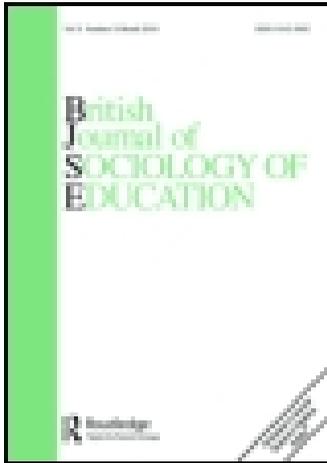


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## Heroic heads, mobility mythologies and the power of ambiguity

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This paper explores how the contradictions of neoliberal education reform and its companion, the self-made aspirational subject, are embodied by Sir Michael Wilshaw, former headteacher of Mossbourne Community Academy in Hackney, East London, through his leadership practices. Wilshaw creates powerful mobility and morality tales that pave over the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the academies programme and Mossbourne's approach. Drawing on a larger study of Mossbourne, the paper focuses on how raced and classed pathological discourses are mobilised and inverted both by Wilshaw and policy rhetoric, cultivating compliance through a belief in the aspirational subject capable of transcending social structures. The paper argues that neoliberal academy reforms are not about autonomy, but the imperative to comply with centralised policy demands at the expense of democratic participation and accountability.

**Keywords:** education; academies; class; race; inequality; social mobility

### Introduction

In a speech to the Scottish Conservatives in 2012, Prime Minister David Cameron announced that schools like Mossbourne Community Academy in Hackney, East London were 'working miracles in some of the most deprived parts of our country' and offered proof that academies and free schools signalled a 'great revolution in education' (Cameron 2012). Cameron (2012) claimed these schools offered the state sector the freedom independent schools enjoyed: 'Head-teachers who can hire their own staff. Shape their own curriculum. Set their own discipline. Captain their own ship'. What made independent schools 'soar ahead' was not children with extensive amounts of economic, social and cultural capital, but this autonomy. Cameron (2012) concluded that Mossbourne's success stemmed from autonomy and parental choice, adding 'these things happen if you trust in schools, believe in choice and give parents more information'. All of this

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culminates in ‘real discipline’ and ‘rigorous standards’ exemplified by children who stand up when teachers enter the room.

Yet beneath a simple tale aligning success with the accelerated imposition of marketised educational reform driven through by heroic heads lies a more complicated story. Drawing on my research at Mossbourne Community Academy, this paper explores how the contradictions of neoliberal education reform and its companion, the self-made aspirational subject, are embodied by its former headteacher Sir Michael Wilshaw through his biography and leadership practices. Now Ofsted<sup>1</sup> Inspector General since 2012, Wilshaw assumed the combined role of business executive, saviour, pioneering cowboy and military commander to lead a redemptive troupe of teachers acting as ‘surrogate parents’.

Wilshaw creates powerful mobility and morality tales that pave over the various contradictions and ambiguities inherent in Mossbourne’s approach and the academies programme. This paper explores how raced and classed pathological discourses are mobilised and inverted both by Wilshaw and policy rhetoric, cultivating compliance through a belief in the transcendent, aspirational subject. I will argue that these reforms are not about the freedom to captain one’s ship, but the imperative that all ships sail directly towards a set of centralised policy demands, where Wilshaw’s ‘transformational leadership’ is not an enabling form of democratisation, but ‘a means of regulation and containment’ (Lambert 2007, 159; Newman 2005).

Mossbourne opened in 2004 on the former site of Hackney Downs School, a once-celebrated grammar school closed in 1995 after being notoriously labelled ‘the worst school in Britain’. Clive Bourne, a Stoke Newington-born working-class boy turned millionaire businessman, sponsored Mossbourne, while former Minister of State for Education Lord Adonis recruited Wilshaw as its head. Mossbourne’s rags-to-riches success story has won praise from politicians and the press, its poverty and ethnic diversity frequently contrasted with its outstanding test scores. Forty per cent of students receive free school meals, while two-thirds of students come from ethnic minority backgrounds, with black African, black Caribbean, Turkish, Bangladeshi and Indian students comprising the largest groups (Ofsted 2010). Yet in 2012, 89% of students received five A\*–C grades at GCSE level compared with 59.4% of students nationally (Ofsted 2012). Hackney itself is a socio-economically mixed borough where poverty and accelerating gentrification co-exist.

This paper draws on a larger study of Mossbourne Community Academy that I undertook between 2008 and 2011 which meshed 18 months of ethnographic research with 46 semi-structured interviews with teachers, students and parents. My assertions about Wilshaw’s techniques within this paper come from my ethnographic observations and resulting field notes. As this paper focuses on how narratives of heroic headship fit against the daily practices of a feted institution and a headteacher who now wields

significant power, I have named the institution and the headteacher after gaining consent.<sup>2</sup> Upon asking Wilshaw about issues of consent, he replied: ‘Sure, I don’t mind if you name the school – no one is going to read it [your research] anyhow!’ Naming Wilshaw is not intended to reify a cult of personality or re-fetishise this symbolic site, but to dissemble these constructions by analysing the disjuncture between rhetoric and practice. Before interrogating how Wilshaw’s embodiment of Mossbourne’s ‘structure liberates’ ethos acts as a persuasive tool, I will briefly examine how the academies programme marks a significant shift in power relations.

