National Improvement Framework and teacher identity:

a (re)turn to performativity in Scotland?

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To inform policy aimed at reducing the attainment gap between the most and least advantaged children, the Scottish Government reintroduced standardised national tests in 2017 as a core element of the National Improvement Framework (NIF). While standardised assessment can provide valuable information to enable policy formation, when used within a performative culture for accountability and control purposes it can alter the meaning and purposes of education and teaching. This article explores performativity within the context of English schools in order to draw parallels with the Scottish context and forecast a potential future for Scotland's schools with particular attention to the impact of performativity on teacher identity.

INTRODUCTION

[C]ommitment to education has been part of our national story, part of our very sense of ourselves.

(Sturgeon, 2016)

The distinctiveness of its education system and a commitment to social justice are central to Scotland's national identity (Humes & Bryce, 2013). Since the First Minister's 2016 statement, Scottish education has gone through a number of changes including the reintroduction of standardised national assessments (SNSAs) as a central element of the National Improvement Framework (NIF) (Scottish Government 2016c). The online SNSAs were introduced to Primaries 1, 4 and 7 and Secondary 3 in 2017 with the intention of providing reliable data which would support the closing of the attainment gap. While standardised testing can provide valuable information to enable policy formation (Stone-Johnson, 2014), when used within a performative culture for accountability and control purposes it can alter the meaning and purposes of education and teaching.

It is the intention of this article to explore the impact of the introduction of these tests and determine whether the direction of Scotland's education policy is, possibly unintentionally, drifting towards a performative culture with associated negative implications for equality and teacher identity. To illustrate this argument, examples will be drawn from the English education system, where performative policies are deeply embedded, to allow the forecasting of possible outcomes for Scotland.

PERFORMATIVITY AND THE SCOTTISH CONTEXT

Underpinned by neoliberal ideology, performativity is described by Ball (2003) as one of three entwined policy technologies, alongside marketisation and managerialism. Together they form an education reform 'package' to distance education from state-centred welfarism in order align more closely with the practices and cultures of the private sector. Performativity controls and incentivises behaviours by harnessing technologies of power such as performance management, high-stakes assessment and the publication of league tables (ibid.). Performative discourse redefines the 'value' of education, so it becomes synonymous with the effectiveness of the education offered by a school (Keddie & Lingard, 2015). Performance on accountability measures such as high-stakes assessment enables judgements on effectiveness to be easily made. Education thus becomes a commodity for parents to select, which stimulates schools to compete. Supposedly, the value-for-money offered to the government is thus assured (Klinger & Rogers, 2011). Indeed, the introduction of such reforms was partly intended to increase transparency of schools and make them more immediately accountable to parents. Proponents of performative technologies may share a 'moral purpose' (Barber, 2004: 7) with educators to improve outcomes and believe that accountability instruments guarantee this improvement. However, there can be various unintended consequences of these policies. To achieve the advantages of accountability, according to Barber (ibid.), goals are clear, progress towards their achievement is measured and success rewarded. Targets and goals are set by the state, and performative measures ensure that these are met. However, this can lead to goal displacement whereby the means to achieve a goal become goals in themselves, resulting in a narrowing of education to only what is measurable,

at the expense of wider education aims (Hutchings, 2015). The performative culture discussed above is predominantly, though not exclusively, drawn from the English context where neoliberalism is deeply rooted and has had a significant impact on education (Jones, 2009). In order to determine whether Scottish schools are on a similar path having re-introduced standardised national tests, it would be helpful to examine the Scottish context and identify any pre-existing parallels with the English context.

