

The impact of performance-related pay in teaching: is it fair for all?

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ABSTRACT

It has been a decade since the Department for Education (DfE) introduced the policy of performance-related pay (PRP) to schools across England. They sold the package to schools by stating, 'The new arrangements provide increased flexibility for schools to develop pay policies tailored to their particular needs' (DfE, 2013a). However, drawing on existing research, I illustrate in this paper the detrimental impact PRP has continued to have on the teaching profession. PRP has not only contributed to the continued gender pay gap among teachers, but has further disadvantaged and targeted teachers who are from marginalised groups in society. The dominance of neoliberal ideology, along with the culture of high-stakes testing, performativity and accountability within the profession, has led many teachers to reassess their position as policy actors. The relationship between government policymaking and the enactment of policy within schools, and thereby retention, is increasingly becoming a problem within the profession, and therefore needs to be reviewed.

INTRODUCTION

The discourse of policymaking within education has been a topic of both national and global debate. A large and growing body of literature has studied its complexities and enactment, concluding that it is multifaceted

(Ball *et al.*, 2012; Ball, 2017; Braun & Maguire, 2020). Thus, policy can be interpreted and enacted in a variety of ways depending on the context (Ball, 2017). We are currently living in a society where both government and educational institutions are heavily influenced by neoliberalism

(Braun & Maguire, 2020) and have proclaimed a culture of testing, performativity and accountability within teaching. Neoliberalism refers to an economic and political ideology that advocates free markets and marginal government involvement. The adoption of neoliberalism within

KEYWORDS

PERFORMANCE-RELATED PAY (PRP)

POLICYMAKING

NEOLIBERALISM

POLICY ENACTMENT

PERFORMATIVITY

ETHNICITY

GENDER PAY GAP

education policy in England was begun by the Thatcher government in the 1980s. The economic ambition behind it was to enable individual workers to gain higher skills and training, which would naturally lead to businesses booming, resulting in an increase of economic growth. In terms of education, it promotes marketisation policies and transferring services from government into private control: for example, parental choice over each child's best-fit school; schools' freedom from local authorities and the ability to pay teachers based on PRP. Neoliberalism has repurposed education and shifted it away from being viewed as a public good. Schools now operate in a competitive environment with a key focus on high-stakes testing and data performance.

This paper will focus on the policy of performance-related pay (PRP) in England, and will examine how it has affected teachers. I will begin with a brief historical overview of how the position of the teacher has evolved. I will then move on to concentrate on the specific policy mentioned above and the impact it has had on teachers in England. Not only has PRP contributed to the continued gender pay gap within education, it has further exacerbated the situation of teachers from marginalised groups in society. I will conclude by stating that the rise of performativity, tests and accountability through such neoliberal policies as PRP, has led many teachers to reassess their position as policy actors, and come to a realisation of how PRP has evidently reduced their autonomy within the profession. The relationship between government policymaking and the enactment of policy within schools, and thereby retention, is increasingly becoming a problem within the profession, and therefore needs to be reviewed.

POLICY CONTEXT

The Importance of Teaching (2010), published by the Department of Education (DfE) during the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government, stipulates

the importance of accountability, one of the many by-products of neoliberalism in education policymaking. The then Prime Minister, David Cameron (2010–16) stated that 'school autonomy, accountability for student performance, is critical to driving educational improvement' (DfE, 2010, p. 12). Although, as stated above, government education policy seems to promote individual schools' autonomy, a large and growing body of literature has contested this (Wilkins, 2011; Ball, 2017; Braun & Maguire, 2020). These studies confirm that the process of policymaking and enactment by teachers is not straightforward, and, in fact, has placed teachers in a vulnerable position.

Gewirtz & Cribb (2009) observed that education policymaking in England had recently been dominated by two opposing principles. First, competitive market forces transformed the provision of, and access to, state education in England. When services are deregulated, state involvement should inevitably reduce; however, this was not the case in education. Second, all of these new regulatory measures led to a heightened structure of checks and balances, highly recommended and advised by the government, for all schools to follow. In the contemporary context, we are still in the presence of these same neoliberal ideologies amongst the different political parties that determine England's policymaking and state education (Hill & Kumar, 2009).

