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Conceptualizing Teacher Professional Identity in Neoliberal times: Resistance, Compliance and Reform

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Abstract: This article examines the dramatic implications of the turn towards neo-liberal education policies for teachers' professional identities. It begins with an analysis of some of the key features of this policy shift including marketization, metricization and managerialism and the accompanying elevation of performativity. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of this turn for teachers in which a new professionalism of increasing regulation and restrictions upon practice in a policy environment dominated by neo-liberalism act to restrict and confine professional identity formation and development. Drawing upon data collected within English schools the article explores how teachers have responded to this new policy environment in ways that are sensitive to how neo-liberal policy has been re-contextualized and re-translated in different educational settings. This reveals both the power of this New Right inspired permanent revolution of educational change

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in English schools and the complexities of how it has been variously embraced, accommodated and resisted by teachers. The article concludes with a discussion that explores the meaning of resistance in the context of what are identified as restricted teacher professional identities where affordances for professional practices lying outside of neo-liberal subjectivities have been dramatically reduced.

Keywords: new public management, neoliberalism, teacher professionalism, resistance, educational policy

Conceptualizando la Identidad Profesional Docente en Tiempos Neoliberales: Resistencia, Conformidad y Reforma.

Resumen: Este artículo examina las implicaciones dramáticas del giro hacia políticas educativas neoliberales para las identidades profesionales de los docentes. Empieza con un análisis de algunas de las características principales de estos cambios, incluyendo la marketización, la medición, managerialismo y la creciente importancia de la performatividad. Sigue con una discusión de las implicancias para los docentes de un nuevo profesionalismo con crecientes regulaciones y restricciones sobre su práctica, que en un ambiente dominado por el neoliberalismo, actúan para restringir la formación y desarrollo de la identidad profesional. Utilizando datos recogidos en escuelas inglesas, el artículo indaga sobre cómo los docentes han respondido a este ambiente político dando cuenta de las maneras a través de las cuales las políticas neoliberales han sido re contextualizadas y retraducidas en distintos contextos educativos. Esto revela el poder de esta revolución permanente de cambios educativos inspirados por la Derecha Nueva en el contexto de las escuelas Inglesas y las complejidades respecto a cómo han sido aceptadas, acomodadas y resistidas por los docentes. El artículo concluye con una discusión que explora el significado de la resistencia en el contexto de identidades profesionales restringidas, donde las posibilidades de prácticas profesionales ubicadas fuera de las subjetividades neoliberales han sido reducidas dramáticamente.

Palabras-clave: nuevo gerencialismo público; neoliberalismo; profesionalismo docente; resistencia; políticas educativas

Conceptualização Identidade Profissional do Professor em Tempos Neoliberais: Resistência, Complacência e Reforma.

Resumo: Este artigo examina as dramáticas implicações da mudança das políticas de educação neoliberais para as identidades profissionais dos professores. Começa com uma discussão de algumas das principais características destas alterações, incluindo a mercantilização, medição, gerencialismo e da crescente importância da performatividade. Continua com uma discussão sobre as implicações para professores de um novo profissionalismo com o aumento da regulamentação e as restrições à sua prática, que em uma sala dominada por ato neoliberalismo para restringir a formação e o desenvolvimento da identidade profissional. Usando dados coletados em escolas de inglês, o artigo explora a forma como os professores têm respondido a este ambiente político perceber as formas através das quais as políticas neoliberais foram recontextualizadas e retraduzidos em diferentes contextos educacionais. Isso mostra o poder desta revolução permanente de mudanças educacionais inspiradas pela Nova Direita no contexto das escolas Inglesas e as complexidades nas formas como elas foram aceitas, acomodadas e resistidas por professores. O artigo conclui com uma discussão que explora o significado da resistência no contexto das identidades profissionais restritas, onde as possibilidades de práticas profissionais localizados fora das subjetividades neoliberais foram reduzidas drasticamente.

Palavras-chave: novo gerencialismo público; neoliberalismo; profissionalismo docente; resistência; políticas educativas

The New Public Management (NPM) is now a well established feature of efforts to modernize public sector service provision in England and it is over a decade since the NPM in this context was pronounced as middle aged (Hood & Peters, 2004). In education NPM has been a central feature of reform efforts in this context since the Thatcher led administrations of 1979-1990 created a newly legible education system organized around a National Curriculum with national testing as part of the creation of a so-called 'Standards Agenda' alongside the creation of local educational quasi-markets in which schools ranked through league tables were expected to compete with one another for 'customers.'

