Professionalism and the post-performative teacher: new teachers reflect on autonomy and accountability in the English school system

Chris Wilkins

School of Education, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK

Correspondence
Dr Chris Wilkins
School of Education
21 University Road
Leicester LE1 7RF
caw11@leicester.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper explores the impact of the increasingly performative nature of the assessment of teachers’ performance in England leading to the introduction of Professional Standards in 2007. It reports the findings of a small-scale study of newly-qualified primary school teachers in the context of literature on teacher identity, performativity and professional development. It suggests the possible emergence of a ‘post-performative’ identity; a generation of teachers who experience as pupils has been of an increasingly performative schooling system. These post-performative teachers cannot be categorised as either ‘compliant’ or ‘resistant’ to the demands of performative management systems and government initiatives. They are still largely motivated by affective rewards but have clear career ambitions; they are aware of the potential conflicts between the demands of accountability and the desire for autonomy, but are generally comfortable with the balance they feel able to strike between these. This paper reflects on the views of these teachers in the light of further developments in masters-level qualifications and their possible impact on the shape of professionalism and professional development.

Keywords: teacher professional identity, performativity; professional development
Introduction

Standardised assessment of new teachers for the award of qualified teacher status (QTS) in England was first introduced in 1998 and is now in its third reincarnation, each marking a significant advancement in the regulation and enforcement of professional standards. This paper reflects on the findings of a small-scale study of newly-qualified primary school teachers in the context of the wealth of literature on teacher identity and performativity. It suggests the possible emergence of a distinctive ‘post-performative’ identity amongst a new generation of teachers who have experienced as pupils a schools system increasingly subjected to external regulation and market-led management approaches. It draws specifically on the English experience of reforms in the management of schools and teacher education, but with similar developments in many other countries, the findings may have wider relevance.

The first Standards for QTS (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1998) were designed to assess the craft skills and subject knowledge, and widely criticised as instrumentalist and technicist (Winter, 2000; Hill, 2001; Menter et al., 2006). The 2002 revised model, encompassing broader ‘professional values and practice’ (Training and Development Agency (TDA), 2002), was broadly welcomed as recognizing the wider professional context of teachers’ work (Reynolds 1999). Some critics, however, have questioned the difficulty of quantifying the assessment of such a complex, nuanced aspect of teaching (Harrison, 2007, McNally et al., 2008). The third model, Professional Standards for Teachers extends its scope beyond entry to the profession by requiring teachers at key career thresholds to demonstrate their continued development of professional skills, knowledge and understanding and to “broaden and deepen their professional attributes” (TDA, 2007, p. 2). Professional Standards forms the policy backdrop to this study.

A substantial amount of research in recent decades (e.g. Sachs, 2003; Day et al, 2006; Troman et al, 2007) has examined the impact of the intensified regulatory framework of teacher’s work, particularly the growth of a ‘performance management’ culture into schools. National data from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) on the improving nature of English schools and from pupil attainment data suggest broadly
positive outcomes of these reforms. However, a significant proportion of these studies have focused on the negative outcomes for teachers, in terms of low morale, job dissatisfaction and a sense of diminished autonomy (Brehony, 2005; Day et al., Galton & MacBeath, 2008). It is appropriate to view the introduction of career-long Professional Standards in this apparently contradictory context. It is also interesting to note that this period has also seen some developments that apparently owe more to the ‘traditionalist’ notion of professionalism. The establishment (in 2000) of the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE), which was portrayed as an attempt to raise teachers’ status, with explicit comparisons drawn with the self-regulation of ‘high status’ professions such as medicine and law. Similarly, the proposal in the government’s Children’s Plan (Department for Children, Families and Schools (DCFS), 2007) that all teachers would be required to obtain a masters level qualification. Primarily driven by a desire to increase pupil attainment, this has also been promoted as a contribution to raise the status of the profession.

This study reflects upon this professional development policy context as it explores the developing professional identity of a new generation of teachers, largely educated during the growth era of ‘performative schooling’ of the 1990s.

**Teacher professionalism**

The ‘classical’ model of professionalism, as described by Goodson and Hargreaves (1996), focuses on such characteristics as self-regulation, autonomy in practice and an ethos of a shared commitment to continually developing knowledge and practice. Given the ambivalent position of teaching in respect of some of these characteristics, it has frequently been viewed as a ‘quasi-profession’ (Etzioni, 1969). In fact, in public and political discourse in England teaching has long been treated as a profession (Whitty, 2002), whilst for scholars the issue has increasingly become not to define teacher professionalism, but to position it as a socially constructed and contested concept (Ozga & Lawn, 1981; Helsby, 1995).

A frequently cited characteristic of teaching is that of a commitment to ‘the public good’, echoing Talcott Parsons’ view of a profession as a blend of altruism and
intellectual engagement (1937, 366). This notion of teaching as a vocation still resonates strongly in studies of teacher motivation/identity (e.g. Scott et al, 1999; Carrington et al, 2000; Leaton Gray, 2006). Troman et al (2007) and Galton and MacBeath (2008) have found that the satisfaction teachers gained from their interactions with pupils remains central to their ongoing professional commitment. This suggests that Lortie’s seminal conceptualisation of ‘psychic rewards’ (1975) is still pertinent, despite the increasingly assertive intervention of state agencies in the regulation of teachers’ work (and the advancement of ‘marketisation’ in schooling). This regulatory approach (across the public sector, not simply teaching) has been widely studied and conceptualised as a ‘performative’ culture. The growth of performativity is central to this study, and so although limitations on space mean that a detailed discussion of this literature is inappropriate, a brief overview is necessary.

