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A tension between rationalities: “off-rolling” as gaming and the implications for head teachers and the inclusion agenda

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Abstract

In this paper the concepts of fabrication, subjectivation and performativity are mobilised in an analysis of varied exclusionary practices in England’s schools with particular reference to “off-rolling”, defined by the national school inspectorate as the illegal removal of a student from a school roll in order to enhance academic performance data. This narrow definition has gained traction over a relatively short period of time, reflecting growing tension between economic and political rationalities as the former is prioritised and the power relations dictated by performativity intensify. Head teachers are required to negotiate normative demands to include and drivers to exclude according to market performance. “Off-rolling” is being fabricated as an object of knowledge, point of governance and policy technology, producing a taken-for-granted reality (that head teachers in England are circumventing legal school exclusion procedures), and illustrating a feature of performativity, namely, the generation of signifiers that reinforce the disciplines of market, management and performance. Following Foucault, the subjectivation and disciplining of head teachers implies dividing practices and ascription of deviant identities, specifically, that of gamer. However, the policy context of, and since, the 1990s has generated incentives to exclude while a concomitant policy discourse around inclusion **has** failed to eliminate educational exclusion.

Key words: school exclusion, off-rolling, performativity, fabrication, subjectivation.

Introduction

The now hegemonic and narrow definition of “off-rolling” provided by England’s school inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted, 2019a), signifies the illegal permanent removal of students from school rolls where removal is in the school’s interests and designed to enhance school performance data. Ofsted (2019a) fabricates head teachers suspected of “off-rolling” as *homo economicus* (Foucault, 2008, p.253), failing to respect the rules of the market order (that competition is free and fair) while cynically calculating the benefits of removing students against the risk of exposure without ever experiencing a “schizophrenia of values and purposes” (Ball, 2003, p.223). Ofsted is rapidly identifying other means of “gaming” performance league tables (Weale, 2020), however, our focus here is on the processes through which Ofsted’s (2019a) particular definition of “off-rolling” as gaming has gained prominence. This signifier, and a proposed re-regulation of school exclusion, are conceptualised as examples of fabrication and subjectivation (Foucault, 1982) and performativity (Ball, 2001, 2003) that highlight the role of language and signification in the subjectivation or control (Youdell, 2006) of head teachers (principals). These poststructuralist concepts disrupt dominant normative assumptions evidenced in educational discourse and imply a critical literacy through which counter discourses can be fostered around what constitutes inclusion and the viability of demands placed on head teachers (Allan, 2008).

Our key objective is to contextualise and complexify the exclusionary landscape in England and beyond, and to argue that “gaming” (Thompson and Cook, 2014) is a function of tensions between prevailing rationalities in an educational culture characterised by performativity (Ball, 2003); the latter describes a culture of continual monitoring ostensibly intended to enhance efficiency. We maintain that Ofsted’s (2019a) current definition of “off-rolling” serves to obscure the varied nature of exclusionary practices (formal and otherwise) within the neoliberal English educational system and the persistent systemic inequities that

contradict a political discourse around inclusive education. Below, we explain how “off-rolling” is being fabricated or constituted as an object of knowledge, point of governance and policy technology to produce a taken-for-granted or common-sense reality that head teachers in England are routinely circumventing legal school exclusion procedures. This is followed by an account of the rationalities which, taken together, inhibit meaningful inclusion and risk producing the “schizophrenia of values and purposes” identified by Ball (2003, p.223). A more detailed outline of performativity is then provided which situates Ofsted (2019a) as a generator of signifiers that reinforce the disciplines of market, management and performance. Finally, we illustrate a feature of performativity referred to by Ball (2003, p. 215, p.225) as “opacity” with reference to speculation around the extent of “off-rolling”. We also distinguish the concepts of performativity and performative signifiers and explain their links to professional identity and practice with reference to fabrication and subjectivation.

An object of knowledge

Fabrication marks out in reality something that did not exist before whilst subjectivation explores the relationship between “the subject, truth and the constitution of experience” and the normative force of discourse (Foucault, 2008, p.19, 1988, p.48).

Circularity in the fabrication and policy design process is reinforced by media reportage, e.g. in an Ofsted-commissioned survey (YouGov, 2019) (with only one head teacher participant) participating teachers acknowledge the media’s role in shaping their understanding of “off-rolling” (YouGov, 2019). Historically, the political discourse of educational inclusion during the 1990s prompted a literature underlining the adverse effects of exclusion on students, families, communities and government expenditure (e.g. Parsons, 1999, 2005, 2009; Parsons, Godfrey, Howlett and Martin, 2001). Disproportionality and intersectionality were also highlighted (e.g. Vincent, 2001; Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2006; Gazeley, 2012). The practices of head teachers and purported deficits in their leadership skills have

subsequently become objects of research, where the quest for “best practice” reiterates a familiar neoliberal trope and draws attention to school leadership and its capacity to ensure the inclusive school ethos then demanded in statutory SEND (special educational needs and disability) related guidance (Departments for Education and of Health [DfE / DoH], 2015).

The current moral outrage around “off-rolling” as gaming side-lines other exclusionary practices such as discriminatory admissions policies suspected in sponsored academies which are more likely to be in areas of high socio-economic deprivation (Norwich, 2019; Black, 2019; Black, Bessudnov, Liu and Norwich, 2019). Children with SEND are, nevertheless, over-represented in some maintained schools within these areas (Exley and Ball, 2011) but, despite research, it is unclear whether this indicates a school leadership able to maintain an inclusive school ethos (and professional identities in which inclusivity is valorised), or whether sponsored academies are refusing admission to specific categories of student within their catchment areas in order to demonstrate their governmentally required aspiration to academic excellence. The opacity associated with performativity (Ball, 2003) has prompted numerous attempts to quantify “off-rolling” and examples are given towards the end of this paper.

