**The neo-performative teacher: school reform, entrepreneurialism and the pursuit of educational equity**

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**Abstract**

*The impact of neoliberal reforms of education systems on the work of teachers and school leaders, particularly in relation to high-stakes accountability frameworks, has been extensively studied in recent decades. One significant aspect of neoliberal schooling is the emergence of quasi-autonomous public schools (such as Academies in England, Charter Schools in the USA and Independent Public Schools in Australia), characterised by heterarchical governance models, the promotion of entrepreneurial leadership cultures, and the promotion of a discourse of pursuing educational equity by means of ‘achievement for all’. This paper explores the emergence of a mode of teacher professionalism characteristic of these quasi-autonomous schools, and conceptualises this as being ‘neo-performative’. The neo-performative profession is shaped by the shift in the focus of the regulation and management of schools from ‘governing to governance’, and the consequential rise of the ‘responsibilised profession’, and marked by the emergence of an entrepreneurial model of school leadership. The paper argues that this new conceptualisation of teacher professionalism requires further, more focused, empirical study in order to explore how neoperformative teachers and school leaders articulate their vision of educational equity and social justice, and how they enact this vision in an increasingly intensified high-stakes accountability culture.*

Key words: Performativity, teacher identity, teacher professionalism, equity, social justice

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**Introduction**

Education system reform in the past two decades, encompassing local, regional, national and transnational domains, has largely been characterised by the deployment of neoliberal policies and practices that emphasise ‘performance and product’ (Moore and Clarke 2016), promoted through a marketised discourse of autonomy and choice (Apple 2001; Ball 2003).  Neoliberal approaches to reforming public sector services has been conceptualised as New Public Management (NPM) (Hood 1995), in which private sector managerial practices became to be seen as superior to traditional public sector ones, and so supposedly would lead to automatic improvements in the quality of provision. Key features of NPM include a focus on input/output auditing, the separation of strategic policy making and policy implementation, the disaggregation of services into basic ‘cost units’ and an emphasis on encouraging a competitive market approach to resource allocation and service delivery, even to the extent of contriving ‘internal markets’ within institutions (Osborne 2006, 339); all of these features are particularly significant elements of school system reforms across the world.

The performative schools characteristic of neoliberal NPM systems are profoundly paradoxical in nature; school leaders and teachers are simultaneously self-governing professionals freed from the ‘shackles of the state’ to act as social change agents through improving educational outcomes, yet also held accountable to the state, and subject to high-stakes – and public - judgements about success or failure. These judgements are reached by subjecting schools and teachers to ongoing, multi-layered surveillance (both internal and external) within a complex web of high-stakes accountability measures (Perryman 2003).  The concept of autonomy - frequently articulated as *giving power to those who know best* - is a central element of neoliberal approaches to school system reform. It is, however, a highly contingent, regulated autonomy, liable to being withdrawn if performance targets are not met.

This paper focuses largely on the ways in which teachers’ and school leaders’ professional identity has been reshaped by the performative discourses and practices that have characterised school system reforms in England in the past thirty years. Although concentrating on the specific context of English school reform, however, our discussion will also draw upon parallels from other contexts. Whilst England has long been seen as being in the vanguard of school reforms since the 1980s, neoliberal principles have been the key drivers for school reform across the globe in subsequent decades, so our discussion is one that has clear international significance. Although particular political considerations at local/national level might shape the specifics of how reforms take shape, the ideological principles that underpin them are fundamentally the same. For instance, when considering autonomy as a central tenet of neoliberal school reform in the USA and Australia, political rhetoric has generally concentrated on creating autonomy for schools and principals, with teachers and teacher unions construed as part of the ‘problem’ that principals, newly-empowered and autonomous, will be able to remedy. This valorisation of ‘autonomy’, and the problematisation of the public sector professionalism, fits into the broader neoliberal rhetoric regarding the supposed superiority of non-public corporate management values and practices. In England, a somewhat broader notion of autonomy is more commonly construed as the ‘solution’ to ‘failing schools’. Here, neoliberal discourse replaces teachers as the ‘problem’ in need of a solution with an amorphous ‘educational establishment’, often ill-defined but usually considered to comprise of teacher education colleges, academics and educational researchers. This is not a new phenomenon; it dates back at least to the 1980s, when Margaret Thatcher’s Education Minister Keith Joseph railed against the “ideologues and gurus of so-called progressive education” (1985); more recently, Michael Gove, Education Minister from 2010-2016, proclaimed his mission to create a world-class education service required that he must first defeat *“a ‘blob’ in thrall to Sixties ideologies…an army of bureaucrats, academics and teacher unions”* (Gove 2010).