The emergence of the performative agenda in schooling in England and Wales

The debate about the management and regulation of teaching and teacher education in England in recent decades has been dominated by rhetoric about ‘standards’ and ‘accountability’. Prime Minister James Callaghan’s speech at Ruskin College in 1976 marked a turning point in UK schooling, opening up ‘the secret garden’ of the profession to public debate, and governmental scrutiny and regulation (Simon, 1991). The next two decades saw the election of a neo-liberal Conservative government that sought to wrest control of schooling from what it saw as a complacent, elitist profession favouring doctrinaire egalitarianism over pupil attainment (aided by a vociferous ideological campaign by radical right-wing academics and lobbyists (Hillgate Group, 1986; O’Keefe, 1986)). A National Curriculum as established in 1998, together with a plethora of initiatives revolutionising the work of teachers and the ways in which their work is managed and regulated. This ‘techno-bureaucratic managerialism’ (Apple, 2000) was reinforced by a ‘rewards and sanctions’ mechanism provided by an accompanying strand of ‘marketisation’.

This approach to the management of public services has conceptualised as ‘performativity’, a phenomenon extensively discussed in the specific context of
schooling (Ball, 2000; Gerwitz & Ball, 2000; Mahony & Hextall, 2000; Brehony, 2005; Webb & Vuillamy, 2006). Performative systems are characterised by three key strands of policy and practice. Perhaps the most widely understood strand of performativity is, in common parlance, the ‘audit/target culture’, in which a multiplicity of targets is used to measure (primarily by quantitative data) the work of teachers and schools. Advocates for educational accountability argue for its effectiveness (Tooley, 1993), and government attainment data certainly suggests that it has delivered on its aim to increase ‘standards’. However, critics argue that the audit culture has led to an ultimately damaging risk-averse, target-chasing ethos where traditional notions of context-specific practice emerging through professional dialogue are suppressed (Seddon, 1997). As Ball (2003) notes, the requirements of performativity result in “inauthentic practice and relationships…[where]…Teachers are no longer encouraged to have a rationale for practice…what is important is _what works_” (p. 87). In this context, professional development is a ‘top down’ imposition rather than a genuine personal and collegial enterprise, and likely to be viewed more as a disciplinary device than an empowering one.

The second characteristic of performative systems is its emphasis placed on interventionist regulatory mechanisms; inspection of English schools is the responsibility of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), established in 1992 to replace the relatively benign and collegial monitoring regime of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI). Ofsted has far-reaching powers to discipline ‘underperforming’ professionals, and was seen by many in its early years to go beyond its brief to be a conscious ‘policy driver’ (Lee & Fitz, 1997) with a clear political agenda (Webb _et al_, 1998). Others portrayed it as a deliberately antagonistic assault on the notion of the autonomous profession (Maw, 1998), which, by presuming that the National Curriculum provides a ‘complete canon of knowledge’ (Leaton Gray 2006, p. 32), undermines a core characteristic of ‘classical professionalism’, the control of the body of knowledge.

Recently, the inspection methodology has increasingly focused on schools’ self-evaluation rather than direct inspection of schools and teachers. Portrayed as enhancing professional judgement/autonomy, critics have argued that this has
reinforced the external control by overlaying the external regulatory system with a self-surveillance regime (Ball, 1997). Through self-evaluation, instead of schools demonstrating the quality of their work in a triennial inspection visit, they now are under the constant gaze of the inspectorate as school managers act as ‘the ever-present inspector within’ (Troman, 1997, p. 363). In the performative school, therefore, leadership becomes inextricably linked with inspection (Ferguson et al., 2000). Where schools’ financial security and teachers’ professional reputations are dependent on their popularity with prospective parents relative to nearby schools, a less than enthusiastic Ofsted report and/or a poor showing in league tables of examination results/attainment data can have devastating results. This virtually guarantees compliance with governmental agenda, with professional judgement (mediated through collegial discussion) undermined by a culture of ‘coercive compliance’ (Graham, 1999).

Finally, performative systems require a ‘market environment’ to enable auditing and inspection to reinforce the power of disciplinary sanctions. Market levers are crucial to the neo-liberal model of governance, and these have been introduced into schools in England and Wales through a series of measures introducing ‘parental choice’ into school admission processes (Ball et al., 1994; Gewitz et al., 1995). In effect, parents have become ‘consumers’, encouraged by government to use the outward manifestations of performativity (schools’ Ofsted reports and ‘attainment league tables’) to inform their choice. Making the funding regime more responsive to admissions at individual school level, parents/carers become consumers free to shop around for a preferred ‘service provider’. This has schools forced into a high stakes marketised environment in which increasing ‘market share’ has become ever more important.

During the performative era, the public and political discourse of education in England has been characterised by paradox. The wider public discourse is dominated by dysfunction; ‘failing schools’, ‘dumbing down’ of the curriculum and examinations and incompetent teachers. Conversely, at a political level, the reforms of recent decades have generally been considered to have been successful both in producing a more effective and efficient teaching workforce, and in delivering
sustained increases in pupil attainment. New teachers are therefore likely to be well aware of the contradictory perceptions of their profession, and this is in turn likely to add further complexity to the ways in which their professional identity develops. This period of revolutionary regulatory and management changes has seen numerous studies of school cultures and of teacher identity, and so this paper, rather than revisit familiar ground, summarises the main themes emerging from these as background to this study.

**The performative teacher?**

Some of these (Woods & Jeffrey, 2002; Goodson, 2003) have viewed identity through the lens of modernity (Giddens, 1991), exploring Bauman’s notion of ‘fractured-contested’ social identities, with individuals adopting multiple identities in different aspects of their lives (Bauman, 2004). A recurring theme of many of these studies has been the disempowering impact of the dissonance between the demands of the ‘new managerialism’ and traditional notions of professional autonomy (Bottery & Wright, 2000; Day et al., 2006).

