t then school leavers on the ground should have the guts really to say well I’m not doing that so we will see. (Kelvin)

In the short term school leaders such as those interviewed will have to adapt, retire, resign or be moved on with no consideration given to the significance of this or the impact on a large group of young people. With the introduction of the National Curriculum and then the introduction of OFSTED in 1992 school leaders have left the profession and in this study it is an intention to look at the impact that the classification and labelling of schools as failing through quantitative and imposed benchmarks has on school leaders. For the teachers in this study there is a clear dilemma in having an educational philosophy at odds with that underpinning the current discourse. In order to ensure the survival of their schools they are forced to compete in an education market and their schools are ill equipped to do this. They do this in the knowledge that whatever they do they are liable to be seen as failing when they are unable to meet the externally imposed benchmarks.

There is evidence within the interviews that respondents feel stigmatized and indeed feel themselves to be ‘failing’ or at least to be perceived as ‘failing.’

Whilst it is true that the headteachers gave the most positive and polished description of their own schools (leading me to speculate that these might be well rehearsed statements) there was no sense in any of the interviews that any of the headteachers shouldered the burden of success or failure alone. In contrast all the respondents talked as though the leadership of the school was a joint enterprise. Throughout the interviews there is a strong sense of senior staff working together and I can find no statements in the transcripts of statements in the form of, ‘I did this,’ or ‘In my school.’ However, there are frequent examples of the use of we and our. Some examples are as follows:

….. the results are special measures and that’s the bit we don’t seem to be able to shift at the moment….. (Neil)
I think we have got a good school, in fact I think that parts of our school are ….
(Olive)

The ways in which we are trying to improve our school are fairly relentless ….
(Eleanor)

This does not fit with the notion of the heroic leader or the model of leadership espoused by programs such as Future Leaders.

7.5 Conceptualising the identity of the senior leaders

In looking at what it means to be a senior leader in a school in an economically disadvantaged area there can be no simple answer as this construction is not only unique to an individual it will constantly change for each individual as the equilibrium between their internal state and the external circumstances shifts (Frosh, 2010). Both the external and internal forces could be seen as being discursively constructed so ‘…. internal states (such as feelings, intentions, motives, beliefs) are constructed as particular entities in discourse (both in the discourse produced for ourselves and discourse for others)’ (Wetherell, 2001, p 187) and thus:

An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate. Accordingly, who one is is always an open question with a shifting answer depending on the positions made available within one’s own and others’ discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and others’ lives. Stories are located within a number of different discourses, and thus vary dramatically in terms of the language used, the concepts, issues and moral judgements made relevant and the subject positions made available within them. (Davies and Harre, 2001, p 263)

If Eleanor is taken as an example of one senior leader some of the discourses with which she interacts and out of which she might understand her sense of self can be considered. During the interview Eleanor makes reference to herself as:

- A headteacher
- A wife
• A mother
• A headteacher under pressure to survive
• A headteacher of a school labelled as underachieving
• An individual wanting a challenge
• A professional loving the challenge
• A successful headteacher of an improving school

There are clearly tensions that exist between these roles and states of mind. These tensions shift constantly throughout the interview even within the same sentence.

You know at the moment we are loving the challenge but as they keep turning the screws on this is what you’ve got to do, at what point do I as head say I can’t do this anymore, I will go and work somewhere else, why would I stay here? (Eleanor)

In order to understand what it means to be a school leader in any school it is necessary to think about the tensions that exist between all the constructed identities that exist at any moment in time for any individual. Bradbury and Gunter (2006) attempt to understand the practice of women, who are both primary school headteachers and mothers, using the notion of dialogism.

From the perspective of dialogism our notion of selves can be seen as ‘struggles across and about differences between self and others’ (Holland and Lave, 2001, p 13). Holland and Lave (2001) build on this notion of struggle by developing the idea of local struggles where power is inequitably shared within institutions or discourses:

In the chapters in this volume, however, we find a more specific set of circumstances: dialogic selves engaged with others in local struggles animated at least in part by the power, if not by the representatives, of pervasive translocal institutions and by discourses widely circulating locally and beyond. In these chapters, the energy of enduring struggles – carried out for and against societal institutions and discourses that disproportionally distribute symbolic and material resources to favored racial, ethnic, class and gendered groups – has been realized in local practice and brought there into the intimate. (p 13)
Holland and Lave use the expression ‘history in person’ (p 5) to describe how individuals build identities by ‘participation in explicit local conflict’ (p 5). In the case of the senior teachers interviewed in this study it seems clear that they understand their practice as requiring them simply as to bring about improved examination results but this at times conflicts with their notion of the purpose of education. In addition they are faced with being in the position that improving their results is unlikely to bring them into line with national averages. So they are likely to be constructed as failures by current education discourse even if they were to be successful in bringing about change the values of which are externally imposed. What is interesting is that within the situation where the professional identity of certain school leaders is forged within the context of personal (possibly welfarist) values in conflict with the values of the dominant (neoliberal) discourse there is no emergence of resistance or sense of a ‘rebel’ identity. It seems that compliance to the extent of espousing the views of an alien discourse at least at a superficial level is what happens and only when describing themselves outside their professional role do individuals talk about the impact on their health and personal lives. In this environment the neoliberal discourse is indeed dominant in that it defines both the purpose of education and what constitutes success. Those responsible for education policy control the monitoring processes by determining what data will be collected, how this will be interpreted and how it will be used as well as the inspection process. Particular aspects of research are favoured, predominantly on school improvement and effectiveness carried out by particular academics or on the impact of leadership carried out by government quangos such as the National College. These quangos also control leadership training and thus define effective leadership. From the interviews it seems that school leaders in areas of economic hardship are almost complicit in the changes and the value shifts that have occurred.
In considering how these leaders define their practice it could be helpful to think about the way in which ‘we “author” the world and ourselves in that world’ (Holland and Lave, 2001, p 10). This can only be done by drawing on the ‘language of the other’ (Holland and Lave, 2001, p 11) which could be seen as arising from the discourses in which you are immersed. So to be understood by others these leaders must talk about results and improving not about success in modifying behaviour or integrating refugee children even if these might have more meaning to the individual. ‘The dialogic selves formed in local contentious practice are selves engaged with others across practices and discourses inflected by power and privilege’ (Holland and Lave, 2001, p 19). As power is so unevenly distributed there is a danger that by ‘authoring’ themselves as leaders trying to compete in a culture that demands improvement in examination results even when they do not believe in this culture and know that a ‘level playing field’ does not exist it will be difficult not to internalize a sense of failure. This is perhaps externalized when these leaders talk about how they would be perceived if they applied to other schools. This effect is perhaps magnified when it is ‘known’ what the impact of effective leadership on schools in challenging circumstances can be when the ‘best people’ are recruited.