A point of governance

Head teachers in state-maintained schools have been obliged to narrow their curriculum following the introduction of “Progress 8” and “Attainment 8” performance metrics (DfE, 2016, 2017a) which focus on “core” subjects and deter schools from offering the richer curriculum now required by Ofsted (2019b). Under new leadership, Ofsted’s (2019b) revised inspection criteria demand evidence of inclusive practice, including a broader curriculum catering for all students, thereby compounding the pressures on head teachers since the requirement to evidence improvement in academic attainment remains unchanged.

Ambivalence

We **argue** that the introduction of “managed moves” by government (TSO, 2002) was a tacit legitimisation of **exclusionary practices** **which risks the manipulation of parents or carers**. Other examples of an ambivalence around inclusion are identifiable, hence the Children and Families Act (TSO, 2014) permits schools refusal of entry where admission would prejudice the provision of “efficient education or use of resources”, legitimising admission refusal and the prioritising of children perceived as assets (Office of the Schools Adjudicator [OSA], 2017, p.28). The Timpson Review **of school exclusion** (DfE, 2019a) was originally commissioned to examine variable exclusion rates amongst ethnic groups; however, the government response (DfE, 2019b) to systemic inequalities identified by Gazeley et al. (2013) and confirmed by Timpson (DfE, 2019a) simply reiterates existing initiatives and **earlier statements on** the importance of monitoring exclusion rates amongst such groups.

The use of alternative provision (AP) and pupil referral units (PPRs) increased in the 1990s, allowing students’ removal from classrooms or school sites for varying periods, sometimes permanently. This trend may increase as the **government** response (DfE, 2019b) to Timpson (DfE, 2019a) includes proposed investment in AP facilities, although a proposed transfer of financial responsibility for costly AP placements to schools is designed to deter **their usage** in future. Given current budgetary constraints, it may equally encourage selective admission policies that pre-empt the possibility of costly provision. Choice on the part of head teachers, **despite endorsements** of professional autonomy (DfE, 2019b), is likely to be curtailed through financial pressures in a move typical of neoliberal governance (Done, 2019).

Caring or pathologisation

Timpson’s (2019a) data analysis by SEND includes both behavioural, emotional, social difficulties (BESD) and social, emotional, mental health (SEMH), and the lower

likelihood of permanent exclusion of the latter group is taken to demonstrate that replacement of the BESD category with SEMH (DfE / DoH, 2015) has deterred schools from classifying poor behaviour as a special need and a ground for exclusion, encouraging recognition of underlying conditions (p.38). An easily overlooked but pertinent point in Timpson (DfE, 2019a, p.38) is that students legally excluded in Year 7 are 11 times more likely to be classified as having SEN and receive SEN Support by Year 11 compared to students not excluded. Although the response (DfE, 2019b) to Timpson acknowledges perverse incentives in current policy to permanently exclude and “off-roll”, the risks implied by Timpson’s findings in this area are neglected. These include a heightened risk of students being pathologised, marginalised, excluded or “off-rolled” and subject to commodified ameliorative interventions with allegedly measurable outcomes around “self-regulation”; indeed, the government is proposing training in trauma and attachment theory to assist the identification process (DfE, 2019b). This implies a therapeutisation of teaching and further tension between the standards and inclusion agendas for head teachers. Where poor behaviour is deemed unrelated to underlying conditions, the government states that it “will always support head teachers to maintain safe and orderly environments for the benefit of all students and staff in their schools” (DfE, 2019b, p.2). It is proposed that the government’s behaviour consultant will produce new national guidance on exclusions and “behaviour and discipline” (p.2) along with organisation of “whole-school approaches” and “behaviour support networks” where “lead schools” disseminate “best practice” for emulation (p.5). The proposed standardisation of behavioural policies and strategies, combined with pressure on schools to identify underlying conditions at an ever earlier age, displaces “caring” or pastoral care as a legitimate component of the teaching role (Ball, 2003, p.222). Timpson’s proposals (DfE, 2019a) and the government response (DfE, 2019b) are suggestive of a one-dimensional professional identity focused on delivering academic progress and attainment by enhancing student self-

regulation **in order** to minimise behaviours that risk compromising school performance in the context of competitive pressures.

A policy technology

Foucault (1982, p.778) insisted on checking “the type of reality with which we are dealing” and, relatedly, the historical conditions of prevailing fabrications in order to provide “historical awareness of our present circumstance”. Performativity implies an “invigilated process of adjustment” in which revised or novel political technologies are presented as promising greater efficiency or rationalisation (Foucault, 1982, p.788) or the fulfilment of political agendas that may be problematic to reconcile with other agendas. As a political technology, efforts to identify and eliminate “off-rolling” coincide with a sustained period of under-funding of the English educational sector that is attracting media attention; schools are, for example, increasingly forced to limit places for children with complex and multiple needs with some head teachers voicing their angst at having to make such decisions. Legislation (DfE, 2014), statutory guidance (DfE / DoH, 2015) and political rhetoric ensure that parents or carers will continue to seek to exercise their legal rights within an environment where schools are finding fulfilment of their dual remit (of delivering academic progress and inclusivity) increasingly difficult. In this sense, the manufacture of a sense of moral crisis is not misplaced. However, a similarly familiar neoliberal trope of training, educating and re-skilling head teachers and their staffs, **e.g. DfE (20119b)**, belongs to a political rhetoric that obscures or circumvents the tensions between rationalities **posited** here.