Some studies have argued that the changes in school leadership culture (from ‘hierarchical’ to ‘distributive’) have revealed the potential for ‘professional empowerment’ through school improvement - led not by top-down initiatives but by collegial professionalism (Gronn, 2000; Coles & Southworth, 2005). However, this view of teacher professionalism in the performative era is outweighed by the significant body of literature taking a less optimistic view, focusing on the erosion of autonomy and exploring the notion of a technicist model of ‘incorporated professionalism’ (Troman, 1996; Day et al., 2006). From this perspective, the justifiable political and public pressure for accountability has led to concern that teachers have become increasingly de-professionalized and compliant in their delivery of state-imposed initiatives, be they curriculum ‘innovations’, new forms of school management or standardised testing programmes (Hatcher, 1994). Similar issues can be seen emerging from studies of reforms of teacher education (Barton et al., 1994).
A third strand of literature has emerged in the last decade looking beyond this dichotomous interpretation of the rise of performativity, arguing that the managerial discourse of incorporated professionalism can be effectively challenged by a professional ‘democratic discourse’ (Sachs, 2003, p. 134-135) Sachs and others (e.g. Avis, 2005) explore the potential for a resistant or ‘transformative’ profession able to balance the needs of public accountability with professional autonomy. Sachs’ model of the ‘activist identity’, countering/subverting the forces of managerialism through collegiality and collectivism has been particularly influential; she sets out what is effectively a manifesto for transformative professionalism, a ‘call to action’ to “…harness the various intellectual, social and political resources” of teachers to “frame future agendas for schooling and education” (p. 154). Collegiality and collaboration has been widely viewed as crucial to the maintenance of core professional values and practices in managerialist institutions (McLaughlin, 1994; Clement & Vandenberghhe, 2000). These alternative readings of the future of professionalism in the performative age; the ‘empowered’, the ‘incorporated’ and the ‘activist’, provide a lens through which this study of a small group of early career teachers views their perceptions of professionalism.

This study explores the views of a small group of teachers in their first year of teaching, regarding their developing sense of being a teacher in the context of the changing regulatory framework, their feelings about job satisfaction, their perceived level of autonomy and their response to the introduction of *Professional Standards for Teachers*. Whilst this is not a new area of study, it is a particularly apposite time to look at this process, not only because of the performative agenda outlined above, but because we are now seeing a generation of newcomers to the profession who (given that most people enter the profession in their early to mid-twenties), are increasingly likely to be themselves the product of the performative school era. As noted earlier, some studies have noted the limitations and contradictions of formalised ‘competence benchmarking’ of professionalism (Harrison, 2007, McNally *et al.*, 2008).

A 25 year-old at the time of this study (the average age of the teachers taking part) would have started school around the time of the introduction of National Curriculum in England (1989), so spending their entire schooling within a school system
undergoing profound and ongoing reform. They will have seen numerous curricular requirements, guidance, strategies and initiatives introduced and implemented, they will have been taught by teachers whose performance in that role was managed in fundamentally different ways – and they would almost certainly have been in schools through a number of Ofsted inspections (an experience reported by many as having a significant impact on pupils as well as teachers (Jeffrey & Woods, 1997; Mansell, 2007).

Although many teachers enter the profession later in life, meaning that new entrants with experience of ‘pre-performative’ schooling will continue to enter the profession for some time, these will become an increasingly rare sight. Furthermore, all new entrants to the profession now undertake their initial teacher training in a highly performative environment, and this study, therefore, was designed to give an insight into the process of professional identity formation for a new generation of teachers, themselves entirely educated in a performative era. In particular, it was intended to look for evidence of the likely path being taken by this new generation; whether they showed the characteristics of ‘empowered professionals’ embracing the performative culture, of compliant, ‘incorporated professionals’ delivering the agenda of the day or of resistant, ‘activist professionals’ acting collegially as agents for change. In order to contextualise this further, it is first necessary to consider the possible impact of the mechanisms in place for assessing the professionalism of teachers.

The assessment of teachers: Professional Standards for Teachers

The Professional Standards for Teachers (TDA, 2007), replacing and extending the Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), set out expectations in relation to professional attributes, knowledge/understanding and skills at each of the following five career stages:

- **QTS** (entry to the profession);
- **Core** (the first year of teaching);
- **Post-threshold** (transfer to an upper pay scale, normally after five years teaching);
- **Excellent teacher** (defined by ability to improve school effectiveness);
• *Advanced skills teacher* (required to contribute to school improvement in schools additional to their own).

Of these, *QTS* and *Core* are minimum requirements, *Post-threshold* a ‘normal progression’ for most teachers, whilst the final two stages are advancement only for particularly skilled teachers.

The detailed content of *Professional Standards* raises a number of interesting issues, although it’s most significant impact is through the establishment of a career-long process of assessing professionalism. Previous frameworks assessed professional competence at the point of entry with a complementary set of Induction Standards to determine whether they had successfully negotiated the ‘rite of passage’, their first year of teaching. Beyond this, assessment of competence was restricted to performance management determining either promotion or to rectify unsatisfactory/incompetent teaching. *Professional Standards* not only sets regular career ‘assessment points’ at which teachers are expected to have ‘gone beyond’ the level achieved at entry, but encroach into more complex aspects of professionalism. It is the attempt to quantify (and assess against) indicators of ‘professional attributes’ that appears likely to impact most directly on notions of professional identity. Professional Standards attempt to define not simply what a teacher *does*, but what/who a teacher *is*, to provide a framework for assessing not just their skills, competency, knowledge, but their values and attitudes. This echoes Helsby’s (1995) distinction between ‘being professional’ and ‘being a professional’.