All the school leaders claim a strong sense of agency in that they have chosen to be in a particular sort of school but none claim to have chosen to be in this particular sort of education system and yet they offer no resistance overt or covert. It is conceivable that if individuals are made aware of how discourse shapes our professional identity they may be better prepared and feel able to take part in debate and challenge the assumptions and values within the discourse:

By noting, criticizing and resisting discourses that predetermine, classify and label us and the things that are important to us, we can challenge the professional orders that position us as credulous consumers, unsuspecting citizens, passive patients and silent students. (Woods, 2006, p 191)
For the senior leaders interviewed in this study to understand how they are being positioned within education policy might be the first step to move away from the passive acceptance that their schools are almost inevitably destined to fail and the sort of school they might value is not fit for purpose in a neoliberal world.

There is a strong sense of certain individuals with particular sets of values and beliefs in danger of being lost from the system and that their passing will go unnoticed as what they offer is not valued by the dominant educational discourses. This could have significant implications for development and change in schools.

Thomson (2005) uses Bourdieu’s tool kit to reframe post–welfare educational changes including the impact of performativity on certain schools:

Different kinds of information were produced to support ‘choice’ – students’ test results were publish and schools deemed to be underperforming were variously named, shamed, supported, closed and reopened. (p 743)

Thomson argues that using Bourdieu’s field theory demonstrates that changes have been made to the symbolic economy in the field. As discussed at the start of this chapter prior to the reforms schools and the staff working in them were positioned within a hierarchy with Grammar schools and faith schools having the greatest status because of the disproportionate amount of cultural and social capital held by the children and their parents. This inequity was then increased and perpetuated by Grammar school and faith school children making use of their advantages to obtain better examination results. Thomson also points out that there was an economic and geographical element to this uneven distribution of capital:

There were also geographical markers of capital differentials, comprehensives in areas of high poverty being at the bottom of the pecking order in the field. (p 743)

Boudieu (In: Wacquant 1989) defined a field in the following way:
I define a field as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (situs) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.). Each field presupposes, and generates by its very functioning, the belief in the value of the stakes it offers. (p 39)

The school leaders interviewed in this project practice within the field of education leadership, it could also be argued that they also exist within smaller fields of leaders of schools in economically disadvantaged areas or leaders trained in the welfarist era. In a field rules apply, as in a game with redistribution of forms of capital being what is played for as well as position relative to others within the field. ‘Capital acquired in one field has uses in others’ (Thomson, 2005, p 742). If a leader is successful as defined by the education leadership field (success would be defined within the discourses of performativity and managerialism) they will acquire capital which could be economic in terms of financial reward or it could symbolic in terms of being seen to successful. If the institution is successful it will gain an even more disproportionate share of power which would be reflected in the material benefits of success and symbolic capital which could be used elsewhere. So for example the institution and its staff could claim more power by taking over a less successful institution of it could transfer capital to another field such as that of education policy production.

As a result of education policy schools in areas of economic hardship command less capital than schools in other areas. For the staff within these schools the rules of the game are the same as for all others in the leadership field. Each individual leader absorbs the rules of the field as habitus:
The habitus, which is the generative principle of responses more or less well adapted to the demands of a certain field, but also, through the formative experiences of earliest infancy, of the whole collective history of family and class; through, in particular, experiences in which the slope of the trajectory of a whole lineage is expressed, and which may take the visible and brutal form of a failure, or, on the contrary, may show itself merely as so many imperceptible regressions. (Bourdieu, 1990, p 91)

Bradbury and Gunter (2006) ‘conceptualise dialogism as struggle within a field or arena where we stake a claim for recognition and distinction’ (p 500). It could be argued that the school leaders interviewed position themselves within the field of school leadership and also within the field or sub field of school leadership in areas of economic hardship. The boundary between these fields is permeable (whether it is permeable only in one direction might be the perception of those interviewed). Within each field leaders will play the game to accumulate capital which could be symbolic in terms of being perceived as successful (this could then be exchanged for other forms of capital) but could find themselves in contradictory positions. In the smaller sub field they might regard themselves as being successful and indeed be seen by others in the field as being successful especially if the others understand their context. The practice of school leaders will be understood by others within the field to be based on a particular set of values such as those granting symbolic capital within the welfarist paradigm. Within the larger field they may make a claim for status that is denied them by others who are better at playing the game, because they possess a disproportionate amount of capital or because they understand the rules better. The school leaders interviewed were secure in their success in leading their own schools but less secure when they were forced to consider their position in the larger field. So they are simultaneously positioning themselves as successful and unsuccessful within two different fields where the rules are the same but the values of the fields are very different. It could be argued that capital accumulated in the smaller field would have little transferable capital in the larger field. It is interesting that the school leaders seemed able to readily switch from one identity to the other with no apparent discomfort or bitterness or
any apparent attempt to reconcile the discrepancies or reflect on the underlying power relations. Their sense of agency emerges from these dialogic and unreconciled identities and is perhaps rooted in a different era and embedded within their habitus.

