CEPaLS 07:

Risky Reform: stories from a New Labour Project

Helen M Gunter, University of Manchester

This paper was originally given to report on work in progress at the *Developing Theory in Organisational Research and Practice in Educational Settings* seminar. University of Bath, June 2007. I have not updated the content. There is some interesting work on risk regimes, and the tensions that we are currently experiencing regarding the impact of Covid 19 on national and local risk regimes.

Abstract

My general area of interest is in the sociology of organisations, particularly the exercise of power through the interplay between agency and structure. This leads me to think about how things get done, in what ways, what the division of labour is and why it is that way. By thinking about a range of projects I have been involved in I have in mind an issue about how risk is handled, particularly in relation to the external-internal interface. In this paper, I show how in one school where I am working with Professor Pat Thomson (Nottingham) they are taking a huge risk in enabling a group of students to undertake research and to write/implement an aspect of school policy. This example raises some challenging issues about professional practice, particularly the resilience of those at local level to determine risk. It seems to me that schools as organisations have had to do some risky things in recent times (comprehensive education; site-based management; specialist schools; inspections; marketisation; managerialism; and national curriculum/strategies). I am particularly interested in what is regarded as safe and hazardous, and what is recognised as in need of control, and why.

Introduction

This paper approaches organisational life on the basis of how people position themselves and others in the processes of decision-making within and about professional practice. What I am struggling with is the local-national boundary as evidenced in local policymaking. I want to approach this in a way that legitimises local policymaking as something more than resistance or refusal, and more than technical implementation of external policy. In working through some thinking on this matter I use an example of a project that I have been working on with Pat Thomson (Nottingham) for the past three years. We have been working with a group of students in their development as researchers, where they have undertaken a project on school life, gathered and analysed data, presented it to the staff, and then redrafted a school policy.

Following Hood et al. (2001) I identify this as a local risk regulation regime, and I show how it interfaces with the New Labour national risk regulation regime in ways that both enable the school to handle the contradictions and weaknesses in national policy and potentially exceed that policy in regard to curriculum and workforce development. I begin by examining the challenge of risk as a policy control strategy in education, and show through the case study how such control is based on an epistemology that does not relate to the demands of control. Indeed, I argue that national risk regulation regimes are necessary for technical issues regarding safety (food, fire, energy) but for social situations they create the seeds of their own collapse.

Risky reforms

In 1984 the then Secretary of State, Sir Keith Joseph, told the North of England Conference:

> 'This Government's aim is to raise standards. I make no apology for repeating that we are indeed after better standards in all areas and in all aspects of the education service. Where the standards now achieved are good, we can all be glad. But we should not be satisfied. Where, for example, the standards achieved by many of our schools fall below what we know is being achieved by some schools in very similar circumstances, then we can legitimately ask for improvement' (138).

Yet, the stories of school change show the importance of professional and curriculum leadership within schools by professionals (e.g. Ball 1981) and how the government sought to use evidence from HMI (labelled as 'professional' evidence) to establish what was known about standards and what needed to be worked on (e.g. DES 1985). Twenty years later, the then Secretary of State, Charles Clarke (2004), reaffirmed the emphasis on standards, but does more than suggest an agenda for change by providing evidence of improvement from OfSTED and clear direction as to how the system will (must) change in detailed ways. Clarke outlines plans for more specialism, strong leadership, partnerships, workforce reform, effectiveness in teaching and learning based on core principles of school improvement:

- 'create a dominant focus for improvement: select key priorities for improving teaching and learning to concentrate effort and build experience of success;
- agree clear and unifying goals: ground goals for teachers and students in evidence, including performance data and benchmarks;
- build collective ownership of the development work: engage staff across the school in a school improvement group;
- enhance knowledge and teaching skills through focused professional development: create time for staff to learn together;

- collaborate with other schools: widen the vision and create opportunities for joint development' (26).