The continued ascendancy of a neo-liberally interpreted NPM in the field of education during subsequent Conservative, New Labour and Coalition governments and an accompanying deluge of educational reforms resulting in an epochal shift from public to private forms of educational provision have predominated to the extent that the term post-NPM is now viewed as a more appropriate label to characterize the educational policy-making environment in England (Hall & Gunter, 2016). In addition to the continuation of consumerist and marketized elements of schooling described above and the strengthening and refinement of those performative technologies of control now so strongly associated with NPM the post-Thatcher era reform process has also taken the form of ever more determined efforts to undermine the common or comprehensive school.

This is being done through the promotion of a marketized model of school diversity designed both to emulate elite, private schooling and to reassign increasing numbers of schools so that they become increasingly distanced from a pathologized public sector (Clarke & Newman 1997); a process distinguishable as educational privatization (Ball, 2007; Burch, 2006, 2009; Hall & Gunter, 2016). The New Labour Academies program which sought to displace the localized basis of state schooling with corporate finance and control (West & Bailey, 2013) and the subsequent Academies Act 2010 that has succeeded in converting over fifty per cent of secondary schools in England to Academy status has been a particular feature of this process.

It is within this policy context that the current article aims to conceptualize teacher professional identity in England, and in particular to illustrate how opportunities for resistance have become increasingly restrictive under the current 'regimes of practice' (Gunter and Forrester, 2009, p.496). The data drawn on for this paper suggests a high level of compliance amongst teachers working in schools in England with regards to the reconceptualization of their work and their identities. It reveals that their professional identities have been co-opted by a managerial NPM identity so that teacher professionals have been recreated as managers with a discourse dominated by professionalism and leadership. For some there are tensions between developing professional identities which embrace some of the more powerful and dominant aspects of the neoliberal agenda on school reform such as the encroachment of private and corporate enterprise into schooling and curriculum structures through the Academies program, and their personal and professional values and beliefs. For all the teachers within this analysis professionalism has become ineluctably tied up with compliance even where accompanied by personal or professional resistance. This is characterized as an adaptive professional compliance in which resistance is emasculated to enable the continuation of a viable professional identity in an educational environment marked by aggressive neo-liberalism.

Teacher professionalism in England

Directly associated with the rise of NPM has been the parallel emergence of a new professionalism in which trust, partnership, collegiality and discretion have increasingly been

replaced by performance review, standardization, assessment and managerialism (Evetts, 2009). Such transformations are not unique to the English context however, and parallels can be drawn with work in the USA in which restrictive, data driven processes are detected in relation to the enactment and appropriation of centrally devised policies, such as the No Child Left Behind agenda (Koyama, 2011). This new professionalism is a markedly restricted version of a previously well established professionalism where a so-called third logic (Friedson, 2001) enabled professionals via their occupational roles to exert significant control both inside and outside of their organizations; a form of professionalism referred to as occupational (Evetts, 2004).

In this new version of professionalism, it has been asserted, controls from below have largely been replaced by controls 'from above' so that occupational professionalism is replaced by organizational professionalism (Evetts, 2009). In this latter version professionals are dominated by forces external to the profession through the commercial logics of the market and the managerialist logics of the organization. For public sector service workers the rise of NPM has been key to the development of this new professionalism and it is directly associated with a particular variant of organizational professionalism referred to here as NPM professionalism; one that has been shaped by the specific nature of reforms associated with this phenomenon (Evetts, 2011). It is argued in this article that professionals working in the education sector in England have been strongly exposed to this NPM professionalism and that the particular forms it has taken on in this specific context are important in revealing the way in which NPM has played out both as a global and local force.

Restricted Occupational Professionalism

Whilst the development of teacher professionalism in England cannot be read off from the above there are nevertheless strong convergences with the foregoing analysis in particular those relating to the changes in professionalism arising out of the NPM. Prior to NPM teachers in England had been subject to what has been described as a bureau professionalism (Clarke & Newman, 1997) in which teachers were granted a licensed autonomy (Dale, 1989) exerting significant control over aspects of their work. This pre-NPM teacher professionalism can be characterized as a more restricted form of occupational professionalism in which teachers enjoyed considerable autonomy within their classrooms exercising high degrees of discretion in relation to their teaching and with significant trust invested in their role. It must be noted though that this autonomy for teachers frequently did not extend beyond the classroom on account of the considerable powers invested in headteachers/principals, in particular over the goals of schools and their administrative structures (Hoyle, 1974). Consequently this period of bureau professionalism might therefore not best be viewed as a golden era (Hargreaves, 1994) tightly aligned to an ideal type of occupational professionalism, but one marked simultaneously both by restrictions and significant levels of autonomy.