The performative agenda is apparent in *Professional Standards*, with teachers at every stage of their career now expected to demonstrate (and provide evidence) that they “…have a creative and constructively critical approach towards innovation” and are prepared to “…adapt their practice where benefits and improvements are identified” (TDA, 2007). Accompanying guidance refers to “improving their effectiveness through critically evaluated ideas and approaches” and to “sharing and adapting effective practice.” This begs some very obvious questions; whose critical evaluation?; what is meant by ‘effective practice’? There is no acknowledgement of the contested nature of evidence-based professional knowledge and practice, leaving this susceptible to the well-documented normalizing impact of performative policies on practice (Ball, 1993; Ingersoll, 2003). In the performative management culture,
such subjectivity provides the means for ensuring compliance, where teacher competence is demonstrated by willingness to adopt the premise and practice of government initiatives.

This narrow definition of professional development, as essentially a mechanism for delivering a ‘reform and standards’, conflicts with the notion of teachers as autonomous agents operating within communities of practice to self-define and construct professionalism. Evans (2008) argues that meaningful professional development can only be realised through ‘enacted’ professionalism, the internalised reflections and practices of teachers (p29). She goes on to conceptualise externally-imposed models of teacher development as focusing on functional development rather than attitudinal development, and so emphasising ‘change features’ that are procedural/productive rather than intellectual/motivational (p 31).

Evans was writing more broadly about reforming teacher professionalism whilst highlighting the impact of performance management of teachers. The introduction of Professional Standards can clearly be seen as a further extension of the performativity culture into performance management, and so this study makes a timely contribution to exploring the possible impact of these on teachers’ professional identity.

**Research design**

In ideal circumstances, researching into the complexities of teachers’ professional identity formation would require both a larger cohort drawn from a representative selection of early career teachers. The sampling would need to be representative of the wide age range of entrants to the profession, of different phases teaching in (primary/secondary) and of different training routes (undergraduate/postgraduate, university/school-based). The research design could also have been strengthened by adding a comparative sample of experienced teachers (to explore their first interactions with career-long assessment of professional attributes and competence).

Resourcing constraints limited the scale of this study and necessitated a focus on the graduates of the university’s own Primary PGCE (one year postgraduate initial teacher education programme), as well as meaning that one-to-one, semi-structured
interviews were the most effective strategy for producing worthwhile data. As a piece of ‘opportunistic’ research, designed to capture the perceptions of a small cohort of new teachers at this particular period of educational reform, it was not designed with any attempt to claim generalizability, but to explore possible issues worthy of further research.

Of the 96 student teachers graduating in July 2007, 74 were known to be working in teaching posts; these were contacted in writing (in January 2008) and 21 agreed to take part in the study (eventually reduced to 18 participants). Initial interviews were carried out in May/June 2008, as subjects approached the end of their first year of teaching, with some follow-up discussions to clarify issues arising during analysis taking place in September/October 2008. 14 were interviewed at their place of work and 4 by telephone (participant preference). All those taking part were given a clear statement of the scope and purposes of the study and an explicit assurance of confidentiality; they were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage (including up to the point of publication of any outcomes).

Initial interview themes (see table 1) drew largely on the wealth of literature on teacher identity and performativity reviewed above, further informed by the ‘anecdotal insider perceptions’ of the researcher and colleagues, all of whom were closely involved in working with student teachers and teachers in schools involved in the mentoring and induction of newly-qualified teachers (NQTs). A review of the literature strongly suggested that the notions of autonomy and accountability (and the tensions between these) are of central importance in understanding the process of professional identity development. In particular, for early career teachers, the professional learning culture in schools is key in shaping their development as a teacher (Day 1999). The literature reviewed in this paper highlights the impact of the management and regulatory reforms on school cultures, leading to the decision to focus in interviews on issues around autonomy and accountability as well as more general impressions of the transition from student teacher to teacher.

Interview schedules, therefore, included exploration of:

- perceptions of the transition from ‘student’ to ‘teacher’;
- their motivation and source of ‘job satisfaction’;
their understanding of the wider professional context, in particular, balancing accountability with professional autonomy;

- career aspirations.

Insert table 1 here

Discursive responses were encouraged to some questions, and in many cases questions were restated in a number of different ways so as to elicit a more detailed understanding of the interviewees’ thoughts; this also led to pursuing particular questions in a dialogic way to deepen understanding. This flexible approach (perhaps stretching the boundaries of ‘semi-structured’ to their limits) meant that interviews varied significantly in length, with the shortest lasting around 45 minutes, the longest close to two hours.

There is an inevitable concern about a research design as this, in that there is a clear danger of the interview process being tailored to produce outcomes in support of an existing hypothesis, albeit a tentative one. Building robustness into both the collection and the analysis of interview data therefore presented a number of challenges. The process of coding data began as early as possible, and continued during the interviews to enable codes to be revised where necessary, with a repeated return to early interviews to test out emerging patterns. Once all interviews were completed the coded data was then re-analysed to identify emerging themes. In this case, in order to increase the robustness of this ‘single researcher’ analysis, at several points during the data collection and analysis process, a number of participants were contacted to clarify particular points, and to comment on interpretations of the original interviews, and an academic colleague with no direct involvement with the PGCE programme generously agreed to undertake an independent audit of the data to check.

The starting point of this study was a focus on the first ‘performative generation’, suggesting a tentative hypothesis predicting higher levels of compliance and a narrow, functional concept of professionalism. Ensuring data analysis tests this ‘hidden hypothesis’ rather than being led by it is a challenge, particularly for the lone
researcher (Morse, 1994). However, although the validity checks outlined above do not entirely offset this challenge, they make a significant contribution to refining the themes emerging from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The difficulty of researcher voice/objectivity should also be acknowledged (Kvale, 1996); the researcher had taught on the PGCE programme from which the teachers had graduated, and clearly the existence of previous professional relationship (exacerbated by power/status differential), could have had a significant impact. During the coding of data from the first batch of interviews, it was decided that it would be too difficult to untangle the influence of this relationship, and was subsequently only coded where it appears to corroborate subjects’ views on wider issues. Later interviews concentrated on post-qualification experiences, only returning to discuss the PGCE experience when raised directly by interviewees.