The above is a brief summary of state education and policymaking in England and how neoliberalism has continued to be such a monumental component within this framework. In reality, governments have, historically, recycled policy, presenting it as new and innovative. PRP is one such example, and the consequence for teachers is reduced autonomy, rendering them as passive actors who merely enact policy without any power.

HOW TEACHERS ARE TARGETED BY PERFORMANCE-RELATED PAY

In 2013, during the Coalition government, the DfE published a press release 'New advice to help schools set performance-related pay'. In 2014, all teachers working in state schools in England were handed a rather complex policy, a new management system known as PRP. The government maintained that not rewarding expectational performance was a demotivating factor for teachers, justifying the decision to reintroduce a measure of teaching standards and procedures that had not been seen in education since the nineteenth century (The Newcastle Report, 1861).

The 2010–15 Coalition government's emphasis on high stakes, competition within the market and free choice began to push state schools into functioning like private businesses. PRP was used as a measuring device, and its correlation with improving teacher performance, from established research, and my own personal experience, is most certainly questionable. As a way of retaining and promoting teachers, 'performance-related pay for teachers is itself the subject of substantial debate' (Belfield & Heywood, 2008, p. 243). Ball (2017) argues that performativity for the teacher is a means of being controlled, compared and changed. It is a measure of productivity and output, and the performative teacher is there simply to ensure results are met. O'Neill & Adams (2012) found that, due to the demands on a performative teacher, less thought was given to the values and primacies of the child, which the teacher once regarded as highly important, in the face of other expectations of, and pressures on, the profession. PRP involved teachers meeting a set of targets that were linked to their appraisal objectives. The DfE (2013a) believed PRP would be the driving force to improve the quality of teaching provided in state schools for three main reasons: (1) rewarding good

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teachers by paying them more would (2) allow freedom for heads to attract teachers in specific subjects and (3) help recruit and retain excellent teachers.

During the first cycle of PRP in 2014, unions nationwide, such as the National Education Union (NEU) and UNISON, shared a collective attitude towards the new policy. All agreed that PRP was not a measurable or realistic framework to use within the teaching profession. 'The quality of teaching cannot be measured, quantified or ranked in the way PRP demands. Teaching is a professional skill rather than an exact science and schools are learning communities – good teachers build their students' achievement on foundations laid by other teachers and support staff' (NEU, 2022a).

Regardless of a child's starting point, the teacher was expected to ensure that children within their class all made 'accelerated progress'. School senior leadership teams (SLTs) suddenly overlooked the facts that not all children learn and progress in the same way and, within a class of 30 children, you are planning and teaching a wide range of social, emotional and academic abilities. Those who were part of SLT in schools were responsible for, and referred to, data and expected results considerably more. However, one of the PRP objectives would be related to a teacher's CPD. Somehow, this was never given the same weighting or support from the SLT. PRP had shifted the culture within the school and raised the profile of performativity and accountability.

Furthermore, PRP has been criticised because, when employed in schools, it can enable favouritism and be viewed as leading to cronyism, such as taking on friends and promoting favourites, and using proven good performance as a justification for doing so. 'It can be a highly subjective system that is open to the prejudice and bias' (Unison, 2019, p. 10). For many teachers, PRP was being viewed as a punishment for 'underperforming' or not being able

to execute the required objectives set. Teachers felt additional pressure knowing that, potentially, their salary may not automatically increase as it had done prior to PRP being introduced. The DfE advertised that PRP was an effective way of rewarding high-performing teachers within the profession. One might assume that this would be attractive to those new to the teaching profession. However, PRP has proven to be quite the opposite and rather a demotivating factor for many teachers. 'Teachers are stressed, overworked and demotivated by PRP and it is causing them to consider leaving the profession. Teacher recruitment and retention rates are a huge problem in England' (NEU, 2022a). This emphasises how PRP has not necessarily led to sustained teacher retention as expected by the DfE.