### **The business of education**

In his new book featuring Mossbourne on its cover, Lord Adonis proudly announces that his vision of success had been realised. Twelve years after sponsor Clive Bourne’s ‘grim tour’ of the crumbling Hackney Downs, Mossbourne has become ‘a model for 21st-century education, pioneering opportunity, social mobility and the reinvention of the inner-city comprehensive’ (Adonis 2012, 7). Yet academies do not re-birth the comprehensive model, but work from a very different premise. They are funded directly through central government, operate outside local authority control and determine their own employment conditions. New Labour academies targeted mainly urban deprived areas, as Adonis (2008) described how academies are ‘establishing a culture of ambition to replace the poverty of aspiration’. Poverty is framed as a cultural problem of low aspiration and implicitly tied to the working-class and ethnic minority populations of areas like Hackney.

The Coalition Government has altered and rapidly accelerated Labour’s programme. When New Labour left office in 2010, 203 academies were open; as of December 2014, over 4400 schools are now academies (DfE 2014). New Labour academies were ‘a *condensate* of state competition policy with all its tensions and contradictions in microcosm’, concerned with flexibility, entrepreneurship and the participation of ‘heroes of enterprise’ (Ball 2007, 160; original emphasis). Ideals of equitable provision for all have been left behind, with parents reconfigured as consumers and schools as small businesses competing for survival. The direction of educational leadership is being framed by networks of policy entrepreneurs and private consultants who ‘determine what is known and worth knowing about leadership as a form of pseudo science made palatable through emotionally seductive language and images’ (Gunter 2010, 519). Cameron’s ship captain is symbolic of this shift where democratic processes of local authority control have been suspended and structures of accountability replaced by market solutions (Ball 2007, 177).

Finance capital’s participation in education has grown, as the chief executive head features as ideal leader. Take Arpad Busson, senior partner and founder of hedge fund management company EIM who is also the

founder of the Absolute Return for Kids academies chain<sup>3</sup> where Wilshaw worked as education director while at Mossbourne. These networks extend into new territory, while excluding certain actors – particularly ‘problematic’ entities such as trade unions – because network membership requires being on the same ideological page (Ball 2007, 133). These networks follow certain interests, precluding political debate as the state is legitimated through the private sector while the private sector gains access to new markets (Gane 2012; Gunter and Forrester 2010). Crucially, changes to education’s administration and governance are not just technical alterations, but part of a ‘broader social dislocation’ permeating our relationship to ourselves and others, changing the parameters of action and instigating ‘a process of social transformation’ (Ball 2007, 186–187). Education functions as a key site for remaking the possible field of human action.

### Radical revolutionaries?

Contradictions and ambiguities at the heart of the academy project are expressed through rhetoric and action. Wilshaw encourages students and staff to feel part of a progressive project, as badges of popular and political approval compel them to feel proudly part of something officially judged ‘outstanding’. Since its grand opening by Prime Minister Tony Blair and Secretary of State Ruth Kelly in 2004, Mossbourne has been visited by an array of politicians – including US Secretary of State for Education Arne Duncan, who Wilshaw described as ‘Obama’s friend’ according to one student. Mossbourne-related media is conscientiously circulated via email, keeping staff abreast of the school’s public profile; however, staff are also explicitly instructed not to communicate with the press.

Celebratory pep talks during staff briefings emphasise Mossbourne’s moral mission while encouraging teachers to keep up the hard work. Wilshaw described how Mossbourne was ‘breaking the mould’ in Hackney – something achievable only if everyone did their part. In another briefing he mentioned meeting with Michael Gove and how they were all part of Mossbourne’s educational revolution. In our interview, Wilshaw described how a clear philosophy and ‘radical’ leadership made an urban school successful, something he realised ‘not by reading a book about it, but by trial and error and experience’. His lack of interest in books and research may seem at odds with his educational position, but this stance fits his pragmatic executive image. What ‘works’ is obvious – consulting elitist texts is unnecessary (see Alexander 2004). This rhetoric shows how ‘once-radical vocabularies have been appropriated and rearticulated in the service of decidedly un-radical ideologies, thereby silencing critical debate ... assimilating the politics of transformation into the lexicon of neo-liberalism’ (Lambert 2007, 160).