Whatever the local differences in context, autonomy (albeit often illusory) is a key feature of neoliberal performative school systems; the illusion being that this autonomy is constructed in such a way as to instil in teachers, and in particular school leaders, an overriding emphasis in delivering externally-determined levels of performance.  Student outcomes are the most common performance indicators, but increasingly a wider range of indicators are used, focusing on ‘softer’ data in relation to, for instance, attendance, behaviour, learner engagement and satisfaction, transferable skills and employability.  For Rose (1999), the putative freedom of the performative profession is enacted as responsibility, with teachers and school leaders locked into a self-policing governance model of coercive instrumentalism (Wilkins 2015).

Although the contradictory dynamic of freedom and duty is ever-present in the performative school, it is also often invisible.  The powerful rhetoric of the neoliberal project in public sector management has largely been normalised, with performative mechanisms coming to be viewed in public/political discourse not just the most effective/efficient means of improving school systems, but the only means. High-stakes accountability fused onto heterarchical governance structures (Ball 2009), with market levers deployed to both incentivise and sanction actors, have come to be portrayed (in public and political spheres) as the ‘common sense’ solution to school/system improvement (Rizvi and Lingard 2010).

The growth of performativity as a central element of neoliberalism has been widely discussed and theorised (Ball 2003; Apple 2010) over many years, with particular connections made with related fields tracing the impact of performativity on notions of teacher professionalism (Ozga 1995; Hargreaves 2003; Day and Sachs 2004; Evans 2011), teacher identity (Day *et al*. 2005; Troman 2008; Wilkins *et al.* 2012) and leadership in performative school systems (Moller 2009; Gunter 2010; Keddie *et al.* 2018).  More recently researchers have focused on the complex and highly contested dynamic between the performative focus on driving up standards of attainment and the pursuit of educational equity (Wrigley 2011; Keddie and Lingard 2015).  The evidence is certainly mixed regarding the impact of neoliberal reforms on a range of social equity goals in schooling, such as addressing apparent ‘achievement gaps’ between students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers, and promoting social mobility. This is particularly the case when examining performance data from reforms that ‘free up’ public schools from direct top-down governance, exemplified by the English Academies Programme, Charter schools in the USA and Independent Public Schools in Australia.  Although some studies have found the quasi-autonomous nature of these public schools can foster a progressive social justice ethos (Lipman 2008), evidence for their impact on closing ‘achievement gaps’ for disadvantaged students is inconclusive (Machin and Wilson 2009; Whitty and Anders 2017).   Particularly troubling in this respect is the emphasis in neoliberal school reform on *competition* (between schools) and *choice* (for parents). A significant number of studies have found that this competitive culture of creating ‘winners and losers’ amongst schools has a particularly negative consequences for schools serving communities in challenging socio-economic circumstances (Alexiandou 2002; Bell 2009; Gleeson 2011).

This paper discusses the ways in which the professional identity of teachers and school leaders are shaped by working in intensively performative systems, and provides a conceptual underpinning for future empirical work investigating the work of a new generation of teachers and school leaders in quasi-autonomous public schools, with a particular emphasis on the extent to which neoliberal reforms of school systems can have a positive impact on the pursuit of educational equity and social justice.

It focuses in particular on the ways in which a new generation of ‘entrepreneurial’ school leaders (Gewirtz and Ball 2002; Woods 2013) articulate their role as ‘self-governing leaders’ (Keddie *et al.* 2018) and the ways in which teachers more broadly embrace performative ways of working in ways that have been characterised as *post-performative* (Wilkins 2011) - but we argue here would be more properly described as *neo-performative*.  The discussion throughout is underpinned by an acknowledgement of the need for further research into the ways in which neo-performative teachers and leaders rationalise their position as being underpinned by a socially progressive moral purpose. In particular, our focus is on the ways in which these teachers and school leaders conceptualise ‘social justice’ and ‘educational equity’. Some studies have shown the ways in which many school leaders have largely embraced the degree of freedom they have in quasi-autonomous school systems to focus on a pursuit of ‘higher standards’; however, the system reforms that have created this freedom are frequently rationalised as being necessary for the pursuit of educational equity and the promotion of social mobility.  This paper explores the relationship between this conceptualisation of equity as being primarily or solely realised through higher academic attainment, and considers the impact this could have on a broader social justice agenda, encompassing broader social mobility issues and the empowering of students from marginalised communities to develop as critically-engaged citizens.

