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Developing understanding through ethnography: Students’ and teachers’ perspectives on schooling in performative times

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Abstract

Discourses of performativity are constructed within educational sites, such as schools, shape the perspectives of participants such as teachers and school students, and gatekeepers to sites, such as head teachers and senior staff, as well as researchers who are taking part in ethnographic studies. Many national governments, often for claimed economic reasons, construct and police schooling and teachers’ work using performative models of ‘techno-bureaucratic managerialism’ (Apple, 2000). In England, central government prescribes for state schools curriculum content, pedagogical approaches, student assessment and the assessment of teachers, all enforced through a punitive school inspection regime (Troman et al., 2007). Discourses of student voice (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004) and a recognition of the contribution students’ perspectives make to constructing successful schools (DCSF, 2008) resonate with wider notions of choice and discipline (DfE, 2010) in education. These discourses influence how participants manage, resist, or perhaps act ambiguously to cope with them while struggling to assert their own values and interests and those of the people with or for whom they (claim to) work. These discourses also shape how researchers in educational settings, whose work is also shaped by these discourses, may design and carry out ethnographic studies on particular sites. This has implications for researchers’ relationships with other participants in a study, as well as for their own careers.

Introduction

Many national governments, often for claimed economic reasons, construct and police schooling and teachers’ work using performative models of ‘techno-bureaucratic managerialism’ (Apple, 2000). In England, central government prescribe for state schools curriculum content, pedagogical approaches, student assessment and the assessment of teachers, all enforced through a punitive school inspection regime (Troman et al., 2007). Discourses of student voice (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004) and a recognition of the contribution students’ perspectives make to constructing successful schools (DfES, 2008) resonate with wider notions of choice and discipline (DfE, 2010) in education to emphasise students’ needs as individual learners, parents’ vested interest in their children’s education, and to try to reduce student disengagement with schooling.

These policy developments have taken place in the context of complex structural changes in the global economy, and the impact of globalization and regionalization at national and European levels (Dale, 2009). Changing global political and economic conditions have had a major impact on developing a common EU outlook, as has EU expansion eastward since 1989 since the collapse of Communism. The last has brought in to EU membership states with different historical ‘social models’, and different economic conditions, democratic structures and traditions of civil society, from those of the founding states of Western Europe’ (Busher et al., 2011).

The power of the state is central to the construction of policy discourses in education and these influence the internal workings of schools. Schools are sites in which national policies and local perspectives are mediated by the boundary activities of their members (Wenger, 1998), especially those in formal leadership roles at several levels, to construct institutionally implementable educational policies and practices (Lupton, 2005) that reflect particular but contested values (Starratt, 2007). The importance of schools and schooling in shaping social constructions, such as society’s views on identity, pluralism and social cohesion, has been increasingly acknowledged by national governments within Europe and by the EU (Dale, 2009).
Education is both a site and a conduit for struggles (Foucault, 1976) through which teachers and students can explore the tensions of being and becoming as they (re)construct their identities (Giddens, 1991; Kearney, 2003) in situational contexts. The pursuit and enactment of self-identity is central to the development of agency (Giddens, 1991) through which people interact with others and with constructed social systems/structures (Giddens, 1984). Consequently these processes are of central importance to students’ and teachers’ development of themselves as learners, community members of a school and citizens. However, schools often restrict democratic participation by students and teachers in shaping institutional practices, but expect them to adhere to policies (Deakin et al., 2004). In part this is because the curriculum is tightly prescribed at national level in England and its implementation is policed by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). School success is defined simplistically in performative terms of certain proportions of students in a particular school achieving particular grades, which places demands on teachers’ work as well as on students. It emphasises corporate (school) productivity that can be evaluated by parents and government agents against other similar schools in school League Tables rather than focusing on individual (student) development, despite policies in English education fostering personalised learning and assessment as a vehicle for learning.

Dominant social discourses in England describe schools as institutions for controlling children and shaping them to become useful adult citizens. Schools are expected to discipline students to fit these norms through careful monitoring of their actions (surveillance) by adults, through regimentation (e.g. school uniform, school bells), through various manoeuvres (school timetables, examinations) and through punishment (detention, exclusion) which is in inscribed on their bodies, at least metaphorically (loss of time in detention, acting in ways prescribed by school rules) (Foucault, 1977, Paechter, 2007). In these processes, sometimes students are to some extent complicit by policing their own actions (Foucault, 1986) often with the encouragement of teachers (e.g. developing a school bullying policy). This reduces the risk of confrontation with students (Lenski, 1986) and helps students to believe they have some part-ownership of school processes.