Gove has used similar rhetoric to justify authoritarian moves, forcing through academy conversions in the wake of consultation processes labelled

‘farcical’ (Baynes 2013; Hatcher 2011). The Education Act of 2011 gave the Secretary of State the right to close schools causing concern. Gove wielded this power with controversy, forcing schools to re-open as academies despite staunch opposition. Despite 94% of parents voting ‘no’ to conversion at Downhills Primary School in Haringey, London, it was taken over by the Harris Federation, an academy chain sponsored by Carpetright millionaire and Conservative peer Lord Harris (Aston 2012; Sahota 2012). Gove justified Downhills’ conversion by appealing to racial and social inequality. Twisting the lines of causality, he referred to his opponents as ‘ideologues who are happy with failure’ who are saying ‘If you’re poor, if you’re Turkish, if you’re Somali, then we don’t expect you to succeed. You will always be second-class and it’s no surprise your schools are second class’ (Harrison 2012). The invocation of ‘inequality’ to impose further inequality is an ingenious discursive conflation whereby resisting public service privatisation becomes equated with promoting prejudice.

Similar rhetoric was used by former New Labour educational advisor Michael Barber, a member of the first education association or the popularly entitled ‘hit squad’ sent in by the Conservatives to assess Hackney Downs School. Upon Hackney Downs’ closure in 1995, Barber (1995) proclaimed that historians would reflect on the year as the point of a ‘seismic shift’ in educational ‘culture’ as failure became unacceptable. Barber attributes this shift to Thatcherite reforms, asserting that the ‘few’ who wanted to keep Hackney Downs open were ‘stalwart in their defence of the status quo’ and believed in ‘an inalienable right to carry on failing’. Barber’s invocation of an invisible ‘silent majority’ echoes the rhetoric employed 25 years earlier by the new right that significantly shifted education debates.

During the 1970s and 1980s the new right skilfully mobilised and manipulated populist narratives to generate moral panics about falling educational standards prompted by ‘loony left’ methods (see Gordon 1990; Tomlinson 1993). Shortly after Crosland’s Labour Government requested local education authorities to begin converting all schools into comprehensives in 1965, an influential series of pamphlets called the Black Papers were released critiquing comprehensives. Written by various authors, these polemic diatribes offered ‘common sense’ home truths, claiming to speak both for and to a ‘silent majority’ of ‘ordinary’ parents fearing for their children’s future. Comprehensives were framed as harming intelligent working-class children, with progressivism described as a ‘pseudo-religion’ (Cox and Dyson 1969, 13–14). The right drew on justifiable insecurities in the face of an economic downturn, placing marginalised groups in competition while appealing to the individual’s perceived powers to exercise choice. Wilshaw’s populist attitude mirrors Gove, Barber and the Black Paper’s faux affinity with ‘ordinary parents’. The abstract parent arguably acts as a unifying concept where anxieties can be projected and differences glossed over. This

rhetorical trick unites unlike things, as contradictory ideas are cohered and framed as complementary.

Mossbourne's focus on discipline, results and respect for authority descends from this new right focus. Now-familiar sounding solutions to alleged anarchy in schools included stricter standards for students and teachers, and school choice. While the right claimed to crusade against the unfair taxation and oppression of the state, it antithetically enabled the creation of a more authoritarian, less visible state; a predicament accelerated by academy schools (CCCS 1981, 250–251). Over 30 years later, Conservative and Labour education policy is indistinguishable, as left-leaning educationalists have adopted the right's rhetoric and policies. Differences have become a matter of packaging and terminology, not ideology. This position's contradictions are made palatable through emotionally seductive tales of mobility that conflate neoliberal aspiration with social justice.

### **Tales of morality and mobility**

Education's promotion as an engine of social mobility is contradicted by the United Kingdom having one of the poorest records on mobility in the developed world (Causa and Johansson 2010). Reay describes 'the prevailing fallacy' that giving teachers the right skills, or in Mossbourne's case acting as 'surrogate parents', can compensate for wider social contexts (2006, 291). Drawing on R.H. Tawney's political philosophy describing social mobility as 'the recycling of inequality', Reay questions how we have come to consider a process which leaves inequitable structures untouched as a meaningful source of social justice (2013, 661). Yet social mobility occupies a 'totemic role in UK society', featuring in elite policy while 'capturing the popular imaginary' (2013, 664). The academy programme combines elite and popular dreamscapes. It champions the self-made subject and creates potent confections that exemplify how mobility's 'mythical qualities' make it '... an extremely generative and productive myth that does an enormous amount of work for neoliberal capitalism' (2013, 664). The following passage from my field notes describes how Wilshaw uses morality tales to make social mobility synonymous with social justice:

### ***A Sermon in the Church of the Self***

The entire school was assembled in the sports hall for the end of term Christmas assembly. The Senior Management Team took their seats on stage, the band came to the last bar of a carol and Wilshaw assumed his customary place behind the podium. He touched on three themes currently in the news: the terrible economic recession that would probably carry on into the new year; the horrible treatment and abuse of children by their families; and most importantly, the election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the United

States. Wilshaw showed a clip of Obama's acceptance speech in Chicago; students looked on, the vast majority captivated and inspired. Wilshaw asked who would have thought that after so many years of prejudice and civil rights struggles the US would elect a black president? This triumph confounded conventions and expectations. He offered three reasons for Obama's victory: first, he had wanted to succeed and was determined. He worked hard to beat the odds and had the will to overcome prejudice. Secondly, Obama was educated. Wilshaw asked if Obama would be where he was now if he were not an educated man? No way, he answered, adding that anybody who thought education and qualifications did not matter was bonkers – they were the key to success. Thirdly, Obama had excellent communication skills capable of conjuring up a feeling in just a few words, referencing his 'yes we can' speeches. Directing this to the year 11 students sitting in front of him brimming with potential, Wilshaw added: We can give you a great building, good equipment, fantastic teachers, but you have to meet us halfway. The other half is you – you have to want it.