**The power of performativity**

Over recent decades, neoliberal principles of free market choice and de-regulation have been applied to the task of fundamentally reconstructing public schools and school systems to mirror the ethos and practices of private corporations. In the context of school reform, the rhetoric of choice and freedom has been so thoroughly incorporated across many parts of the globe it has become normalised, and therefore largely invisible (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). It is this normalisation that has led to the largely unquestioning adoption by politicians of globalising neoliberal ‘solutions’ to perceived inadequacies of public education provision (Furlong 2012). Those who challenge this orthodoxy are frequently disparaged in political and public discourse as being politically motivated; speaking in 2013, the then-UK Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove dismissed critics of school reform as being ‘enemies of promise’, interested only in *“valuing Marxism, revering jargon and fighting excellence”* (Gove 2013).

At the core of the neoliberal school system lies a complex performative apparatus that has had a crucial role in not only changing the ways in which schools are governed and held accountable, but in reframing the nature of teachers’ and school leaders’ work – and the parameters of their professional autonomy. Performative school systems vary in accordance with local contexts, but almost all share some common characteristics. Lying at the core of the neoliberal school system are its perhaps most visible features – the deployment of ‘high-stakes’ accountability measures that are used to ‘performance manage’ schools and teachers by setting benchmarks that determine ‘success or failure’. These measures are in turn used to both incentivise and sanction teachers and schools; typically in neoliberal systems these performative ‘measures of effectiveness’ have direct and significant consequences. In many systems they are used to determine funding flow to schools, and in some systems to determine the governance status of schools. Under the English Academies Programme, an ‘underperforming’ school falling within public local authority jurisdiction, with a community-based governing body, is likely to be subjected to a ‘forced academisation’. In these circumstances the existing school is closed and reopened (usually with a new head teacher) under the direct control of an existing academy chain or Multi-Academy Trust, frequently with no community or parental representation on the governing body and little or no local authority influence.

The English Academy system exemplifies the paradox by which a school system reform initiative purportedly centred on the principle of autonomy actually functions in such a way as to undermine school autonomy. Whilst many aspects of the governance of academies in England are context-specific, at a fundamental level they have much in common with quasi-autonomous public schools elsewhere. Charter Schools in the USA are similarly freed from many of the control mechanisms of local government, but as with academies are ultimately accountable for delivering against academic performance targets, and subject to either forced takeover or even closure should key performance indicators not be met (Torres and Weiner 2018). Elsewhere, similar characteristics of governance can be detected, such as the Independent Public Schools of Australia and the Friskolor (Free Schools) of Sweden.

So, whilst neoliberal reforms lead to distinctly different policies, structures, practices that reflect the different contexts upon which they are imposed, the emphasis on quantitative data as either the only, or the most significant ‘true’ measure of effectiveness is common to all. The presumed primacy of quantitative outcomes data is utilised to inscribe new notions of professional responsibility; the duty of schools is to meet quantitative ‘key performance indicators’ and deliver measurable improvements in student performance. The consequence of this is to devalue – or delegitimise – traditional notions of teacher knowledge and teacher professional capital. The performative apparatus and the targets it sets negate the need for teachers themselves to draw on situated learning and their professional self to develop a rationale for actions; *the target is the rationale*. For Ball, this displacement of individual professional qualities leads to an “alienation of self”, in turn resulting in inauthentic practice and relationships (Ball 2003, 222).

**Heterarchical systems: from governing to governance**

The liberalisation of governance models in neoliberal school systems, as exemplified by the English academies programme, has been conceptualised by Ball as creating ‘heterarchical’ governance (2009). Neoliberal, performative school systems are characterised by a shift to a polycentric state (Jessop 1998) in which relatively simple state hierarchies are largely replaced by more complex networked *heterarchies*, in which the emphasis is not on *governing* (or ‘being governed’) but on *governance* (Ball 2009, 100). In heterarchical governance models, top-down bureaucracy and administration are replaced by *“regulated self-regulation…a system of organization replete with overlap, multiplicity, mixed ascendancy, and/or divergent-but coexistent patterns of relation”* (*ibid*, 101). To further complicate this governance network, the ‘regulated self-regulation’ often does not completely replace previous apparatuses of governing, but merely overlay pre-existing administrative systems that either by design or inertia remain in operation. Heterarchies, therefore, are generally not truly devolutionary, but more accurately a ‘de-concentration’ of control in which state authorities are still able to wield considerable power and influence over actors (Fairclough 2000).