Contestation of the dominant discourse of schooling is a normal part of the processes of membership of school institutions, not an indicator of pathology in an organisation (Bottery, 2003). The participants in a school include all staff and students and possibly other stakeholders, such as parents, too. Through struggling with national and local discourses on education, people construct their own particular cultures of and within institutions and their identities (voices) in the social, intellectual, emotional and political spaces of society (Bhaba, 1994) or of organisations such as a school. The struggle is particularly expressed through the cultures teachers and students construct collectively to delineate the values and beliefs that underpin their own practices whether in classrooms, subject areas or school generally. The ‘small’ cultures (Holliday, 1999) in classrooms and subject areas stand in tension and collusion with the dominant discourses of a school, incorporating elements of its organisational culture along with teachers’ or students’ own personal and work-related values and their shifting views of preferred practices. As in other institutions, especially those of a disciplinary nature, teachers and others in part control their own actions by monitoring them against the norms embedded in dominant discourses that impinge on their bodies in the way, for example, that they are allowed to use time and space (Foucault, 1977). Further, teachers who have ascribed authority to lead (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) have to sustain a school’s culture to their own subordinates, the students, to maintain order in a less abrasive manner than that of more overt coercion (Lenski, 1986). In schools, teachers are both leaders and led and face the tensions that occupying such ambivalent positions generates.

Teachers’ views of their identities are closely bound up with their social and personal values and interactions with others and from the dispositions of knowledge, skills, values and experiences they
carry with them, their histories (Thomas, 1995) as well as with the policy contexts in which they work (Hall and Noyes, 2009). Teachers’ identities are (re)created through the interactions of their personal, situational and professional experiences (Day et al, 2005). The first is linked to teachers’ lives outside school, with their families and social networks. Their daily work is ‘socially and politically constructed’ (Goodson and Numan, 2002, 272) in particular locations from the values and experiences they share with others in multiple communities (Wenger, 1998) and the influences of the dominant cultural and political discourses they encounter (Giddens, 1991). These are mediated by a teacher’s location in a specific school that is influenced by local conditions (e.g. socio-economic status of a school’s catchment area, school links with parents), quality of leadership (use of power) and the support they are given. The last includes the way that it is implemented by the Principal or other senior staff (Day et al., 2006a) and how feedback is given to teachers on their practices. Successful teaching seems to require positive support from school institutions both culturally and with resources (Bubb and Earley, 2010) to allow teachers to fully use their professional knowledge and skills (Day et al, 2006b). The broader cultural and policy discourses includes those of the state (Reay, 1998) which transit the semi-permeable boundaries of their institutions, as Riley et al., (2000) point out, and infiltrate their personal lives.

Democratic participation of students can be fostered through institutional structures such as a school council, but school councils are often dominated by the agenda of senior staff (Fielding, 2004). Pupil consultation can lead to a transformation of teacher-pupil relationships, to significant improvements in teachers’ practices, and to pupils having a sense of themselves as members of a community of learners (Ruddock and McIntyre, 2007). Further, Sebba and Robinson (2011) argue that children, under the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, have rights to take part in decision making about their own lives, and that their involvement helps to create a culture of respect in schools. However, some authors have raised doubts about the authenticity of student ‘consultation’, considering that sometimes it may be tokenistic (Byrom et al., 2007) because staff are reluctant to engage with the heterogeneity of pupil voice (Arnot and Reay, 2007) and are unwilling to listen to some students’ voices if they do not construct their views in ways expected of them by staff (McIntyre, et al., 2005) since adults control the metaphorical ‘territory’ of the child/student even though students have particular (legitimate) agendas (Hoyle, 1981, Busher, 2007) but are often only able to assert these in school through resistance or rule breaking.

There are clear advantages, too, for teachers of listening and talking to students about their perspectives on teaching and learning (Rudduck, 2004, Demetriou and Wilson, 2010). Students are experienced participant observers of teachers, teaching and schools (Riley and Rustique-Forrester, 2002). Many are able to articulate clearly what they consider to be effective and ineffective teaching and support for students, views that chime closely with the literature on effective teaching (Wragg et al., 2000). It can help teachers to improve teaching and the support of learning in their classrooms (McIntyre, et al., 2005) and meet the needs of all their students. Student voice can also contribute to the effective management of schools to meet students’ educational needs, especially when schools work in economically and socially disadvantaged areas (Mujis et al., 2005).