Having considered the impact of current discourses arising from neoliberal reform on the individual school leaders and how this constructs them and their schools as failing, I will now look at the models of improvement that are proffered. These models will arise from the same discourses and be based on the same functionalist knowledge claims. The models will position the school leaders as failing and being required to do what is ‘known’ to be effective.

7.6 Models of improvement and impact on teacher professional identity

For schools in areas of economic hardship survival depends on being seen to ‘improve’ but Gewirtz (2002) argues that these schools ‘fail’ because of the structures within which they exist, not necessarily because of ‘… ‘weak’ management and ‘poor’ teaching’ (p 21). Another way of thinking about this is to consider that these schools are not designed to succeed in the neoliberal education world. Schools that have provided a service to young people in areas of economic hardship over many years must either adapt to compete (and most are unlikely to be able to do this) or face a restructuring. I am aware of no research that attempts to evidence the benefits for individual students even in simple measures of examination performance over a period of time following these reorganizations. Indeed there is no evidence of the long term outcomes of any of these changes or of changes in the style of leadership that is being advocated. Indeed Barker (2010) who carried out a detailed study of four schools that had been through seemingly successful transformations driven by six headteachers reports that ‘none of the schools managed to achieve a higher level of effectiveness in terms of student test and examination outcomes’ (Barker, 2010, p 98). I have suggested earlier that, because there is no forum for discussion or no discourse of
resistance, as change is externally imposed, so to, are shifts in both values and understandings of the purposes of education. This is a point also made by Gewirtz (2002):

Nor does there appear to be much recognition in public debates, around schooling that the discourses of post-welfarist education policy, like markets, target setting, performance monitoring and inspection, are not neutral mechanisms for ‘improving’ schools. In particular, there seems to be little appreciation that these discourses have embedded within them a set of values about what education is, and is for, and that they function as powerful disciplinary mechanisms for transforming manager and teacher subjectivities and the culture and values of schooling. (p 21)

Strategies for improvement are going to have a huge impact on the working lives of those teachers in schools in towns such as Bridgetown and come on top of the additional pressures of working with economically disadvantaged children. Improvement policies are based on a set of values and a particular set of beliefs about the purpose of education. If those teachers working in areas of economic hardship do not share the same beliefs and values it is likely that it will be more difficult for them to full engage with and implement the strategies that arise from these policies. This lack of engagement is likely to be exacerbated if there is no forum to voice concerns or participate in a debate about these beliefs and values. The following are some of the improvement strategies that were referred to during the interviews:

- The removal of senior leaders and their replacement possibly with a ‘superhead’
- Monitoring and classification of schools by OFSTED
- The National Challenge
- The closure of a school to be reopened as an academy
- The formation of trusts and federations
- A focus on English and math

Since the interviews were conducted the Future Leaders scheme has gained prominence as a way of getting the ‘best’ people in to run ‘challenging’ schools.
The majority of these strategies have a number of common factors. They are most likely to impact on schools serving areas of economic hardship. They involve ‘things’ being done to the school as change is usually imposed by external forces. The implication is that the knowledge about what needs to be done exists and resides outside of the schools. Looking at this the other way round it could be said that if a school is ‘failing’ it is because the current leadership is ‘failing’ either, because they do not know what to do or they are incapable of doing this. On the other hand there are those who can come in to the school and as transformational leaders and the ‘best’ people available bring about the changes that the dominant discourses demand.

There is little in the interview transcripts to indicate that the school leaders had great confidence in this external knowledge base. There was recognition that most of the schools involved in the study have been given additional resources and two individuals mentioned helpful support from local authority advisers. It is interesting that as schools increasingly operate outside local authorities as academies this support is disappearing. The externally appointed school improvement partners and National Challenge advisers (indicated in Chapter 4 as key figures in the National Challenge documentation) who had been externally appointed were mentioned but were not considered to have had a significant impact. Eleanor, whose school was identified as having serious weaknesses illustrates these views on support:

How much support have I had from outside? None. Very, very little. We’ve been on a notice to improve but we weren’t bad enough to get the real support. At one point I said I wish we had gone into special measures because we would have got some intensive support and lots of money. We got nothing, we did it ourselves but the thing is we are a school that we know we are going we don’t really need the help, we will take the help. We’ve had some support from county with some advisers coming in and supporting us. The best support I got as a head and senior leadership team was through the specialist schools trust which we were involved in last year and we’ve teamed up with [ ] school in London who are a trust and that was very, very helpful. That’s the only support I’ve got but then I went looking for that. Support, yes I get the money I get some funding in. The trust we are in now, what support have I got, do I think I’m going to get. Bottom line is it’s up to you. (Eleanor)
This is a school that has been placed in an OFSTED category, was in National Challenge and is part of a trust. Clearly it is a school that has been identified by external agencies as having a need to improve but there is no evidence presented to suggest that the external ‘experts’ have made any difference. Graham talks about the external support he has had but suggests it is little more than a cosy chat:

We get very little even though (Local Authority) had quite a protracted team of advisers and senior advisers and other advisers. I think it’s highly variable the quality of support you get. I think the SIPS, I don’t want to be inappropriate because it’s a colleague head teacher but I think the SIP, and I’m grateful in some senses for the kind of the watching brief, the none interventionist sort of relatively laissez-faire like touch, approach that my SIP has taken because it shows a respect and an understanding of what I’m doing. (Graham)

One possibility is that ‘experts’ do not exist and that if the individuals swapped school roles the adviser might become the advised and the advised the adviser. So these leaders find themselves in the position as being constructed as someone in need of help as opposed to someone able to offer advice. The transitory nature of expert status was illustrated to me whilst attending a training course on the new OFSTED framework. One of the speakers was the headteacher of a school judged to be outstanding under the new framework. He was in the position of having only been in the school for two weeks when it was inspected and his previous school had been inspected under the old framework two weeks before he left and was judged to be satisfactory.