Baby Jesus now filled the screen. Wilshaw described how Christians reflected on Jesus' birth and the love his earthly family gave him at this time of year. Referencing the now infamous murder of Baby Peter<sup>4</sup> in nearby Haringey, he said some families were not giving love. Family was key; when you become the head of a family you have to give your family care. This was more important than how much money you had or going on nice holidays. Family values were important for the Obamas; they had good morals and a clear idea of right and wrong. Finally Wilshaw tied these themes to Clive Bourne, Mossbourne's late sponsor who came from a poor background but became a very wealthy, successful businessman. Even when Bourne had faced economic problems and struggles, he still got out of bed happy because he liked facing a new challenge and seeing what new solutions he could find. At this point, Wilshaw asked everyone to bow his or her heads, leaving a pregnant pause.

The cavernous hall was completely silent, save the occasional cough or sneeze.

After a few moments Wilshaw asked students to remember Mr Spencer, a teacher who had recently died, commending his determination to come to work each day despite his terminal illness.

Another pause.

Wilshaw finally broke the silence, sombrely pronouncing: 'May good triumph over evil'. Slowly everyone opened their eyes and raised their heads as the band struck up a rousing rendition of Curtis Mayfield's 'Move on Up' – the perfect Motown soundtrack to accompany a rags-to-riches escape from the urban ghetto via a magical combination of will-power and education.

This neoliberal church of the self promotes several key ideas while smoothing over continuing structural inequalities. We are given a cast of masculine heroes who have triumphed over evil: Barack Obama, Clive Bourne, Mr Spencer, Jesus, and Wilshaw himself as the mixed-raced son of a postman.

These masculine heroes conquer all manners of hardship – from racial prejudice to poverty to physical infirmity – to reign victorious over their lives and forge their own destinies. Mossbourne’s mission is aligned with Obama, a much-respected figure among students. It portrays itself as a revolutionary project breaking with convention, rather than a conservative force reinstating a nostalgic version of traditional British values infused with a hefty dose of the American dream. The Baby Peter case is used to exemplify what a lack of family values can produce. By employing this extreme, heart-breaking example as a worst-case scenario of moral lapse and contrasting it to the Obama’s wholesome portrayal of family values, a sensational tale with clear binaries of good versus evil is created. This drama removes its characters from their social context, placing them in a heroes and villains scenario to make persuasive rhetorical points.

Michel de Certeau describes how tales and legends ‘are deployed, like games, in a space outside of and isolated from daily competition, that of the past, the marvellous, the original’ (1988, 23). The morality of Jesus is tied to the nation-state led by the nuclear, heterosexual family, which is wedded to the success and wealth of Mossbourne’s sponsor, Clive Bourne. Meanwhile poor parenting techniques, largely propagated by single mothers, are instigators of moral dissolution. These tales ‘... frequently reverse the relationships of power and, like the stories of miracles, ensure the victory of the unfortunate in a fabulous, utopian space’, while social categories that ‘make history’ are obscured through this power reversal (1988, 23).

Wilshaw aligns Mossbourne’s mission with the pursuit of equality, while simultaneously refuting the continued structuring influence of race and class on social outcomes. Personal advancement gained through a competitive edge is presented as possible for everyone, concealing the fact that social mobility cannot be universally achieved because competitions require losers. An evangelical belief in mobility and the enterprising, acquisitive self persists as the sole solution to inequality. Students and teachers can sign up to these mobility mythologies through belief in Wilshaw’s speeches. Yet Bourdieu describes how, unlike myths which are collectively produced and consumed, ‘... ideologies serve sectional interests which they tend to present as universal interests common to the group as a whole’ (1977, 114). Dreams of mobility are not only mythological because they contain visions of a future never to come for the vast majority of students, but because they present the ideology of neoliberal education reform as the only way to pursue these mythological futures – a dynamic that guarantees their continual elusiveness.

### **Living proof**

Wilshaw’s biography works to demonstrate social mobility’s truth. During our interview, he reflected on his experience as a working-class youngster

born in India to a half-Indian and half-Irish-German mother and a British father who worked as a postman. In our interview, Wilshaw described himself as mixed race, and then quickly jested ‘People think this is just a sun-tan’.<sup>5</sup> He feels class, not ethnicity, is the biggest hurdle to mobility, as ‘a child going home to a home which doesn’t value education, doesn’t support their child, where there are no books, where there is no experience of higher education’ is ‘the bigger problem’. Yet Wilshaw has overcome this hurdle, describing how he transcended his working-class roots:

Economically I am working-class, but in terms of attitude, middle-class because my parents were always aspirational, even though they didn’t have any money. I think class is about attitude to life, as well as a financial position and what sort of job you hold.