Lipman states that 'neoliberal restructuring is "path-dependent" – taking different forms in different contexts shaped by specific histories, and relations of social forces' (2009: 68). It would be useful, therefore, to explore the background of performativity within the Scottish context prior to the introduction of SNSAs. Whereas neoliberal policy technologies of performativity, marketisation and managerialism have combined to radically alter English education over the past 30 years, they have had less of an obvious impact in Scotland, although their effects can still be seen. Priestley *et al*. (2012) consider that Scotland is like England in several ways, including a top-down approach to reform and in accountability measures, particularly in terms of inspection. While Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIe) could be considered more supportive than Ofsted, it is nonetheless influential and, as in England, schools and local authorities often perform in ways which they believe HMIe would expect (Priestley &Bradfield, 2021). Perryman *et al*. (2011) identify the frequent criticism levelled at education in England as a contributory factor in the public acceptance of the neoliberal reforms experienced in England since the 1980s. Education in Scotland forms part of the national consciousness and has traditionally been well respected (Arnott & Menter, 2007). However, there has been mounting evidence of disquiet as education policies have attracted increasing criticism, particularly in light of Scotland's 2016 Programme

for International Student Assessment (PISA) performance (eg Johnson, 2016). Scotland is subject to the same global pressures as England, and PISA results influence educational discourse (Humes & Bryce, 2013). It could be said that Scotland is entering its own 'PISASchock', or more appropriately PISA Scunner,[1] as it dropped down the international league table. While the decision to reintroduce standardised testing was made before the publication of the most recent PISA results, they have contributed to the reform agenda:

Looking at the data, the status quo is not an option. Change is needed, change is happening and more change is coming

(Swinney, 2017)

STANDARDISED TESTING IN SCOTLAND

Standardised testing is not new in Scotland. As part of the 5–14 Curriculum (5–14), introduced in the 1990s, there were five attainment levels and at the end of each was a standardised test. While they were not intended to be high-stakes and the results were never published, the tests were used for planning, target-setting and to hold teachers and schools to account. Strategies to improve results were adopted as teachers felt pressure to ensure children were at the 'correct' level for their age. While there was some initial resistance from teachers, these tests were cancelled only in 2003 (Cassidy, 2013). While the introduction of SNSAs in August 2017 was the first time in nearly 15 years that tests had been issued at a national level, it is important to bear in mind that 28 of Scotland's 32 local authorities continued to issue tests and gather test data. Early announcements of the SNSAs emphasised the low-stakes nature of these tests (Scottish Government, 2019), but before the tensions within that claim can be examined, another policy with significant implications for performativity within Scotland requires examination.

Previously, Scotland did not publish official league tables, although local authorities

had their own tables and newspapers would, and continue to, publish their own unofficial tables (Priestley & Bradfield, 2021). Despite declaring in November 2016 that the new tests' results would not be used to form league tables (Scottish Government, 2016a), in December 2016 the decision to publish individual schools' Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) levels was announced (Scottish Government, 2016d). While the creation of a quasi-market of education has not taken hold as it has in England (Bhattacharya, 2021), parents with the capital to do so can vote with their feet (Hardie, 1982). The impact of the introduction of what is essentially an assessment-based league table remains to be seen, but observation of the English context gives reasons for concern. Stone-Johnson (2014) reflects that standardisation has the potential to draw attention to areas of need to enable the redistribution of resources to narrow attainment gaps (as is the intention in Scotland). However, as will be shown, even assessment systems intended to be low-stakes can exhibit the negative consequences of high-stakes assessment where there are additional components of a performative system such as inspection or league tables. Stevenson & Wood (2013) reject the term 'unintended consequences' as it presupposes that 'their occurrence could not have been anticipated' (p. 50). Certainly, the Scottish Government would be naive to believe that Scottish education would somehow be immune to the pressures of performativity given existent policies, the policies to be introduced and the history of 5–14.

SCOTTISH IDENTITY

Performativity can not only shape institutions but also change the essence of what it means to be a teacher (Ball, 2003). Teaching is often described as being imbued with a 'tremendous sense of moral purpose' (Carter, 2015: 4). Performative practices have the potential to disrupt a teacher's identity by generating a values schism (Ball, 2003).

Day *et al*. argue:

If identity is a key influencing factor on teachers' sense of purpose... then investigation of those factors which influence positively and negatively, the contexts in which these occur and the consequences... is essential.