The gender pay gap in England is a long-standing phenomenon across various working sectors. When we analyse this further within the teaching profession, we can see that the inequality of gender and ethnicity pay has remained a rather complex issue across schools in England. The average annual pay for all women teachers in all state-funded schools including academies in England is £2,900 less than that of their male counterparts, with this gender pay gap still further widening when progressing to senior leadership roles in schools. According to the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT (2021, p. 4), 'regardless of school phase or structure, men typically earn more than women. The more senior the position, the wider the gulf becomes.' These results corroborate the findings of a great deal of work that has been conducted by the NEU (2022a, 2022b), who have continued to raise the issue of pay inequality within the profession and how the use of competitive PRP impacts the promotion of female teachers the most.

The NEU (2018) reported that, on average, women headteachers in state-funded schools earn £5,700 less than their male

counterparts, with the gender pay gap in leadership roles only further widening with age. Given that the majority of primary and secondary school teachers in England are women, the statistics vastly differ for male and female teachers. While 14% of teachers in state-funded primary and nursery schools are male, as many as 27% of primary and nursery school headteachers are men (NEU, 2021). If we now turn to data within secondary schools in England, around '36% of teachers are male, yet 62% of head teachers are men' (NEU, 2018). With regard to gendered differences in pay progression through PRP, those who were absent from work due to maternity leave or pregnancy 'had been denied progression. This was also twice the rate of female teachers denied progression overall' (NEU, 2018). This again demonstrates how PRP substantially contributes to the gender pay gap divide and disparity.

As discussed above, we can see that PRP and its problematic review system has added another layer to the long-standing gender pay gap divide within the teaching profession in England. It has also been proven that PRP does not just heighten gender inequality within promotion and pay progression: recent evidence has emerged that PRP also demonstrates and contributes to further discriminatory outcomes. For instance, the NEU's pay progression survey in 2021 exposed some alarming trends. This included data that indicated how PRP can specifically target and disadvantage teachers from a minority background. Contrary to expectations of how the government is working towards creating a socially just society, the NAHT (2022) reported, 'We've seen school leadership pay eroded for everyone over the last decade, but for those with protected characteristics, including leaders from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background, they risk facing a "double hit" as a result of inequalities in the pay system.' It was also found that black and Asian teachers were almost twice as likely as white respondents to report being turned down for pay

progression. In 2021, 85.1% of all teachers in state-funded schools in England were white British, with 92.5% of headteachers being white British (Gov.uk, 2023). We can see here that teachers from a minority ethnic background make up a rather small fraction of the teacher workforce, yet they continue to experience discrimination, racial and gender inequality, which ultimately prohibits promotion and progression opportunities, above all for those teachers who are women from an ethnic minority background. Therefore, discussions around the impact of PRP on social inequality in the teacher workforce in England cannot be ignored; as the evidence above suggests, it has exacerbated gender and ethnic pay differentials.

HOW TEACHERS ARE AFFECTED BY PERFORMANCE-RELATED PAY

Reasons for wanting to become a teacher are particularly linked to the social, emotional and child-centred aspects. An article in the *Times Educational Supplement* in 2016 stated, 'At the end of the day, teaching offers far more than just a pay cheque. You'll have a satisfying career, knowing that you've made a difference in many lives.' Like many teachers nationwide, choosing to become a teacher was not solely based on the salary one attains. There are various other motivations. If I was to ask the university students I currently teach, who are training to become teachers, why they chose a career in teaching, the responses would range over a variety of: personal, social and emotional factors. Much of the time, the discourse is around the emotional feeling and satisfaction you have when you can see the impact you have had on a child's learning journey. This is because teaching has 'psychological processes that influence teacher behaviour towards the achievement of educational goals; and the conditions and factors that promote commitment in teachers, allowing them to enjoy teaching and thus fulfil their goals'