7.7 Implications for development and change

The implications for change seem fairly clear. Schools in areas of economic hardship appear ill-equipped to meet what is demanded in the current education policy context and those who currently lead them might be seen to have little to offer in this context. Therefore, the schools will change in the way they are constituted to convert to become academies or parts of trusts and a new style of leadership is likely to take over. The
purpose of these schools will change in that they will pursue qualifications that ‘count’
primarily English and maths in order to be seen to compete and improve. What is less clear
to me is what will actually change. It is clearly desirable that children obtain good
qualifications but some schools will always be less successful than others at doing this for
a myriad of reason and so will continue to be labelled as failing and so liable to
restructuring. It appears that this is likely to be a cyclical process involving a relatively
small number of schools. There seems to be no voice given to this apparently irrational
view of performance. This is eloquently expressed by Stronach (1999):

For example, a world reduced to the impeccable performance and ‘effectiveness’
and ‘improvement’ is a world gone mad, because the logic of this kind of
competition has no ending. There will always be losers as well as winners in such a
competition, no matter how much the line is speeded up. (p 187)

In schools like those in Bridgetown the curriculum will become narrower as the emphasis
is placed on English and maths and the students will be mentored and supported to meet
aspirational targets and obtain C grades at GCSE. What is at risk is a loss of relationships
and the relevance of the education these children receive. Raising aspirations of children is
a powerful mantra but care has to be taken not to build unrealistic expectations and
questions need to be asked about the desirability of more children studying for “A” levels
and taking degrees when alternative routes might better have met their needs. There is a
real danger that because leaders of schools in areas of economic hardship have no voice or
are ill equipped to interpret the wider political framework within which they work the
value shifts in education will continue unabated even in the absence of any apparent logic
or concern for what might be lost.

7.8 Summary

In this chapter I have used aspects of Bourdieu’s field theory to show that schools in areas
of economic hardship are positioned in such a way as to be under constant risk of being
labelled as failing due to the hierarchies that they are located within. These hierarchies are
a result of the uneven distribution of all forms of capital and codified and maintained by the discourses of performativity, managerialism and the market. Senior leaders working in these schools are trapped between two conflicting value systems which can crudely be matched to those of welfarism and post-welfarism. It has been argued that this conflict gives rise to the hysteresis effect with the habitus of an individual not being adapted for the field as it is currently operating. In order to manage this conflict, rather than oppose the dominant discourses, the senior leaders enact different identities which might be regarded as inward and outward facing.

The senior leaders claim a strong sense of agency expressing a strong commitment to the work they do despite what they see as job insecurity due to current models of school improvement and the personal toll on their psychological health and work life balance. They exhibited evidence of vulnerability in talking about how they might fare if applying to more highly attaining schools.

There was no evidence of school leadership and responsibility for success or failure resting solely with the headteacher.

The notion of school failure has been conceptualised as being due to codification, which was a product of the discourse of performativity, giving rise to a doxa resulting in misrecognition. So, as doxa, school failure is directly linked to low attainment as exemplified by the National Challenge outcome measures or indirectly by OFSTED judgements which in turn are heavily influenced by performance data. This construction of failure has been shown to assume a shared and agreed understanding of the purpose of education and its desired outcomes. I have described how the schools that are at risk of being labelled as failing have always been at the foot of a hierarchy and that the current discourses that dominate education maintain them in this position but through a different mechanism.
Chapter 8 – Conclusion

8.1 – Introduction

In this chapter I will return to the original aims of the research which was to provide a better understanding of senior leader professional identity and sense of self in schools serving areas of economic hardship and the implications for development and change in these schools. The work was structured using three research questions. I will address each of these research questions with regard to my data and the resulting analysis of this and then place this analysis within a conceptual framework. I will follow this with a consideration of the implications of this work for the leadership of schools in areas of economic hardship and for attempts to improve these schools. Finally I will make some suggestions about further work that could be done.

8.2 - The starting point

The origins of this work lie in my desire to better understand my own professional identity and the context within which I have worked as a senior leader for nearly twenty years. Before I embarked on this work a number of issues had troubled me for some years:

- I experienced a sense of not belonging in gatherings of headteachers
- I had a sense that our school was not treated ‘fairly’
- I felt uneasy with some of the decisions we took in order to ensure that our data moved closer to national norms
- I was aware that some of my fundamental values such as a commitment to the notion of a totally inclusive schools posed a threat to our capacity to compete

When I first took up the headship the school was designated by the Local Authority as being in challenging circumstances and I would go to meetings with other headteachers whose schools carried the same label. What became apparent were the similarities that existed between the schools:
Many were in the OFSTED categories of special measures or serious weaknesses
Many had feeder primary schools that were also in the same categories
All had difficulty recruiting staff and operated with many supply teachers
All had very skewed student populations in terms of the numbers of students of low ability, with behavioural and psychological issues, with difficult family backgrounds and some of ethnic groupings
All had very low attainment levels but some had good progress measures

As a headteacher I was under constant pressure to improve attainment and the school was involved in numerous initiatives aimed at improving results in addition to dealing with the many issues and challenges that arose on a daily basis. I did not feel that as a school we had a ‘voice’ because there was little interest in the views of the leader of a ‘failing’ school. I was also very aware that over the years many colleagues for whom I had the upmost respect in terms of their abilities and commitment to young people in economically disadvantaged areas had been removed from their posts.

I made the decision that I would like to have a ‘voice’ but that first I needed to understand the position in which some schools found themselves and how this impacted on the professional identity of the senior staff and thus move beyond the simple notion that we were not treated ‘fairly.’

What quickly became apparent as I embarked on this project was that I had no understanding of the wider policy context in which the school existed and that I was simply implementing the policies without questioning the assumptions and values that underpinned them. Nor did I have any way of thinking about or conceptualising the issues that concerned me. This thesis is the product of my journey so far.
8.3 Research Question 1: What are the dominant discourses and models of change in education and how do these both impact on and define schools serving areas of economic hardship?