The idea that the middle classes possess a superior attitude to life is reflected in Mossbourne’s ethos and the academy programme’s culture-changing aims. Working-class parents are the ‘problem’ with detrimental parenting skills and poor attitudes. Teachers are explicitly required to become ‘surrogate parents’ who ‘substitute and take over where necessary’. Embedded within surrogate parenthood is the notion that bad parenting – or mothering – is a key source of social dysfunction. Yet Gillies (2007) shows how poor parenting is not the sustaining force behind poverty and working-class parents merely adopting middle-class parenting practices does not ameliorate social hierarchy. Mossbourne’s mission reflects the school’s historical role as a regulating institution, providing an opportunity to monitor children and supervise parenting practices (Foucault 1991).

Wilshaw’s ‘structure liberates’ ethos is centred on ‘... the belief that children who come from unstructured backgrounds, as many of our children do, and often very unhappy ones, should be given more structure in their lives’. He professes that working-class children can do as well as middle-class children in school, while simultaneously reiterating pathological representations of ethnic minority and working-class families. Structure is more necessary for ‘urban children’, whereas ‘you can be a lot more relaxed and free and easy in a nice, leafy middle-class area ...’ This neo-imperial stance regards urban children as in need of civilising to become happier subjects (Ahmed 2010). The ‘tough, urban principal’ performs this task, while test results protect institutions from critique about their methods (Zirkel et al. 2011).

Possessing the power of self-transformation links to the ability to transform others. Wilshaw’s success as a maverick from modest beginnings shows students that his present could be their future. One day in the library at a sixth-former ‘board meeting’, students discussed strategies for selling advertising space to sponsor their young enterprise project. One young man refused to wear his suit – the Mossbourne sixth-form uniform – when selling advertising on a Saturday. The group insisted, explaining no one would

take him seriously. When he continued to resist, they jested his jeans were from Primark. He claimed they were from Hugo Boss. The argument led to a discussion of Wilshaw's finances. Allegedly he was 'stacking it' with a house worth at least £600,000 and only wore clothes from Ralph Lauren and 'the big stores' like Selfridges. Wilshaw arguably embodies Mossbourne's ethos through his consumption habits, serving as a mascot for progression from enterprising sixth former to wealthy professional. Within this mobility myth is the fantasy that we can all become successful like Wilshaw or even fantastically wealthy like Clive Bourne, yet Reay describes how these 'fantasies estrange the working classes from any sense of personal worth or feelings of value if they remain as they are' (2013, 666).

Meanwhile the media perpetuate and normalise images of the maverick head through human-interest reportage. Blackmore and Thomson (2004) describe how many of the star heads featured in a *Times Educational Supplement* series had overcome poverty to achieve their positions. These redemption narratives show that determined individuals can reach their goals and justify English education policy's belief in an individualised, marketised view of equity, creating '... imaginaries that do important political work. They construct a normative heroic head teacher unlike any who exists in reality, but one who embodies government policy aspirations and desires' (2004, 309–310). Wilshaw embodies policy desires, validating the imaginary that Mossbourne students can achieve the success he models.

### **Lone ranger and empire builder**

Action-laden, masculine vocabularies have framed media commentaries of Wilshaw. Education Secretary Michael Gove has called him 'my hero', while a *Sunday Times* headline on 2 October 2011 read "'Sergeant major" to sort out England's schools' upon his appointment as Ofsted chief inspector. *The Sun* commended his 'tough love' image in an article on 6 October 2011, noting Bob Marley's *Redemption Song* playing when they visited the school and showing a smiling Wilshaw standing with folded arms in between two smiling black students under the caption 'We tell kids we believe in them and give them love ... but it's tough love'. One teacher describes the school as a 'well-oiled machine' capable of delivering its passengers from point A to point B. A militaristic, emancipatory masculinity ensures the efficient production of disciplined children shaped by the authoritarian factory foreman. This posturing is more than a media guise, but a managerial style filtering throughout institutional practices, norms and language.

Mossbourne's fundamental parameters were dictated by Wilshaw, as he delegated daily tasks to his Senior Management Team, reserving his direct participation for assemblies, staff briefings and special occasions. His leadership was clear as he routinely paced up and down the corridors, momentarily pausing in doorways to scrutinise lessons. Numerous teachers, students

and parents referenced Mossbourne's 'boot camp' tactics, while the panoptic, glass-fronted building promoting perpetual visibility was designed with Wilshaw's disciplinarian ethos in mind (see RSHP 2013). It has no staff-room and its openness creates a space where teachers and students can be continually surveyed. Cultivating a position of supreme authority, Wilshaw does not casually banter in corridors; appointments are made through his personal assistant.

