

PART ONE: THE NATURE OF IRONY

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Introducing the ironic perspective

Why do efforts to improve the quality of education via organizational leadership and management make matters worse in some respects as well as better? In what ways are education professionals responding to such efforts? Could the endeavour to improve education through organizational leadership and management be rendered more effective by accepting certain limitations in practice on what is desirable in principle? These questions are of considerable significance for education now and in the future, yet they are also contentious. Implicit in the first question is the assumption that contemporary efforts are producing negative as well as positive impacts. The second question raises the possibility that not all educational professionals are responding as would-be improvers might wish. The third question suggests that there are perhaps limits to the potential for improvement at the level of practice that need to be taken into account. These reservations rarely surface in current policy discourse – at least in its public expression, though we suspect that some might be acknowledged privately. For alongside the gains of reform, there is plentiful evidence of problems.

Here is just one indicative example. Heralded by the passing of the Education Reform Act in 1988, successive British governments have generated an extensive series of policies aimed at transforming English state school education as part of a wider strategy to reform, or to ‘modernize’, all the public services (e.g. OPSR, 2002). An unintended negative consequence has been to overload chronically the headteachers and teachers charged with responsibility for implementing the multiplicity of innovations entailed in these policies. Government-sponsored surveys between 1994 and 2000 revealed a steady increase in working hours of those

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employed in schools (Table 1.1). As a result of pressure from representatives of teachers and headteachers, at the end of the 1990s central government instituted an initiative to reduce the level of bureaucracy in schools that had mostly resulted from its own reforms. However, subsequent surveys showed that the initiative had done little to stem the tide of paper and computer files. One comparative study showed that the annual working hours of headteachers – even after taking the length of school holidays into account – were still above the average for managers across a range of occupations. Weekly term-time hours of headteachers were much higher (PWC, 2001).

Table 1.1: *Evidence from PriceWaterhouseCoopers teachers' workload study*

Data from previous diary studies

<i>School and teacher type</i>	<i>Hours worked in a 'typical' week</i>		
	<i>1994</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2000</i>
Primary			
Headteacher	55	55	58
Deputy head	51	54	55
Class teacher	49	51	52
Secondary			
Headteacher	60	61	60
Deputy head	56	56	58
Head of department	50	52	52
Class teacher	48	50	51
Special			
Class teacher	46	49	50

Data from PwC study, 2001

<i>Teacher type</i>	<i>Hours' work per week</i>	<i>Primary school</i>	<i>Secondary school</i>	<i>Special school</i>
Headteacher	total hours	59	64	58
	hours spent teaching	5	1	3
Other teaching staff	total hours	54	55	51
	hours spent teaching	22	19	18

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Table 1.1: Cont.

**Hours worked according to different salary and associated responsibility levels
(all schools)**

<i>Hours of work per week</i>	<i>Salary and responsibility level of teacher or headteacher</i>				
	<i>Newly qualified teacher</i>	<i>Main pay scale</i>	<i>Management points</i>	<i>Upper</i>	<i>Leadership</i>
Total hours	53	54	54	53	58
Hours spent teaching	19	21	20	20	16

Hours worked during the school holidays

<i>Annual hours worked during the school holidays in different types of school</i>				
<i>Primary school</i>		<i>Secondary school</i>		<i>Special school</i>
<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Headteacher</i>	<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Headteacher</i>	<i>Teacher</i>
116	100	121	196	107

Source: Based on extracts from the interim report of the PriceWaterhouseCoopers teacher workload study (PwC, 2001)

In late 2002, another major survey of the responses of teachers to the demands of their work, sponsored by the General Teaching Council for England and the *Guardian* newspaper (GTC, 2003), found that:

- approximately one-third (35 per cent) of teachers planned to leave teaching in the next five years, just over half expecting to retire. But the remainder of those planning to leave (including 15 per cent of all newly qualified teachers) expected to secure jobs elsewhere;
- more than half (56 per cent) stated that their morale was lower than when they joined the profession;
- the longer teachers had been in the profession, the worse their morale. However, there was also a sharp dip in morale immediately after the first year of teaching;
- in nominating three factors which demotivated them as teachers, over half (56 per cent) identified ‘workload’ (including unnecessary paper-work), over a third (39 per cent) referred to ‘initiative overload’, about a third (35 per cent) the ‘target-driven culture’ (connected with central government-imposed improvement targets), and almost a third (31 per cent) blamed poor student behaviour and discipline;

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- four-fifths (78 per cent) of teachers perceived that the government accorded them little or no respect.

An enduring staff recruitment and retention problem had emerged, created in large part by the heavy workload that was being experienced. Carol Adams, the chief executive of the GTC, commented (GTC, 2003):

Teachers in the 45+ age range constitute half the workforce and represent a significant and valuable resource of experience and expertise. Often, however, their potential contribution is overlooked for a variety of reasons:

- workload has increased to the point that they feel a proper work–life balance is impossible to achieve and some start to look at the option of early retirement or a change of occupation;
- seniority in the profession still tends to be associated with taking managerial responsibility, whereas some would prefer to remain in a teaching post;
- for women returners promotion involving an even heavier workload may not be attractive.