It has been argued throughout this work that the discourses of performativity, markets and managerialism that arose from the post-welfarist, neoliberal reforms have positioned schools in areas of economic challenge so that they are liable to be constructed as failing. Within this construction is the apparent and somewhat illogical association between low attainment and failure on the part of the school as has been illustrated in the analysis of the documentation pertaining to the National Challenge in Chapter 4. This can be interpreted as an example of ‘misrecognition’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p 142) so that by making this link the underlying power relations in the field remain obscured. Linking low attainment to school failure creates a problem which can be ‘fixed’ by the approved and ‘evidenced’ improvement strategies implemented by an inspirational leader. Framing the problem in this way means that other factors (which potentially pose far greater challenge to governments), such as the link between poverty and low attainment (Raffo et al, 2011) resulting from the uneven distribution of forms of capital in society, can be ignored. Hence ‘educationally disadvantaged young people are so positioned because they are disadvantaged both economically and culturally’ (Raffo, 2011, p 341).

In Chapter 5 it was argued that within the managerialist discourse the responsibility for school failure is located with the leadership of the school, particularly that of the headteacher. There is a clear correlation between ‘failure’ and economic disadvantage but the definition of failure is unclear. To be seen as failing a school might:

- Be judged to require special measures as a result of an OFSTED inspection
- Have attainment levels below a certain benchmark as with the National Challenge
- Be unable to attract students
• Have problems with student behaviour or attendance

I have argued that it is significantly more likely that schools matching one or more of these labels will be found in areas of economic hardship. It is not always the case that schools in areas of economic hardship will be seen as failing as with school B in this study. Over the years other labels have been attached to these schools (Clarke, 2005) such as schools in challenging circumstances, schools facing challenges, low attaining, underperforming or schools in social priority areas. Predominantly the labels attach to the same group of schools. These descriptors and definitions of failure arise from the discourses but are very problematic as with schools going into the National Challenge and shortly prior to that receiving favourable OFSTED judgements. These discourses not only construct a large number of schools in areas of economic hardship as failing but they also establish a cycle of decline in certain areas. So in towns like Bridgetown and Hastings once the schools are perceived as failing those parents with the greatest share of capital will send their children out of the area and thus further distort capital distribution and perpetuate a lack of equity.

In this study the schools were labelled as schools in areas of economic hardship in order to avoid using definitions which arise from the discourses. However, using a geographical descriptor is in itself problematic as poverty and educational outcomes are so intrinsically linked. Not all schools in areas of economic hardship attract negative labels, as illustrated by school B, however, it is of note that this school has different outcome measures and students who have elected to be there. The senior leaders and teachers came from the same population of teachers as all the others in this study and indeed a significant number of its teachers still work in other schools as well.

Both the analysis of the National Challenge and of the interviews reveal that the discourses of performativity, managerialism and markets as well those of school improvement not only determine which schools are successful but also the desired outcomes of education and give priority to functional knowledge claims. They also carry the assumption that it is
‘known’ what can be done to improve schools; that there are individuals who can ‘do it’ and that this knowledge resides within the government, their chosen advisers, favoured researchers and some headteachers. Improvement strategies are based on the assumption that a school’s function is to send out young people with the best possible qualifications, the baseline for which was described by the National Challenge as five A* to C grades at GCSE including English and maths. However, I would share Mansell’s (2011) view that ‘results have relative and not absolute value for pupils’ (p 300). So if national examination results go up there will still be children with the lowest examination results in the same way that if there are school performance league tables there will always be schools at the bottom. The sad fact is that, it is those children and those schools in areas of economic hardship that will remain at the bottom (Levin, 2009). The National Challenge was chosen as an example of approaches to school improvement within the era of reform and it shows how discourses can determine organisational and value systems within schools. So within the National Challenge analysis and in the interview material it can be seen that schools shift towards a narrow focus on English and maths with three other subjects in order to meet the benchmarks. There is also a danger that these schools will focus resources on students who are likely, or possibly, going to gain a C grade at GCSE thus potentially risking not providing support to more able students who could go on to obtain the highest grades.

The analysis of the documentation relating to the National Challenge showed that what is offered to schools are a set of improvement strategies which are ‘known’ to work if implemented by the ‘best’ people and will work regardless of context. The strategy of seeing what has worked in certain schools and doing the same things in different schools is taken from the school effectiveness research. However, there was little evidence in the interviews that the school leaders in this study had faith in this approach. In fact there was strong evidence that the effectiveness of ‘blanket’ approaches was regarded as
questionable. The models of change are premised on the notion that ‘we’ all agree upon the desirable outcomes of improvement and that ‘we’ all know what is needed. There is strong evidence in the documents that much faith is put in ‘experts’ who will be able to go into a school, analyse the problems and select the appropriate strategies from the toolbox. There was strong evidence in the interviews that the school leaders had little faith in the ‘experts’ and that they generally felt unsupported apart from the allocation of additional funding.

The penalty for failure to meet benchmarks would be school closure and conversion to an academy therefore putting careers at risk. In terms of the professional identity of the school leaders the models of change proposed make it clear that failure would reside with them and that if improvement does not happen there are ‘better’ people waiting to take their place.

There is no place within the models of change to discuss values or the purpose of education. Regardless of what individual school leaders might regard as being important it is taken as a ‘truth’ that what matters in education is improved attainment figures. This aim will then shape the internal organisation of the school and create tension with other aspirations that the school might have such as a commitment to inclusion. The models of change do not seek to address the issue that no matter how much improvement takes place there must always be some schools with lower attainment than others.