The subsequent decay of this restricted occupational professionalism for teachers has been well documented and analyzed by a number of writers (Gewirtz, 2002; Gleeson & Husbands 2003; Mahony & Hextall, 2000; Ozga, 1995; Robertson, 1996). What emerges from these accounts are detailed analyses of the development of a new professionalism in which teachers increasingly found themselves controlled by metricized, marketized and managerialist processes (Hall, 2013) identified as forming the classic NPM troika (O'Reilly & Reed, 2011). The narrow, instrumentalist and tightly managed performance regime that has emerged from this had been engineered to conform to the strictures of the wider NPM reform movement in ways that have been experienced by teachers in many national locations beyond England (Cohen, 2013; Hall et al., 2013; Montecinos et al., 2013). Accordingly teachers have been increasingly positioned as technicians (Ball, 2003; Coffield, 2012; Lieberman, 1992; Whitty, 2006) and deliverers of agendas determined by national policy elites in a

marketized environment where competition between and within schools has become key to individual and institutional survival.

In England the cult of ‘deliverology’ (Barber et al., 2010) was an especially fanatical manifestation of this trend towards coercive forms of accountability (Shore & Wright, 2000). Deliverology cast teachers as the white van men of education responsible for ‘delivering’ in the classroom policies determined on the sofa of No. 10 Downing Street (Campbell, 2011). In this policy environment, where failure to deliver in classrooms was to become ineluctably associated with national economic disaster (Stronach, 2009); efficiency, effectiveness and productivity emerged as the hallmarks of success in the classroom (Fitzgerald, 2008; Gewirtz et al., 2009) and with teaching therefore increasingly aligned with the organizational requirements of deliverology (Butt & Gunter, 2007). This involved the development of metrics focused upon the measuring of educational efficiency and effectiveness which became central to performance management in a data driven climate. Accompanying these changes a new managerialism (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Gewirtz 2002) evolved to seek the compliance of students, teachers and schools with the performance demands of this regime with a view to ensuring that managerially derived agendas predominated in establishing both individual and institutional priorities.

Alongside this dirigiste regime of performativity schools came to operate within competitive markets hierarchically ordered according to their efficiency and effectiveness. Unsurprisingly this process has been associated with a re-allocation of values with regards to the purposes of education (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), a further erosion of the discretion and judgment so fundamental to the newly outmoded occupational professionalism.

There have been various attempts to characterize the effects upon teachers in England of the neo-liberal reforms described above. Whilst it is worth noting that an early, optimistic view was that the reforms of education would enable opportunities for teachers to forge a new professionalism based upon greater collaboration and collegiality, with a focus upon whole school policy and orientated around student achievement and learning (Hargreaves, 1994), far more pervasive and persuasive have been accounts linked to macro-structural changes associated with NPM that have emphasized the diminishment of individual and collective teacher autonomy and power (Gewirtz et al., 2009). Such critical accounts of changes to teacher professionalism under NPM stress attempts to manufacture teachers as compliant operatives (Smyth, 2001) in a system where the diminishment of their professionalism has been such that they have had been left with much reduced space for the exercise of their agency. A particular focus of some accounts has been the importance of forms of governmentality (Ball, 2009; Rizvi, 2007) in facilitating self governing practices amongst teachers whereby the reach of policy interventions goes beyond those associated with conventional government and networks of governance. Such interpretations are closely aligned with concerns about the de-professionalization, proletarianization (Lawn & Ozga, 1988) and post-professionalism (Ball, 2003) amongst teachers strengthened by assertions that neo-liberalism itself is in antagonism with professionalism (Connell, 2009) viewing it as a monopolistic impediment to the efficient operation of free markets.

These critical accounts emphasizing the neo-liberal, reforming dimensions of NPM in the education sector are adopted within this article as a fundamentally important basis for enquiry into contemporary teaching in England. They speak to dramatic changes in the nature and form of teachers work and professionalism and they suggest that teachers have been left open, vulnerable indeed, to powerful forces that seek to radically change educational institutions and redefine teacher professionalism in this context.