As a result of undervaluing the over-45s, we are not only seeing many experienced teachers go early, we are also failing to tap into their valuable experience of change management, behaviour management and as potential mentors for new recruits. Many of this group of teachers were involved in the school-based innovations which preceded the Education Reform Act of 1988 and they have been instrumental in managing substantial change through the past decade. But instead of valuing what they can offer – we are watching them go.

She noted that according to government statistics one-third of teachers retiring in 2000–2001 had retired prematurely.

If government reforms had produced such consequences for the morale and aspirations of teachers, one can assume that the impact on headteachers was even greater. However, notwithstanding all the reform efforts of policy-makers, and the increased workload of teachers and headteachers, educational outcomes based on qualifications across the UK as a whole have not kept pace with all of its international economic competitors. A recent league table published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2003) compared the proportion of students achieving good qualifications at the end of secondary school in 30 developed countries between 1991 and 2001. The UK had dropped from 13th to 20th in the league because improvement in the UK since 1991 was more modest than elsewhere.

We recognize that survey data are contestable and open to different interpretations. Nevertheless there is strong evidence from a variety of sources that two decades of reform have not led to anticipated levels of educational improvement, and certainly not commensurate with levels of investment in

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education, but have led to widespread teacher and headteacher dissatisfaction. We regard the gap as ironic. For this reason we have taken *irony* as our key analytical concept. However, although one side of the coin of irony reveals the gap between intention and outcome in government policy, the other side of the coin reveals how headteachers and teachers have adopted an ironic orientation as a means of coping with the pressures which this gap has generated.

Taking irony seriously

Irony has no canonical meaning. It is a term with a long history in the English language and has diverse connotations. Some are intentionally playful, mocking or cynical, as in Mark Twain's dictum: 'To succeed in life, you need two things: ignorance and confidence.' We realize that taking this term as the centrepiece of our perspective risks us being interpreted as frivolous, and so not to be taken seriously. But we are very serious about improving education. We have chosen to employ this term as the basis for a new perspective because no alternative concept so incisively illuminates the phenomenon we believe needs exploring if government and organization-based improvement efforts are to become more effective. To minimize the risk of being misunderstood, we will below unpack the connotations that we have attached to *irony* for the purpose of our argument. However, before considering the concept itself, we offer two illustrations of irony by way of setting the scene.

The first is far from education. We have selected it as the most extreme of cases to show how irony is a concept that can direct attention both to coincidences and to unintended cause and effect linkages, including those of the most shocking kind. Perutz (1998) recounts the story of the 'ambiguous personality and career' of the German chemist Fritz Haber (1868–1934), a Jew by birth. In 1909 he became the first scientist to synthesize the gas ammonia from nitrogen in the air, paving the way for industrial production of nitrogen fertilizers that dramatically increased worldwide agricultural production, producing the very positive long-term consequence of improving life chances for millions of people.

However, Haber's discovery also enabled the German manufacture of nitrates for explosives to be continued throughout World War I, after the British naval blockade in 1914 halted supplies of Chilean saltpetre from which explosives had traditionally been manufactured. According to Perutz, without Haber's invention the Germans would have soon been forced to sue for peace. This invention thus generated the negative consequence of prolonging the war, robbing millions of people of their life chances.

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Haber, fervently patriotic, was instrumental in developing poison gas for trench warfare. He helped to mount the first chlorine gas attack which caused some 15,000 allied casualties, a third of them fatal. That night Haber's wife committed suicide, shooting herself with her husband's service pistol. Her act was widely interpreted as a protest against his chemical warfare activities.

In recognition of his pioneering synthesis of ammonia, Haber received the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1918. He continued advising Germany's government on the secret production of chemical weapons until 1933, when the Nazis seized power. They forced him from his official position because he was Jewish, and he soon fled abroad, dying a year later. He never lived to witness the longer-term consequences of another of his inventions, in 1919: the poisonous gas Zyklon B, originally intended for use against agricultural pests. Nine years after Haber's death, the Nazi SS chose this gas for deployment at Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps, and among the millions of Jews who were killed in the Holocaust were Haber's own relatives.

But as Perutz (1998: 16) reflects:

By a terrible irony of fate, it was his apparently most beneficent invention, the synthesis of ammonia, which has also harmed the world immeasurably. Without it, Germany would have run out of explosives once its long-planned blitzkrieg against France failed. The war would have come to an early end and millions of young men would not have been slaughtered. In these circumstances, Lenin might never have got to Russia, Hitler might never have come to power, the Holocaust might not have happened, and European civilization from Gibraltar to the Urals might have been spared.