(Salifu & Seyram Agbenyega, 2013, p. 70). The teaching profession is not mechanical and involves a wide range of duties and responsibilities that change on a daily basis. Schools are, for many children, a safe haven and their teacher can be the most consistent person in their lives. Hence, building positive relationships with the children you teach can have the greatest impact on a child's ability and overall progress (Baker, 2006). One of the main responsibilities a teacher has is to ensure they are 'accountable for pupils' attainment, progress and outcomes' (DfE, 2013b, p. 10). Student teachers are taught this from the inception of their teacher training course and are aware that, fundamentally, this is what they are responsible to ensure happens to all the pupils they teach. Therefore, PRP clearly does not determine whether teachers work hard or not to perform, as they know their primary role in the classroom is to ensure their pupils, irrespective of their background, make progress, not just academically but socially and emotionally too.

To no surprise, the majority of teachers across England opposed the PRP system when it was introduced in 2014, and held contrary views to those of the DfE. It left teachers feeling inadequate and that they were working within a private-like system. This is exemplified in the work undertaken by Farrell & Morris (2004), in which they found 'Teachers overwhelmingly disagreed that PRP would lead to more effective teaching or to improved pupil learning' (p. 91). They believed it was not an appropriate tool to use to measure teacher performance. These results are in agreement with those obtained in a report by Marsden (2015). His paper collected data on teachers' opinions about their experiences of the first cycle of PRP and of their schools' decisions about pay and rewards under the new system. When researching the impact of PRP on teachers, and their views on the process of its implementation in schools, he found that when PRP was first introduced in 2014, teachers did not feel that it had

changed or impacted their teaching and learning practice in any drastic way; if anything, PRP focused more on improving test scores and performativity within their schools.

As previously stated, teacher retention and recruitment in English schools has become a major concern. In 2018, the DfE carried out a qualitative investigation of this. The published report stated that one of the main reasons that there were high numbers of teachers leaving the profession, which is common knowledge, was workload pressures. It is interesting to also see that, within the inquiry, PRP was cited as one of the issues related to pay and performance management: 'Not agreeing with performance-related pay, particularly in primary schools where progress-related pay may not be completely under a teacher's control' (DfE, 2018, p. 27). Having worked in primary education for over a decade, I had personally experienced this in one of my PRP cycles. Pay scales within teaching in England are nationally agreed and published online. When entering the profession, a teacher begins on M1 on a scale that ranges from 1 to 6. Each academic year, a teacher will hope to automatically move up the teacher pay scale. Once you have reached M6 you are eligible to apply for threshold, which, if you are accepted, qualifies you as an Upper Pay Scale (UPS) teacher.

When a teacher reaches UPS, it becomes more difficult to make those incremental moves within these pay spine points and receive a pay rise. When a teacher applies for UPS, an application form must be completed, giving detailed evidence, in accordance with the teaching standards and PRP targets, as to why one deserves a pay increment and promotion. This is then submitted to a panel that involves governors of the school. A potential problem clearly exists around governors having control over a teacher's pay progression, given that 'discretion in school governing bodies in turn, raises the question of how far they are equipped

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to carry out such a role'. (Cutler & Waine, 1999, p. 64). In consolidation with the headteacher, the panel meets to determine whether or not the applicant deserves to move up from the main teaching pay scale to threshold or within other spine points of UPS. When looking at this particular example of PRP, the power lies in the hands of governors, who may have no experience of education, do not know the teacher and have not observed them teaching. If the panel rejects the application and a teacher is not accepted for a pay progression, they simply remain on their current pay scale and are able to reapply the following academic year. Having worked in primary education for over a decade, I had personally experienced this in one of my PRP cycles and was rejected for promotion. Interestingly, this is supported by the research conducted by the NEU (2022b, p. 10) who found that the fact that concerns over performance should be raised and addressed during the appraisal cycle appears to have been almost entirely ignored. Some 93% of those who were denied progression were given no indication during the year that they were failing to meet the required standards.