The challenge of delivering on New Labour interventions into schools and classrooms has been reported in a number of texts by insiders (e.g. Clark 1998), outsiders (e.g. Barker 2005), and those who straddle both (e.g. Hyman 2005). Hyman (2005) shows the problematics of the pace of reform, particularly the difference between the soundbite in a Prime Ministerial speech that he helped to write compared with the delivery of change by working with students at Islington Green School. Notably, he acknowledges how schools do not, and perhaps cannot, implement a policy directly, but have to begin with local context.

Both the New Right and New Labour governments of the last quarter of the twentieth century undertook structural and cultural change in the school system. Each made interventions into the type of functions and practices in schools, together with reforms to the curriculum and to measuring performance as a means of delivering standards. Both faced the issue of risk, that is, the possibility that what they wanted to see happen does not happen, or does not fully happen, or results in an unpredicted happening. Comparing Ball and Hyman shows not only the difference that being a researcher as distinct from being a speechwriter makes to analysis, but also how there is a difference to how control was understood to be legitimately located. In Beachside Comprehensive the school worked on its agenda for change, and in Islington Green the school worked on implementing external requirements for change.

It seems that what Tilly (2005) describes as 'trust networks' were evident in education in the 1970s and 1980s could no longer deliver in the way that central government required from the 1990s. For the Thatcher governments the market was a form of trust network, and for the Major government this was challenged through the beginnings of a central regulation of leadership training and interventions into failing schools (e.g. hit squad and Hackney Downs School). Hence, based on Tilly (2005), I intend to look at what trust means to different constituencies:

> 'Trust consists of placing valued outcomes at risk to others' malfeasance, mistakes or failures. Trust relationships include those in which people regularly take such risks.

> Although some trust relationships remain purely dyadic, for most part they operate within larger networks of similar relationships. Trust networks, then, consist of *ramified interpersonal connections, consisting mainly of strong ties, within which people set valued, consequential, long-term resources and enterprises at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, or failures of others'* (12, author emphasis).

The relationship between those in central government and local provision had broken down as the class structure had been challenged through educational achievement and opportunities within the working and middle classes (see Gunter 1999). Both the 'indirect' integration of teachers through union bargaining and the 'direct' integration of teachers as public employees delivering a public service had not resulted in the protection of this group of workers (Tilly 2005: 7). To be blunt, teachers were charged with being responsible for the 'malfeasance', 'mistakes', and 'failures', and had shown that they could not be trusted to deliver in the public interest. This is evident in policy documents, speeches and legislation regarding the nature of teachers and their work (see for example, Coopers and Lybrand 1988, DfEE 1997,1998), and has been analysed by a range of researchers who have looked at what this means for professional practice in schools (e.g. Gunter 2008, Ozga 1999).

The politics of trust (the teaching profession as a 'network of mistrust') has been a feature of public sector policy intervention and audit where a managerialist framework for structure and practice has been used to control those who are charged to deliver public policy. The borders between national strategy and local provision (re-conceptualised as 'delivery') have been officially fixed through a combination of national performance (standards, inspection, league tables) and local individual performance (value added scores; body; dress; language; appraisal; grading). This creates as self-fulfilling 'technology of risk' (Power 1997: 138) where the risk problem is defined in relation to audit, where the underlying epistemology of audit (evidence in formed policy and practice) becomes normalised. Problems within the social world are seen as technological ones that need fixing and so technical solutions such as an audit are generated. However, this could be the fundamental weakness, as Power (1997) notes:

> 'If there were no trust in managers, teachers, doctors, and so on, there would be no problem of risk associated with their behaviour, i.e. the possibility of unexpected adverse outcomes. To the extent that regulatory systems have an inherent tendency to trust the

> supervisee, they are always at risk and these risks create burdens for the enforcement machinery because expectations are raised that control is possible' (138).

Hence, controlling risk through audits needs those at local level to deliver; people need to comply with the process of doing the audit and being audited. It needs regulation that is not only external to the organisation but deeply embedded within practice, and so I want to use Hood et al's (2001) construct of a "risk regulation regime" (9) to bring meaning to educational reform over the past decade.