There is a horrific mixture in this story of the ironies of coincidence and the ironies of unintended consequences, often far removed in time from the actions that led directly or indirectly to them. We move on to a second example, of a very different order from such an utterly appalling case, but which could have serious enough implications for education.

Our second illustration is nearer to home: on 28 April 2003 it was announced that Jarvis, an engineering company, had been awarded a three-year contract from the British government to advise the 700 worst performing secondary schools in England and Wales, through its subsidiary Jarvis Educational Services Ltd. The *Guardian* (2003) newspaper reported that the announcement was condemned as 'shocking', 'extraordinary' and 'a joke' by teachers' leaders. Their angry reaction was provoked by the fact that Jarvis had been notably unsuccessful as the main contractor for the privatized national railway network infrastructure. The parent company was at that time under police investigation in connection with

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the possibility of negligence in the Jarvis railway line maintenance work that might have caused a fatal train crash. It was thus deemed highly inappropriate for Jarvis to be commissioned by the government to 're-engineer' failing schools.

By July 2004 the *Guardian* was reporting the Jarvis group to be close to bankruptcy. Its Accommodation Services Division was the biggest contractor in the country within the central government private finance initiative for refurbishing schools and universities. Underbidding to win new business had brought the dire unintended consequence of cost over-runs. Jarvis was forced to write them off, plunging the group into debt and threatening to delay much-needed improvement in the education building stock. In the same month, the parent company was heavily fined for negligence over a second rail repair incident described by a judge as 'breaking basic rules known to every child with a train set'. A freight train had been diverted onto a line with a missing stretch of track.

The award of the advisory contract to Jarvis is emblematic of the ironies of unintended consequences besetting state education in the UK. We contend that such ironies have been generated by unintentionally inappropriate responses to alleged problems. Although greatly increased levels of funding have been allocated to education, it is not evident that members of the public perceive corresponding improvement. There is some evidence to the contrary – witness the OECD international league table mentioned earlier. Although government policy is to give schools greater freedom through policies of devolution and 'cutting red-tape', many headteachers and teachers perceive only greater bureaucracy. Although a policy of equality of opportunity is proclaimed, another government policy to create 'specialist' schools is creating new forms of selection, and although government ministers have confirmed their intention to recruit and retain high quality teachers, we have already noted evidence of a decline in the job satisfaction of teachers and a drift away from the profession.

These discrepancies appear to stem in part from a lack of understanding among policy-makers about the daily realities of schooling and how the multiple changes they introduce impact on what is already a difficult job. They arise especially from a misguided faith in leadership and management as a panacea. The discrepancy between intention and outcome in relation to policy has been widely discussed in the policy literature. But here we seek to explore the significance of this discrepancy in terms of the experience of headteachers and teachers and its implication for professional work.

The ironic perspective will help us to sustain the argument that the latent function of much recent policy has been to eliminate prevailing ambiguity from educational organizations even though, in our view, much of that ambiguity is endemic. This strategy has entailed the pursuit of greater

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uniformity over the process and outcomes of education, to be achieved by establishing a much tighter link between official goals, school leadership and management, school structures, school cultures, the technology of learning and teaching, and measured learning outcomes. It is a strategy based on the optimistic Taylorist assumption (to be discussed further below) that the tighter the coupling the greater the efficiency. We accept that there are compelling reasons for reducing ambiguity in schools in order to provide a consistent and incremental education – but only up to a point. We consider that policy-makers have unwittingly tried to reduce ambiguity beyond that point, bringing the ironic consequence of generating increased ambiguity. We also accept that there exist in schools as organizations endemic ambiguities that can neither be ‘managed away’ nor ‘dissolved’ through a ‘shared culture’. Headteachers and teachers live with these ambiguities and cope with them on a daily basis. Over-reliance on managerialism, which seeks to resolve ambiguities in the interests of accountability and on the enforcement of ‘national standards’, has made life difficult for teachers and headteachers. Managerialism diverts teachers from their core task of promoting learning into an expanding range of managerial roles. Some are at best pseudo-managerial, and at worst, could be merely self-serving for their incumbents. Too much leadership and management could be constraining the very educational activity they are there to facilitate.

Despite the unacceptable pressures on headteachers and teachers, a majority remain committed to their vocation. By selectively reinterpreting policy they are continuing to do their best for their students in their immediate circumstances. In this way they are offsetting to some degree the unintended, and potentially deleterious, consequences of managerialism. Ironically this response often ensures that the intention of policy-makers is fulfilled to a degree that would not be possible if specified procedures had been followed to the letter.