This reconfiguring of the boundaries of power also entails a blurring of the boundaries between public and private spheres, creating spaces that are then populated by corporate and/or philanthropic non-state actors. Underpinning much of the ‘common-sense’ rationale for neoliberal reforms is an acceptance (sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit) that the public sector on its own lacks the will and/or capacity to bring about sustained improvements, and that creating a quasi-market is the most effective means of overcoming these shortcomings. The involvement of corporate and/or charitable partners in education is typically constructed as “philanthropic and salvational” (Courtney 2015, 211), non-state organisations directing their energy and resource to ‘rescue’ failing state schools because of their sense of moral purpose and/or commitment to social justice. This is exemplified by the English academies programme, first introduced by the Labour administration of 1997-2010, and expanded by the subsequent Conservative-led Coalition government that followed. At their introduction, the initiative was explicitly justified as being a means of closing achievement gaps for disadvantaged students (Wilkins 2017), despite the inconclusive nature of the evidence of such outcomes (Machin and Wilson 2009; Gleeson 2011). Similar findings from across the globe suggest that the linkage made by policymakers between neoliberal school reforms and educational equity is not supported by outcomes data (Levin 2001; Waslander *et al.* 2010). For many critics, contrary to the claims that academies were a practical not a politically-motivated initiative (Blair 1996), they were in fact inherently ideological, being constructed “…to enhance the growing influence of private versions of entrepreneurialism” (Wood *et al.* 2007, 253).

**Autonomy and Identity: tensions in teacher professionalism in the performative school**

A recurring theme in literature examining the reframing of public schooling as a neoliberal quasi-market has concentrated on the ways in which teachers’ professional identity is shaped by the emergence of performative accountability frameworks, with particular regard to notions of professional autonomy and self-efficacy. Much of this literature has argued that the intensive ‘audit culture’ of the performative school has diluted – and often suppressed – ‘traditional’ notions of teacher professionalism through which context-specific practice emerging through a process of collegial professional dialogue (Seddon 1997). In the performative school, the rise of heterarchical governance and professional responsibilisation means that teaching can be conceptualised as a ‘self-policing’ profession. The threat of sanctions for underperformance means that teachers are subject to constant surveillance, predominantly that of senior and middle leaders, but also through self-surveillance. Where performative practice is normalised (Rizvi and Lingard 2010), teachers are likely to embrace these primarily because they view them as *self-evidently* effective rather than being determined through a collegially-determined pedagogic rationale (Wilkins 2011). The combination of normative reasoning and high-stakes performative incentives and sanctions appears predisposed to creating what Ball has described as “inauthentic practice and relationships” (2003, 87) founded on uncritical assumptions about ‘doing what works’.

This reductive notion of responsibility has become pervasive in the teaching profession (Clarke 2013; Hennessy and McNamara 2013); not just in England, but wherever performativity is the dominant discourse, with devaluing of ‘traditional’ conceptions of teacher professionalism, in which knowledge-making, professional development and ‘practice improvement’ are context-specific actions. It is, furthermore, reinforced by the increased contractualisation of the teaching workforce that is particularly notable in the English Academy model, but is characteristic of performative systems more generally; the precarious nature of contractual status and the erosion of union power to combat this combines to disincentivise teachers from challenging normative practices. Teaching, along with other public sector professions under neoliberal systems, has increasingly come to occupy a contractualised position in the labour market hierarchy (Courtney and Gunter 2015; 414); this consequential dilution of professional identity and agency presents further risks to a values-led approach to professionalism.

The impact of performative reforms on teachers’ professional identity has been extensively discussed since the emergence of the neoliberal reform agenda. Nonetheless, there is little consensus as to the longer-term consequences for the nature of teacher professionalism in the performative era. For many critics, particularly in the relatively early phase of NPM (the 1990s), performative systems were viewed as ‘de-professionalising’ teaching, creating a incorporated workforce of ‘techno-bureaucrats’ (Hatcher 1994; Bottery and Wright 1995; Apple 2003), passively delivering a prescribed curriculum using mandated pedagogies, living out the technologies of performativity in “…an existence of calculation” (Ball 2003, 217). Others have proposed more optimistic consequences, arguing that teacher communities exercising professional collegiality and collaboration had the capacity to resist performative managerialism and promote instead a professional ‘democratic discourse’ (Sachs 2003; Avis 2005). This tension is evident in the conflicting discourses of on the one hand a focus on engagement with child development theory and creativity in the curriculum (Alexander 2014) and on the other a standards-driven ‘back to basics’ model (Braun and Maguire 2018).