(2006: 601)

Buchanan (2015) argues that placing the profession in its social and historical context is important for understanding identity. Therefore, it would be useful now to identify aspects of the education system which may influence the identity of Scottish teachers. Politically, Scotland is traditionally to the left of England and it could be argued that part of Scotland's political identity was formed as a reaction against the Conservative government policies of the 1980s and 1990s. Under the UK's New Labour government, a Labour–Liberal Democrat coalition led Holyrood for much of the time. As a result, education policies were more closely aligned, leading to some of the performative practices discussed (Arnott & Menter, 2007). Despite there being some alignment, Scottish education is, nonetheless, strongly linked with the national consciousness (Humes & Bryce, 2013).

If identity is partly formed by contrast with an 'other', then being Scottish is formed, in part, by not being English. Education in Scotland is lauded as one of three institutions – the others being the law and the Kirk – that distinguish Scottish culture from that of England (ibid.). This institution has a strong democratic element which has produced a sense of policy cohesion between stakeholders (Jones, 2009). Provision of schooling is more uniform than in England, with the state providing comprehensive education for most children (Furlong & Lunt, 2016). While there may be a general belief in the importance of education for society and a prominent social justice rhetoric within policy, the commitment to social justice may be oversold (Humes & Bryce, 2013). While this may well be true, it could also be said that these 'ideas and values are

grounded in the specifics of Scottish culture and history' (Hearn, 2000: 4) to the extent that, even if they are not supported by historical evidence, they still form an important part of Scottish identity and, concomitantly, part of Scottish teachers' identity. Therefore, any policy which may disrupt this sense of educational fairness must be considered in relation to the possible impact on the identities of those charged with its implementation:

The SNP government has the challenge of managing the tensions between pressures for modernisation and competitiveness and the maintenance of national integrity and traditions. (Furlong & Lunt, 2016: 250)

By introducing standardised testing, the attempt to meet this challenge is likely to become overwhelmed by a performative culture which threatens the government's commitment to social justice and teachers' moral sense of self.

MODEL INTRODUCED BY SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT

Launched by First Minister Nicola Sturgeon in early 2016, the National Improvement Framework (NIF) for Scottish Education identified assessment of children's progress as a key driver of improvement (Scottish Government, 2016b). The NIF is one of three supporting policies of the government's commitment to the Scottish Attainment Challenge, itself based on the London Challenge. The NIF outlines the government's intention to replace the various assessments currently used by local authorities with online standardised tests for pupils in Primaries 1, 3 and 7 and in Secondary 3. In a document with a limited evidence base, it is declared that '[d]ata gathered on children's progress is essential to achieving excellence and equity' (Scottish Government, 2016d: 7). Keddie & Lingard (2015) argue that gathering data through large-scale testing regimes has had some success at identifying underperformance and areas in need of additional resourcing.

However, they also warn that the data can 'paper over the complexities of equity and disadvantage and fail to recognise the subtleties of context in shaping school performance' (p. 1119). This is echoed, to some degree, in a report for the Rowntree Foundation which argues that pupil attainment data will develop understanding of the curriculum's impact on equity (Sosu & Ellis, 2014). The report cautions that 'active measures' (p. 43) must be taken to avert the development of a high-stakes testing regime although, unhelpfully, it does not elucidate what these active measures might be. Nor does the NIF's supporting documentation clarify the meaning of 'intelligent use' in its intention 'to encourage the intelligent use of data... with the primary focus on driving improvement rather than simply for accountability' (Scottish Government, 2017, emphasis added). This is an important point because, although the government steadfastly maintains that these tests are not high-stakes (eg Scottish Government, 2016a), some argue that other assessment regimes, including Scotland's, intended to be low-stakes still demonstrate some negative side effects commonly found in high-stakes assessment systems (eg Cassidy, 2013). Given the Scottish Government's insistence on the low-stakes nature of the assessment, Lingard's (2010) account of low-stakes assessment in Australia rapidly becoming high-stakes when coupled with the publication of school data may invite uncomfortable comparisons, especially when one considers the government's decision to publish individual school Achievement of CfE Levels (ACEL) online.3 Taken together, there is ample rationale for concerns about the potential for a return to performativity in Scotland's schools as a result of the reintroduction of standardised assessment under the NIF.