An approach to irony

Our approach, then, is to adopt the notion of irony as affording a profitable perspective upon contemporary leadership and management in education. It is a modest approach. Our perspective has neither the rigour of a theory nor the neatness of a model. It has no pretensions to be more than one lens for bringing into focus the implications of the gap between policies and their effects. In using the term we seek to encourage reflection, provoke thought, generate discussion and thereby enhance understanding. Normal academic protocol would require us to define our key term of irony at the outset. Yet no single definition meets our needs. In fact, many

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who have written on irony have noted the problem of defining the term. Enright (1984), in *The Alluring Problem: An Essay on Irony*, questioningly heads his first chapter: 'Definitions?' Here he cites a remark by Muecke (1969) that 'getting to grips with irony seems to have something in common with gathering mist, there is plenty to take hold of if we could'. Since there appears to be no canonical definition of irony, we feel at liberty to propose connotations which are appropriate to our purposes. In this spirit we draw an initial distinction between what we will call *situational irony* and *semantic irony*.

Situational irony refers to those ironies that are part of the reality of social life. The major manifestation of situational irony is the unintended consequence: when good intentions lead to unfortunate consequences and also where apparently unfortunate occurrences have a happy outcome. The term 'ironic' is often applied to a coincidence. But some writers on English usage warn against this: 'Recently all seriousness seems to have departed from the word. The slightest and most banal consequence or point of resemblance or even just-perceptible absence of one, unworthy of a single grunt of interest, gets called ironical' (Amis, 1997: 113). Two close friends, both professors of politics in different universities, dropped dead within a relatively short space of time of each other within the precincts of the Houses of Parliament. Some would interpret this unusual circumstance as irony, but presumably Amis and others would regard it as simply coincidence.

We are concerned with the serious aspects of irony. In the next chapter we will discuss how situational irony is endemic in all organizations, and members have to live with it through making repeated adjustments and negotiating frequent compromises. However, policies embodied in the educational reform movement of the past two decades have brooked little compromise, relying on the excessive resort to leadership and management that we will term 'managerialism' to ensure implementation. This reliance, coupled with the increase in ambiguity intrinsic to change connected with reforms, has considerably increased the potential for situational irony. We write in support of headteachers and teachers as they find ways of coping with the high level of ambiguity. But we also argue that managerialist attempts to remove ambiguity can have deleterious consequences. Many could be avoided if there was a greater recognition of the endemic nature of irony and a consequent refocusing on effective leadership and management – which may mean *less* leadership and management than are demanded of headteachers and teachers today.

Semantic irony we use to connote the ironic use of language, which comprises a variety of linguistic and literary forms. We suggest that semantic

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irony may be either intended by a speaker or writer, or unintended but still detectable by an observer. A common *intentional* strategy was noted by Samuel Johnson in his dictionary definition of irony: 'A mode of speech of which the meaning is contradictory to the words.' There are many forms of wordplay which are ironic. When the late Daniel Moynihan allegedly observed that 'there's money in poverty' he was presumably using irony intentionally to indicate that poverty was becoming a well-funded area of research. In response to the news that Jarvis, the railway engineering company, had been offered the contract referred to above, The *Guardian* newspaper reported that the Liberal Democratic Party spokesperson on education derided the fact that Jarvis 'had no track-record' in education. Was this intentional or unintentional semantic irony? On hearing of the coincidence that two professors of politics had died in the Houses of Parliament, a colleague responded: 'No professor of education would be found dead in a school.' Irony was thus expressed through multi-level ambiguity.

We suspect that ironic humour has a considerable role to play in schools whose staff members are confronted by managerialism. But little of the banter we hear in school staffrooms has reached the public domain, for obvious reasons. A rare example of published ironic humour is the spoof account by Davison and Kemshall (1998) of a school inspection under the auspices of the central government Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED).

Ironic humour is widely recognized as a defence mechanism for those who find themselves in difficult circumstances. The Soviet logician Alexander Zinoviev (1979) wrote a novel poking fun at the ironies entailed in the unintended consequences of Soviet bureaucracy – before wisely escaping to the West, and Powell and Paton (1988) have discussed the role of humour in relation to conflict and resistance. We suspect that it is a common response to the current pressures of school life, but we cannot document this.

It is usually clear when a writer or speaker is being consciously ironic. However, we are intrigued by the possibility that there also exists, in the context of educational leadership and management, a form of indiscernible 'inward' or unarticulated irony. Careers in educational leadership and management are now dependent on having mastered what is usually dubbed *managementspeak*. Today's everyday discourse of school leadership and management simply did not exist 30 years ago. Consider terms like 'curriculum delivery', 'mission statement', 'development priorities', 'achievement targets', 'budget-setting', 'incentivizing' or 'deliverables'. Managementspeak is an international phenomenon. Fullan reports a North American school principal as saying: 'If I had said twenty years ago

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that I had a vision, I would have been put in an institution. Now I can't get a job without one!