Recognition of these forces of neo-liberal reform is not though viewed as incompatible with an examination of the various ways in which policies are re-contextualized and retranslated at more

localized levels. The importance, in particular, of schools as institutions in mediating these reforms and of understanding how different teachers respond to reform is seen as key to a more nuanced and complex understanding of neo-liberal education policy. For this reason although the notion of a compliant operative is viewed as a valuable critical tool in terms of highlighting the dangers and intent of neo-liberal education policy making it is consequently regarded here as a partial basis for understanding the lived experiences and identities of teachers not least on account of well-rehearsed shortcomings of attempts to reduce professionals to the role of passive recipients of policy (Levinson et al., 2009). The notion of compliance though and its inevitable antonym, resistance, are both seen as crucial to this endeavor.

Methods and Context

The research from which this paper is drawn took place in English secondary (High) schools between 2008 and 2013. This particular period in England was marked by the final years of a New Labour government (2008-2010) that had determinedly pursued a New Right inspired educational agenda inherited and developed from previous Conservative governments (Hall & Gunter, 2016) and a Conservative led coalition government (2010–2015) that was seeking to convert as many schools as possible within its fixed term of government to Academy status (Hall & Gunter, 2016)—that is, a school that operates out of the local control of a maintaining authority and as such is categorized as an independent state school. The Academies program had been located as a potential tonic to ‘underperformance’ and the raising of educational standards, although research into the efficacy of this as a mechanism for achieving such aims remains inconclusive (Gorard, 2005; PwC, 2005).

Our findings are drawn from two empirical studies. The first is Hall et al. (2011), an Economic and Social Research Council funded study of the social practices of school organization in England between 2008 and 2010. Fieldwork took place in five case study schools and multiple interviews were conducted with 76 respondents, mostly education professionals, over a two-year period. Q methodology (Brown, 1997; McKeown & Thomas, 1988) was employed to provide more detailed analyses of participant discourses.

The schools were selected through an annual survey of a representative national sample of secondary schools. There was a range of school types (selective, faith, single sex/co-educational, size, regional location) and they are positioned differently in relation to their socio-economic status and their official performance history over ten years. For the purposes of this article particular reference is made to one school, given the pseudonym here of Birch Tree School, a northern English institution located in an inner-city district. Associated with its physical location Birch Tree serves relatively high proportions of young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It opened as an Academy following the closure of two local high schools as part of New Labour’s City Academies program. National policy initiatives designed to raise standards in schools like Birch Tree have placed significant pressures upon such institutions that frequently find themselves the subject of extremely demanding performance targets tightly monitored through regular OFSTED inspections.

Second, McGinity’s (2014) study of Kingswood School in the north of England between 2011-2013. In this study, 21 teachers, 7 school leaders, 5 parents and 18 students were interviewed and observed multiple times over the course of two academic years. Kingswood is located in a dormitory town on the outskirts of a Northern city in England. The school has a successful track record in achieving well in externally derived performance measures, such as leagues tables and Ofsted inspections. The intake of students is largely although not exclusively socially advantaged and in 2012 Kingswood converted to an Academy.

The two studies have been combined for the purposes of this paper to produce a broader data set allowing for a more nuanced and detailed examination of teacher professional identity. In particular the amalgam of two schools operating in quite different circumstances provide a useful lens through which to critique and theorize professional identity during a period of rapid neo-liberal educational reform in England.

Data and Analysis

At both Kingswood and Birch Tree Schools large numbers of teachers considered that, within the “disciplinary framework” of the Standards Agenda referred to above, they still had high levels of autonomy and trust meted out to them through localized policy processes and for which they displayed high levels of loyalty and trust in leadership decision-making in return (Gewirtz, 2002, p. 19). As a result there was recognition, frequently tacit, that developing and continuing the ‘success’ of the school rested in no small part on a top down approach of implementing organizational and structural reforms, in response to the competitive demands of the neo-liberal schooling agenda. However, this implementation process was widely believed in both schools to be taking place on the schools’ or the schools’ senior leader(s) own terms. Again in both schools teachers were broadly supportive of such changes in recognition of the need to maintain (Kingswood) or improve (Birch Tree) the school’s position in the local education market.