Following Beck (1992), Hood et al. (2001) argue that we live at a time of hazardous dangers (BSE, Computer Millennium Bug, GM Food, Mobile Phones, dangerous dogs, terrorists) where harm is "knowable and assessable only through scientific investigation rather than by direct lay observation", and life is subjected to an epistemology which over complicates everyday judgements about what is safe and unsafe (4). In other words, professional judgement and an inherent understanding of quality is too risky, judgement has to be evidence based with statistics, laws of probability and prediction in play. Blame, enquiry, litigation, prosecution and punishment are all linked to this, where the individual, the company/organisation/nation (failing teacher, failing headteacher, failing school, failing local authority, failing parent) can be charged with negligence or wilful damage.

Regulation is the product of the state privatising what it used to own and provide (travel, jobs, welfare, education, health), but at the same time having to retain control: minimise risk from private interests delivering goods that the public requires and would punish governments through the ballot box if there are serious failures (e.g. food, communication). Through the use of contracts, licenses, legal standards and agencies (e.g. Food Standards Agency), the state can ensure that hazards are controlled and so public welfare is protected. However, as Hood et al. (2001) go on to argue, there are variations between and within a state about what is regarded as a hazard and how resilient or risk tolerant the state is. For example, there is strict regulation regarding drink and driving, but wider driver health is vague. They go onto argue that there is a

need to inter-play risk and regulation in ways that do not present a regulatory or audit state as an entity (Power 1997) but instead they develop 'the idea of risk regulation "regimes" to bring out some of the ways in which risk regulation varies from one domain to another and how it can change over time' (8).

The argument I intend to construct is that education policy under New Labour has adopted a national risk regulation regime, but within this policy domain local schools become inter-connected risk regulation regimes. Here the consequences of doing and not doing something are assessed and decisions made. It is a useful means by which the local can be conceptualised as productive and active in how national regulation is engaged with. This can be a matter of contestation as New Labour politicians have told me about how they have welcomed headteachers who have led their reforms, and operated at a pace that is faster than the DfES (increasingly being labelled as 'system leaders'), but at the same time there are heads who would argue they are working to their agenda (unpublished data!). Hence I adopt the term regime (see Gunter and Forrester 2007) based on Hood et al. (2001) and Harding (2000) where there is an association and inter-connection between people within and external to formal institutions such as a school, and where interests coincide in order to control and deliver processes and outcomes in particular ways.

Hood et al. (2001) show that a regime is an activity system where people practice, there is continuity over time, and where boundaries can be set and agreed. It has intellectual origins in a range of disciplines from the social and natural sciences, and terminology used includes networks and organisations, and has key control features:

- Information gathering: which can be sought out through inspection, be provided informally, and can be based on the requirement to report.
- Standard-setting: which can be highly technical (e.g. nuclear safety) through to on-site deliberation of local standards.

- Behaviour-modification: which can require compliance but also needs to be linked to issues of preferences and incentives, not least the operation of sanctions.

The type and operation of control happens within two main dimensions: context and content:

- Regime context: which means the type of risk, view of the public, and how organised interests define what is and is not acceptable.
- Regime content: which is the issue of under and over regulation, the way regulation is organised, and, the way things are done, not least the tension between rules and discretion.

Table 1 provides an overview of a risk regulation regime in the New Labour education policy domain.