Our interview took place in Wilshaw's corner office overlooking the playground at the top floor of the building. Looking relaxed as he lolled up and down in his black leather executive chair, Wilshaw was clearly accustomed to the format. He answered my questions with none of the reluctant suspicion displayed by some of his subordinates who apologised for delivering 'the party line'. Wilshaw vows to disseminate Mossbourne's ethos, with his rhetoric assuming missionary tones: 'We'll spread the message of Mossbourne to other schools. Mossbourne will become an empire ... Not an evil empire. A good empire'. The ethos should not be tied to one person, but be part of a wider culture that teachers 'lower down the pyramid buy into' and then carry out by becoming leaders: 'We want to train, develop, nurture, encourage deputy heads, assistant heads, heads of department, people lower to say "Hey I believe in this". You know?' This is a credo I can repeat in other institutions". The ethos takes on religious dimensions as a doctrine to be invested in and exported to other deprived areas as truth, combining the language of church and market. At the close of the interview when asked if he had any other comments, Wilshaw laughed, saying 'No, that's the gospel according to Saint Michael!' This gospel has been subsequently spread through Wilshaw's increasing influence on education policy.

Wilshaw's 'good empire' rhetoric has taken on increasingly strident tones since our interview. At a headteacher conference in 2011 he courted controversy by suggesting heads should be powerful empire builders crafted in the guise of gun-slinging action hero Clint Eastwood in *Pale Rider*:

Being a headteacher is all about being the lone warrior, fighting for righteousness, fighting the good fight, as powerful as any chief executive. I'm not that bothered about distributed leadership; I would never use it; I don't think Clint would either. We need headteachers with ego. You see heads who don't use 'I' and use 'we' instead, but they should. We need heads who enjoy power and enjoy exercising that power. (Barker 2011)

The lone ranger motif develops his assembly rhetoric where the righteous hero saves urban children. A subsequent *Times Educational Supplement* article questioned whether Wilshaw's approach was uncomfortably reminiscent of white missionaries converting African natives to Christianity regardless of their wishes (Frederick 2011). Yet as aforementioned, Wilshaw is not white, but mixed race. Nor is Wilshaw leading a Christian organisation; however, he effectively synthesises the Wild West hero with religious and

militaristic overtones to deliver a convincing message. His position highlights the elasticity of race and class, advantageously employed to claim authenticity within certain contexts without implying a progressive political position. Wilshaw embodies the heroic individualism he promotes.

### **The risk-taking riot stopper**

Like risk-taking entrepreneurs, Wilshaw feels heads must adopt similar approaches when facing urban deprivation and be ‘quite radical ... they need to think outside the box and take risks’. Misdemeanours face immediate consequences:

There’s none of this 24 hour notice, but I’m sure if I looked up – now, I’ve never done this – the detail of statute I’m probably forbidden by law to do that. But I don’t. So it’s a risky threat to make, that they stay there ...  
(Wilshaw, interview)

Pioneering strategies are rationalised and legitimated through pathological notions of Hackney and the need to salvage ‘urban children’. Despite the potentially illegality of his actions, disregarding the law is seen as necessary, while Mossbourne’s ‘short, sharp, immediate, effective’ punishments are part of a behavioural policy which parents and students must sign. Ironically, acting lawlessly is positioned as a means of preserving the law, serving as an antidote to the civil disorder caused by unruly youth. Yet usurping the law is only acceptable in the pursuit of goals legitimated by power.

A *Telegraph* article on 16 August 2011 in the wake of the English Riots heralded Mossbourne as ‘the school that beat the rioters’, with Wilshaw claiming that no Mossbourne students were involved because of the school’s ethos:

Respect for adults is a given. Outside the school, I have been appalled at the way in which police officers are treated with contempt and disdain; that just should not be happening. We have got to get back to a situation where young people start respecting authority again.

*The Daily Mail* on 19 August also commended Wilshaw’s return to conservative values, claiming the riots were caused by a discipline deficit: ‘If formal education, and simple self-awareness and improvement, are the key to moving forward from this crisis in our inner cities, then it is precisely schools like Mossbourne and men like Wilshaw that should lead’. Wilshaw added that his students did not participate because ‘They are being given a stake in society at Mossbourne so why would they want to throw that away?’

Mossbourne crafts students into law-abiding, future-orientated selves, neutralising the threat of the gendered, classed and raced body of the potential gangster, while other educational approaches are aligned with public disorder. Wilshaw's rhetoric draws on a diverse range of discourses, blending sociology with a common-sense amalgamation of Conservative and New Labour doctrine to craft persuasive arguments. While dismissing research as irrelevant to his pragmatic approach, Wilshaw reflexively references and inverts research through his assertions. Hackney's multi-coloured cultural problem and its contaminating effects are stymied and respect for authority is restored. The moral panics coalescing around race, crime, youth and British society's disintegration are reminiscent of the issues tackled in *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 1978), prompting us to question how much debates and framings have shifted in three intervening decades.