Many users of managementspeak may well be secret ironists smiling inwardly even as they use managerialist language in conformity with current expectations. We entertain the possibility that there exist, alongside the straight-faced conscious ironists, those who are in this respect bilingual and would not dream of using managementspeak outside work, and those who unreflectively use managementspeak but are capable of appreciating its ironic aspects when events force this realization upon them. There are also, undoubtedly, those who have internalized the managerialist discourse to such a degree that they are oblivious to its irony, however great the discrepancy between the comfort of language and the harsh reality of events. As Auden put it: 'He lectured on navigation as the ship was going down.'

Visionary rhetoric is a form of managementspeak that has increased very noticeably in schools since the advent of educational reforms. Much is designed for public consumption, and it has even become a commonplace official expectation that staff in senior posts will be visionaries. Under the OFSTED (2003a: 41) framework for school inspection, criteria for assessing leadership quality include the extent to which 'leadership shows clear vision, a sense of purpose and high aspirations for the school, with a relentless focus on pupils' achievement', and 'leaders inspire, motivate and influence staff and pupils'. Advertisements placed by school governors for headteacher posts make frequent reference to vision, as in this illustration: 'The governing body will require and expect the new headteacher to: be a transformational leader, inspiring staff and students; develop the vision of a high quality fully inclusive community secondary school – the natural choice for local parents ...' Or this list of ingredients:

What's needed:

- 1 part passion
- 1 part vision
- 1 part sheer hard graft ...

Or even this example, linking humour with serious expectation:

Can you walk on water? Or leap tall buildings? Have you got the strength to lead by example? ... We are looking for a professional with experience and vision to build on ... [an already strong] foundation. We have high expectations that you will be able to demonstrate your excellent strategic planning and management of resources, while maintaining a good sense of humour as you guide the children to reach their full potential.

The semantic irony of the visionary discourse that senior staff are required to produce lies in the more or less conscious or unconscious gap between

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the hubris of the rhetoric and the more prosaic reality as actually experienced by teaching staff, students and parents alike. If all the visionary rhetoric corresponded with reality, would a third of teachers be seeking to leave the profession?

Visionary rhetoric may create situational irony if those who are to be inspired find the discourse unrealistic. One of us recalls working as a teacher in a school where the headteacher was referred to by most of his colleague teachers (but not to his face) as a 'vision-a-day' person. The unrelenting effusiveness of his visionary rhetoric and enthusiasm for myriad initiatives to realize this vision did not square well with the classroom experience of his colleagues. He unilaterally decided one day to have an unbreakable mirror installed in each of the student toilets, since he wanted students to take more pride in their appearance as part of their social development. He announced as much in morning assembly and, by the end of the day, the students had succeeded in proving experimentally that the mirrors were in fact not unbreakable.

Another form of semantic irony can occur through *reification*, where a collectivity such as a school is referred to as if it is a corporate entity capable of corporate action independent of the people who constitute it. Attention is thus diverted from the possibility that there may be significant differences among members. Reification is defined by Berger and Luckmann (1967: 106) as 'apprehension of the products of human activity *as if* they were something other than human products – such as facts of nature'. Collective nouns are inescapable, but reification in such phrases as 'the school has decided on an improvement plan' or 'this school has a passion for learning' can blind users to the existence of competing positions.

The difficulty is well illustrated by the notion of 'organizational capacity'. A school staff and others in the community may be regarded as having more or less capacity for the learning needed for effective educational innovation. Stoll (1999: 506) defines internal capacity for school improvement as: 'the power to engage in and sustain continuous learning of teachers and the school itself for the purpose of enhancing student learning'. But how can 'the school itself' learn, as opposed to the staff and other community members? She states further that 'a school with internal capacity can take charge of change because it is adaptive'. This definition implies that schools – rather than the people who work in them – are capable of taking charge of change. It belies the impact of people beyond the school gates who may also wish to take charge of change inside them, including central government policy-makers.

Reification is even starker in metaphors such as 'the self-managing school' (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988), 'the intelligent school' (MacGilchrist

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et al., 1997), or ‘the learning organization’, to be discussed in more detail below. Those who use such terms in academic texts are aware that the reification is shorthand. Most readers will also be well aware from their experience that this is the case. But there will be eager managerialists who take it that such entitiness is both desirable and achievable and may, with unintended consequences, pursue the chimera.

Let us return to our saga of the unbreakable mirrors. Suppose the headteacher had announced that the school vision included students possessing high self-esteem and so taking pride in their appearance. Such a statement would have glossed over the fact that neither the other staff nor the students actually shared this vision. It was the headteacher’s vision and he failed to achieve its widespread adoption, leading to the situational irony entailing the negative unintended consequence (from his perspective) of the students testing the indestructible mirrors to destruction. Reification is often allied with the visionary rhetoric now widely expected of school leaders. Vision is usually expressed as the property of an entity rather than the property of such of those individual members of the school who have internalized it.