This paper considers students’ and teachers’ awareness of the contradictions of policy, power and voice and of the official and unofficial discourses in a school, which Paechter (2007) argues reflect the interactions of agency and structure in particular policy contexts, and the influence of these on their constructions of their work-place identities and their school’s organisational culture (Busher, 2006). It argues that even though English government investment in education in the mid-noughties possibly raised academic achievement in narrowly instrumental terms, it did so at a cost of disempowering many of the actors in schools, generating a sense of alienation and disengagement for some, teachers and students, from nationally sponsored performative discourses.
Methodology

The study was carried out in a multi-ethnic Secondary school in a largely economically deprived area of a Midlands English city. It set out to elicit the views of some students and teachers in the particular contexts of a school, which were investigated through the views of senior staff and school policy documents, about what it meant to be a participant in a school, especially for engaged and disaffected students, two categories that during the course of the study seemed to lack substance, since students said by teachers to be disaffected in one class were said by other teachers to be engaged in another. It used ethnography to investigate asymmetrical relationships between people (students, teachers) and senior staff in institutions and flows of power between people in situations in a case study that was bounded in time (2007-2009) and space (one school, one year group of students and their teachers in the school). Students’ and teachers’ views were triangulated with the official discourse of the school and with our own observations of classes and school life as we visited and worked with our participants in the school. Triangulation strengthened the credibility of a study by cross-referencing different perspectives on the social situation being studied (Flick, 2009).

Three groups of 12 students from Y9 (36 students in all), studying English and Citizenship, were selected, of whom 18 were to be defined by their teachers as ‘engaged’ and 18 as ‘disaffected’. To construct the groups of students, their class teachers were to be asked to select those whom they thought were strongly engaged or disaffected, using indicators such as: attendance, punctuality, homework, participation in curricular and extra-curricular events, alignment with goals and aims of the school, and performance in line with expectation. To locate the students in one of their normal learning communities, 12 were to be selected from a top set in English, 12 from a bottom set and 12 from a mixed-ability tutor group (defined as a Citizenship teaching group). The 12 in each class were to be found by teachers selecting six students who were either engaged or disaffected from school, according to criteria derived from school documents. At the suggestion of one of the teachers from the school we also included a group of students with special learning needs (SLN).

Investigating students’ views of their experiences of schooling can be seen as similar to investigating the perspectives of people who are or have been deprived of access to power in formal decision-making processes, effectively silencing their voices and denying their values except when they turn to resistance (Bourdieu, 1998), a form of asserting power. Research methodologies for these circumstances try to construct research through the standpoints of indigenous peoples as well as enabling their voices and values to be heard (Spivak in Morton, 2003). This approach seems applicable to school students, who inhabit the metaphorical ‘territory’ of the child but are ruled over by adults who impose their norms and values, arguably a form of colonisation.

The study drew on the work of Thomson and Gunter (2005), who worked with a small group of students as consultants to develop a ‘students-eye’ set of evaluative categories and questions, and Riley and Rustique-Forrester (2002), who asked young people to use visual methods to represent their views of their life in school. We asked participants to take photographs to illustrate this, then make them into scrapbooks and talk with us about them. Visual ethnography is a well-recognised group of methods (Prosser, 2009) for capturing participants’ views of their experiences. Photo-records can communicate the feeling or suggest the emotion imparted by activities, environments, and interactions with people and provide some tangible evidence of these (Prosser, 2006). Photo-records, like other visual displays, also embody the values and beliefs their makers hold (Howells, 2003). Interviews based on such representations can help elicit people’s views of schooling (Croghan et al., 2008). Visual and interview data was analysed qualitatively and quantitatively as Wall and Higgins (2009) suggested it might be. The qualitative analysis used open coding (Flick, 2009) to
construct patterns of perceptions among students and teachers. The quantitative analysis merely counted what artefacts appeared in the photographs taken by students and teachers (Bush and Cremin, 2009). Instead of counting the objects and location of objects students placed within each photograph, as Prosser (2009) suggested researchers might do, we counted how many times particular objects appeared as the main focus of each photograph taken by the student participants in the study, as Wall & Higgins (2009) did – see Table 1 below. Although this content analysis could not answer questions about why participants had made their choices of objects, it did provide a mute testimony to what students appeared to think was important in their relationships with the school as an institution and with the people with whom they worked in it (part of their brief for taking photographs as a visual record of their experiences of school). It gave us an indication of what aspects of schooling the 36 students thought were more or less important in their school lives, something we followed up in more detail with 17 of them through interviews based on their scrapbooks (see below).