### **Factory foreman: dictating culture**

Despite his individualistic, lone-ranger posturing, Wilshaw was not alone on the range and autonomously leading. Quite conversely, Wilshaw was under enormous pressure to produce high examination results and was directly responsible to the secretary of state. Staff briefings continually emphasised the importance of results to Mossbourne's survival in the education marketplace. Before Mossbourne's first GCSE results, Wilshaw stressed the importance of every teacher ensuring the 80% pass rate target was met. He professed, 'I cannot overemphasise how important those results will be. My head is on the chopping block.' In a governor's meeting Wilshaw also emphasised how these targets were not possible without extension classes, six o'clock clubs and Saturday classes from 09:00 to 12:00 h each week. He announced: 'We will live or die by those [GCSE] results – it's the first thing that people look at ...'. Heads of learning areas for mathematics and English then gave detailed presentations highlighting which Year 11 students were on the 'C' borderline and what interventions were being made to ensure they passed.

The intensive labour and continual anxiety over examination results disrupts the notion of the heroic head captaining his ship. Instead, the source of the headteacher's power is located outside the school within a wider structure of power delegated by the state and their private and third-sector partners (Hatcher 2005, 257). Gunter describes how knowledge production has been fundamentally altered through the centralised leadership of schools 'where education strategy is in Whitehall and tactical delivery is what schools are left to grapple over locally' (2010, 519). Tactical delivery of results consumed a vast amount of Mossbourne teachers' time and energy, and these non-negotiable goal posts were centrally set. Rather than headship signalling a close relationship to knowledge, the curriculum, pupils, teachers or pedagogy, the headteacher's role is altered through market cultures where

this ‘chief executive’ has new priorities and concerns— namely the seamless manufacture of results by whatever means necessary (Grace 2000, 234).

The burden of steadily manufacturing results corresponds to the appeal of dictatorial leadership styles where little is left to chance. Mossbourne’s top-down management frustrated numerous teachers who commented on the lack of transparency and poor communication between the Senior Management Team and less senior staff. Several teachers felt continually surveyed and that they had little jurisdiction over their classroom, yet most assuaged these qualms through high results. Wilshaw was resolutely unapologetic if teachers felt continually monitored:

We are inspected to death ... Examination results are published; everyone knows how a school is performing. I am accountable for the success of this school. If things go wrong here and I get or this school gets a poor inspection or children don’t do well, I am accountable for that and I am likely to get the sack. I believe in passing that accountability down the line. People need to be aware that they are accountable for their performance and I am quite open about that. And there is nothing secret and I’m not going to say that they’re not. (Interview)

While teachers are accountable for their performance as accountability is passed down the line, decision-making is not similarly distributed. The personal responsibility Wilshaw feels to produce outcomes is clear through his use of if ‘I get or this school gets a poor inspection’ as he comes to represent the school. He paints teachers as an idealistic bunch of good people who tend to be unmotivated by financial gain; however, they also tend to be complainers. These ‘whiners’ need to ‘stop moaning, get on with it’, adding that he was once a whiner himself. If teachers do not agree with his ‘philosophy’, there are plenty of other schools: ‘If they don’t want to sign up to it, that’s fine by me. But don’t work here’. Management through dictation, not consensus-building, is portrayed as a more efficient, effective strategy than taking the opinion of teachers, parents or students into account. Listening to others is presented as a time-consuming distraction and could disrupt the ‘well-oiled machine’.

Wilshaw described how he wants staff that ‘go the extra mile’ and commit to acting as a surrogate parent:

... It’s not a nine to five ethos, it’s an ethos which says the only way that these children will achieve is if we go the extra mile for them ... we can’t have a staff here who just see it as an ordinary job where they are worrying about their total number of hours and the minutia of their contract. Because that’s the only way it’s going to work. (Interview)

Working at Mossbourne is not ‘ordinary’, but a calling where teachers act as modern-day missionaries. This redemptive undertaking justifies going ‘the extra mile’, excuses the discomfort regarding disciplinarian methods,

and makes teachers part of a radical, acclaimed project. While the staff turnover rate was remarkably high due to long hours, concern over working conditions are dismissed by Wilshaw as trivial complaints best remedied by self-help measures like counselling which position the individual as failing to meet institutional demands – rather than the institution making unreasonable demands. Staff surveys measuring satisfaction come to replace unions as a mechanism for ‘participation’. Although these surveys may be described as democratically orchestrated and participatory, audit practices are premised on hierarchical relationships and coercion where ‘challenging the terms of reference is not an option’ (Shore and Wright 2000, 62). This dictatorial management style is justified through the necessity of ‘saving’ Hackney children.

Democratic leadership and organisation is regarded as a messily impractical way of keeping the conveyor belt running. Cameron’s autonomous heads have a limited scope to reinterpret policy agendas and are caught within the structures of centralised policy. Leadership is taken out of head’s hands and now ‘very substantially located at the political level where it is not available for contestation, modification or adjustment to local variations’ (Wright 2001, 280). Heads cannot escape wider dynamics of politics and power, as ‘effective leadership’ becomes reduced to dealing with the stresses and predicaments introduced by non-negotiable policy directives (Day et al. 2000, 177). Wilshaw shapes Mossbourne to run in line with these requirements, ensuring its values fit snugly against the demands of a neoliberalised system to ‘work’.