Individualisation

LA guidance on legitimate pretexts for the removal of students from school rolls **lacks** the tone of moral indignation expressed by Ofsted at “off-rolling” (e.g. Croydon Council, 2013). This shift from neutral procedural term in local guidance to “off-rolling” as a novel crisis in mainstream education has been rapid. Ofsted’s discursive constitution of the English

head teacher as *homo economicus* (Foucault, 2008, p.253) is apparently tempered by Timpson's (DfE, 2019a, p.32) recognition of the "reality of the complexity that schools must consider for each child", particularly where students exhibit several characteristics associated with greater likelihood of permanent exclusion (p.31). This recognition, however, simply reproduces the individualising of systemic inequality reported by Gazeley et al. (2013).

A shift in signifiers from the broader "informal" or "unofficial" exclusionary practices towards "off-rolling" (as gaming of accountability procedures linked to the quasi-marketisation of the education system) is testimony to a fabrication process effected by ministerial and non-ministerial governmental bodies, and quasi-governmental bodies associated with neoliberal education governance. It suggests a tension between the different rationalities through which head teachers are subjectivated (which includes individualisation) and, therefore, constrained.

Exclusionary practices

Head teachers in England have enjoyed a longstanding legal entitlement to exclude students on a permanent or fixed term basis. The Timpson Review (DfE, 2019a) and current Conservative government's response (DfE, 2019b) endorse this right, evoking Foucault's (1982, p.1982) characterisation of neoliberal governance as a 'complex interplay' of power and freedom or, here, of regulation and professional autonomy. Suspected illicit exclusionary practices have been reported for over a decade, contributing to an evidence base which is informing current policy proposals intended to eliminate such practices (DfE, 2019b). Examples of such reports are introduced later in order to illustrate the fabrication process and the implications for head teachers.

The prevailing culture of performativity (performance monitoring to ensure accountability and efficiency) relies on the production of novel signifiers carrying a regulatory or disciplinary force (Ball, 2001, 2003). The constitution of "off-rolling" as

gaming and associated policy discourse are likely to have profound implications for the professional identities of head teachers and the range of actions available to them, whilst it is questionable whether such initiatives will significantly impact educational inequalities. The Timpson Review (DfE, 2019a) indicates that numerous inclusion-related initiatives, e.g. the Equality Act in 2010 (TSO, 2010), Children and Families Act (DfE, 2014) and related statutory guidance (DfE/DoH, 2015), have not addressed the disproportionate representation of specific social groups within school exclusion data. Permanent exclusion rates in the 10% most deprived areas in England were 0.12% compared to 0.07% in the least deprived 10%; students eligible for free school meals (FSM), taken as a proxy indicator of disadvantage, are four times more likely to receive fixed term exclusions (DfE, 2019c). Students with SEND account for 45% of all permanent exclusions and 43% of all fixed term exclusions, and disparities by gender and ethnicity remain marked (DfE, 2019c, p.5). Legislation has, however, created additional demands on head teachers within a hegemonic test result driven educational culture. **Despite exclusionary practices being identified as** a site of ambiguity, inconclusive evidence, and tension between local and national control of school practices, policy discourse de-contextualises head teachers' actions by individualising and 'dividing' (Foucault, 1982, p.777), ascribing professional identities such as gamer (Done and Knowler, 2019).

Following Gazeley, Marrable, Brown and Boddy (2015), the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR, 2017) describes formal exclusion as the "tip" of an "iceberg" that is indicative of the inadequate training of school leaders and early career teachers in managing and supporting vulnerable students at risk of exclusion. Training and up-skilling of senior school leaders, teachers and support staff is a recurring theme in governmental reports and policy discourse, exemplified by Ofsted's (2010) SEND Review which identified poor teaching and school leadership as inhibiting progress towards inclusive education. Similar arguments appear across school sectors (Done and Andrews, 2018) and staff in AP are now being targeted (IPPR, 2017). The government response (DfE, 2019b) to

Timpson (DfE, 2019a) outlines measures to improve the quality of teaching and support in AP while Ofsted has condemned head teachers relying on long-term AP as “off-rollers” (Allen-Kinross, 2019), hence, it appears ironic that this reliance could be extended by the present government. Such extension is, however, entirely compatible with the privileged economic rationality associated with quasi-marketisation and performance ranking. A standards agenda and inclusion may not be ‘necessarily mutually exclusive’ but, according to Florian, Rouse, Black-Hawkins and Jull (2004, p.115), schools rarely successfully combine both. Narrowing of the curriculum to facilitate improved performance has detrimentally affected many students with SEND; withdrawal of vocational subjects can lead to frustration, poor behaviour and high rates of exclusion (Evans and Lunt, 2002). Students are ‘forced into taking subjects [] entirely as a response to accountability measures’ (Hutchings, 2015, p. 42) whilst Kelly (2020) views the promotion of vocational subjects as perpetuating educational inequalities in a ‘progressive conservatism’.

The novel signifier of “off-rolling” as gaming (Ofsted, 2019a) intensifies the tension between rationalities that head teachers must negotiate. A dominant economic rationality linked to quasi-marketisation accounts for Ofsted’s (2019a) definition gaining prominence and its functioning as a point of governance and policy technology. Contrary to this attributing of illicit exclusions to head teachers’ manipulation of academic performance data, the Children’s Commissioner (2019) highlights schools’ failure to “understand and support” the behavioural needs of vulnerable students, reinforcing a deficit model of school leadership. The ethical dimension of the inclusion agenda is eclipsed when, for example, the IPPR (2017) invokes an economic “imperative” to leverage improved support for vulnerable students by underlining the “staggering” social cost of their support following exclusion.