Table 1: Extract from the content analysis of student photographs in the scrapbooks

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<tr>
<td>Male peers</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female peers</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males (N)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females (N)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other staff</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classrooms</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching Block</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>Year base</td>
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Having gained access to the school, late in the Autumn term, after interviewing senior staff and collecting school policy documents on inclusion and discipline, the academic researchers trained the selected students in a series of lessons to carry out visual research ethically, including constructing a story board using photographs to show themselves in school and to think about their identities in school. During one of the lessons just before Christmas they took photographs round the school showing their relationship in it and with it. These tasks were closely related to elements of the National Curriculum in English and Citizenship which these students had to study. The students were trained in the ethics of visual methods since taking any pictures around a school could involve, intentionally or unintentionally, capturing images of people. The actions of students as researchers using photography is potentially ethically problematic (Allan and Cullen, 2008) and raises questions
about what documents might be ethically used and what might constitute informed consent amongst young people.

The scrapbooks (storyboards) were constructed during three lessons in January 2008, supervised by the teachers and academic researchers, and became the property of the students as they were told when they took the photographs for them. They were used as the basis of reflexive interviews with 17 students drawn from across the four classes (including the SLN group) with the research team in the Spring 2008 and with three of the teachers who taught the students in the Summer 2008. Prosser (2009) describes this as photo-elicitation. As Pink (2001) points out, what is often conveyed in images is not the objects that are seen but the meanings they represent. These can only be gleaned by talking with the creators of the images about them and their intentions when constructing them.

These reflexive interviews were intended to encourage participants to explain their taken for granted intentions and ideas (James and Busher, 2006) rather than be introspective stimulated recall interviews to explore participants inner cognitive processes (Lyle, 2003). They aimed to explore participants’ values and perspectives when thinking about their relationships with other people in school and with the school as institution, similar in manner to the way in which James and Busher (2009) used email based interviews to explore the views of professional workers about their experiences in different academic work settings. It assumes that research cannot be value free, i.e. is inevitably subjective (Greenbank, 2003), so it becomes important to understand the values carried by participants when trying to make sense of their understandings of situations if the outcomes of research are to be credible (James and Busher, 2009).

A final data collection phase of the project also used the student photographs to construct group posters in the July 2008 to try to interrogate students’ group views to see if these differed noticeably from students’ individual perspectives. Focus groups and group interviews are often used to investigate group perspectives on social situations and how these differ from individual perspectives on the same situations (Flick, 2009). Visual methods can be used in a similar manner. Patience (2007) used a participatory group video to allow a group of low-achievers in a Secondary school to gain self-esteem in their academic capacity. At this time, too, the English and Citizenship teachers, in whose classes we worked, asked to carry out a similar process to that of the students. After taking their photographs of significant sites and other people for them in the school, the teachers were interviewed in the same manner as the students.

The lived experience of the research was more fraught than this apparently smooth narrative suggests, in part due to the pressures of performativity that invaded the school, and is discussed below. However, anecdotal evidence from teachers and students suggests the students welcomed this study and saw themselves benefitting from it. This and the development of knowledge related to the formal curriculum of the school helped to give benefit to the students taking part in the research as Pink (2001) suggested research should do to be ethical.

Findings

The findings from this study help to develop an understanding of how discourses of performativity enshrined in English central government education policy 2007-2008 affected the cultures of schools and classrooms and the practices of individual teachers and students, whether or not the practices were directly linked to public examinations or the subject curriculum. The discourses of
performativity appear to have permeated every aspect of school life and the relationships of participants in it through influencing the culture of the school and the values enshrined in it because of the importance ascribed to those discourses by key players in the school. Firstly, this section investigates teachers’ and students perspectives of how national and local policy contexts pervaded their learning opportunities in school. Then it considers how these discourses played out in the internal policy processes of the school and how teachers and students responded to and coped with them to try to maintain their own agenda. The initials after quotations indicate which participants, staff or student, produced which perspective, but the initials are fictitious.

The impact of performative discourses on participants in a school

**Central government policy**

Teachers thought education policy discourses strongly shaped their work and constrained their relationships with students (pupils).

> It’s the idea of you have to get this exam. Pressure it put on the [students] and they switch off (Staff PH)

National Curriculum structures were transmitted through its examination processes, the Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) which students had to take and pass at certain levels in particular Core subjects at the end of Key Stage Two (when they were 11 years old) and Key Stage Three (when they were 14 years old), and the school leaving examinations (GCSEs) which all students were required to take when they were about 16 years old.

> Part of the way that the school is judged is by the percentage of kids getting three A to A* [at] GCSE. We were appallingly low at this (Staff CS)

Schools were expected to gain certain percentages of children passing examinations (GCSE) or achieving particular attainment levels in the SATs, as well as many other targets, if they were to be deemed effective by OFSTED. The school in this study was not deemed effective.