As the performative era is well into its third decade (at least in countries such as England that were in the vanguard of the neoliberal reform movement), performative policies and practices in school systems have ‘matured’, and the teaching profession is now overwhelmingly one constituted of teachers with no experience of a pre-performative system. Not only this, teachers have increasingly trained as teachers and even been school students in the post-1980s world; they are, to all intent and purposes, a truly performative generation (Wilkins 2011). A number of empirical studies (Wills and Sandholtz 2009; Wilkins 2011) have attempted to describe and contextualise this generation of teachers as either *principled pragmatists* articulating/justifying professional decisions from a principled pedagogical stance (Moore et al. 2002), *constrained professionals* operating with a degree of autonomy at the pedagogical level but limited by external compliance demands (Wills and Sandholtz 2009), or *post-performative professionals*, maintaining a delicate balancing act between compliance and resistance (Wilkins 2011). Braun and Maguire (2018) go somewhat further than this, noting in a study of English primary school teachers that although their participants appeared compliant “…there was simultaneously a sense of deep unease” (8). This unease was evident in the voicing of “…outspoken and desperate opposition to practices” in relation to children’s well-being that led to a form of “doing without believing” (ibid. 8).

We argue here that as neoliberal reforms have become embedded and performative school system have ‘matured’, recent entrants to the profession – and teachers moving into leadership roles – might more properly be characterised as the *neo-performative* generation. Performative values and practices have not, as could be inferred from the use of the term ‘post-performative’, been diluted by pragmatism and accommodation. Instead, performative values and practices have become normalised in the profession through the enactment of the imperatives of performance and competition (Ball 2012, 97), and as the product themselves of performative education systems, as well as a wider neoliberal cultural landscape, and increasingly working in highly-performative quasi-autonomous state schools with explicitly corporate identities and management practices, the neo-performative teachers’ professional identity is likely to be increasingly shaped by this experience. Heffernan’s research into the leadership styles of school leaders in Queensland, Australia, reveals the emergence of a new leadership paradigm amongst those principals at the beginning of their leadership career, for whom the performative climate represents the status quo (Heffernan 2017, 511). For the neo-performative teacher as well as school leaders, performative, data-heavy benchmarks of ‘quality’ and ‘effectiveness’ have increasingly become normalised, adopting the broader neoliberal conceptualisation of what makes a school successful and therefore what makes a teacher “a good teacher” and a head teacher “an effective, transformational leader”. The distinctive culture of the quasi-autonomous public school creates an environment in which a generation of teachers appear to reflect the high levels of vocational commitment evident in the earlier generations of ‘traditional professionalism’. However, this is overlaid with ‘demanded commitment’ – the “expected selflessness” that is a characteristic of this type of school (Torres and Weiner 2018, 17). In these highly performative institutions, there is commonly a repeated and explicit expectation (and sometimes requirement) that all members sign up to a ‘shared’ vision (in actuality one devised at arms-length beyond the school and operationalised by the leadership team); the vocational commitment at the heart of traditional professionalism has therefore become, at least informally, a matter of contractual expectation (Courtney and Gunter, 2015). Whereas the post-performative teacher of the 2000s was shaped by a relatively straightforward tension between traditional and performative professionalism, the neo-performative teacher of the 2010s operates in a more complex ecosystem. The self-governing system is occupied by a responsibilised profession where the imperative is not just to ‘raise standards’ but to ‘close gaps’ in the name of equity.

**School leadership in the performative school: from managerialism to entrepreneurialism**

Alongside, and sometimes overlapping, the wealth of literature exploring the way performative practices and values have altered teachers’ professional identity is a similarly extensive body of literature examining the extent to which managerialist concepts of performance, competition, efficiency and value for money have become normalised for school leaders (Grace 1995; Thrupp and Willmott 2003; Courtney 2015). This might be particularly the case for a newer generation of school leaders; for instance, those early career principals in Queensland, Australia, who formed part of an ‘accountability generation’ (Heffernan 2018) having had no experience of leading a school prior to the introduction of neoliberal reforms. For policy makers, embedding these concepts not just as management practices but ensuring school leaders fully embrace managerialist discourses at a cultural level has been seen as a key lever in bringing about sustained school and system improvement (DfES 2004). Courtney (2015) has described a thirty year project of the corporatisation of the leadership and management of ‘non-economic fields and relations’, by which he means the leadership and management of schools, has been reconfigured to adopt the “goals, practices, motivations and instincts of the private sector” (Courtney 2015, 214-215). Courtney’s analysis of this process of corporatisation is largely based on the English policy landscape, and the creation of a quasi-privatised school system, but its wider international significance is evident in its critique, echoing the work of Stephen Ball, of the commodification of the social order inherent in neoliberal policymaking (*ibid,* 215).