The strategizing effects that were developed at the local level in both schools by their respective school leader(s) combined to produce a set of social relations in which teachers’ work is positioned by school leaders as simultaneously optional yet central to localized policy process. The “buy in” of teachers to this process was achieved through the development and co-option of professional identities at both schools through a discourse of institutional change that positioned resistance as ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ responses to change as professional in ways that simultaneously bolstered and acknowledged the professionalism of teachers positioning them as self-interested in the processes of policy development. In both schools teachers found the positioning of their professional identities in these terms compelling and for many seemingly irresistible.

“We get very little negativity. It’s wonderful to see the staff response to negativity. If you get somebody who is not of the culture, negativity does not go down well at all.” (Senior Leader, Kingswood School)

“We’ve only been together a few years, lots of the really negative people either didn’t come and also to be fair your traditional skivers, you know the ones who always seem to have quite a few Mondays off or don’t do their reports ever or skive meetings, Sally (the Principal) won’t tolerate ... I can think of 20 people who have started here but are no longer here for that very reason ... you know staff had to get in but just didn’t fit into the ethos.” (Senior Leader/Teacher at Birch Tree)

“If you are not seen as being supportive on school policies and you are not supporting the school ethos, it doesn’t really look very good.” (Middle Leader, Birch Tree School)

Teachers interviewed in relation to their role in policy development and enactment spoke of high levels of autonomy in the ways in which they were both involved in developing localized policies and practices and considered that such autonomy had a significant impact upon how they perceived that their sense of professional agency was explicitly supported and encouraged:

“An example for me would be own personal experience and developing engineering. Now I have a curriculum to deliver, I have pupils you know so that they can come into my environment and learn, get qualifications, raise aspirations. So its quite an open brief but I know that is my responsibility and I feel empowered to make changes to classrooms, to education, to where we go to learn, how we do that, I feel empowered. I feel that someone has given me a job to do and not told me how to do it but has trusted me enough.” (Senior Teacher, Birch Tree)

“I was never really questioned in a negative way as to what I was doing and I have been able to implement strategies and policies as I see fit, and when I discovered a new resource rather than say one [the head teacher] had invested a lot of money in, I asked for a meeting and he didn’t question my decisions. And recently he has been doing some observations and monitoring and evaluating of observations and he asked me if I would be interested in doing that with him, so we did some joint observations together and again he said you can choose what the lesson goes down as, you are the expert, so that’s from the very top. So he gives that professional respect to you and I feel the same with our department structure as well, I mean I was only an NQT (Newly Qualified Teacher) really when I got my first promotion to responsibility and I was never questioned with what I did. They put the trust in and they believed I could do it.” (Teacher, Kingswood School)

These teachers speak highly of the way in which their professionalism is understood through a prism of trust, autonomy and ownership. The same was true of the following member of staff:

“My experience with the homework policy was that it was open to individual learning centers to decide on the best way forward, using the guidelines of the policy, so it was tailored by each individual learning center. So for example, there is a whole school, I think it is policy, that we set work on the VLE (virtual learning environment), actually state what the homework is on the VLE, however in our subject we don’t necessarily do that because we feel we have enough coverage of homework already. So we don’t actually follow the policy as such and that is fine.” (Head of Department, Kingswood School)

Yet alongside this sense of autonomy a very different sense of the work of teacher’s frequently emerged. For example:

“[...] when it comes down to it, we are in the business of exams at the end of it, GCSEs and that’s what we are measured on and I don’t think it’s completely superficial to tell the kids, coach them, teach them how to learn for an exam if that’s the game we have to play and its going to serve them and us so that’s ok...But I thinks there’s a disconnect between the things that we do, the management things that we do and the actual thinking about teaching and learning.” (Teacher, Kingswood School)

Here the performative dimension of contemporary schooling in England is foregrounded in a manner that discursively reduces schooling to exam preparation.

In a different way the below interaction between a researcher and a teacher at Birch Tree suggests a working environment at some distance removed from one where autonomy is encouraged:

Q: “And are people given the opportunity to say I’m not happy with this?
(Researcher referring to localized policy changes at Birch Tree)

A: People don’t tend to say they are unhappy with it. (Teacher, Birch Tree)

Q: They don’t?

A: No because sometimes they are concerned about repercussions. If you are not seen as being supportive on school policies and you are not supporting the school ethos it doesn't really look very good."