Table 1: Risk Regulation and New Labour

	Information Gathering	**Standard Setting**	**Behaviour Modification**
Regime Context	Between school variability too risky; whole system at risk; public and media lobbies hostile.	Requirement to know about individual, group and school outcomes in order to change media and public attitudes. Requirement for 'high reliability organisation'. Requirement for single individual to take blame for service delivery. Requirement for statistical evidence and a science of performance.	Define, train and reward a regulated workforce. Individual external/secular motivation. Language of effective, efficiency, delivery, excellence.
Regime Content	Active and aggressive information seeking through: Ofsted; Fresh Start; League Tables; Performance Management; etc.	National standards for roles/jobs. National standards for Key Stage tests/exams. Training, accreditation and licensing of jobs (NCSL). Restructuring: specialist schools; beacon schools; academy schools.	Curriculum content and assessment control (literacy and numeracy). Training and performance culture. Conflation of headteacher with leader, leading and leadership. Entrepreneurialism and private sector cultures and practices (managerialism). Remodelling and redeployment, workforce deregulation.

It is out of the context of this paper to go into the detail that underpins the analysis in this table, but I have written about New Labour policy (Gunter and Forrester 2007) and aspects of that policy e.g. remodelling (Butt and Gunter 2005, 2007) and leadership (Gunter and Rayner 2007).

What I want to focus on is the way in which information gathering, standard setting and behaviour modification operate in ways to enable control to be secured, and how this relates to context and content. In order to do this I am going to draw on two inter-connected arguments: first, that the process in play is an ordinary tyranny (Gunter 2007) where everyday regime regulation is seen to be acceptable and normal, but in reality such practices are limiting the exercise of professional agency; and linked to this, second, compliance with such tyranny by others who know better than us is in the form of a makeover (Gunter and Thomson 2006).

With Pat Thomson (Nottingham) I have studied the makeover genre in UK culture, particularly in television, with the examples of Trinny and Susannah in *What Not to Wear*, and *Ten Years Younger*. One of our analyses has been about how headteachers have been made over into organisational leaders, and how this operates according to the logic of practice within gardening, body and lifestyle programmes. We have suggested that the makeover of heads into organisational leaders who deliver national standards has occurred through:

- "the ritual denunciation and demonisation of everything that has happened before, always via media -. heads in former times were lax, badly or untrained, inefficient, ineffective, indulgent of teacher unions, slack in their requirements for performance, and sloppy in the ways they conceptualised change. At the same time they were also capable of change if the circumstances were right.
- the harnessing of new forms of 'expertise' to the task of reforming the object in question – heads are trained to take charge of budgets, planning, staff selection and staff and student performance. The market requires them to develop new skills in networking and public relations and New Public Management requires them to learn how to manage risks and to become entrepreneurial.
- displays of willing acquiescence - heads must be enthusiastic participants to this process or risk being belittled in public. Leadership makeovers give selected heads a platform to speak from and public rewards as symbolic capital or silence them through scripting and

emotional sedation. Only their professional associations can be critical, although they too must play the game as social partners in order to achieve benefits for members.

- continual monitoring and audit to ensure continued compliance – this has now moved to an invidious form of school self evaluation in which their statistical representation must be continually available for examination. It is leader-heads who must manage this process and take responsibility for the consequences.
- rituals of humiliation if the object of action fail to live up to expectations – media is quick to take up local and national cases where heads are deemed to be wanting in leadership" (10-11).

The workings of the makeover are such that the person is told to take a risk: with their bodies, gardens, clothes relationships, but the risk is actually handed over to an expert (Trinny and Susannah) who shows 'you' are wrong in 'your' practice (shopping, taste), they provide the rules to follow, target the resources onto 'you' to deliver the change, reveal the new 'you' to 'yourself', the family, and the UK public, and then put 'you' under surveillance to check up that the rules are being followed. In this way the individual is required to be seen to be risky even if they are risk averse, but through the process the risk is managed by others who know best and they deliver a new risk free person who can follow the rules. I would argue that this is the way in which the risk regulation regime is working in education, and it operates through the person putting themselves forward (e.g. as an npqh candidate; as a teaching assistant trained to cover a lesson; as a chief operating officer who heads up a community campus without QTS), receiving the rules (national standards), operating in required ways (delivering national reforms locally through distributed leadership) and being rewarded (performance related pay). In Bourdieu terms there is a self-evident truth or "doxa" for headteachers as organisational leaders, this acts as "misrecognition" where those who are within the game in play "forget" how they are produced by the game they are located within (2000: 192).