In England this process of commodification, and the consequential growth of performative practices, was triggered by the Education Reform Act of 1988, which began the process of decoupling schools from local authority control and handed significantly increased levels of power (including financial and workforce management matters) to head teachers. This increased power led to the emergence amongst head teachers of a ‘managerial professionalism’ (Grace 1995) in which the focus shifted away from pedagogic leadership towards managing the fulfilment of targets for school performance (Tseng 2015; Miller 2018).

One outward sign of this shift of emphasis has been the extent to which, in English schools, the term ‘head teacher’ has fallen out of fashion, being largely replaced (at least in the Secondary phase) by the term ‘principal’. The role of the principal in the performative school (and even more so the ‘executive principal’ leading schools clustered into Multi-Academy Trusts) is to manage performance; the task of *pedagogic* leadership is largely devolved to a middle-leadership tier of senior teachers (Gunter and Forrester 2008). Principals and executive principals are crucial to delivering policy, and neoliberal principles require them to be granted a degree of autonomy, or freedom in order to manage their schools. However, this freedom is highly conditional, and is accompanied by a highly stratified bureaucratic hierarchy that has fundamentally changed the relationship between the *manager* principal and the *managed* teacher (Tseng 2015, 497).

The era of performative school leadership in England can be characterised as falling into two distinct phases. The first, from 1988 to 1997, was one in which the role of head teacher was reshaped as a technocratic managerialist one in which strategic organisational qualities were privileged and the pursuit of ‘effectiveness’ and ‘performance improvement’ was paramount (Grace 1995; Gunter 2001). This phase of performative school leadership saw a dramatic increase in attention given to the role of head teachers in managing the performance of their workforce and monitoring their schools’ progress towards meeting improvement targets (Hentschke 2009). The second phase, beginning in 1997 with the election of Tony Blair’s ‘New Labour’ government, continued – and intensified – the pursuit of neoliberal policies and practices, but with a conscious focus on cultural change in approaches to school leadership, emphasising the importance of the charisma of school leaders utilising their ever-increasing power to promote a transformative vision (Thrupp and Willmott 2003). The New Labour model of transformational leadership is deeply rooted in an entrepreneurial model of management; individual principals are encouraged to adopt innovative, risk-taking approaches to leading schools (Miller 2018) and the wider system is awash with ‘policy entrepreneurs’ who operate in a competitive market to offer expertise in pedagogy and school management (Gunter and Forrester 2008, 153-155).

The notion of the school leader as entrepreneur emerged through study and critique of neoliberal reforms leading to the model of public service delivery known as New Public Management (Wood 2015), and entrepreneurial approaches to school leadership has become to be viewed as essential to managing the challenges and risks of educational leadership in the performative era. However, whilst entrepreneurial leadership can in some senses be defined as being narrowly focused on maximising efficiency in a competitive system (Ball and Junemann 2012), there is growing evidence that this new generation of school leaders exhibit varied and complex ways of navigating the demands of their role (Keddie et al. 2018). Some (e.g. Woods 2013) have argued that the level of freedom and power delegated to entrepreneurial school leaders generates the potential for more progressive possibilities, utilising their innovative, creative approaches to management not just to narrow ‘performance goals’, but to social, ethical and equity concerns (Roomi and Harrison 2011; Keddie *et al.* 2018).

**Harnessing performativity for social purpose**

Wood and Woods (2011) have argued that alongside the more obvious business/market orientation of entrepreneurial leadership, we should also consider the possibility for ‘social’ entrepreneurialism aimed at tackling deprivation and social exclusion, and ‘public’ entrepreneurialism focused on citizenship issues such as community welfare, social justice and democratic participation and accountability’ (Wood and Woods 2011). There is no doubt that a governmental level (and trans-governmental, through the work of the OECD), there has been a conscious coupling of neoliberal school reforms and performative policies and practices with social equity goals, particularly in England under the 1997-2010 New Labour government’s ‘Third Way’ ideology of harnessing economic growth to further socially progressive goals (Wilkins 2015, 1145). For New Labour education policy was certainly focused on improving educational outcomes overall, but the closing of the ‘achievement gaps’ between different groups in society was seen to be of equal importance (Hills and Stewart 2005).

The pursuit of equity of outcomes for students has become commonplace in the rationale for system change, both in England and more widely. However, many critics have pointed out the ways in which rearticulation of social justice as social equity limits the extent to which this can be seen as a genuinely transformatory process (Alexiadou 2002; Lingard *et al.* 2014). For Lingard et al., the dilution of social justice, and its replacement by social equity, represents a significant shift made possible by performative practices, away from “…philosophical discourses about social justice to a reliance on more data-driven practices of equity” (2014, 712). The growth of ‘Big Data’ tools for monitoring the performance of schools and school systems (at a global level, the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and its national equivalents) have created an entirely quantitative approach to judging the quality of schools, leading to a shift away from *“…concerns about causality and understanding towards more pragmatic approaches focused on correlations and predictability”* (*ibid*., 713). The OECD’s influence over education policy through the PISA programme has been profound, and has been a key driver of the positioning of social equity in a purely economic domain; for OECD educational equity is desirable not on moral grounds, but simply because it brings economic benefits – and conversely, inequity in education leads to economic loss through the wastage of potential economic productivity (OECD 2012).