> the government says 639 or 638 schools are failing. We are on that list. Most teachers in the school think that we are successful but we realise that the standards that we achieved in OFSTED on the national scale, aren’t that good (Staff CS)

The benchmarking of school performance emphasised the importance of the C/D grade boundary in GCSE. This led to teachers making great efforts to get students to pass at grade C, arguably to the detriment of other students, especially those in need of additional support to achieve the best grades they could. This emphasis on achieving particular examination grades appeared to affect relationships between teachers and students and the culture of the school. ‘Other teachers are quite strict and they want you to do the work – but I s’pose that’s because they want us to get good grades’ (Student AR). Students acknowledged that they had to accommodate to the system if they wanted to achieve their own agenda. ‘No matter how much I dislike it, I have to do it[French] for GCSE because you have to have at least one modern foreign language to get in’ (Student CA).

School examination results were monitored by the central government system of school inspection, OFSTED, and published in annual National League tables to allow parents to compare the achievements of different schools. To meet some inspection targets related to levels of student exclusion, school discipline policy was moderated for malcontent students:

> Something called persistent defiance which you can permanently exclude for, but we don’t and we should. And it’s always been, oh OFSTED’s coming and we don’t want our exclusion rate up (Staff PH)
If a school failed to meet its inspection targets it could be required to amend its policies by the inspectors. High rates of exclusions were said to affect the popularity of a school and the attractiveness of it to local parents.

Government investment in education focused on targets that it perceived the public thought were important. ‘So the government invested masses of money in able and talented [students], via the Excellence in Cities programme’ (Staff CS). This included trying to raise students’ aspirations to go to university regardless of their social class or ethnic background. ‘We are trying to increase aspiration. I am responsible for ‘Aim higher, widening participation’ programme’ (Staff CS). It also included improving the physical environment of a school, as some participants illustrated through their photographs. ‘It’s a big sports hall because apparently we got the choice between sports hall and a swimming pool ... our other two gyms ain’t that nice’ (Student CP). ‘That’s the DT block ... it’s a Technology College ... And we’ve got good equipment’ (Student MK). This investment seemed to have improved student performance and the reputation of the school locally. ‘The GCSE grades ... were really bad when I came to the school and now they’re getting better’ (Student MK).

Government policy of increasing parental choice of school for their children was said to increase parents’ and students’ engagement with schools. However, one student pointed out don’t like coming to [school] ... it’s not a very nice atmosphere really. .... It wasn’t any of my choices [of school]... that doesn’t help at all (Student CA).

Researchers’ activities were also affected by the performative culture of schools. Teachers in the school’s English and Citizenship departments wanted to work with the research project because it was related strongly to elements of the National Curriculum in their subjects for Year 9 (Y9) students. However, they perceived two major problems: which Y9 students should take part; Y9 students had to take Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) at the end of their studies for Key Stage Three of the National Curriculum in late May 2008. SATs results were reflected in the school’s performance in National League tables and poor performance would make the school look unattractive to potential parents compared with other local schools.

As teachers feared that selecting a few students in each class would prevent the others from benefiting from the aspects of the project related to the Y9 National curriculum, teachers asked the researchers to work with whole classes, groups of at least 18, much larger than the project had planned or were easily manageable. As the timetabling of the school curriculum to meet National Curriculum targets was very tight, students could not afford to miss any lessons so could not be taken out of lessons for the project. Teachers thought that alternative lunchtime ‘meetings’ for the project would not attract disaffected Y9 students.

Teachers thought Y9 students needed the period from February to May to revise for their SATs, so requested that the last phase of the research (making group posters) happened in July 2008, nearly six months after students finished constructing their scrapbooks and being interviewed in early February 2008. By then, students and teachers were close to the end of the school year. Students appeared to have lost enthusiasm for the project and they and their teachers tended to see the construction of the posters as an ‘end of term’ time filling activity.

In Autumn 2008, according to several staff the school’s Senior Management Team (SMT) became nervous about how the school’s image amongst the local community might be affected by findings from the study reflecting students’ views of the school, although SMT welcomed the findings themselves and thought them helpful. Consequently, despite explaining the importance to the
trustworthiness of research of getting participants to check researchers’ emergent findings, researchers were not allowed to present the project findings to staff and students.

**Parents and the local community**

The importance of the views of parents and local communities to the school was shown by the efforts made by teachers and senior staff to keep parents involved with their children’s progress. ‘I mean [parents] get reported to every half term. So six sets of tracking plus a parent’s evening [each year]’ (Staff PH). This element of school policy reflected long term perspectives on the importance of the relationship between home and school as well as current policy discourses. ‘When it was [a] secondary modern ... there have always been students who went to university from our local predominantly historically white council estates’ (Staff CS).