The National Challenge strategy was analysed in Chapter 4 as an example of post-welfare education reform policies acting as codification which according to Bourdieu (1990) ‘goes hand in glove with discipline and the normalization of practices’ (p 80). Establishing a simple, quantifiable benchmark which marks the line between success and failure but giving the appearance of rationality and neutrality thus ignoring the ways in which the measure is itself problematic. Codification, through performativity, provides a rationale for the positioning of schools in a hierarchy and it has been argued in this study that this is simply a way of reaffirming an existing hierarchy that always has a similar group of
schools, those in areas of economic hardship, at its base. This, it was then argued gives rise to a ‘doxa of misrecognition’ (Thomson, 2005, p 741), which links low attainment to school failure. Then because claims are made as to the capacity of particular forms of leadership to transform schools in the most difficult of circumstances as exemplified by ‘heroic’ leadership in Chapter 5 a link is made between school failure and leadership failure. Neither of these links is unproblematic and both can be seen as examples of misrecognition. Linking low attainment with school failure fails to challenge the relationship between poor educational outcomes and poverty. The link between the transformation of schools and ‘heroic’ leadership is read as the ‘right’ sort of leadership and the ‘right’ sort of leader will result in transformation regardless of context. If transformation does not occur is due to the failure of leadership in that particular school.

There is no place within the models of change to discuss values or the purpose of education. Regardless of what individual school leaders might regard as being important it is taken as a ‘truth’ that what matters is education is improved attainment figures. This aim will then shape the internal organisation of the school and create tension with other aspirations that the school might have such as a commitment to inclusion. The models of change do not seek to address the issue that no matter how much improvement takes place there must always be some schools with lower attainment than others.

8.4 Research Question 2: How are senior teachers constructing their professional identity in these schools?

The analysis of the interviews reveals how this group of senior leaders in one area of economic hardship are internally positioned within a struggle between their own values about the purpose of education (which are described as being broadly welfarist) and the values assumed within post-welfarist educational policy. This struggle externally manifests itself in their professional practice when they are required to make decisions and enact policies which do not fit with their personal philosophy. The notion of these senior leaders
being in a struggle is linked to the dialogic self (Holland and Lave, 2001, p 13). In dialogic terms the self can described in the following way:

The self is a position from which meaning is made, a position that is “addressed” by and “answers” others and the “world” (the physical and cultural environment). In answering (which is the stuff of existence), the self “authors” the world - including itself and others. (Holland et al, 1998, p 173)

The evidence from the interviews indicates that the senior leaders in this study ‘manage’ this struggle not by offering resistance but by adopting a number of dialogic selves. These mean that internally they can describe how their own school is a good one because its value systems reflect their own and the same time they can explain to the ‘outside’ that their school is not yet a good one but is ‘improving’ so that eventually it will become a good one. If they chose to challenge current dogma the school leaders risk not only their own careers but also further damage to the school if it fails to show signs of moving towards the imposed benchmarks. If there is no culture of resistance then policy and value shifts are forced through without comment and further strengthen the assumptions relating to values alluded to in chapter four. In this way nothing changes and school leaders are complicit in the way in which their schools are constructed as failing.

Bourdieu’s concept of hysteresis was used to describe the struggle within which the school leaders in this study are located. They have a habitus which was well adapted to the welfarist period of education but it is not adapted to the requirements and expectations of the post-welfare education system. The nature of this crisis and the challenge of the transition will be greatest for those school leaders whose personal beliefs and values are most closely aligned with those of pre-neoliberal education ideology. Bourdieu (1998) said that readjusting their habitus was not something that individuals did consciously but Kerr and Robinson (2009) say that changing the habitus ‘can be a conscious process, at least in cases when agents have acquired academic capital as part of their habitus’ (p 848). This view makes sense to me. I have acknowledged that I am very much part of the social world
that I am investigating and that by acquiring a better understanding of the professional identity of my colleagues I should gain insight into my own professional identity and practice. By carrying out this policy scholarship I have acquired some academic capital that has enabled me to better understand the struggle in which I am located. A better understanding of the origins and the nature of struggle could perhaps lead to more creative solutions to managing it and even perhaps to support the evolution of resistance.

During the interviews the school leaders claim a strong sense of agency but this appears to conflict with their sense of not being looked upon favourably if they chose to apply for posts in other types of school. This is possibly explained by stigmatisation due to being associated with ‘failing’ schools.

8.6 Research Question 3: What are the implications of senior leader identity for development and change in schools serving areas of economic hardship?

The implication of school leaders operating dialogic identities in the struggle between different value systems and different beliefs about the purpose of education rather than offer overt resistance results in two main issues. Firstly there is no practitioner based space to debate these issues and this is left to academics operating from a critical perspective and who practice policy scholarship but this is not the favoured form of knowledge production. 

Thrupp and Willmott (2003):

Problem-solving perspectives reflect ‘common-sense’, functionalist, ahistorical, individuated and often monocultural views about the purposes and problems of schooling. Crucially, even when ‘quick fixes’ are not seen as realistic, there are always thought to be school-based solutions to school problems. Such perspectives dominate the media and policy circles and problem-solving perspectives on education are also widely found among teacher educators, headteachers, and teachers themselves, even those with considerable experience. By comparison, critical perspectives on education are less common but more searching. (p 4)

Whilst I would endorse the views of Thrupp and Wilmott, my study reveals that there are senior leaders whose values and beliefs differ from those that underpin the current
discourses but they manage (and outwardly mask) this by learning the required language and attempting to conform rather than resist, even though they know that conforming is unlikely to cause them to succeed. My learning from carrying out this work is that as practitioners the majority of school leaders do not have an understanding of either their context and how this has evolved or an awareness of how they are positioned within discourses. This is not surprising as these discourses are so dominant with knowledge production, training, policy creation and delivery so tightly controlled. The result of this scenario is that nothing will change for schools in areas of economic hardship.