Notwithstanding the lack of convincing data suggesting that school reforms have led to significant progress, even in respect of the more limited goal of equity (Machin and Woods, 2009; Wrigley 2011), the emphasis on equity at the expense of social justice is likely to have profound implications for the ways in which teachers and school leaders conceptualise the social purpose of their work. In the performative school, where their performance is measured either exclusively, or at best predominantly, through the often simplistic and sometimes misleading correlations occurring in quantitative data sets, the dialogue about social justice made possible in more traditional models of professionalism may be suppressed in the entrepreneurial one.

**Discussion: the age of the neo-performative professional**?

The discussion presented in this paper is a wide-ranging one, but essentially aims to bring together key ideas from three related conceptual strands;

* The changing nature of the regulation and management of schools in the neoliberal era; from ‘governing to governance’, and the consequential rise of the ‘responsibilised profession’
* the changing nature of teacher professionalism in performative school systems
* The evolution of the entrepreneurial model of school leadership, beginning with the transition from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’ headship, followed by the shift from managerialism to transformatory leadership

Our discussion has noted the hugely significant impact of neoliberal reforms on school governance and management, and of the array of performative policies and practices deployed to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of schools and teachers’ work, is perhaps the most significant and fundamental one in relation to schooling internationally over the past three decades. Our discussion has also considered the many studies carried out during this period that have examined the ways in which teachers (and school leaders) talk about and actually carry out their work, and paid particular attention to the ways in which new generations of teachers have developed distinctly different models of professionalism as a result of the changing nature of the regulation and management of their work. Alongside this we have drawn attention to the ways in which the progressive, transformatory concern for social justice that was a significant motivating force for the teaching profession of the 1970s and 1980s has been rearticulated as an aspiration for *equity*, an aspiration to be achieved by a ‘levelling up’ of academic attainment by students from across all sections of society. In England, the USA and many other countries, successive governments have focused on the closing of ‘achievement gaps’ between students from disadvantaged communities and their more privileged peers, yet despite the increasingly explicit articulation of the relationship between effective schools and educational equity, there has been relatively little attention paid to teachers’ and school leaders’ concept of equity.

Some studies have examined the ways in which teachers articulate their sense of social and moral purpose (Nias 1999; Villegas 2007), harking back to a traditional view of teaching as a vocation in which individuals can have a significant positive impact on the life chances of their students. However, there has been little recent research tracing the impact of working in performative school systems on this sense of the idea of social/moral purpose, and in particular the ways in which teachers in quasi-autonomous public schools see themselves in relation to a mission of educational equity and social justice. There is little doubt that teachers in such schools, particularly senior and middle leaders, are familiar with the discourse of ‘equity through efficiency’ that commonly underpins schools’ mission statements about ‘excellence for all’, even if we are less certain about the ways in which this new generation of teachers and school leaders – the neo-performative generation of entrepreneurial public sector professionals – conceptualise their social mission. In particular, in the quasi-autonomous public school, such as the English Academy, the Charter School in the USA and the Independent Public School in Australia, school leaders’ role is to deliver a state level strategic mission to elevate student outcomes, thus articulating a social mission based on a narrow, reductive notion of levelling up of academic attainment, and it may be that the specific context of schools is significant in shaping leaders’ responses. Some evidence from Australia suggests that whereas in high socio-economic status (SES) schools, data is primarily used to attach more weight to ‘quality teaching’ in producing high attainment levels at the expense of other factors (including SES), in low SES schools leaders were more likely to emphasise school context and the needs of students and to distrust ‘big data’ (Gable and Lingard 2013). However, further research would be valuable in helping us better understand how school leaders in quasi-autonomous public schools engage with the dynamic tension between accountability, professional values and understanding and sense of ‘moral purpose’ in relation to equity and social justice.