Yet this instrumentalised approach has numerous pitfalls. Besides the reiteration of raced and classed pathologies, democracy is extirpated from this structure. This highlights a ‘major paradoxical contradiction’ at the heart of English schooling culture where schools are meant to be cultural agents aiding the workings of democracy, yet rarely adopt democratic practices (Grace 2000, 238). Grace thinks the hierarchical ‘headmaster tradition’ has significantly contributed to this formation, with suggestions that schools can be well run and organised democratically brushed aside in favour of inevitable hierarchies (2000, 239). With the normalisation of the chief executive head, moving towards democratic forms of school governance have been pushed firmly off the agenda. Wilshaw describes how ‘a hierarchical pyramidal structure’ is ‘... what you’d find in 99.9 percent of schools because people have to take responsibility and you’d find that in most business organisations as well’. Distributed leadership is off the menu as schools mimic business organisations.

The shift from participatory to dictatorial management models ties to the shift away from the comprehensive system towards the academy and free school model. Hatcher reminds us that participatory decision-making was an original theme of the comprehensive school movement in the 1960s and 1970s with roots in the post-war social democratic tradition. Here

‘participation was seen not as a management strategy, to be granted on licence as a privilege, but as a right, an entitlement, of the teaching staff’ (Hatcher 2005, 262). Now the possibility of democratic participation or accountability is not discussed as plausible or a desired value; efficient production is the main task and is more readily achieved through cultivating docility and compliance. Students, teachers and parents are positioned not as citizens, but as passive consumers of education.

### **Conclusion: ambiguous power**

This paper has explored the slippery new frontiers presented by neoliberal education policy and embodied by headteacher Sir Michael Wilshaw. His leadership and management practices embody the contradictory heart of both New Labour and Coalition education policy that equates social equality with market-driven reform. These imperatives are marked by numerous contradictions between the stated intentions versus the actual policy outcomes; between social mobility dreams versus the reality of growing inequality; between assertions of autonomy, choice and freedom versus increased centralised control. The shifts are also marked by the co-opting of radical vocabularies to describe conservative, neoliberal projects – signalling a need to develop new progressive vocabularies.

Wilshaw’s fluid array of personas reflects the different ways in which education is being disciplined and measured ever more closely in this neoliberal moment. Wilshaw poses as anti-establishment yet establishment – giving love, yet laying down the law. Old fashioned, yet brand new all at the same time. These ambiguous concoctions correspond to the contradictory aims of the academy programme, while concealing and ignoring the continuing reproduction of raced and classed inequality through the education system.

These contradictions are persuasive and do important political work. Ambiguity’s power has been highlighted by queer, feminist and postcolonial theorists alike. Wilshaw comes to wear whiteness and middle-classness despite his origins, becoming comfortably normative as his otherness is appropriated and incorporated, his mobility story capitalised upon – yet overarching structures of power are left undisturbed (Bhabha 1994). This grey area of ‘almost not quite’ means contrasts cannot be pinned down. Power is diffuse and this ambivalence makes Wilshaw’s approach and neoliberal education policy extremely persuasive and durable as inherent paradoxes are concealed (Skeggs 2004, 25).

Authoritarian practices on a micro scale signal a pivotal macro-level shift in accountability, where academisation signals the depreciation and demise of participatory democracy. The narrative that freedom from local authority management instigates innovative success ignores how headteachers are not simply ‘free’, but inherit new parameters of obligation. Heads might

transcend having to address race, class or gender inequality, or dealing with staff concerns and union demands, but quantifiable results must be consistently produced. Results become the central organising theme as education is tied to an imagined, external market looming in the distance and directing the action. School management remains irrevocably bound to the directives of central government and their business partners – not the concerns of teachers, students or most parents. These pivotal shifts in accountability are a hallmark of the neoliberal state and showcase the continuing powerful allure of mobility fantasies.

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### **Notes**

1. Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills.
2. Consent was gained both verbally and via email.
3. Celebrity has also combined with education at Absolute Return for Kids' £10,000 per ticket gala attended by Sir Phillip Green (ironic given the amount he withholds from public coffers annually via tax havens), Elton John, Liz Hurley, Boris Johnson, Mariella Frostrup and Uma Thurman among others. This also raises the question of how much additional capital is being ploughed into Absolute Return for Kids academies to ensure they are 'winners'.
4. Baby Peter, aged 17 months, died after abuse from his mother, her boyfriend and his brother, resulting in a highly publicised inquiry into Haringey Council's child protection policies.
5. How Wilshaw interprets and negotiates this 'suntan' comment within institutional life is very different from the accounts offered by Sara Ahmed (see Ahmed 1997).

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