By the end of this data collection, analysis and checking cycle, a set of broad themes had emerged (see table 2) that together suggest a complex, nuanced view of identity in a performative profession. It echoes many of the findings of previous research into teacher identity, but is perhaps more capable of adaptation to the demands of external regulation and accountability than generally thought to be the case. The tensions between accountability and autonomy are acknowledged, but are accommodated rather than creating irreconcilable conflicts, and the teachers do not appear to share the characteristics of the compliant ‘incorporated professionals’, or those of Sachs’ ‘activist professionals’.

Insert table 2 here

Findings

Job satisfaction: ‘psychic rewards’ v career development?

Perhaps not surprisingly, the teachers without exception felt that the most satisfying aspect of their work were in their relationships with pupils, and the positive impact they had made on their intellectual and emotional development.
It’s the ‘wow’ moments, when you see a spark of something and think, I made that happen, it’s the best feeling in the world! (G)

I came into teaching to make a difference…it sounds corny but it still gives me an incredible buzz when I see kids suddenly get something. (B)

When they’ve had a good day, I’ve had a good day, simple as that. When a mum says they’re really loving school now, he can’t wait for Monday morning….I think I’ve got the best job in the world at that moment! (N)

Many referred to moments of inspiration from their own schooling that had a significant impact on them. Not all had led to a longstanding desire to become a teacher, with the recollection often coming during their own early teaching experiences.

These responses should, of course, be seen with a cautionary eye. The professional culture (and public discourse) so strongly promotes the relational aspects of teaching as being central to the job, it would be hard for any teacher, particularly one new to the profession, to put forward a contrary view. However, it was striking that these new teachers were so enthusiastic in their responses, with almost all recounted the idealistic notions of ‘making a difference’ and ‘changing pupils’ lives’ held when beginning their training. For the most part these preconceptions accurately anticipated the ‘psychic rewards’ of pupil progress as becoming crucial aspects of their professional life. However, although these rewards were very apparent, they did not feature as strongly as most would have preferred, with a small minority (two/three participants) signalling their disillusion explicitly.

To be honest, it’s been tough….there’s been some highs, like, when a child who’s been struggling makes a breakthrough, and that reminds me why I wanted to be a teacher, but, I’ve not had many moments like that. Not enough to make it worthwhile…it’s 1% highs and 99% grinding away getting nowhere. (B)
I suppose I was a bit naïve really…I thought it would all be wonderful and enjoying being with the children. Of course the reality is that you only get glimpses of that, in between the meaningless bureaucracy. (C)

More commonly, the teachers were comfortable with a shift in their focus, with personal career development goals seen as being as important as the rewards through interactions with pupils.

It’s more about me now. I used to think teaching was what you can do for kids but now I think about myself developing…where my career’s going. (N)

I’ve definitely become more focused, looking forward more. I used to be really idealistic about teaching, but…now I realise that actually I just have to think about where I am going, career-wise, what I need to do to get on. (G)

Becoming a teacher involves engaging with a complex, and sometimes conflicting, range of processes, including socialisation into the professional culture of teachers (Hargreaves 2000). For some of these teachers there was a sense that this professional culture emphasised teaching as a vocation where professional ambition was viewed as ‘a distraction’. M said she still felt uncomfortable about expressing long-term professional aspirations amongst her colleagues. She talked opening of these with another NQT working in her school where they discussed, but noted that she would not have the same conversation in the staffroom. Furthermore, she had not discussed her ambitions with her induction mentor in school, feeling that it would “seem a bit pushy, a bit arrogant”.

Even the overtly ambitious teachers, such as D, were very clear that they did not want this to be at the expense of ‘losing touch with the classroom’. This created a very strong sense that the ‘real work of teaching’ is the face-to-face interaction with pupils. Many of the teachers accepted that they would one day consider a management role, they qualified this with a concern about ‘losing touch’ with children.

I wouldn’t be satisfied as a class teacher for everyone. I have a 5 year plan mapped out….I’d never want to be a head in a big school, though. I can’t understand why someone who’s been a teacher…can take on a job that takes
them away from kids. The younger teachers here all seem to be very focused on
where exactly they are going in teaching, but, equally, everyone feels torn
between ticking off those career developments, and doing what’s best for the
kids. (D)

I love being a teacher, and at the moment can’t imagine myself as anything
doing anything else. I look at my head and think, why is doing that job? She’s
just a manager, never sees a child from one day to the next…I can’t see me
doing that. But it seems to be the only way to get on in teaching…if you’re any
good, you have to stop doing what you’re good at to get on. (H)

D and H articulate the tensions apparent in the relationship between the psychic
rewards of teachers and the more explicit rewards of career development in the
performative profession. For others, every aspect of their work is drawn into the
process of ‘formalised professional practice and values’, leading to a degree of
ambivalence.

When my head asked me to do an after-school club I didn’t hesitate…I don’t
think there’s any direct pressure, but everyone is expected to run a club.
Ironically it was only afterwards, when the Head said ‘I’m glad you’ve taken
this on…it will be good for you’…it made me think, what if I’d said no? (J)

I’ve always done clubs in school…I think it’s really important, you get to relate
very differently to children….I’ve come to resent it a bit now, though, because
it seems like it’s expected and you’d get a real black mark against you if you
didn’t. (G)

This ambivalence illustrates the challenge for new teachers. They are drawn into a
teaching through a commitment to ‘contribute to the common good’ in return for
‘psychic rewards’, yet finding themselves entering an institutional culture of career
progression through managerial incentives.

**Becoming a teacher (‘being’ a teacher, ‘doing’ teaching)**
When asked about ‘turning points’ in their professional induction that significantly changed their sense of professional identity, the teachers gave very mixed responses. Although many could readily identify a single incident that triggered a realisation that “I am a teacher now”, for others it was a more gradual process.