POSSIBLE IMPACT ON EQUITY

Closing the attainment gap [is] a defining challenge over the next few years... And all of this action to close the attainment gap leads on to another issue – that of assessment and evidence. After all, we can only drive rapid and significant improvement if we know in detail what the extent of the gap is.

(Sturgeon, 2016)

While Barber claims 'accountability systems have been the key to driving equity' (2004: 10), there is considerable evidence that accountability pressures can distort practices and, by focusing on certain groups, undermine commitments to equality (Stevenson & Wood, 2013). Indeed, performativity can redefine social justice in terms of the 'relationship between students' social class backgrounds and performance on test results' (Keddie & Lingard, 2015: 1120). Some commentators argue that the potential for performativity can deepen inequalities within the education system itself. Keddie (2017) argues that performativity promotes a competition between schools in which some are labelled 'good' and others 'bad'. The value of the former increases at the expense of the latter. As the 'bad' schools are more likely to be working with an underprivileged student body, 'these circumstances have reinforced stratification and segregation within the system and increased the gap between privileged and under-privileged schools' (Keddie, 2017: 3). Valli & Buese (2007) support this view and argue that high-stakes accountability unfairly affects teachers and students working within schools with higher than average rates of disadvantaged students. For these schools, the pressure to perform and improve is greater and, correspondingly, so is the risk of experiencing the disaffection associated with 'failure' (Hutchings, 2015). Parental choice within the market of schooling dictates, to a certain degree, the funding available for schools. As mentioned previously, Scottish schools are not marketised in the same way and funding is more equitable, which may protect schools from the worst excesses of performativity's impact on inequality. However, according to Harlen (2005), high-stakes assessment is found to alter the practice of teachers, who shift focus to teaching for test, thus producing some of the inequalities outlined above. In a nation with an arguably strong attachment to social justice, a policy which may in fact worsen inequality may cause tension for those who must enact it.

The way teachers react to this moral schism is, to an extent, influenced by the length of their careers. More experienced teachers view performative culture as being in conflict with their notion of professionalism, whereas newer teachers seem not to feel this as acutely (Stone-Johnson, 2014; Buchanan, 2015). This may be partly due to the influence of teachers' own educational experiences on their sense of teacher identity. Wilkins argues that England is in a 'post-performative era' where the performative culture does not produce the same values schism for newer teachers as it does for their more experienced colleagues (2011: 405). This could be cautiously extended to Scotland, as teachers younger than 40 would have been taught under 5–14 so they may greet the reintroduction of standardised testing with neither compliance nor resistance (Wilkins, 2011). Some academics argue that, far from being passive, teachers have agency and can choose to accept or resist (eg Buchanan, 2015). Resisting top-down reform is difficult, however, as those in power tend to be 'defenders of the discourse' (Perryman *et al.*, 2011: 121). For others, over-regulation of their work can lead them to feel demoralised and demotivated (Valli & Buese, 2007). Those who feel morally compromised by the consequences of high-stakes assessment may feel they have no option but to leave the profession, which may lead to the realisation of Robinson's bleak future:

While external factors define, impose and control teachers, the professional gradually becomes redefined in those terms and their work, even those who maintain such values..., becomes re-shaped and re-formed or so disenchanted that they opt out and exit, leaving the managers and controllers behind.

(2014: 17)

EARLY FINDINGS

The test is meant to be low stakes and is at risk of becoming medium stakes, but it is not at all high stakes. (Education and Skills Committee, 2019: 51)

Humes & Priestley (2021) argue that the accountability mechanisms that developed under the 5–14 Curriculum have continued under the CfE despite its emphasis on professional autonomy. This continuation is due to the global pressures from, for example, PISA, and national pressures such as inspections based on predetermined performance indicators. Priestley & Bradfield (2021) make brief mention of standardised assessment (but not specifically SNSAs) leading to a narrower curriculum and teaching to test, particularly in secondary schools, and recommend a return to sampling-based testing. There is little recent research generally on performativity in Scottish schools, and scarcer still are studies which examine performativity and the SNSAs. Those that do exist (eg Peace-Hughes, 2021), do identify standardised assessments (again, not specifically SNSAs) as having some negative impact, but these studies are limited in number. It is therefore difficult to draw firm conclusions as to the impact, positive or negative, that the SNSAs have had.