This is at least in part explained by the below extracts from the Principal of Birch Tree. Below she discusses how the school can achieve an 'outstanding' grade from OFSTED as opposed to the lower grade of 'good with outstanding features'. Interestingly this performative dimension of Birch Tree was linked to the notion of trust:

"it also involves trust, so for example, we've said by 2012 all teaching and learning must be outstanding. Angie's the Director of Teaching and Learning so she directs, her job is to be a strategic director, she's accountable and she has ownership over the strategic direction of that, she recognizes that actually, it's the middle leaders that will impact the most on teaching and learning. They therefore have to drive it and own it, but the shaping of the tasks, the strategic direction of the tasks is my vision. The task of how to shape and achieve is the middle leadership, now if the middle leadership were to have a meeting and say 'well, we've decided actually that we think it's too stretching targets and we only want teaching and learning to be good with outstanding features by 2012' then it would be 'in here, that isn't your job, your job is it will be outstanding and you are going to deliver, but you can go away and deliver that.'" (Principal, Birch Tree)

Thus achieving a particular OFSTED grade becomes discursively tied to ideas about 'ownership and trust' being afforded to teachers, or as they are described in this context middle leaders and a Director, yet their ownership of this process does not extend to questioning the target for the school of achieving an 'outstanding' grade from OFSTED; that 'isn't your job' and 'you are going to deliver'. In other words in this case the 'middle leaders' will do what they are told to; managerialism as hierarchically demanded compliance. Thus in one paragraph the discourse shifts from ownership and trust to an imagined silencing by reference to authority and obedience.

"They're terrified of letting me down, that is true, that's absolutely true and that's a very humbling thing, it's quite a worrying thing when you realize that somebody who is a real high achieving senior leader actually hasn't slept last night out of absolute terror that they're letting you down." (Principal, Birch Tree)

Extracts from the transcripts highlight in different ways the dominance of the neoliberal policy agenda on localized policy-making processes. At Kingswood this emerges as a sense of acceptance, albeit sometimes reluctant, that such policies are ultimately assented to because, as the extract above points out, schools are in the 'business of exams', grades and results; the metricization of education. At Birch Tree compliance is demanded and there is a marked restriction upon the exercise of agency imposed by an authoritarian Principal and linked to job roles. Despite this a discourse of professionalism co-exists alongside this demanded compliance offering a softer discursive edge to a working environment that at least in some respects is otherwise highly controlled. We would argue that such practices reveal the game teachers and schools are expected to play within this agenda and so the expectation that their work will be interrupted and indeed shaped by policies that reinforce the principles of performativity and competition intrinsic to this game do not come as a surprise to the teachers in the schools we researched.

Instead, there is a sense of contingent pragmatism that pervades the teacher accounts which are deemed necessary to get on with the game (Moore, 2004). What such data does is to highlight how the development of professional cultures at Kingswood and Birch Tree, combined with external policy demands have produced a situated context in which staff members develop and conceptualize their own identities in response to the significant structural reforms that were taking

place as a result of marketizing legislative interventions, such as the Academies Act 2010. The below extract exemplifies how this came about:

“I think all staff were involved, in terms of being informed of what was happening, I think I see it as a bit of an inevitability. I think the government’s agenda is that all schools will eventually be academies, and [the head teacher] stood up in one meeting and said actually we have the opportunity to mold and shape what this academy looks like or we can sit back and wait for the point when everyone else has done it.”
(Head of Pastoral Service, Kingswood School)

Here the teacher at Kingswood is reflecting upon the ‘inevitability’ of the shift of Kingswood to become an Academy as part of a highly determined national program of school academisation taking place at the time of the research. Interestingly, whilst the staff reported that the school structure contributed to the development of a professional culture in which they considered they were granted autonomy, trust and ownership, the process of converting to an academy as “the right thing to do” (Deputy Headteacher, Kingswood) reflected a pervasive position taken up by all but one of the teachers in the research, despite having had little agency in the decision-making process. It was noticeable how staff positioned the curricular and organizational re-structuring as making ‘complete sense’, or ‘difficult to argue against’ (Kingswood Teacher). The ‘buy in’ to the school leadership ‘vision’ (Kingswood Teacher) was significant within the staff accounts. The academy conversion was positioned as inevitable, with one member of staff stating that this was how they were ‘sold’ that vision by the School Leadership Team at a whole staff meeting regarding the conversion:

“The way that the [Principal] sold it was looking at the admin process now the school would get much smaller if we didn’t convert to academy status and become a Professional School. And there may be some job losses and all the rest of it, we might shrink. But also we have got competition with all the other academies that are local so just in keeping up with the times really and also the DFE are refusing to deal with any schools that don’t convert, so we were told really it wasn’t an option. I wasn’t asked to tick a box to say yes or no, but there was a lot of discussion.”
(Teacher, Kingswood)

This data helps to make sense of the overwhelming support for the localized interpretation of the Academies Act from staff, despite a number of expressions of uncertainty regarding how such a ‘vision’ would be realized in practice. It is possible to posit that the successful ‘buy in’ from the staff is linked to the explicit strategizing of the School Leadership Team in terms of packaging and presenting the idea as turning something that was inevitable (conversion to an academy) into something exciting, different, innovative. The majority of teaching staff were philosophically supportive of the idea without having much understanding of what it actually entailed and how it would be realized in practice.

What the data illustrates is the powerful way in which a significant re-articulation of the school in direct response to national policy should occur with very little resistance or probing. The legitimation of such significant changes at the local level was linked in nearly all staff accounts to the structures within the wider economic and political fields. The main concerns shared by staff in light of such developments were about protecting the position of the school within the local educational market, and by proxy, the protection of the school’s interest within the wider schooling field.

Where this perspective upon the change to Academy status was challenged, by one individual teacher, the resistance to some of the more restrictive elements of the disciplinary framework upon teacher’s work and identities, was articulated through fantastical whimsy as the below extract demonstrates:

“I did go through a phase...when I stopped believing in it and it was really horrible. I thought why am I here I don’t think kids should go to school! The bells! And the

curriculum! And how much was being achieved? What are we doing? But I seem to have got over that it was probably just me feeling a bit depressed... but I have had my moments with education and thought lets just buy a campervan and take the family and have an adventure!" (Teacher, Kingswood)

Where this teacher embodied an alternative narrative to the restrictive practices embedded within the English educational system, the articulation of such resistance quickly turned into an inward reflection on her own capacity to deal with such tensions as 'probably just me feeling a little depressed'. Thus the resistance is internalized and individualized with the reaction being to escape and 'buy a campervan' and as the first sentence suggests it becomes a transitory feature of her identity; a 'really horrible' phase. Tellingly during research at Birch Tree no teachers expressed overt resistance to any significant aspects of the school's 'improvement' strategies.

There are two factors at play: the pervasive influences of the standards and performativity agendas; and the dominance of a discourse directly linked to the re-structuring of the curriculum and the organizational structure of the school. These combined to produce a set of discursive practices in which neoliberal agendas in relation to educational reform formed a new orthodoxy as to what the school is for with little resistance from those teaching and working within such structures – despite the uncertainty of how such changes may affect their working lives in a system in which governance structures, and conditions related to pay, remained relatively uncertain.

Thus, the development of teacher identity in these seemingly very different English schools reveals remarkably similar contradictions and complexities. On the one hand, both schools actively promoted a sense of professionalism amongst their teachers linked in particular to notions of autonomy, and yet on the other hand, the sway of powerfully influential external policy interventions pervaded teachers' work and identity in ways that suggested compliance and control rather than autonomy and discretion. Interestingly as the weight of the reform process upon schools became ever heavier, for Kingswood as a consequence of the academisation process and in Birch Tree on account of a tight performance improvement surveillance, the discourse of professionalism remained strong and seemingly unaffected by dramatic changes both internal and external.

Discussion

We would argue that our data reveals the emergence of a NPM professionalism in schools in England tied closely to prevailing marketized, metricized and managerialist practices in schools in this context. This is a form of professionalism where agency is significantly restricted to locally legitimate action taking place within a centrally regulated structure, as nationally developed by neoliberal policy agendas such as the Academies Act 2010, and locally constructed by the explicit strategic and tactical responses revealed by the Principals' decision-making.

Whilst tensions exist within this for teachers, the overarching dominance of the former over the latter appear to obscure space for a 'politics of resistance' (Dale, 1992). In this regard there was very little evidence of the critiquing of the development and enactment of the more restrictive elements of teachers work, let alone as a possibility "to obstruct and disrupt macro-structural forces" (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009, p. 42). That one teacher in Kingswood who felt marginalized and frustrated by policies that positioned her professional subjectivity in competition to others, and another at the same school reserved personal discomfort of the academies policy for seeing it as the only viable option: both spoke of being positioned by policies in ways in which their agency appeared to be restricted by the structures embodied within approaches to teachers work within a neoliberal system.