There is a tendency by governments to commission further reviews of SEND provision before the implications of existing reviews are enacted (Education Policy Institute [EPI], 2019), suggesting a strategic deferral of educational inclusion as other agendas are prioritised (Slee and Allan, 2001). Indeed, deferral through commissioned reviews is characteristic of neoliberal governance and represents a politicised impression management (Ball, 2003, p.221) that obscures tensions between political agendas and produces a confused policy landscape that head teachers may struggle to navigate. Tension between rationalities is illustrated in comments from the Chief Executive Officer

(CEO) of a multi-academy trust (MAT) comprising 34 schools in areas of social deprivation which is seeking to eliminate permanent exclusion even though, consequently, its 'Progress 8' data is relatively weak. This CEO is critical of the short-termism evidenced in governmental expectations articulated through Ofsted reports, asserting that rapid performance improvement is only achievable by "getting rid of many students" (Carr, 2019).

Two rationalities

Foucault (1982, p.798) recommends focusing on specific rationalities to investigate links between power, rationalisation and the modern state **without** presupposing an overarching teleological process of rationalisation. Informal exclusionary practices result from quasi-marketisation and its corollary of a culture designed to sustain competitive forces in a neoliberal economic rationality (Ball, 2003). Quasi-marketisation implies a pervasive neoliberal economic rationality which has generated numerous "metrics of accountability" and "fields of judgement", demanding a "new kind of professional" able to negotiate the "terrors of performativity" (Ball, 2003, p.223, p.213, p.218). An economic rationality dictates that unacceptably sub-optimal performances risk punitive action. Historically, such actions include the conversion of schools into academies "sponsored" by external organisations and removal of their head teachers from post. The under-representation of children with SEN in sponsored academies, demonstrates the privileging of an academic standards agenda and an associated political discourse of excellence over a concomitant social justice agenda; head teachers here are obliged to deliver progress in academic performance for league table and market purposes (Norwich, 2019). Such under-representation implies pre-emptive **exclusion** in that students refused admission escape Ofsted's (2019a) definition of "off-rolling" as gaming by removing enrolled students.

Reiterations that few head teachers engage in "off-rolling" (Nye and Thomson, 2018a; DfE, 2019b) contradict Ball's (2003) argument that data manipulation is endemic in cultures

where the “terrors of performativity” (e.g. threats of removal from post) and a discourse of continual improvement mandate displays of organisational improvement or progress. Ofsted’s narrower definition of “off-rolling” discursively constitutes head teachers as enterprising risk takers (Hall, Gunter and Bragg, 2013) where only the legality, or otherwise, of their competitive initiatives matters, thus evoking the free and fair competition of neoliberal economic theory and the market order. In Ofsted’s fabrication of “off-rolling”, only the pressure on schools to deliver suitable academic performance data is acknowledged. It neglects the wider context of increased levels of child poverty (Joseph Rowntree Trust [JRT], 2019), inadequate school funding (*The Guardian*, 8 March 2019), delayed access to external support services (DfE, 2017a), chronic under-funding of local government joint working arrangements around SEND (Weale, 2020) and, indeed, its own pivotal role in instilling such priorities. New inspection criteria (Ofsted, 2019b) are misleading as the choice of schools to inspect **continues to be** based on academic performance data; only then is the broad curriculum, intended to support inclusion, looked for. The impact of “Progress 8” (DfE, 2017b) is also neglected.

Quasi-marketisation was accompanied by an inclusion agenda and political rationality demanding that schools admit students deemed, historically, to be uneducable or, more recently, requiring specialist provision (Powell and Tutt, 2002). The unintended consequences, particularly, the incentivising of exclusionary practices have provided a renewed rationale for Ofsted’s disciplinary role. Following Youdell (2006, p.514), Ofsted’s discursive agency was instrumental in generating expectations that schools can readily fulfil political agendas around inclusion and inclusive practice, and improvement in academic standards and behaviour. Contrary to recent acknowledgements that quasi-marketisation over-emphasises academic performance, and revised inspection criteria (Ofsted, 2019a, 2019b) aiming to correct this imbalance between an economic rationality (competition

around academic performance) and political rationality (delivery of inclusive education), the former continues to be prioritised. As proponents of full inclusion, we argue that this is unachievable without major change in socio-political priorities and the reversal of current priorities. Yet, head teachers must negotiate the tension between rationalities in fulfilment of their politically-ascribed remit. Their capacity to improve academic performance whilst addressing educational inequalities varies according to school type and resourcing whilst a discourse of teacher blaming (Thrupp, 2008) and leadership deficit (Gazeley, Marrable, Brown and Boddy, 2013) denies the complexity of the educational landscape.

Tension between rationalities is evidenced in Nye's (2019) suggestion that further increases in formal secondary school exclusion should be viewed positively since this implies reduced rates of "off-rolling" – a logic that hardly implies inclusion is the overriding priority. Formal exclusion can result in LAs placing excluded students in AP (given their legal obligation in these circumstances to find alternative placements). However, where head teachers avoid formal exclusion through their own organisation of AP, and subsequently remove students from roll, their overall Ofsted "outstanding" judgement may be abruptly replaced with "requires improvement". At one English secondary school where inspectors questioned why students placed in AP had been removed from roll, Ofsted also noted exemplary practice in supporting students, including those with SEND (2019c, p.3). This case is pertinent to our argument that "off-rolling" functions as a point of governance and political technology; the government's response (DfE, 2019b) to Timpson (DfE, 2019a) proposes that schools remain responsible for students moved into AP **in order** to prevent performance data manipulation, with the cost of AP to be borne by schools as an economic deterrent to costly AP placement. Where AP continues to be used head teachers are, effectively, acquiring responsibility for its quality.