To the distinction between situational irony and semantic irony we add two further distinctions. The term *responsive irony* refers to the coping strategies adopted by headteachers and teachers when confronted with irreconcilable demands in matters of curriculum, pedagogy and organization. We here use the term *mediation* – to be discussed at greater length below – as a category of ironic response which seeks to meet the accountability requirements embedded in national policies while adapting those policies to the perceived needs of particular students and classes, and the circumstances of particular schools. *Responsive irony* thus relates to the *actions* of headteachers and teachers. We have inferred its existence from a variety of case studies, and from the typologies that some ethnographers have generated of how headteachers and teachers have coped in practice with the policy demands of the reform movement.

An illustrative form of responsive irony in English schools is ‘teaching to the test’. The reputation of teachers and, ultimately, the jobs of headteachers depend on comparative performance of their students as represented in public league tables of national assessment and examination results. National tests therefore impinge significantly on the circumstances of every state-funded school in the primary and secondary sectors. Yet the 1996 Education Act also requires that school staff should provide a ‘broad and balanced curriculum’ which ‘promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society’, reaching way beyond what is tested. The assessment policies were designed by government policy-makers to promote the educational goals of raising

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standards of achievement and informing parental choice of school. But a widespread ironic response has been to focus on teaching what stands to be measured and published, at the expense of other government-sponsored educational goals. It is notable that a cycle of ameliorative policy-making has been stimulated. For example, legislation under the 2002 Education Act allows applications to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills to exempt a school in England from specific educational legislation, for up to three years, where such action is judged to be likely to raise standards. (What might constitute sufficient grounds for a positive judgement in advance of the improvement action seems inevitably ambiguous.)

We use the term *ironic orientation* to refer to the disposition that allows many headteachers and teachers not merely to cope, but to flourish in circumstances of value conflict and irreconcilable external demands. Let us offer an illustrative anecdote. An experienced supply teacher had worked regularly in a particular school which was due shortly to receive an OFSTED inspection. This supply teacher volunteered to come into the school during the inspection, masquerading as a parent helper. The supply teacher then supported a class teacher with maintaining student discipline during lessons observed by an OFSTED inspector, enabling the class teacher to give the best possible performance.

Subsequent conversation hinted at the supply teacher's disposition leading to this ironic response. What had been done was justified partly on the grounds of having complied with the letter of the law: the inspectors had not been obstructed in any way from observing the learning and teaching process they had come to evaluate. But the justification was also moral, on two counts of the end justifying the means. First, it had been right to take action to protect the staff and students from disruption that would ensue if the class teacher was negatively judged. Second, it had been right to offer covert resistance to a policy deemed unfair because of the massive pressure it placed on staff, and the distorted picture of practice to which it gave rise. We neither condone nor condemn this person's rationale behind the ironic response to an external inspection regime. We cite it in support of our claim that a more or less intuitive or consciously held disposition may lie behind the actions constituting ironic responses.

Hypothesizing an 'ironic orientation' is the 'high wire' part of our argument for three reasons. First, we have no empirical evidence from attitude scales or other measures that such an orientation exists. Second, there is the problem of whether we can legitimately attribute an ironic orientation to people who would not use the term in their daily language – the general problem of 'first order' and 'second order' concepts in the social sciences. Closer to our concerns we note that Alexander (1995) criticizes Berlack and

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Berlack's (1981) conception of teachers' 'dilemmas' on the grounds that they do not demonstrate that teachers are aware of these dilemmas. Third, the notion of an ironic orientation may appear too playful to constitute a moral approach. It is true that the scepticism (in the sense of 'reasonable doubt'), pragmatism (complying with external demands while attempting to sustain valued practice where possible), and contingency (what will work in specific circumstances) that we will associate with the ironic orientation run counter to current approaches to educational leadership and management. The latter emphasize the transformative power of values (to be discussed in Chapter 7). We will simply state at this point that we believe the ironic orientation to be genuinely but realistically moral.

Gathering mist: getting to grips with irony

It is self-evident that the questions asked in any field of enquiry determine the answers that are found. We opened this chapter with the questions:

- 1 Why do efforts to improve the quality of education via organizational leadership and management make matters worse in some respects as well as better?
- 2 In what ways are educational professionals responding to such efforts?
- 3 Could the endeavour to improve education through organizational leadership and management be rendered more effective by accepting certain limitations in practice on what is desirable in principle?

They reflect our 'intellectual project': our scheme of enquiry to generate the kinds of knowledge that will realize our specified purposes. We wish to get to grips with what happens when well-intentioned improvement efforts come unstuck, and why it happens. We wish to understand what educators do when coping with the implementation of improvement efforts. We wish to use this knowledge as a platform for reflecting on how improvement efforts might be rendered more effective. Answering our questions necessitates drawing on a wider range of theory and research than is usually considered in the leadership and management literature. We need ideas and evidence from investigators who have asked different questions from most who work in the educational leadership and management field, and which relate to our questions because of the intellectual project these theorists and researchers have pursued. Five intellectual projects may be identified (Wallace and Poulson, 2003). Each is driven by a different rationale and value stance towards the phenomenon under scrutiny, leading investigators to ask particular kinds of question (Table 1.2).