However, the changing social mixture of the school’s catchment area had made teaching much more challenging.

With our mixed racial and indigenous population ... possibly the biggest challenge for most of the white students ... is no aspiration or low education generally. For the other students [it] is adapting to life in a new city, with different conventions, rules and different possibilities (Staff CS)

Consequently some senior staff and teachers welcomed government investment in widening aspiration programmes, while students welcomed any investment that improved how the school was perceived by local people.

I want to make it a better school for other people com[ing] up in Year 7, who never wanted to come to the school. ... By getting a good mark in my GCSEs, making the teachers look good, making the school look good (Student MK)

Several students were concerned about the image of their school locally, and used photographs to illustrate this.

It feels quite safe – no-one’s going to get in and no-one’s going to get out, but ... it don’t look nice. All you see is a load of spikes and poles ... It’s more like a prison than a school (Student CP)

Some resented how the actions of other students damaged the school’s image. One pointed out, ‘a graffitied door ... Which is not really good’ (Student MR). While another acknowledged, ‘there’s quite a lot of rubbish everywhere - and there’s bins in every Year Base- but people just can’t be bothered to use them’ (Student SY).

**Adapting to performative discourses**

**Internal policy process:**

The internal policy processes of the school reflected and enacted national and local performative discourses. The head teacher altered the school hierarchy, creating ‘a non-teaching post ... to work with C/D borderlines and people who aren’t in Year 10 and 11’ (Staff PH). This concern led to a constant scrutiny of students’ performance to identify which ones needed special support to help them achieve what examination grades they could. ‘We identify the [students] is ... if they have not done SATS/Teacher assessments ... as soon as they arrive we do reading/spelling tests’ (Staff JT).

The curriculum became a disciplinary regime for teachers and students as staff sought to gain the examination grades the school needed to maintain its standing in the League Tables. ‘How can you
get kids to sit down for an hour. What gives us the right? And then to say ... put your hand up, bubble bubble, but [actually] repress’ (Staff PH). It also led to increasing pressure on teachers to adapt their pedagogy to suit the learning needs of all students to help them achieve better examination results by, ‘doing a lot of special needs workshops this year. Trying to get the [teachers to] ... differentiate the work [more]’ (Staff JT). Although this might be interpreted as government policies helping to improve teachers’ practices, some teachers thought it was merely re-inventing people-centred modes of teaching and learning. ‘But we’re just re-inventing, ... Personalised Learning, what was it called, a long time ago when I did my PGCE, it was called MIXED ABILITY [teaching]’ (Staff PH).

The apparatus of the ‘state’
Senior staff organised a system designed to create productive docile bodies that would allow the school to meet its performativity targets. ‘If he’s [Vice-Principal] strict, then the kids will all be scared of him and they will do what he asked them to do’ (Student AH). One aspect of this was depriving students of control of access to knowledge without any explanation. ‘They’ve just shut off Google, because there were things last year ... which is quite annoying. We haven’t really been told [why]’ (Student CA). Another aspect was limiting students’ control of their bodies, e.g. by preventing girls, ‘wearing more jewellery and pushing the uniform. [Disaffected girls] are more likely to be more physical, just walking down the corridor ... linking arms or pushing’ (Staff PH), and sometimes threatening embarrassment through normal bodily functions. ‘The [toilets]... always locked, so if you really need to go, then you have to [like] walk all the way over to a place where you can get the key to a toilet’ (Student SY). School and curriculum activities were tightly timetabled, too, depriving students and teachers of control of time and space.

This system was implemented through a surveillance regime to monitor the actions of students and staff. One aspect was that of active observation.
Part of our Head’s attempt to tighten things up ... he is waging a war on uniform ... when students come in between 8:15 and 8:45 the doorways are monitored to check that they are coming in appropriately [dressed] but quite a lot of students circumvent that by coming in late, so every day between 8:45 and 9:45 a member of senior staff sits there (Staff CS)

This included staff patrolling corridors and playing fields during lessons and break times.
I do one [Break duty] down in the hall, and one up on the field, which is basically telling all the smokers to go further away ...If I can see who they are I will report them (Staff PH)

A second aspect, to some students’ annoyance, was the use of CCTV. ‘I didn’t even know we had it until we went into the staffroom ... we could be talking about ... something private and stuff!’ (Student NR). A third aspect, as one student recorded in a photograph, was a teacher carrying, ‘a walkie-talkie and a bunch of keys. I think she was trying to sort out a problem ... someone might have run away ... from a lesson or something like that’ (Student SY).