There wasn't recognition that there were alternatives ways of utilizing their agency within and in response to these structures, or that such an avenue was worth pursuing in order to produce a

politics of resistance to the restrictions placed upon their professional identities as a result of regulative and performative policy developments at the macro, meso and micro level. Interestingly within both contexts the discourse of professionalism had endured and this was a discourse that was linked to trust, ownership and autonomy.

In Birch Tree this connection with an organizational professionalism acted as discursive veil hiding a determined, authoritarian and controlling local regime that demanded astonishingly high levels of compliance and a pared down professionalism at some distance from its origins. Yet this was combined with an audacious move by the Principal to invite teachers at this school to imagine that these processes were serving to promote their professionalism so that the diminishment of professionalism was presented as its very opposite. In Kingswood where change was managed less brutally it served to co-opt teachers in ways that helped enable their acceptance of 'new realities' as the Principal sought to hasten its move into a newly corporatized phase of its existence. In both cases professionalism was used as a discourse of organizational change and control (Fournier, 1999) gentling an accelerated neo-liberal turn viewed widely as inevitable.

The above analysis of teacher professionalism in England raises important questions about the capacity for teachers to resist further neo-liberal encroachments upon schools and their work with young people. It could be interpreted as suggesting that levels of compliance are now so high that teachers' resistance to neo-liberal educational policy in this context is no longer worth taking seriously; that they have been successfully reduced through marketization, metricization and managerialism to compliant operatives where their remaining professionalism is nothing but a manufactured and managerialist discursive co-option.

Whilst the NPM professionalism presented in this paper has clearly had dramatic implications for the working lives of teachers in this context, this still remains at some distance from the above interpretation. Nevertheless the data we collected at Birch Tree and Kingswood offered very little evidence of overt resistance and precious few hints of covert resistance. In both schools teachers had been overwhelmingly won over to accepting and/or embracing neo-liberal reforms. Neither simulated compliance nor principled resistance (Thomson, 2008) were revealed to any significant extent in our research and the notion of principled infidelity (Hoyle & Wallace, 2007) is difficult to maintain in an English context where a permanent revolution of neo-liberally inspired reform has now been on-going for so long that unfaithful relationships are likely to have led to either deeper unions or break-ups; in this case usually taking the form of retirement.

One explanation for this might reside in the nature of Kingswood and Birch Tree Schools and the specific circumstances pertaining in these institutions, although wider evidence from the project of which Birch Tree formed a part (Hall et al., 2011) suggests that these schools are not atypical in terms of the levels of compliance amongst teachers. A more compelling explanation might locate our failure to surface resistance in the research methodologies and theorizations employed during these projects and the manner in which the practices of teachers necessarily involve frequent micro encounters, for example with young people, that evade the logic of performativity and marketization. This suggests an attempt to capture and perhaps subsequently build resistance through the identification and analysis of these mini resistances through a determined focus upon micro level practices in schools.

A further explanation is that compliance has been achieved through fear (Ball, 2003; Stevenson & Wood, 2013) and that the associated terror experienced by teachers has markedly muted resistance. This explanation does certainly speak directly to circumstances of teachers at Birch Tree, but it does not entirely capture the processes in play at Kingswood. Nevertheless the methodological implications of researching resistance during institutionally fearful times do certainly pose important questions for educational researchers.

What this suggests is that theorizing and researching resistance at a time of widespread compliance has become an urgent issue for educational researchers and we would argue a developed and localized understanding of how compliance has been secured is vital to this process. Whilst there are many valuable contributions researching how the field of schooling is being reconstructed at the national, indeed international level, there exists a paucity of in-depth studies that look to understand what this means to individual schools, and the social actors within them (Exley, 2012; Glatter, 2012; Gunter & McGinity, 2014; Hoskins, 2012; Maguire et al., 2011; Morris, 2012; ; West & Bailey, 2013; Wright, 2012). Such studies are necessary and indeed in urgent need, because as the field of education continues to be re-configured in England in a post-NPM privatizing phase further blurring the lines as to what is meant by public and private, there is not enough empirical evidence being made available to those who *are* engaging in activism as a means to challenge the dominant discourses embodied within the neoliberal approaches to educational policy.

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