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Table 1.2: *Five intellectual projects pursued in the field of educational leadership and management*

<i>Intellectual project</i>	<i>Rationale</i>	<i>Value stance</i>	<i>Typical question</i>
Knowledge-for-understanding	understand through theory and research	disinterested	what happens and why?
Knowledge-for-critical evaluation	evaluate through theory and research	critical	what is wrong with what happens?
Knowledge-for-action	inform policy makers through research and evaluation	positive towards policy and improving practice	how effective are actions to improve practice?
Instrumentalism	improve practice through training and consultancy	positive towards policy and improving practice	how may this programme improve practice?
Reflexive action	improve own practice through evaluation and action	critical of practice, positive about improving	how effective is my practice, how may I improve it?

The two mainstream intellectual projects in this field are closely associated. The first is *knowledge-for-action*, directed towards developing knowledge with practical application from a positive standpoint towards current policy and practice. The second, usually informed by the first, is *instrumentalism*, imparting practice knowledge and skills directly to improve practice inside the prevailing policy framework. These projects attract external funding and generate most practical prescriptions for educational leadership and management. But the combination of operating largely within current policy and attempting to improve practice tends to deflect the attention of investigators from the more searching questions to which we seek answers. Our intellectual project lies closer to *knowledge-for-understanding*, consistent with Popper's (1963: 125) dictum that 'it is the task of social theory to explain how the unintended consequences of our intentions and actions arise'. We believe that deepening comprehension leadership and management in the context of schools as organizations is essential to underpin the development of more realistic knowledge-for-action and instrumentalism. Indeed, ignoring the potential insights to be gained from knowledge-for-understanding is one reason why managerialism continues to be pursued despite the ironies it generates.

Introducing the ironic perspective

We take an explicitly negative normative stance towards what we judge to be a deleterious consequence of excessive leadership and management: unintentionally inhibiting the educational improvements that they are intended to foster. In this respect our intellectual project has some affinity with *knowledge-for-critical evaluation*, but we part company with those whose purpose is restricted to demonstrating what is wrong with what happens. The constructive goal of our intellectual project is to use the insights from knowledge-for-understanding to inform knowledge-for-action that, in turn, could support more realistic policy-making and leadership and management practice to improve education in conditions of endemic ambiguity.

The ironic perspective presents school leadership and management in a new light. It offers no prescriptive theory but seeks to generate understandings which *might* – not *will* – contribute to more effective leadership and management of schools. Texts on educational leadership and management born of knowledge-for-action and instrumentalism are vital in providing practitioners with guides to action. But because of their narrow focus on improving practice within the bounds of current policy they may inhibit understanding of the wider context in which leadership and management take place, and the often unforeseen and unnoticed consequences of actions taken by leaders and managers. We will draw on two bodies of literature which figure only marginally in conventional, practice-oriented leadership and management texts. We will call them *organizational studies* and *professional workplace studies*.

Organizational studies differ from most knowledge-for-action and instrumentalist project-driven leadership and management studies and the form of theory that they generate. While a broad distinction can be made between leadership and management theory and organization theory we recognize that they interpenetrate in many ways and are ultimately interdependent. Indeed, organization theory is not a tight, self-contained body of thought. It embraces a diversity of approaches (reviewed in Hoyle, 1994). But overall, the organizational approach does represent a different way of viewing organizations from that of leadership and management texts.

First, the intellectual project of organization theory is knowledge-for-understanding. While many organization theorists hope that their work will have positive consequences for practice, they are more likely than leadership and management theorists to orientate their findings towards broader social and political concerns surrounding the practice being examined. Second, organization theory is oriented primarily towards understanding what happens, whereas leadership and management theory are oriented more towards specifying what should happen and towards

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improving what does happen. It should be noted that the stance underlying the attempt to understand, rather than improve, cannot be wholly disinterested. Organization theory is certainly not value-free, many contributors having a more or less explicit political or educational agenda – as we have. But leadership and management theory are more directly orientated towards changing practice according to implicit or explicit values. Third, organization theorists are more likely to engage in general social scientific theory-building, in contrast to the reliance of leadership and management theorists on practical experience, consultancy and applied research in developing normative applied theory.

Despite the different orientations of organization theory and leadership and management theory, it is possible to draw eclectically on both. We will do so, but our priority to deepen understanding by questioning what so many leadership and management studies take for granted draws more heavily on organization theory than most leadership and management texts.