It was when the Ed Psych…[Educational Psychologist]…came in for an assessment, and she didn’t even realise I was an NQT, she just talked to me as an equal, a proper professional. I hadn’t realised, but, until then I’d always felt like the junior, like a student on practice who was somehow winging it. I walked out feeling 10 feet high! (N)

A couple of times parents came in, they called me Mr…………, the first time it felt strange, but after that, I started to feel that this label fits now. I feel comfortable being a teacher…at first I was busy doing teaching, but that’s different from being a teacher. (J)

J’s distinction between ‘doing teaching’ and ‘being a teacher’ is a notion that recurred throughout the interviews, with a clear sense of a separation between the ‘craft skills’ of the professional and the professional persona. It also recalls the distinction found by Helsby (1995) between ‘being professional’ and ‘being a professional’. However, although Professional Standards acknowledges the importance of being a teacher by distinguishing between ‘professional attributes’ and ‘skills, knowledge and understanding’, the distinction does not appear to resonate with these teachers.

It’s the bit that no-one ever teaches you, about how you grow into being a teacher. On the PGCE, my Induction Mentor, it all seems a bit mechanistic. Maybe you can’t teach it, you just have to grow into it. (J)

You can’t really reduce what it is to be a teacher to a bunch of Standards to tick off. I really resent that, everything I do has to be written down, put in a box. (A)

As with responses regarding motivation, these should be treated with caution. Conceptualising ‘being a teacher’ as indefinable is perhaps ‘intuitive’, whilst also matching the distinction between formalised professional development with ‘enacted’
professional learning (Evans, 2008, Webster-Wright, 2009). It may be a weakness in conduct of this study that this issue was not pursued more rigorously during interviews. If there really is a crucial distinction between ‘being’ and ‘doing’, then surely genuine professional learning must get to the core of the ‘being’? Delineating professional attributes is perhaps an essential task for the reflexive professional.

**The bureaucratic professional (the generational divide?)**

Not surprisingly, perhaps, given the idealistic starting point of the majority of the teachers, when asked about the least rewarding aspect of their job, paperwork was cited by every single teacher interviewed. However, although a minority suggested that their job entailed an unnecessary amount of paperwork, the majority were relatively sanguine. Typically, they saw the large amount of record-keeping required as ‘a necessary evil’, something from which they gained little direct satisfaction but that improved their teaching as well as demonstrating accountability.

A popular impression of teachers in the UK is that the ever-increasing burden of bureaucracy is a major cause of discontent, and of teachers leaving the profession. This impression is at least in part supported by research evidence (Smithers & Robinson 2001; Galton & MacBeath, 2008), but this study suggests that a new generation of teachers may have a different perspective.

I’m keeping track of where they need to be at the end of the year, and I know who will be there and who are just on the edge and need a little bit more support….I am very aware of how important the assessment side of it is now. (B)

I have to hold back sometimes when people moan about paperwork…to be honest I think they are hanging on to the past where teachers could get away with murder. I couldn’t do my job without the paperwork. (D)

This ‘relaxed’ view of bureaucratic workload was a recurring theme within this study. The idea that they viewed their work in different ways to more experienced colleagues emerged strongly without any prompting in five of the eighteen interviews.
In the other interviews, prompt questions were presented and all bar two of the teachers broadly supported the view that they (and colleagues still in the first few years of teaching) held very different views about the need for recorded accountability. Of the two exceptions, one was working in the independent fee-paying sector.

This study is too limited in scale and scope to demonstrate a generational shift in professional identity, but given that these new teachers do appear more comfortable with the competing demands and priorities of teaching. Although almost all participants acknowledged the presence of different outlooks of ‘the older generation of teachers’, only one directly referred to the influence of the performative culture of their own schooling (and teacher education).

There is a divide, I think. I grew up with the National Curriculum, I spent all last year meeting Standards and I don’t see why anyone should find that a problem. I don’t have any time for teachers who think they don’t have to keep developing…that’s just unprofessional. (B)

What is not clear from these teachers’ responses is a sense of how they really understand the purpose of their recording and evidencing of their performance. Whilst they were generally confident that it is essential to their development as teachers, they were not generally able to articulate what it is that actually leads to improvement. This may, of course, be another limitation of the research design, but it it suggests an emphasis on evidencing/reporting rather than reflecting on performance. This mechanistic notion of professional development is a familiar feature of the performative profession, so this may be a significant outcome.

**Micro-autonomous spaces (“I can do what I like as long as I hit my targets”)**

Whilst virtually all the teachers (16 out of 18) directly identified constraints on their professional practice, they also considered that they had a very high degree of autonomy. Through discussion around this subject it emerged that the teachers viewed autonomy predominantly at the micro-level of individual interactions with pupils, the detail of lesson planning and with particular approaches to curriculum
delivery. A number went on to give slightly more ‘nuanced’ responses, particularly in relation to the role of middle managers in school (year group leaders, key stage or subject coordinators) in directing their work. B initially seemed very clear that she was largely in control of her daily work, although later in the interview when discussing the management culture of the school she modified this.

You’re left to your own devices in the way you plan and the lessons that you do. It’s down to you as long as everything’s covered over the year …I really feel that there’s someone telling me what to do, watching everything I do. There are at least three layers above me. (B)

In a follow-up discussion, B said identified these three layers as, in order of significance on a day-to-day basis, school managers, parents and government priorities/targets.

The teachers made references throughout to the freedom to ‘teach the way we want to’, but equally frequently qualifying this by pointing out that this freedom was actually quite tightly constrained.