The second issue is that models of change are being delivered by senior leaders who do not necessarily believe that they are not in the best interest of their school as they have had no role in shaping these models. It would seem far preferable that those who understand the context and the needs have a shared investment in the strategies that are used. (Clarke, 2005):

One feature of working with schools in difficulty might, therefore, be to personalise the action, to localize the challenge and to engage and empower the actors – in this case teaching staff – to connect with the problems that they define as challenging, rather than giving them a pre-existing definition of challenge. But here comes the rub, and how it connects to the second theme of this book, the matter of process – how to ‘think’ about how to ‘do’ the improvement. (p 3)

It would be a daunting task to equip senior leaders with the knowledge and tools to fully participate in this debate and it is difficult to imagine how this might be achieved in the current context. An alternative might be to trust in the knowledge, values and practice of those professionals who work in schools in areas of economic hardship to deliver improvement that is meaningful to them and their students. It is difficult to see this coming to fruition in the foreseeable future.
8.7 The identity of the researcher

From the outset it was clear that this was insider research and my identity in this study can be considered against a dialogic framework. Thomson and Gunter (2011) ‘talk about the fluidity of academic researcher ‘identity’’ (p 17) and in this study I existed as friend, colleague, acquaintance, manager and researcher. One of my initial concerns was that because of where the study was located the interviews might proceed as friend to friend or colleague to colleague. The pilot interview dispelled some of my concerns and likewise the interviews proceeded primarily as interviewer interviewee or researcher researched largely due to the formal way in which they were set up. This manifested itself in a way that was particularly significant to me in the contrasting way in which some of the questions were answered. When talking about their own school or their concept of what a good school was they talked freely and openly. When asked how the Department would view their school they were much more guarded and used careful language and emphasised the weaknesses and that they were improving. At this point I felt like an outsider, as though I was being delivered a pre-prepared speech and on reflection wonder whether at this point they had shifted to present to the outside.

The use of the concept of hysteresis as discussed earlier in this chapter has provided me with the greatest insight into my own professional identity and reinforced the notion that this is very much insider research where any outcomes provide as much insight into my own practice as to that of any of the other interviewees.

8.8 How this research could move forward

One aspect that emerged very clearly during the literature review for this study was the lack of empirical research that has been carried out on the identity and practice of school leaders particularly that of deputy and associate headteachers. Within the managerialist discourse there are clear assumptions made about the impact of the headteacher but no recent studies of the work of leadership teams and the contribution that individuals work.
Most of the studies that do exist are small scale projects carried by associates of the National College. It would be interesting to investigate some of the claims, made for example, on the Future Leaders’ website of the impact of the headteacher.

In terms of my own work it would be useful to interview those involved in policy production and leadership training to better understand the origins of the claims to knowledge and what discussion has taken place with regard to the values and desirable outcomes implicit with policies relating to school improvement in areas of economic hardship. It would also be of interest to take some of the themes, particularly an understanding of hysteresis, which have emerged during this initial study and pursue them in depth with senior leaders in schools in different areas of economic hardship and with more recently appointed leadership teams.

A piece of work that I believe would be of value in acquiring a deeper understanding of how schools implement policy in a particular context would be a long term collaborative study between a group of senior leaders and a group of researchers. This would follow the process of school improvement in a school that was in an area of economic hardship whilst at the same time engaging the senior leaders in thinking about the policy context within which they operate and giving them the language to fully participate in the debate. This would provide an insight into the impact of policy on teachers, children and the wider community in much the same way that Ball’s (1981) study examined comprehensive education but placing a greater emphasis on the active participation of the senior leaders in the school as equal partners in the enterprise.

Whilst I recognise that the findings from this study relate to one group of senior leaders in one well defined geographical area at a particular moment in time I would argue that they are relevant to other groups of teachers and other schools in different contexts. It is clear from this study that the senior leaders interviewed had little understanding of the origins of education policy and the knowledge claims and evidence on which it is based. If school
leaders are to engage with a debate about policies and the impact they will have on their schools and their professional practice then they need to have an understanding of the wider policy context and how they and their schools are positioned within discourses. If school leaders are not able to participate in a debate about the values and beliefs that underpin policy they risk allowing major changes including ideas about the nature and purpose of education passing unnoticed.

8.9 The implications of this work for school improvement and for the professional practice of senior leaders in areas of economic hardship

Harris and McGregor (2005) assert the need for a book that challenges a policy context that is intrinsically linked to standard based reform and the underlying notions of managerialism and performativity. This work makes a further contribution to this debate that is derived from the stories of a group of senior leaders working in schools in areas of economic hardship. It is these teachers who interact with students and translate and implement improvement strategies. Gaining insight into the experience of these teachers may develop an understanding of barriers to improvement that cannot be dismissed as using social context as an excuse for perceived poor performance.

The senior leaders in this study present as professionals who are very committed to working with young people in schools that face considerable challenges and who also fully recognize the importance of examination success. They have a detailed knowledge of their particular context but it appears that this knowledge is not valued by policy makers and improvement strategies are handed down to them as are the measures that will be taken to indicate success. Indeed success itself is defined by external agencies. If these imposed strategies fail then the school leaders are held to be responsible. If school leaders in areas of economic hardship could be involved in a professional dialogue about what success would look like in their school and feel that what they value is recognized by the policy
makers it is likely to lead to much greater engagement. It might also offer a model of improvement that is much more tailored to the needs of the school and its students.

By understanding the experience of teachers it may be possible to embrace the complexities that exist and provide a dimension to school improvement that involves sharing views of what is important in schools and listening to and valuing alternative perceptions. If groups of teachers are acquiring an identity based around failure and in a culture of conflict over values and purpose there is a threat to attempts to improve schools.

If it were possible to embrace differences in values it might be possible to review the way that policies are framed, publicized and delivered and to consider issues such as how teachers are trained to teach in these schools and to question if all senior leaders are doing the same ‘job’ and should they all be ‘judged’ by the same measures. Ultimately it might result in a shared understanding not only of what success and improvement mean but about what is important in our schools for the long term benefit of our young people.