Organization theory is included, if under represented, in the study of educational leadership and management. By contrast, professional workplace studies are conspicuous by their absence in the leadership and management literature primarily because, like organizational studies, they reflect the intellectual project of developing knowledge-for-understanding. They explore the experiences of professionals who work in educational organizations, including leaders and managers. We employ the umbrella term ‘professional workplace studies’ to connect investigations rooted in different social science traditions in order to enhance our understanding of the daily realities of schools and their leadership and management. Such work includes:

- *Studies of teaching as a profession*: these can be divided into studies of the teaching profession in society – its institutions, prestige and power, and studies of professional practice and the school context. Studies of practice are particularly relevant to our argument;
- *Studies of the school as a workplace*: these cover similar ground to studies of the professions and professional practice, but have different theoretical roots and lean more towards the intellectual project of knowledge-for-critical evaluation, with more emphasis on conflict and constraint. We do not, however, draw extensively on these studies since they have a stronger orientation towards policy than our own approach;
- *Studies of responses among teachers and headteachers to policies entailed in the reform movement*: they cover somewhat the same ground as the above but are focused on specific issues, such as responses to the introduction of the National Curriculum into English state schools. We will draw heavily on a number of these studies including those of Helsby (1999), Osborn et al. (2000) and Woods et al. (1997).

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Collectively, professional workplace studies convey a sense of the reality of school life for teachers and headteachers, not least their responses to managerialism, which so many studies of school leadership and management fail to convey because their orientation is much more towards what organizations could and should be like. It is largely on the basis of professional workplace studies that we hypothesize the ironic response and the underlying ironic orientation. Among the insights offered by the professional workplace studies is the depiction of varied responses to managerialism in schools. We will adopt as our starting point the following categories of orientation that underlie responses:

- 1 *True believers*, who have internalized managerialism in language and in practice.
- 2 *Ironists*, who have not internalized managerialism and are often critical of it, but who have fashioned their own commitment by being 'flexible, adaptive, creative, opportunistic, collaborative with a drive towards self-improvement and self-development' – the description of a primary school headteacher labelled as a 'composite' head by Woods et al. (1997).
- 3 *Uncommitted*, who are less positive than either of the other types and have responded to managerialist reforms in a variety of ways including surface adaptation, minimal compliance, retreatism, resistance, and exit (as we have seen, approximately one-third of teachers are seeking to leave the profession).

Our heroines and heroes are, of course, the *ironists* who adopt creative means to meet the contingent needs of students where their needs are perceived as not being appropriately met through official policies. These are the headteachers and teachers who fulfil the professional function of the flywheel of education by their steadfast focus on pupil interests, throughout the vicissitudes of repeated changes in policy and associated modes of accountability.

We have said more by way of introduction about organizational studies and professional workplace studies than about educational leadership and management studies. The latter literature also reflects different perspectives, which we will not seek to map. Instead, we set out in a condensed, breathless and intentionally provocative form what we see as constituting the current orthodoxy in educational leadership and management studies, particularly as expressed in texts on school improvement:

School improvement is the outcome of the capacity of a transformational leader driven by moral purpose to harness distributed leadership in creating a learning organization, underpinned by a strong organizational culture which reflects shared values and is expressed through a clear vision, encapsulated in a distinctive

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mission, and internalized through a school-focused staff development programme by a collegial staff who contribute to a corporate development plan which gives unified direction to their synergistic and continuous improvement efforts.

This summary constitutes the touchstone of our analysis, yielding key concepts such as transformational leadership, culture, the learning organization and vision that we discuss separately. There is a strong body of work within this tradition and we in no way deny its value. Most contributors are well aware of the complexities of improvement. However, some readers, and not a few teachers of educational leadership and management, bring an oversimplification to their reading. We are concerned with the ironies of unintended consequences which flow from writers pressing these concepts too hard and from readers over-interpreting the prescriptive element of such texts. Here and in the rest of the book we generally avoid referring critically to specific texts from this genre in order to keep the length of our own text within bounds. But we can assure readers that we are not attacking a 'straw person'. The current orthodoxy is widely prevalent, as anyone who has read the school improvement literature will appreciate.

From intemperate to temperate leadership and management

We appreciate that this book is unlikely to influence any 'true believer' who ventures to open it. But we hope to reassure those headteachers and teachers that we have identified as ironists, who continue to sustain a focus on the well-being of pupils but who feel pressured, and perhaps stressed, by managerialist expectations. We also hope that it will provoke our colleagues involved with the professional development of educational leaders and managers to join us in giving this reassurance, and to consider the possibility that effective leadership and management may entail reducing their compass. We aspire to inform any policy-makers who recognize the problems induced by managerialism, and are willing to consider, in principle, moving towards a more temperate approach to educational improvement.

We will attempt to show how an understanding of contemporary educational organizations can support the stance which many headteachers and teachers are currently taking towards managerialism. But we offer no general prescriptions. It would be contrary to our position to do so. Our view is that we must look to local, contingent and temporary solutions to educational problems and accept ambiguities and dilemmas as endemic problems which may be amenable to the achievement of temporary equilibrium, but never fully resolved. In saying this we are sensitive to March's (1999: 5) dictum: 'Balance is a nice word but a cruel concept.'