With the management of this school, you’re expected to give them what they want, and they obviously want all the children to progress especially in core subjects. As long as they are, and you’re doing all the paperwork and teaching correctly…you are given freedom to do things if you want to. (G)

We’re very much are into being explicit with the children, saying “You’re a level two on your writing, OK get to level 3. (G)

There is a pressure on results. Our standardised scores averages 110, that’s our target. So instead of looking at children in the 90s, we’re looking at ones that are 108 and 109 and working on those. (M)

I thought I’d be constantly looking over my shoulder waiting for the Head to jump on me….it’s not like that, she lets us get on with it. I can do what I like as long as I meet my targets. (M)
As this ambivalence began to emerge from data, later interviews focused in more depth on attempting to uncover what this sense of freedom, of autonomy, actually meant, and an increasingly sophisticated, nuanced response emerged. Some found it difficult to pin down what the key ‘indicators of autonomy’ were, but maintained that ‘once the classroom door shuts’ they were able to teach with freedom. Others, however, acknowledged the contradiction in this. D actually described her sense of autonomy as ‘an illusion’, suggesting that she was consciously maintaining this.

I know I am pretty much teaching by numbers most of the time, but I really don’t want to think that way…I don’t think I could carry on if I just saw myself as a wage slave. I hear older teachers in the staffroom moaning about having no choice in what they do, and I think, well, get out if you don’t like it! I love being with the children, I love being a teacher, but I don’t think I’d love it so much if I really focused on the fact that I am teaching to order. (D)

The post-performative professional identity?

Whilst the performative culture continues to encroach into all aspects of the work of teachers and the management of schools, debate regarding its impact on teachers’ professional identity will continue. This exploration of the developing professionalism of a small group of new teachers, perhaps inevitably because of its small scale and scope (and the timing, taking place in the first year of a significant change in the regulation of professional practice), provides more questions than answers. However, some themes worthy of further research do emerge.

A recurring theme of recent initiatives in teacher development has been a desire to build a trajectory from initial teacher education that ensures teachers are continually developing as professionals, with an increased emphasis on formally recognised qualifications as well as conventional performance management benchmarks. The introduction for performance-related pay (via ‘threshold assessment’), of career-long Professional Standards and the proposed requirement to complete a Masters degree (likely to be within five years of entry to the profession) are explicitly intended to ensure that there are no ‘flat periods’, that teachers are constantly striving to meet new
benchmarks of professional competence and attributes. A number of writers have argued that the model of professional development being legitimised through formalised study and achievement should be re-envisioned as ‘lifelong professional learning’ (Friedman & Philips 2004, cited in Fraser et al, 2007, p 156; W-Knight, 2009). For these new teachers, however, the functional model of professional development is generally viewed with equanimity, and the accountability demands of senior and middle managers) seen for the most part as key to improving professional practice.

Whilst these responses resonate with another recent study of student teachers’ views regarding the transition to ‘real’ teaching (Barnes, 2008), there was little sense of the alienation reported in research on the working lives of experienced teachers (who therefore had largely been educated themselves before the main wave of performative reforms). These studies reveal a much stronger sense of conflict, with a clear focus on the negative impact of reform on teachers’ professional identity, leading to accounts of spoilt identities” and “teacherhood in crisis” (MacLure, 1993, p. 318), of “extreme uncertainty and identity crises” (Day et al., 2005, p. 565) and of ‘a profession under siege’ (Leaton Gray, 2005, p. 3).

However, there is little evidence that these teachers are markedly instrumentalist, rejecting a traditional professional identity in favour of the ‘entrepreneurial-competitive' identity envisioned in the performative era by Bernstein (1996). They are very aware of the need for continuing professional advancement, that ‘standing still’ is not an option, and most were already thinking about the possible direction they would like to take (at least in the medium term). However, despite their generally positive view of the managerial culture of teaching, they expressed reluctance about taking on management roles themselves. Even those who described themselves as ‘conventionally ambitious’ viewed this move away from the classroom as undermining their motivation for teaching. The durability of their idealism is striking, as is the primacy of the psychic rewards of teaching (Lortie, 1975; Troman, 2007). Many other researchers (e.g. Nias, 1989) have found this to be the case; Kitching et al. (2009) refer to Affect Trigger Incidents, the ‘little moments’ of student achievement/engagement that foster positivity and resilience for teachers (p53). It may be this perspective will be affected by longer immersion in a profession
seemingly characterised by a culture of conflict between ‘techno-bureaucratic managerialism’ (Apple, 2000) and traditional professional values focusing on the affective domain.

Also clear from this study is the ease with which these teachers were able to hold on to their sense of autonomy whilst accepting (and generally welcoming) an intensive regime of accountability to both internal and external managerialism. Whilst some acknowledged the tensions, they were appeared comfortable about the impact on their sense of professionalism. This appears to contrast with the majority of research into teachers’ lives in recent decades, which reflect on the impact of the reduction in the professional autonomy of teachers (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996; Ball, 2000; Woods & Jeffrey, 2002). Whilst some researchers suggest that teachers’ professional culture is highly resistant, with adaptive forms of professionalism emerging in response to the demands of performativity (Sachs, 2003), the prevailing view can be characterised as a ‘conflict’ model, the ‘teacher under siege’ (Leaton Gray, 2006).

These teachers’ responses say much about the complexities of professional identities in the performative school system. In particular, their focus on the ‘micro-autonomy’ of the classroom is fascinating. One interpretation could be that they are ‘in denial’; prisoners of a Foucauldian panopticon unaware of their invisible gaoler. A significant strand of critical analysis of performativity in education has used this Foucauldian approach as a theoretical model. For Stephen Ball, they may simply be revealing the ‘inauthenticity of performativity’ (2003, p. 218) that creates “the illusion of freedom through a devolved environment” (p. 217). Others would argue that this underestimates their ability to rationalise their position in complex institutional cultures, for teachers have long been recognised for their capacity for subversion, their refusal to “…collude with the victim mentality which relinquishes initiative, self-belief and a sense of agency” (MacBeath & Galton 2008, p115).