The introduction of the SNSAs was greeted with negativity from the media and some political corners. While some of this initial hostility may have abated, SNSAs, particularly those issued in Primary 1, are still contentious amongst some commentators. The 'Play Not Tests in P1' campaign began following the first tranche of SNSAs in August 2018, although based on concerns around the impact of SNSAs on play-based pedagogies (Palmer, 2019). This movement led to a parliamentary vote on whether to abandon the P1 tests (which passed 63 to 61) and the commission of an independent review of the evidence on standardised assessment in P1. This review found that as the purpose of SNSAs was to provide formative and diagnostic data and the school-level data was not held by the Scottish Government for the purposes of league tables, then the risks of the tests becoming high-stakes were mitigated. Responses from P1 teachers demonstrated that they found the tests useful for identifying gaps in learning. Those who were negative towards the tests were found to have not received training on the administration of the SNSAs (Reedy, 2019). While this presents a positive picture of the SNSAs, there is still perhaps cause for concern. The report concludes that the P1 SNSAs have the potential to contribute to school improvement (ibid.). Priestley & Bradfield (2021) highlight school improvement based on performance indicators as a mechanism of governance which exists in Scotland, and it could be said that using the SNSA data in this way could exacerbate this. Furthermore, while no official league tables exist, the Scottish media annually produce their own. Media attention and parental anxiety could potentially charge the atmosphere surrounding the SNSAs and drive them to be high-stakes assessment (Education and Skills Committee, 2019). Turning to the administration of the tests themselves, there are further areas of concern.

Official guidance is that teachers, in consultation with their schools, decide on the best time to issue the SNSAs to their class (SNSA, n.d.). This would support the government's argument that the tests are formative and to be used 'as a diagnostic tool within the education system' (Redford, 2019: 145). This could perhaps militate against a high-stakes assessment-based accountability system as, arguably, in this way the tests are not truly standardised and results cannot, therefore, be reliably compared. However, some local authorities have imposed on schools set times of the year for use of SNSAs (ibid.). This raises the possibility that the school-level data gathered by local authorities could be used as key performance indicators to drive school improvement.

CONCLUSION

The Scottish Government's reintroduction of standardised national testing is ostensibly motivated by social justice and the desire to narrow the attainment gap between the most and least deprived pupils. This paper has set out to argue that, despite the worthy rationale, there is nonetheless a change of direction towards a return to the performativity experienced in Scottish schools in the 1990s. To date, there is too little research on the relationship between the SNSAs and performativity in Scottish schools to be able to draw firm conclusions as to whether the former is increasing the latter. Perhaps some of the initial concerns surrounding their introduction have been assuaged as evidence shows that teachers do find them useful (Reedy, 2019). However, there is still reason to suggest that SNSAs have the potential to become an accountability measure. Until there is further research, and until the SNSAs are fully embedded in schools without Covid lockdowns to contend with, it is too early to determine the full impact of the reintroduction of performativity within Scottish schools. However, it would be wise to remain cautious as, despite repeated protestations that the tests are not high-stakes, parallel policies such as inspection and publication of data combine to create the conditions where even low-stakes assessment can produce the negative effects of a high-stakes accountability regime which may have the potential to increase inequality within the education system. ∎

ENDNOTES

[1]Strong dislike or irritation.

[2]While not the most up-to-date example, I have referenced this newspaper article as I was a pupil at Broughton High School at the time of its publication. My mother was insensed and wrote to *The Scotsman* to defend the school's reputation.

[3]Percentages of children achieving the Curriculum for Excellence levels are published, not the individual school's SNSA results.

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