Ofsted judgements of “requires improvement” render head teachers vulnerable to removal from post and necessitate navigation of conflicting advice from Ofsted, LAs and central government, and uncertain outcomes at inspection. In the case above, Ofsted (2019c, p.2) simultaneously claims “no evidence that this practice [placement in AP] benefits the pupils” *and* “these pupils [attending AP] are well cared for, achieve good examination results and move on to college” (p.2). We view transfer to AP as an exclusionary practice but, clearly, the fabrication of head teachers as exclusively motivated by league table position is a denial of the complexity that tensions between rationalities produce.

Fabrication, subjectivation, signification

The wider historical and international context of educational reforms illuminates the fabrication process through which “off-rolling” as gaming has gained prominence in policy-related reports, and undermines reductionist assumptions that specific neoliberal discourses inevitably achieve dominance. As previously stated, fabrication marks out in reality something that did not exist before and subjectivation describes: the relationship between “the subject, truth and the constitution of experience” (Foucault, 2008, p.19, 1988, p.48); identity formation or “how the self comes into being”; and “how the self might be made *again differently*” (Youdell, 2006, p.512; original italics). Both concepts require a critical reading of policy discourse and its influence on professional identity to facilitate political control.

Past (present)

Educational reforms in England initiated in the 1990s under a Labour government (1997-2010) resulting in quasi-marketisation of the school sector (West and Pennell, 2002) were accompanied by a political discourse of social and educational inclusion and a growing ascendancy of performativity in education; continual “improvement” in organisational performance was demanded, premised on ongoing monitoring of academic test and

examination results. An OECD (1995) report was instrumental in the introduction of performativity (Ball, 2003, p.226); however, it matters how such reports were subsequently taken up in education policy and why a post-WW11 social justice agenda has, increasingly, been subsumed by a discourse of national economic competitiveness such that inclusivity is measured using academic progress data that purportedly indicates a potential contribution to national human capital. Gruening (2001 p.20) rejects the OECD's (1995, p. 8) suggestion that "New Public Management" represented a necessary paradigmatic shift, arguing that historical divergences in organisational management theory and its uptake are value-based and always contestable.

Commonalities

Commonalities in neoliberal education reform over the last four decades are evident in several European countries, the U.S.A. and Asia-Pacific region **as are** context-specific nuances (Clarke, 2013). In the U.S.A., President Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" programme had included the Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965 which increased federal government's role in education in order to eliminate racial injustice and redress imbalances in the educational performance of disadvantaged students by injecting federal funding. In 1983, the U.S. Department of Education released "A Nation at Risk", characterised by Mehta (2015, p. 23) as a highly rhetorical narrative of "decline and fall" with profound and enduring effects. The report's linking of educational and national economic performance, attention to core skills and endorsement of reliance on external testing to measure school performance have become familiar themes in education policy globally. Mehta (2015, pp.22-23), however, rejects notions of an inexorable process of neoliberalisation, outlining factors which facilitated the report gaining traction, including, a failure to develop powerful counter-discourses and publication during a recession when it provided a "compelling" explanation for a widely reported decline in educational

performance and concomitant poor economic performance internationally. The discursive manufacture of a sense of crisis was made possible by such conditions but, as Mehta (2015, p.22) explains, an alarmist and questionable interpretation of the report's data was a response to President Reagan's planned curtailing of the role of federal government in education and disbanding of the Department of Education itself. Reagan's plans became "impossible" following publication and media uptake of "A Nation at Risk" (Mehta, 2015, p.22). Associated legislation was updated in 2002 under George W. Bush. "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) (United States Code [USC], 2001) actively sought to improve national economic and educational competitiveness within a global context and mandated schools to deliver specified levels of academic progress or risk sanctions. Specific social groups (the disadvantaged, those from minorities or with SEN) were targeted and all states were required to achieve a "proficiency" level across their student populations by 2013-2014, a target which was not realised. In March 2010, President Barak Obama tried but failed to secure changes in NCLB legislation designed to provide greater state control over intervention in schools on condition that teacher performance would be evaluated through student outcomes. Although such initiatives imply attempts at devolving authority, neoliberal reform processes should not be recognised as "de-regulation" but, rather, as "processes of *re-regulation*" (Ball, 2003, p.217).

Similar re-regulation of the English education sector through the introduction of market forces and school league tables produced increasing levels of school exclusion in the 1990s (Bagley and Hallam, 2015, p.433); punitive school behavioural policies were necessitated by market pressures and political discourse privileging academic performance. These policies continue to function as grounds for formal and informal exclusion today. The sense of crisis generated around "A Nation at Risk" (U.S. DoE, 1983) is not dissimilar to the sense of moral crisis generated by Ofsted's (2019a) fabrication of "off-rolling" as undertaken

by deviant head teachers cynically gaming monitoring systems at the expense of students who are legally entitled to an inclusive education or, more accurately, to attendance at mainstream schools (Done and Knowler, 2019). The fabrication of “off-rolling” as a head teacher’s choice, and misplaced entrepreneurial inclination, obscures the prevailing tension between economic and political rationalities; it individualises a problem now conceived as a matter of head teacher accountability, tightening loop holes and maintaining the pressure to deliver divergent agendas. Fabrication is self-reinforcing; hence, Ofsted’s (2019a) positioning of the inspectorate as protecting the inclusion agenda has prompted moral outrage from bodies concerned with educational and social inclusion which, in turn, has increased the pressure on government to act to control such deviant school leaders despite a declared commitment to professional autonomy.