The school had a recognised punishment regime to enforce the system. This included that of legitimised verbal force. ‘Most of the [teachers] just shout and they’re mean ... don’t like the way they treat you and the way that they teach the class’ (Student CT). Some students perceived this practice as one of intimidation because, ‘everybody’s [like] scared of him ‘cos if they go to see him they know they’re going to get yelled at really badly’ (Student CT) and thought it humiliated them.

There was a scale of penalties for different misdemeanours that was recognised by staff and students. ‘By stage three [students] are sent outside [classrooms] to cool down for a few minutes and ... they can then be removed to a stage four or a stage five’ (Staff ER). ‘One of my friends, she
Some students acknowledged the legitimacy of this ‘state’ apparatus, particularly welcoming it when it gave them support - ‘Everyone has a named teacher, or a tutor ... if there’s anything you want to talk about, they’ll ask you to see if you’re alright, (Student AR) – or kept them out of trouble – ‘[in] our [subject] area where we hang around ... staff are there to keep an eye on you ... just in case something does happen’ (Student AR) – or helped them to learn successfully. However, other students did not seem to be unduly deterred by the system punishment regime. ‘But if you get caught [smoking] more than twice ... you get some letters sent home ... they show you some video on smoking’ (Student JD). Staff, too, recognised the surveillance regime was not entirely effective, but offered no alternative. ‘Another smashed window! We have cameras in all the rooms, so I don’t know how

Some staff recognised that they could work with students to sustain the school system, especially when it focused on intra-student relationships. ‘The anti-bullying policy ... We deliberately went to kids with that. And they in fact designed [it]’ (Staff ER).

**Teachers’ views of the other: perceptions of students**

Teachers were very aware of the need to ensure that students performed as well as possible in public examinations, including SATs: ‘you know it’s an exam factory and you must get them through exams’ (Staff ER). Consequently, they tended to categorise students in terms of whether or not they were willing to collude with teachers in achieving the performative objectives of the school. Collaborative students, they thought displayed certain behaviours: ‘won’t have the jewellery. ... are much less likely to be sitting on the corridor’ (Staff PH). Some teachers translated the performative discourses of government into a perception of students as consumers of education

I see our students really as the customers ... [who] tell the management or the teachers things that they would like, things that they think could be improved, things that they’re happy with (Staff ER)

Other teachers perceived students as victims of their circumstances. ‘We have a lot of naughty children. [Their] behaviour comes from the fact that they can’t access much and frustration and things like that’ (Staff JT). ‘I think its home expectations possibly’ (Staff PH). In this view, students’ anti-social behaviour was mere criminality rather than any deeper sense of alienation. Staff needed to get, ‘students to respect [the environment] a lot more. Stop wrecking the display boards’ (Staff ER), perhaps in part by taking responsibility for it. ‘We tried painting the [toilets] as part of the student council’ (Staff ER).

However, some teachers thought students’ behavior reflected the way in which they were treated by staff and how the broader regime of the school disempowered them from taking many decisions about their own lives

There are teachers in this school who will pick on jewelry ‘right take that off’... And you see some teachers take pupils outside to shout at them for five minutes just because it’s easier to do that than engage with the rest of the class (Staff PH)
Students’ perspectives of teachers

Students’ perspectives of teachers were ambivalent. Although they recognised the hierarchical nature of schooling through which teachers legitimately exercised control of the school and of students’ work, they generally resented the unfair way in which control was implemented.

“I don’t like DT. The teacher’s a bit moody … one day she’ll be alright with me but [then] be a bit sarcastic and stuff like that sometimes” (Student AK)

They also disliked perceived incompetence by teachers, including not being able to control a class, even when sometimes teachers were absent from lessons because of their other, often pastoral, duties.

[teacher] wasn’t around a lot in the DT class and I used to think, “Why is she never there?” and, you know, we used to just do random things in our lessons and we didn’t really learn anything. We just went around doing stuff (Student AH)

Alongside this, students developed an utopian view of the ‘good’ teacher who could accurately interpret student behaviour – ‘your teachers know … if [pupils] are playing games and not do[ing] their work’ (Student AH) - and helped students learn successfully – ‘he helped me a lot to get … a level 7 in my mock SATs’ (Student AH). Such teachers developed respectful and caring relationships with their students. ‘There’s always a nice atmosphere when you go into that room … she’s always really happy and really nice about things and you’ (Student CT). They trusted students to work in a collaborative but focused way and ‘sit with your friends and get on with your work, and they’re not always telling you off and [like] give you detention for no reason’ (Student SY).