It was clear that these teachers, after less than one year of teaching, felt that they had established themselves in the profession and come to terms with what it meant to ‘be a teacher’ - as opposed to simply ‘doing teaching’. In doing so, they are beginning to articulate a notion of professionalism not entirely consistent with that of more experienced colleagues. They provide some evidence of an emerging divide,
particularly in response to the performative aspects of teachers’ work. Not only do they report some differences in colleagues’ perceptions of the needs of accountability, but the generally sanguine response of this cohort is in marked contrast to views reported elsewhere from the profession as a whole.

What this study cannot do, of course, is draw conclusions over whether this will be a long-lasting cohort effect of this generation of teachers. In effect, the question to be posed next is; what model of professionalism will these teachers adopt? Will they become empowered professionals continually pushing forward a neo-liberal ‘school improvement’ agenda, as envisaged by the government (Coles & Southworth, 2005)? Will they become de-professionalized and demoralized ‘techno-bureaucrats’ suggested by Apple (2000) and Ball (2003), the incorporated professionals (Hatcher, 1994, Troman, 1996)? Or will they be drawn towards a ‘collegially resistant’ professionalism, to become the activist professionals described by Sachs (2000, 2003) and Avis (2005)?

This study is clearly limited in scope and scale, and so cannot provide a definitive answer to this question. However, it is timely because it captures the perceptions of a small sample of the first generation of teachers to enter the profession having spent their entire educational career in an increasingly performatized school (and higher education) system; they are the first ‘post-performative teachers’.

Findings point to the possibility of a subtly different notion of professionalism developing that does not fit neatly into any of the three models outlined here. They are clearly not incorporated professionals, compliantly delivering a succession of top-down initiatives and subjecting themselves, as Ball might suggest, to ‘self-policing’ through the technologies of performativity, living “an existence of calculation” (2003, p217). The spaces in which they can assert autonomy of practice are not a Foucauldian illusion, since they seem well aware of the limited scope of their autonomy.

Neither, however, do they provide evidence of developing into the activist professionals envisaged by Sachs, who argues that the activist professional does not simply operate within micro-autonomous spaces as these teachers are, but create new
spaces (Sachs 2000). For Sachs, being a teacher is essentially a generative political endeavour, generating ‘new cultures’ through collective/collegial discourses (p. 93). It may be that this post-performative generation will develop into ‘activist professionals’, but their life history suggest this would be a counter-intuitive development. The Sach’s model of activist professionalism directly conflicts with the managerial professional discourse; these teachers perhaps have more in common with the model of the empowered professional. They fully embrace the accountability culture of teaching less from a sense of democratic duty as public servants than simply that it is effective. They have little patience for those amongst their experienced colleagues who they see as resistant to change, and are generally comfortable with the wider framework of performative management cultures – so long as they continue to enjoy the ‘micro-autonomy’ of the classroom. If a picture is starting to emerge of this new generation of teachers, it is of a rather traditional model of professionalism viewed through a ‘post-performative’ perspective.

For these teachers, whilst the demands from senior and middle managers in schools that they continually demonstrate the effectiveness and impact of their teaching might produce pressure to perform, it does not significantly conflict with their professional identity. This may be because, for the post-performative teacher, the ‘improvement agenda’, the remorseless focus on increasing the quality of teaching and learning and the standards of attainment by pupils, is a given. It has increasingly dominated their own schooling and so it is perhaps not be surprising to see their relaxed approach to balancing accountability with autonomy.

The future of post-performative teaching?

The context for this study was the introduction of Professional Standards in 2007, but the educational landscape has changed significantly since it was carried out. The government intention to make teaching a Masters level profession was been announced in November 2007 (DCSF 2007), and at the time of writing new teachers in some parts of England are studying for a government-funded Masters in Teaching and Learning (MTL). Whilst the development has met with a broadly positive response from teacher educators (Universities’ Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET), 2008), it is too early to judge whether this will bring similar changes to the
profession to the move forty years ago to a graduate profession, or whether its centralised prescription will lead to a further intensification of the performative culture. Early consultation meetings revealed the possibility of the requirements for ‘post-threshold’ Professional Standards, to be met after five years of teaching, being directly aligned with MTL requirements. This could prove to have an even more significant impact on teacher professionalism, entrenching professional development as an arm of performance management (as well as creating potential for conflict with the academic quality concerns of the universities awarding MTL) The election of a new government in early 2010 has clearly added to the uncertainty surrounding complicated the situation still further. Although the new government has given cautiously worded support for the MTL initiative, it has also raised the possibility of fundamental reform of teacher education. Despite the uncertainty over the possible direction of future policy, it is hard to envisage any scaling back in the performativity culture in education, and so the need for further research remains.

In particular, if the MTL initiative is to be continued, it may have significant implications for at a time of intense pressure on public financing in the UK, it is almost certain that it will continue to be targeted at early career teachers, and require redirecting current funding away from professional development for all teachers. This raises the possibility of a potentially explosive generational divide in the teaching profession as the status of a new generation of post-performative teachers is accelerated at the expense of their more experienced colleagues.

**Tables to be inserted in text**

**Table 1. Initial schedule for semi-structured interviews**

| Perceptions of being a teacher (reflections on changes in perspective since beginning training) |
| Transition from student to teacher (‘critical turning points’) |
| Job satisfaction – positive rewards of teaching |
| Constraints on job satisfaction/frustrations and least rewarding aspects of teaching/anxieties |
| Control over working practices (autonomy/freedom/accountability) |
| Managing the induction process/awareness of new Standards |
| Career planning (future aspirations) |
| New developments in teaching (CPD, Masters level) |
Table 2. Themes emerging from data analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘psychic rewards’ v career development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Becoming a teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘being’ a teacher, ‘doing’ teaching</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The bureaucratic professional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the generational divide?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Micro-autonomous spaces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘I can do what I like as long as I hit my targets’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Short biographical note

Chris Wilkins is a Senior Lecturer in Education and Director of Teacher Education at the University of Leicester.

References