The Education Policy Institute (EPI 2019) has yet to isolate data pertaining to “off-rolling” and SEND; however, its executive chairperson has called for schools, in this “national scandal”, to be “named and shamed” (*The Times* 18 April 2019, 26) and Ofsted has begun naming allegedly offending schools. In the aforementioned case, responses from Ofsted and the head teacher were reported (Allen-Kinross, 2019); the former announced that the practice would cease henceforth and the latter argued that Ofsted’s intervention failed to acknowledge established local school practices undertaken with its LA, undermining local government control and longstanding locale-specific arrangements which schools perceived to be legitimate. Such nuanced contextual detail is not acknowledged in a fabrication process that occurs predominantly at a national level and as a prelude to a centralised policy technology.

Research commissioned by the Labour (1997-2010) and subsequent Coalition (2010-2015) governments has sought to identify “best practice” in schools around social and educational inclusion and explain marked geographical variations in formal exclusion rates.

The DfES (2006) and Gazeley et al. (2013) note that schools individualise difficulties affecting students instead of acknowledging systemic inequalities affecting specific student groups; both emphasise the complex interplay of contributory factors behind exclusionary practices. Indeed, Gazeley et al. (2013, p.30) insist that the poignant issue is that of reducing inequality *in* exclusions not reduction in the overall rate *of* exclusion. School ethos and leadership are deemed pivotal in reducing or eliminating exclusionary practices, combined with the policy and practices of a school's LA (DfES, 2006, p.4, p.14; Gazeley et al. 2013).

Individualisation and totalisation

Individualisation and totalisation are how political control of a population is achieved; the latter manifests as national and transnational performance monitoring involving quantification and measurement, whilst the former functions to instil a profound sense of personal responsibility for politically-required outcomes and as a prelude to dividing practices (Foucault, 1982). Shaming through placing poorly performing schools in “special measures” (House of Commons [HOC], 2019), or mobilising a deficit model (lack of leadership skills), suggest an affective dimension to the categorisation and division posited by Foucault (1982). Instilling fear of the negative consequences of poor performance has prompted characterisation of the English educational environment for head teachers and teachers as “fear-driven” (Weale, 2020). Measures to ensure conformity to policy expectations around exclusion explicitly leverage the threat of public shaming or, conversely, public approbation through categorisation as exemplars of practices that commissioned research has deemed “best” regardless of context (Done and Knowler, 2019). Such subjectivating binarisation (best/worst) is pronounced in discourse around “off-rolling”. Institutions “improvise, cite and circulate discursive frames and coterminous technologies that render subjects in relations of power” (Youdell, 2006, p.518) and, although Foucault's (1982) concept of power implies an intrinsic possibility of resistance (p.518), head teachers

are obliged to deliver on policies which may be incompatible given contextual factors. An “ethic of competitive individualism” continues to be “the engine for education policymaking” (Slee, 2019, p.1). The “fundamental subjectivating divide” (Youdell, 2006, p.522) which Ofsted’s (2019a) fabrication of “off-rolling” effects (gamer or exemplar of “best practice”) can be experienced within subjects not only between them. Hence, situations where the school leadership is condemned for cynically engaging in exclusionary practices with no indication of the facts of an individual case (OSA, 2017).

Signification

The normative import of emotive signifiers is demonstrated by fabrication of home education as either “elective” or “coerced”. In March 2018, 52,770 children were known to LAs as electively home-educated (a likely underestimate as there is no legal obligation to register children as such) (OSA, 2017, p.34). The OSA (2017) documents reports from LAs of increases of up to 70% and concerns that home education was not in the child’s “best interests” in an unknown but sizeable proportion of cases (p.35). The term “*coerced*” is used by one LA to denote school pressure on parents, particularly in Key Stage 4 (KS4) (p.36). An earlier House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee (TSO, 2009, p.9) report had attributed “coerced” home education to both LAs and schools. “Coerced home education” has become a taken-for-granted reality as one way of “managing” students off roll (Children’s Commissioner, 2019). Understanding of contributory factors and pressures on head teachers was once more nuanced (TSO, 2009) compared to Ofsted’s (2019a) exclusive focus on academic performance and gaming: “Where local authorities and schools encourage parents to deregister their child from school it is typically as a result of a child’s poor school attendance, poor behaviour and/or poor attainment” (TSO, 2009, p.9). Nevertheless, suggestions that head teachers resort to force or coercion are highly emotive and this signifier serves to heighten the sense of social injustice or moral crisis surrounding “off-rolling”. It

introduces a binarised common sense assumption (Popkewitz, 2013) about the power dynamics involved; parents are fabricated as powerless and head teachers as omnipotent.

Precedents

There is, of course, a historical precedent for the management of students off roll, instigated and sanctioned by central government. The Labour government (1997-2010) sought to reduce formal exclusion rates through “managed moves” whereby the Education Act 2002 (TSO, 2002) permitted transfer of students to other schools where all relevant parties **consented**, the rationale being that this avoided registering “exclusion” on students’ school records and provided a fresh environment (Department for Children, Schools and Families [DfCSF], 2008). Guidance explicitly prohibited schools from pressurising parents to agree to such transfers whilst encouraging what is, effectively, a form of exclusion. “Managed moves” are one vehicle for the “intergenerational cycle of social and educational disadvantage” (Gazeley, 2012, p.297) while Bagley and Hallam (2015, p.434) note the lack of research in this area and Parsons (2009) identifies considerable variation in procedure amongst coordinating LAs. For Gazeley (2010), communication and adequate support for students and parents are key to the success of “managed moves” **whereas** we would emphasise the careful (and strategic) political choice of signifier to manipulate exclusion data and obscure the fact that “managed moves” are school exclusions legitimated and, indeed, facilitated by government as a vehicle for managing students off roll.