Conclusion: What was the impact of performative policies on the experiences of education and implications for educational futures and local cultures?

The findings from this study show how students and teachers in this school perceived the impact of national and local discourses on education. Staff and students recognised that they were disciplined by these discourses, and that this discipline was inscribed on their bodies (Foucault, 1977, Paechter, 2007) through them being expected to act in certain ways to meet the performative norms embedded in government education policies. Not only were teachers able clearly to indicate how particular national discourses and local habitus (Bourdieu, 1986) led to particular institutional policies and practices, but students recognised some of these, too (impact of national curriculum on teachers’ behaviour, impact of technology college policy on resources to which they had access, concern about local community perceptions of school). Consequently students did not blame teachers for acting as agents of school policies and dominant discourses. Indeed they acknowledged that teachers’ work, when carried out successfully, helped them to meet their own agenda of attaining particular careers.

The processes of surveillance (Foucault, 1977) that the adults in the school used to keep control of the students is clearly visible – the use of CCTV, of patrolling teachers with walkie-talkies – as well as the conventional processes of teachers being on patrol at break and lunch times and being with classes during lessons, although some students suggested that this was not always the case when a teacher was drawn into taking disciplinary action against students in other classes on behalf of teacher colleagues. There is also evidence of students being drawn into the complicity of self-surveillance through helping teachers to develop an anti-bullying policy in school and through preferring to be supervised indirectly by teachers at lunch times to avoid being the butt of other
students’ aggression. In part this seemed to be an attempt to meet their own agenda (Busher, 2006) as much as them accepting dominant social perspectives on the purposes of schooling. Other students recognised that, however alienated they felt by school system, they had to comply for their own benefit – gaining the GCSEs they needed for preferred careers.

Students and teachers showed clear awareness of the punishment regime of the school, how it was implemented and what was the tariff of penalties for particular actions and how that affected how they might control themselves. This, students and teachers thought, was clearly linked to the performative norms faced by students and teachers. Whilst some students did their best to act in ways to avoid punishments, such as detentions that they did not like, others seemed to regard the risk of being punished as something worth chancing in order to act in particular ways with their peers (smoking). However, some students also showed resentment of some punishments – teachers shouting at them, in particular – which impinged on their person creating docile bodies (Foucault, 1977). Some teachers also expressed concern at the violence that was shown to students by some of their colleagues, particularly over aspects of personal adornment which challenged dominant norms of how children in school should dress.

The impact of performative discourses seem to support the view that education is both a site and a conduit for struggles (Foucault, 1976, Hall and Noyes, 2009) through which teachers and students explore the tensions of being and becoming (Giddens, 1991; Kearney, 2003). There seemed to be considerable stress amongst the teachers and conflict between teachers and students as a result of performative discourses, as Hall and Noyes (2009) noted. Teachers felt they had to do everything possible to help students to attain the best academic grades they could, especially above the C/D GCSE border line. The consequences for not doing so threatened the standing of the school with parents and, potentially, ultimately their jobs, but also their sense of professional pride in what it meant to be a teacher. The students were aware of the pressures on the teachers and on themselves to attain these grades, but resented the emphasis on control rather than collaboration that many teachers seemed to prefer to try to achieve this.

The study supports the view of (Riley and Rustique-Forrester, 2002) that students are experienced observers of teachers, teaching and schools. If teachers had a stereotypic view of what was the ‘good’ student – docile, enthusiastic, hardworking, quiet – which did not match what they regularly experienced in the classroom, students, too, had a view of the ‘good’ teacher who was friendly and supportive and helped them achieve good results through carrying out interesting work in a well-organised manner in collaboration with their colleagues. They discriminated clearly between the teachers they liked and those whom they liked less, and articulated what separated the former from the latter. Had the teachers listened more carefully to the students’ views on schooling and lessons, as Rudduck (2004), Demetriou and Wilson (2010), McIntyre et al. (2005) suggested, they might have learnt a lot about constructing successful lessons with collaborative cultures that minimised dissonance and maximized performance.

The performative policies in education of central government in England in the noughties had a considerable cost socially. The need which teachers perceived for tighter control of students in order to achieve the performative targets they faced led to students with jaundiced perspectives of schooling and teachers, teachers who were seriously stressed because of the demands of performativity (two of those involved in this study left the school in 2008), a sense of loss of empowerment by teachers, and a discouragement of collaborative approaches to work. Students learnt to be part of a production process in which they themselves were produced and controlled, rather than being encouraged to be creative collaborative citizens and producers.
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