This study has made a contribution to the conceptualization and research on school failure by locating this within its historical context and seeing it as a political construction enacted as policy strategy as part of the neoliberal education reform process. It has been described using Bourdieu’s tool kit particularly codification, doxa and misrecognition. The position of individual school leaders has been described as a struggle due to them being in a state of hysteresis resulting in the activation of dialogic identities.
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Appendices

Appendix 1 Letter from Ed Balls to headteachers explaining the National Challenge

Rt Hon Ed Balls MP
Secretary of State

Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1 P 3BT
tel: 0870 0012345 dcsf.ministers@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk

13 October 2008

Dear Colleague

I know that we share the ambition to ensure every pupil secures the good qualifications that will help them succeed in life. Realising this ambition depends on what you do in your school, together with your staff, pupils and parents, and on what local authorities and central government do to support you. That is why — building on the success of the London Challenge — I launched the National Challenge, to boost your efforts with additional support, including national funding of £400m over three years.

I also know that many of you feel that local and national media coverage of the National Challenge does not accurately or fairly reflect the situation in your school and the efforts which you and your staff are making. I have been clear from the outset, in all the statements I have made, that many National Challenge schools are, with great leadership and high aspirations, improving fast, and are not only on track to reach the benchmark but also ready to go far beyond it.

The truth of this was demonstrated by the record GCSE results this summer. I am delighted that many schools have reached, and sometimes far exceeded, the 30% benchmark, and should like to offer congratulations to all head teachers, staff and pupils in schools whose results have improved.

National Challenge Schools are those in which fewer than 30% of the pupils achieved five or more GCSE A*-C grade passes including English and maths in their most recent results. National Challenge support will be available to these schools and also to schools above 30% which need it to sustain results above this benchmark.

Since June, I have had the opportunity to visit many schools and see at first hand the work you are doing and the progress which you are making, sometimes in difficult circumstances. I am clear that my Department's role, through the National Challenge, is to support your efforts.

National Challenge Advisers — or in London, the Black Country and Greater Manchester, City Challenge Advisers — will help you to do this. They will bring their experience of leading and supporting schools in challenging circumstances to ensure you get the support you need to help your school
improve. They will be able to draw from a menu of tried and tested
improvement strategies, as well as tailoring support to the particular
challenges your school faces and bringing to bear the other children's
services that you need. Funding will be allocated to your school from the
£400m available based on what you agree with your NCA.

In some cases, schools will need radical change. Some are already entering
into innovative partnership arrangements, and others are moving to Academy
status. I have also recently announced the first National Challenge Trusts. In
Southend, secondary modern Chase High will become a National Challenge
Trust school, partnered by King John School in Essex; Risedale School in
North Yorkshire will be merged with high performing Northallerton College;
and David Lister School in Hull will establish a National Challenge Trust with a
range of partners. These collaborations will transform standards through
significant new investment and a lasting partnership with strong schools and
other organisations, with each project eligible for up to £1 m of new resources.

Finally, I would like to reaffirm that the National Challenge strategy is
designed to help you to achieve our shared ambition to ensure that all pupils
are able to realise their potential, no matter how challenging the circumstances,
and break the link between social deprivation and low educational attainment.

I wish you and your staff every success in the coming year and look forward
to celebrating your achievement.

Yours sincerely

ED BALLS MP
Appendix 2

Dear Colleague,

As part of my study towards an EdD at the University of Manchester I am carrying out a small-scale research project to think about and reflect on the experience of school leaders in schools that are labelled by government policy as ‘being in difficulty’. The labels would include being given notice to improve; requiring special measures; being in challenging circumstances; and currently National Challenge schools.

The focus of my study is how individual senior school leaders in schools in areas of economic hardship respond to their school being ‘labelled’ and the impact that this has on them as a person, as a professional and on attempts to improve the performance of the school.

I realise that it is difficult to find time in busy schedules but I would be very grateful if you were able to set aside 30-45 minutes.

The interview would be semi-structured i.e. based, around several questions but involving informal discussion as issues arise. The interview would be recorded and transcribed. Quotes from the transcripts will be used in the production of my thesis and possibly again if publications are generated from this study, but you may say at the end of the interview if there are any responses that you would prefer I did not use. The quotes will not be attributable, but due to the unique context within which we work it is possible that individuals may be identifiable by colleagues.

Once the interviews have been transcribed I need to reserve the right to use the material in pursuit of my studies.

All contributions will be anonymous and no individual school mentioned. You will be offered a copy of any written up form of the work that relates to interview material.
This is a genuine attempt to highlight what it is like for those individuals who work in a significant number of schools in this country and identify possible ways of thinking differently about the whole school improvement agenda.

The study has been approved by the University of Manchester. If you would be willing to assist me in this endeavour please contact me in order to arrange a mutually convenient time to carry out the interviews. It would be really helpful if I could carry out the interviews in an appropriate room in your building in order to minimise the amount of your time I will need.

If you would like to discuss the project further please contact me by either e-mail or phone.

Yours sincerely,

………………………………

Associate Headteacher, ……………………

Mobile ………………………

E mail ………………………
Appendix 3

Interview Questions

1. What is your definition of a good school?
2. How would you describe your current school?
3. How would the DCSF describe your current school?
4. How would the DCSF describe a good school?
5. Why do you think the DCSF or DES, label schools as National Challenge or special measures.
6. What do you think is the impact on staff, students and parents of these labels?
7. What do you think are the major differences between being a school leader in schools in economically disadvantaged areas and those in more affluent areas?
8. Has being a senior leader in a school in a disadvantaged area had an impact on you as a person?
9. If you applied for a post in a school judged to be high attaining, how do you think it would be viewed?
10. Could you briefly describe your career to date, the sorts of choices you made and how you came to be in your current post?
11. If you could re-plan your career would you want to be in a school in a socially disadvantaged area?
12. What do you think are the main differences between working in a school in a socially disadvantaged area and one that might be described as high attaining?
13. In the debate about raising standards where is the notion of fairness applied in comparing schools?
14. Where do you think the evidence for current educational policy comes from?
15. What external support has your school had in raising standards?