We have argued here that in the neoliberal, performative era, policy-makers have largely bought into the OECD notion of equating economic/labour market capital as a proxy for social equity. We also argue that in the quasi-autonomous school system, where educational reforms have overwhelmingly looked to market-led approaches that emphasise both autonomy and responsibilisation; a shift from *governed* to *governing* (Rose 1999). In such schools, entrepreneurial teachers and school leaders see themselves as embracing new freedoms in order to act as a moral agent (Keddie *et al.* 2018), even though there appears to be a lack of clarity regarding the difference between social justice and educational equity. Critics have noted the way in which performative accountability measures, dominated by testing and data-driven comparisons of individual students and schools, have led to the reduction of complex and nuanced definitions of social justice (based, according to Fraser (2009) on redistributive, recognitive and representative dimensions) to simplistic and abstract statistical representations of ‘equity’ (Lingard *et al.* 2014, 711). This concept of equity, commonly central features of the objectives of performative school systems, is in essence reductionist, restricted to ‘driving up standards’ in academic terms and adding ‘labour market value’ to students’ future economic prospects. The rearticulation of equity is significant because existing studies of teachers and school leaders in such schools suggest a broad acceptance of raising achievement as a proxy for promoting equity/social mobility. As the global spread of neo-liberal school reform continues at speed, there is considerable research interest in investigating the extent to which this reform agenda impacts on educational equity and social justice.

However, although there is an inherent risk remains that the ‘coercive compliance’ culture characteristic of performative schools will remain weighted towards narrower aspirations that focus on closing attainment gaps at the expense of consideration of more fundamental structural challenges to social justice, we would also argue that the heterarchical governance model of public sector schooling (Ball 2009) outlined in this paper has created at least the *potentiality* for a social justice orientation. The extent to which this potentiality is realised will be dependent on the extent to which the neo-performative generation of teachers and school leaders can resist the pressure to simply accept the positivist epistemological assumptions of the data-driven accountability culture. If they are unable to resist, then the neo-performative reality will be a reductive rearticulation of social justice as the mere pursuit of equitable but narrowly-defined performance outcomes.

The neo-performative generation are navigating a complex terrain in which schools maintain a relentlessly data-driven approach to improving outcomes and closing ‘achievement gaps’. Whilst on the surface this appears to orientate the mission of schools in a way that satisfies teachers’ sense of moral purpose, it also suggests that perhaps more fundamental aspects of social justice and equity, such as the need to support students to develop as critically engaged citizens, empowered to participate fully in society, will be increasingly side-lined in the pursuit of ‘better numbers’. If this is the case, then there seems little prospect of the neo-performative generation exploiting the ‘conditional freedoms’ of the self-governing, self-improving school to pursue a genuine social justice agenda – essentially leading to the ‘activist professionalism’ first envisaged by Sachs (2001).

The paper provides a conceptual starting point for future empirical work investigating the work of a new generation of school teachers in quasi-autonomous public schools, with a particular emphasis on the extent to which neo-liberal reforms of school systems have rearticulated equity and redirected the moral purposes of schools. By conceptualising teachers as ’neo-performative’, our intention is provide an clear account of a generation of teachers who have moved beyond the purely managerialist ‘post-professionalism’ described by Hargreaves (2000) and others, but whilst they appear to have overcome the ‘terrors of performativity’ (Ball 2003), neither do they appear to display the characteristics of Sachs’ activist professionals. For Sachs, activist professionalism is founded not only on principles of collaboration and reciprocity, but on a willingness to examine and challenge the epistemological bases of their practice (2000, 89-90). The performative school culture is not conducive to epistemological challenge; its commitment to a ‘shared vision’ more commonly means the acceptance of prescribed pedagogical orthodoxies and standardised, data-driven measurement of their ‘effectiveness’. Future research will need to not only focus on the tension between professional values and notions of social justice and equity, but on how a new generation of teachers and leaders make sense of the heterarchical modes of school governance rather than governing, and what impact the responsibilisation of individual teachers and leaders has on their work.

To conclude, we argue that performative school systems – and quasi-autonomous public schools in particular – have led to the emergence of a neo-performative form of teacher professionalism with distinctive ways of articulating social/moral purpose and conceptualising social justice and education. We have noted the *potentiality* for the neo-performative generation of teachers to deploy their entrepreneurial creativity within the space granted to quasi-autonomous public schools to focus on a broader notion of social justice than the reductive one of ‘releasing economic potential through educational equity’ as envisioned in the neoliberal imaginary. It is possible, perhaps, to suggest a counter-discourse to this in which the core purposes of schooling were decoupled from the neoliberal goal, borrowed from private/corporate spheres, of ‘social mobility through credentialism’. This counter-discourse would reaffirm the role of schools as promotors of public goals of social betterment and critical citizenship – goals that are more closely aligned with Fraser’s redistributive, recognitive and representative notions of social justice – and so provide a resistance to neoliberal imperatives.

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