The performative power of language is assumed in Foucault’s (1982) concepts of fabrication and subjectivation, and integral to Ball’s (2003) concept of the performativity which characterises the “marketized and corporatized education workplace” (Youdell, 2006, p.515). Performative language refers to “discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (Butler, 1993, p.13 cited in Youdell, 2006, p.515) and our methodological strategy of identifying and unpacking a tension between governmental rationalities clearly

situates signification, fabrication and subjectivation within “relations of power” that normatively organise and constrain the actions of head teachers (Foucault, 1982, p.791). Subjectivation describes a process of subject formation but also the control of possible actions. Ofsted’s (2019a) fabrication of “off-rolling” as cynical gaming invokes the political rationality of inclusion in order to justify an intensification of control. This is evidenced in the application of revised inspection criteria of Ofsted (2019b) where inspection is triggered by review of academic performance data.

Performativity

Gaming as manipulation of data is held to be routine, endemic and inevitable within performativity cultures (Thompson and Cook, 2014), indicating “cynical compliance” to a hegemonic discourse of continual improvement (Ball, 2001, 2003, p.224). Reports on “off-rolling” (Nye and Thomson, 2018a; DfE, 2019a, 2019b) emphasise that few head teachers engage in this practice and, presumably, this is intended to maintain confidence in academic performance monitoring systems given the privileging of an economic rationality and fabrication of head teachers as enjoying professional autonomy, albeit, within governmentally stipulated constraints.

Relations of power operate at national and transnational levels in education governance and performativity implies a wider discursive field which has been, and continues to be, constitutive. Transnational agencies, e.g. the World Bank and OECD, exert considerable influence on national education governance. Hultqvist, Linblad and Popkewitz (2018) describe a crusade for international performance measurement and the global universalisation of schooling which, despite national differences and an overarching symbolic canopy of democracy and equality, promotes standardised educational practices. Power seeks “stable mechanisms” in order to sustain control (Foucault, 1982, p.794). Historical theological tropes and forms have persisted, as suggested by crusades for efficiency,

continual improvement and inclusivity (with tactical public shaming). Emphasis on measurement in non-ministerial government body reports follows the replacement of the state's historical pastoral role by population management (Foucault, 1982). The pervasive character of performativity and orchestration of the actions of head teachers through models of "best practice" and "effective leadership" suggest a concomitant de-professionalisation of the head teacher's role.

Subjectivation implies power such that "discursively constituted and constrained subjects deploy discursive agency and act within and at the borders of the constraint of their subjectivation" (Youdell, 2006, p.526). "Off-rolling" can be understood accordingly once the complexity produced by tensions between different rationalities is grasped. The potential for agency persists in power relations for them to function as such (Foucault, 1982, p.794). To complexify and contextualise "off-rolling" is to recognise and make explicit the discursive field in which subjectivating practices constitute "particular sorts" of head teachers (Youdell, 2006, p.525; Done and Knowler, 2019); "all categorical names and claims to action are potentially performatively constitutive of the subjects to whom they refer" (Youdell, 2006, p.525) and "dividing practices" are integral to the stability of relations of power (Foucault, 1982, p. 777), The discursive constitution of types of head teacher and ascription of identities not only support intensification of control or new stable mechanisms. The discourse of "off-rolling" as gaming creates a pressure on head teachers to differentiate their schools from others found locally and nationally, reinforcing competitive practices associated with quasi-marketisation. Anecdotally, we are aware of one school which declares, "We do not off roll" on its website, testifying to the increasingly taken-for-granted assumption that the practice not only occurs but is potentially widespread. Such impression management involves the "use and re-use of the right signifiers", i.e. performative signifiers which effect changes in the fabrication of social events and exert a political force (Ball, 2003, p.224). In this case, given

our familiarity with this school's Ofsted ratings, the declaration accords with Ball's (2003, p.225) suggestion that **allegedly** weak performers in this quasi-marketised data-driven environment "may well submit to becoming *whatever it seems necessary to become* in order to survive" (original italics). However, the contention that **"elite"** institutions are better placed to evade judgement from the "technicians of transformation" (p.225) is complicated by Ofsted's (2019a) use of performance data to select state-maintained schools for inspection such that high or exceptional academic performance could arouse suspicions of "off-rolling" and invite further scrutiny.

Ironic opacity

Contrary to their ostensible promotion of transparency and accountability, performativity cultures work to produce "opacity" (Ball, 2003, p. 215, p.225). Hence, the OSA (2017) underlines the difficulty of **quantifying** all types of exclusionary practice; evidence tends to be anecdotal or indirect (as in LA reporting of parents' comments to the OSA), involving a chain of communication that includes organisations with vested interests or that fear reputational damage or new centralised directives that **serve to** diminish local autonomy in a sectoral "*re-regulation*" (Ball, 2003, p.217).

The OSA (2017) states that the scale of reported practices is impossible to gauge but notes that, of 152 LAs, 40 reported that secondary schools' mis-use guidance on legitimate admission refusal to students with challenging behaviour (which requires an already high proportion of such students) (p.30). The OSA insists that data interpretation depends on the undisclosed "facts of the case" and, in the context of refusal of "in year" admissions, it acknowledges that the current funding system based on PAN (Published Admission Number) means such admission produces shortfalls in per student funding and staffing problems (2017, p.30). Other examples of reported exclusionary practices include inaccessible language on school websites, schools refusing to be named on Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) (due to financial pressures), and failure to advise parents of their rights to request admission outside normal entry periods. All evoke Vincent's (2001) identification of

varying levels of maternal social capital or capacity to navigate bureaucratic systems. LAs may find securing school places for “vulnerable” children problematic (OSA, 2017, p.15), e.g. those with SEN but no statutory EHCP who, therefore, lack priority status, those excluded from another school or taken into care; some LAs report a “particular reluctance” to admit such students in KS4 (p.24) rather than those “perceived to be likely to be an asset” in league table performance (p.26).