What is problematic here is that even if a teacher has worked consistently hard throughout the year, this PRP procedure does not work in favour of the teacher, who, in some instances, can be left unaware and demotivated.

'Teachers' positions on their respective pay scales influence the opportunities and risks they experience with the new scheme' (Marsden, 2015, p. 13). If this is looked at in more detail, the experiences of the impact of PRP on main-scale and UPS teachers differed. The views expressed by UPS teachers were more negative: 'Upper Pay Scale teachers are more negative about the questions on fairness and recognition, and more pessimistic on delivery, except for possible favouritism' (Marsden, 2015, p. 13). These varying viewpoints from teachers were mostly due to the fact that

PRP had created the opportunity for pay progression to happen more quickly for those who were main pay scale teachers. The effect of PRP was causing a higher rate of discomfort and anxiety to those more experienced teachers.

To summarise, the literature identifies that what needs to be considered is that PRP cannot be used as a straightforward quality assurance method within the teaching profession. Together, the literature discussed provides important insights into how PRP ignores the fact that 'quality of teaching cannot be measured, quantified or ranked in a way PRP demands' (NEU, 2022a). There are varying responsibilities of a teacher, and a holistic approach must be reflected and considered when evaluating teacher performance. One must also acknowledge that other factors assist in the positive progress and attainment of a child. For example, PRP does not recognise the importance of collaborative learning and working amongst staff in schools, which has a positive effect on the relationships built with the children. Policymakers need to consider the control PRP has over teachers if they want to regain trust from those working in the profession and to tackle the continued teacher recruitment problem across England.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the policy of PRP and those of the past have persistently managed to undermine teachers' knowledge, position and their voice in education and as policy actors. Ultimately 'The quality of teaching cannot be measured, quantified or ranked in the way PRP demands' (NEU, 2022a). Government policymaking and the vast influence of neoliberalism and global competition in education have led to a rise in performativity and accountability within the profession and a reduction in the autonomy of teachers within their own classrooms. Research in this paper has outlined the impact of neoliberalism in policymaking within education and how it has managed to shift the purpose

of education and created an environment of high-stakes testing and performativity within the teaching profession. It has built a culture within state education of constant accountability, where data and league tables are the driving force within schools.

Neoliberalism and PRP have accentuated various other problems within the teaching profession, such as operating within an environment of increased workload and intense pressure. Therefore, it can be argued that the combination of neoliberalism and PRP to assess and evaluate teacher performance is one of the main reasons why, in recent years, a high proportion of teachers have left the profession. '[R]espondents (82%) have considered leaving teaching due to concerns about pay levels or PRP. This is up significantly from 60% last year and 63% the year before' (NEU, 2022b, p. 5). Some other facets of the problem, such as workload and emotional pressures of teaching, lack of confidence in the opportunity for, and fairness of, pay progression, and teachers' own beliefs, values and pedagogy, simply cannot be disregarded. Hence, it is vital to resume enquiry into the impact of neoliberalism on education aims, processes and policies. Surely, the government should wish to have a nation of teachers who manifest a culture within the classroom that will build a love of learning, develop critical thinking, deliver a broad and balanced curriculum and equip children with the relevant skills needed to succeed in today's complex society.

The discussion around education policy in this paper provides an insight into why policymaking remains contested and complex. Despite this, we witness how policymakers disregard the views and valid opinions of teachers and impose policies such as PRP that ultimately discriminate most against women and those from a minority ethnic background within the teaching profession. In order for real education reform to take place, policymakers must now consider

and foster an innovative approach to policymaking that is inclusive and more equitable. Greater efforts are needed to ensure that dialogue with educators and teachers is kept open and their recommendations taken on board by government, as they are the individuals who enact these policies. Schools are the fighting grounds to develop the minds of children in becoming socially just citizens. Unless this imperative stance and position is taken on board by the government, England's education system will see history continue to repeat itself and education policymaking remain as a continuum. ■

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