Risky Schools

I intend drawing in this section on a case study of a school where Pat Thomson and I have been working for the past three years. There is a formal report (Gunter and Thomson 2004) and a series of papers about school improvement (Hollins et al. 2006) and the students as researchers project (Gunter and Thomson 2007, 2008; Thomson and Gunter 2006, 2007a, 2007b). Here I want to say something about the students as researchers project and then present educational policy reform in the school as an example of a local risk regulation regime.

The students as researchers project began in the summer of 2004 and has gone through a number of phases:

> **Phase 1:** we undertook an evaluation of the school based on a questionnaire to students; interviews with staff, parents, governors; a study of documentation. We began with the questionnaire to students by designing and piloting it with a group of students. We see this as a process of consultation.
>
> **Phase 2:** we took the questionnaire data back to the students who had helped us to design and pilot the questionnaire. We negotiated with them a research project where they voted to follow up the data which said that some students, particularly boys in KS3, did not feel safe. They were interested in studying bullying, what it means and how it is experienced. They did this by holding focus groups with students in school, where they showed them photographs of dramatic scenarios within school. These pictures showed staged interactions between students that were ambiguous, and they were used to prompt discussion: what is going on here, do you see this around school, how often? They also showed pictures of clothes and footwear which the students argued denoted allegiance to particular groups based on music and language. The data showed that the students liked the school and generally felt safe, but it did reveal a form of low level bullying that was under the adult radar based on sexual language and comment. The findings challenged the victim-perpetrator view of bullying and suggested it was a social practice deeply embedded

within youth culture. They did not like this, did not feel that adults in school were interested in helping them, and they felt powerless to handle it. We see this as a process of enquiry

Phase 3: the students presented their findings to the staff and gained support to interview staff about how they understand bullying and how they handle it. The students constructed five dramatic scenarios in the form of stories and used them with a number of teaching and support staff to gain their responses to bullying in school, particularly low level bullying. They found out that there was clarity in regard to major incidents (e.g. fights, racism) but beyond this the staff exercised professional judgement in how they would deal with name calling and whether to involve senior staff, police and parents. The students identified that staff have a range of priorities in handling such matters, and hence may need to maintain the working consensus in the lesson rather than be dramatic. Up to this point the students had interpreted that this meant the staff where not taken the incidents seriously enough, and found that staff talking to them was not sufficient. We see this as a process of learning.

Phase 4: the students scaled up this research by holding an in-service session with all staff after school, where they presented the scenarios and gained the whole staff response. They also presented a redrafted anti-bullying policy where they had gone through the school policy and agreed edits. We see this as a policy review process.

What this students-as-researchers project shows is that within the New Labour risk regulation regime regarding the delivery of national standards at key stages the opportunity has been taken in the school to take risks:

- Working with two professors from Universities;
- Working with a group of students over a three year period;
- Securing parental agreement for students to miss lessons to do this project;
- Allowing a project on bullying to take place at a time of marketing and media interest;
- Working with teachers through a student and professor led project.

The dangers were all around us: the students might not do the work they had set themselves, they might get fed up; parents would complain (one student left as parents felt he was missing too many maths lessons); teachers would not take it seriously; the local paper would get hold of the project and distort the 'bullying' agenda; and, OfSTED would arrive and identify that the school was working in a way without national approval or evidence of impact on student outcomes. It seems that the school has developed its own risk regulation regime where it took a risk that the project would make a difference, the students would exercise choice and develop an approach to personalised learning which delivers national priorities but in a local way; and that curriculum change would be based on the purposes, principles and practices that the school determined were appropriate. Hence, the school may be flattered by the data revealing it is officially successful, the school listens to and takes what it finds interesting and helpful from the makeover ringbinders in national curriculum strategies, and experts who are promoting makeovers (e.g. performance management consultants; OfSTED inspectors; school improvement advisor) can do their work within the school. However, the school does not yield to prescription or to the invincible expert, and begins all encounters on the basis that the control of educational standards and strategy are within its grasp. The doxa is a truth that is not necessarily self-evident. They aim to be accountable for what they do and believe in rather than what they have done to deliver what someone else believes in. Table 2 provides a summary:

Table 2: Risk Regulation and the school experience

	Information Gathering	**Standard Setting**	**Behaviour Modification**
Regime Context	Research by students on an aspect of school life.	School determination of effective teaching and learning based not only on formal outcome data but also on student-staff research data.	Teachers and students working to develop and evaluate policy to enhance teaching and learning.
Regime Content	School determination of purposes, principles and practices in school that make a difference to students. School is successful in official terms (league tables, Ofsted) and has the support of parents.	School has specialist status but successfully argued for creating specialisms within school, and so has redesigned the curriculum.	School delivers legal requirements but where there are opportunities the curriculum, workforce, personalisation and choice have been developed based on research, partnerships, and professional development.

In this sense innovation is locally based where education policy is developed within the school. The school does not disobey the law and can show it meets national requirements. However, the school also has to handle the contradictions within national policy (e.g. told to work in partnership but remain in competition with other schools), and initiatives which are bold but not carried through nationally (e.g. enterprise education), in ways that have opened up risk. Schools have had to take risks in handling such contradictions and hence this has drawn on the building of trust between people locally. They have sought to manage risk by taking risks based on teaching and learning, and what is in the interests of the students. Hence it is official government good practice to have a student council, and the example of the students as researchers project showed that students can work together on a major area of school life and negotiate with teachers on policy changes. Hence the school has set up a student parliament which has more 'teeth' than a council where adult agendas dominate and decisions are about toilets and the canteen. In this school the parliament will annually commission a student research project that will focus on a major area such as learning. However, what is also of interest is that while the students dominate in numbers and in-school change is done in the interests of students, it is the case that other interests hold more weight. Our end of project review shows that while the students had generated interesting data that said some very important things about school life, the policy review process did not begin with their data but with the previous policy. They have been allowed to be involved in amending but not drafting policy. The students have been trusted, but only so far, and the risk of the implications of their findings and the status of their research knowledge was too much at this stage. What they have shown is that their contribution is productive and credible, they have responded to the privilege of being allowed to be involved in whole school decisions (a form of co-option has taken place with the three older students), and so they can be trusted to work within an adult determined agenda, but they cannot, as yet, contribute to setting that agenda. The potential exists in future research that they are doing to impact on the agenda, but this will depend on how the boundary of the risk regime is negotiated, not least the power processes within notions of teacher professionalism.

Summary

What I have raised in this paper is how people within an organisation such as a school are being integrated into a New Labour risk regulation regime. This control of risk is based on negative views about teachers as deliverers of national reform, and hence within education there is information gathering, standardisation and behaviour modification based on a response to a hostile context (need to get more positive stories in the press) and the production of an auditable content (scripted lessons, performance calculations). Risks have not been taken with the curriculum as it is still subject based in ways that echo the 19th Century or with learning process where didactic whole class teaching is retained and modernised through interactive whiteboards and online learning. However, risks have to be taken locally to handle the contradictions in national policy, and to handle the demands of students and parents who want to see innovations in teaching and learning. This has given space to schools to create their own risk regulation regime, and in the example given the approach is not just how do we handle the pace and 'fast food nature' of interventions but also how trust might be extended to students and teachers to do things which exceed national policy requirements. What this illustrates is that local policy can and does matter, and so change can happen within such trust networks which are dynamic and innovative. It seems to me that the interplay between students and the workforce in local decision making is a fertile area for research and theorising. Not least because the case shows that the audit structures and cultures which aim to control risk actually do generate the need for risk taking and as such sow the seeds of their own collapse.

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