The Family Fischer Trust (FFT) has endeavoured to establish an evidential base for “off-rolling” (Nye and Thomson, 2018a, 2018b; Thomson and Nye, 2018) through interrogation of England’s National Pupil Database. Nye and Thomson (2018b) found that, of 553,000 students completing secondary education in 2017, 22,000 had left school between Years 7 - 11 and were unaccounted for (e.g. through transfer to AP); these students were more likely to be eligible for FSM, have SEN and lower attainment at primary school. 6,200 - 7,700 are identified as particularly concerning (having no GCSE results) and deemed “potentially off rolled” or subject to “informal exclusion”. A “perverse incentive” for schools to lose students who would dilute performance data is identified as school league tables measure only those on roll in January of Year 11 (Nye and Thomson, 2018b). Again, however, it is noted that identifying “off-rolling” through data alone is impossible. When school league tables are re-weighted by time spent by students at a school (rather than including only those completing secondary education as currently occurs), re-weighted “Progress 8” figures show a negative effect on 44 of the 62 MATs considered, with sponsored academies faring particularly badly (Thomson and Nye, 2018). It is emphasised that re-weighted data does not necessarily imply “off-rolling” but questioned whether MAT league tables “send the right message in terms of the importance of inclusion” (Nye and Thomson, 2018b). FFT methodology highlights the importance of the January in which students are in Year 11 in school league tables and, by implication, the competitive pressures on head teachers (Nye and Thomson, 2018c).

Currently, schools accepting students excluded from other schools in the preceding two years are permitted to exclude these from league table data.

In collaboration with FFT's Datalab, Ofsted reports that 19,000 Year 10 students (4%) in maintained mainstream secondary schools in 2016 failed to appear in Year 11 data in 2017; LAC (looked after children) and those eligible for FSM, from specific ethnic minorities and with SEN are over-represented (30% had SEN compared to 13% nationally) (Bradbury, 2018, 2019). It is, again, acknowledged that "it's not possible to know the full story of where students went to, and why, from school census data alone" (Bradbury, 2018). An uneven incidence of "possible off-rolling" is noted within academies; MATs display higher levels of student movement, although it remains unclear whether this is due to school policies. The FFT statistical model permits Ofsted to identify "exceptional" movements taking into account the factors mentioned above but also prior attainment (at KS2) and consistency of data over two years; of 2,900 schools that "lost some" students between Years 10 - 11, 560 experienced above average movements and 300 did so consistently over two years. In the following year, 720 and 340 schools experienced above average movement over two years, respectively; 22% of the 20,000 students leaving school rolls were from these 340 secondary schools (which comprise 11% of such schools nationally) and 60% of these had featured in the previous year's 300 schools that met Ofsted's criteria (Bradbury, 2019). However, of the 100 schools inspected between 1st September 2018 and 30th June 2019, only 5 received inspection reports mentioning "off-rolling" and inconsistencies in Ofsted judgements have been noted (Roberts, 2020).

It is unsurprising that participants in Gazeley et al.s' (2013) research position their schools as complying with statutory advice or exemplifying inclusionary practice given the illegality of "off-rolling" and the "impression management" characteristic of performativity cultures (Ball, 2003, p.221). Reliance on published exclusion data is warned against since no recorded

exclusions may, in fact, indicate that “*exclusion is happening informally*” (Gazeley et al., 2013, p.27) or “*dubious methods*” to manipulate exclusion rates (p.27). Meanwhile, in Bagley and Hallam (2015, p.441), school staff criticise LAs for merely “*box ticking*” and also other schools: “*They’re not gonna take the rubbish*”. Such common-sense understandings of what happens or may happen elsewhere have clearly been in circulation for several years but remain problematic to substantiate. Such ironic opacity has necessitated the constitution of “off-rolling” as an object of knowledge in a circular and self-reinforcing process. Efforts to quantify the extent of “off-rolling” raise further questions, and inconclusivity functions as the ostensible rationale for a proposed disciplining of school leaders.

Concluding remarks

Informal exclusionary practices are a function of the quasi-marketisation of the English educational sector and its corollary of a culture of performativity intended to sustain competitive forces in a neoliberal economic rationality (Ball, 2003). Policy discourse around “off-rolling” relies on fabrication and subjectivation processes that carry a regulatory normative force (Foucault, 1977, 1979, 1982, 2008; Popkewitz, 2013). Both processes have facilitated neoliberal public sector reform and the intensification of performativity. Policy discourse relating to “off-rolling” aimed at head teachers illustrates neoliberal governance as a “complicated interplay” of power and freedom (Foucault, 1982, p.790); both professional autonomy *and* greater control of actions are emphasised. Subjectivation does not preclude agency (Foucault, 1982; Youdell, 2006); nor are specific fabrications of exclusionary practices historically inevitable as historical developments in the U.S. and England suggest (Mehta, 2015). However, Ofsted’s (2019a) fabrication of “off-rolling” signifies the gaming of performance metrics by head teachers purportedly seeking to enhance their school’s ranking in league tables. It is a policy technology in which head teachers risk subjectivation as cynical gamers that disrespect the rules of the market order. The wider context and complex

circumstances informing their decision-making are neglected by Ofsted (2019a), including the tensions between economic and political rationalities. Ofsted's novel subjectivation of head teachers also fails to adequately address previously identified issues around class, race and ethnicity and gender, and their relation to both legal and illegal exclusionary practices.

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