(7920 words)

Chapter 4

Competition, accountability and performativity: Exploring schizoid neo-liberal 'equality objectives' in a UK primary school

Jos Harvey and Jessica Ringrose

Introduction

> We are building an Aspiration Nation, my dream for Britain is that opportunity is not an accident of birth, but a birthright… as Churchill said: 'we are for the ladder, let all try their best to climb'.
>
> (Prime Minister David Cameron, 2013)

As noted throughout this book, the complex set of ideas that inform the concept of neo-liberalism are multifaceted and have been taken up widely to explain new processes of marketization and new regimes of governance in schooling and education internationally. Davies and Bansel have effectively summarized this, speaking in the Australian context:

> The neoliberal management technologies that were installed included increased exposure to competition, increased accountability measures and the implementation of performance goals in the contracts of management. (Davies and Bansel 2007, p. 254)

Using these three themes – competition, accountability and performativity – we critically examine current UK Prime Minister David Cameron's notion that schools are somehow equalizers providing an 'equal opportunities' ladder for children to climb, regardless of their background. We explore how schools are now increasingly required to demonstrate that they are providing an equal service in terms of

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opportunity, access and experience, as set out in the Equalities Act (Great Britain Parliament 2010). We will argue that the pressure to prove an equalities outcome may actually eclipse everyday spaces and practices of social justice and equality in schools. Indeed, there are many who argue that what has been called a 'neo-liberal transformation' of the education system is contradictory, so whilst claiming to equalize opportunity, new aspects of performativity and competition introduce further deficit models and winner and loser models, in fact deepening inequalities in schools (Lucey and Reay 2002; Cross 2007; Carey 2014; Littler 2013; Gillborn 2010; Bradbury 2013).

Stephen Ball has been one of the most proficient critics of neo-liberal performativity and audit cultures in schools. He and his colleagues note accurately that England been one of the most advanced centres of neo-liberal policy experimentation and practice, forming a sort of laboratory for studying neo-liberalized policies, networks, enactments and effects in education (Ball 2003. Following this logic, in this paper we explore a case study of the implementation of so-called neo-liberal policy reforms in an East London primary school. We explore the development of the school's new equalities policy, a requirement under the Education Act 2010. Our main research objective was to question how so-called neo-liberal governmental policies were filtering into schools and impacting their equalities practices. Within this we sought to broadly explore the following questions:

- How are policies and cultures affecting the ways in which staff members and school policymakers approach equalities?

- What are the contradictory or schizoid effects/affects of the new pressures?

To begin to think about these questions we want to discuss in some greater detail three key aspects of neo-liberal policy formation as identified in the research literature: accountability, competition and performativity.

Accountability

In England, recent policy 'bias' towards acadamization has led to some schools becoming increasingly distanced from local authority-led governance. This new neo-liberal autonomy (in contrast to major state governance that emerged in the 1980s around the introduction of the National Curriculum) places a high degree of accountability on schools, as with greater freedom comes greater responsibility: 'Individual subjects have thus welcomed the increasing individualism as a sign of their freedom and, at the same time, institutions have increased competition, *responsibilisation* and the transfer of risk from the state to individuals at a heavy cost to many individuals' (Davies and Bansel 2007, p. 249). Responsibilization of actors at various levels is key here, with schools being increasingly held to account using quantitative measures (Ball 2003; Bradbury 2013; Gillborn 2010) such as exam results, phonics screening tests and progress charts, measures often critiqued by those working in schools for being too narrow (Martino and Rezai-Rashti 2013; Gillborn 2010). As Yelland writes:

> Conservative forces have constructed and implemented an agenda that attempts to reduce educational outcomes to the minutiae of observable outcomes that can be demonstrated in simple tasks that require routine responses rather than consider the educational experience as engagement with people and ideas. (Yelland 2007, p. 9)

Ball argues that the increased levels of accountability have become 'terrors of performativity', which are internalized by educators (Ball 2003; Bradbury 2013) and normalized: 'a rationality that cannot imagine any other way to justify and evaluate preschools except in terms of their ability to produce pre-specified outcomes and through the application of measurement techniques that are assumed to be objective and universally valued' (Dahlberg and Moss 2004 p. 5). Here, Dahlberg and Moss are troubled by the over-reliance on specific outcomes to judge schools, suggesting that they may be unreliable and potentially too narrow to judge quality.

Competition

Neo-liberalism 'involves the alignment of public sector organisations with private sector values' (Bradbury 2013), and one of those values is competitiveness.

> In an internationally competitive marketplace, education plays a critical role in helping each nation to create and maintain a competitive edge… what has emerged is a new set of public policy demands for efficiency, accountability, effectiveness and flexibility, what Ball has described as a 'generic global policy ensemble'. (Maguire 2010, p. 41)

Maguire references the UK education system as a whole competing with other nations through tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), but the competition filters through to individual schools. Bradbury (2013) references the 2011 Tickell review's guidelines: 'results should be published at national and local level so that the general public can hold government and local authorities to account for quality of Early Years services'. There are many competitive layers in

schools: parents can state their preference for a school from a variety of competing local options; schools aspire to score a higher OFSTED grade in inspections, and career reputations of senior leadership teams are at stake, enhanced by the introduction of performance-related pay (Ball 2003). (The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) is the testing and auditing system in the UK through which school performance is measured and disciplined.

Some researchers argue that competition affects equalities because, as noted through Gillborn and Youdell's (1999) 'triage system' example, in a neo-liberal system pupils are seen as 'commodities' to improve schools' outcomes. Using the metaphor of a medical crisis, Gillborn and Youdell use the idea of triage to show how limited resources are siphoned for the greatest benefit according to categories of predicted success and failure for students. Gillborn and Youdell applied this triage process to the educational context of streaming by math ability, showing the systematic process of directing educational resources to some pupils whilst neglecting others, the significant point being that fewer resources were directed towards students deemed 'hopeless cases', intensifying inequalities, particularly around 'race' in the UK (in Smith, 2012). Dudley-Marling and Baker (2012) describe, for example, how 'Students with high test scores enhance the reputation and, hence, the marketability of charter schools. Students who do not score well on tests threaten charters' competitiveness' (p. 141). One teacher-participant in their study argued:

> Teachers don't want [difficult-to-educate students]. If my job depends on their test scores…I don't want those kids. I do because I am a teacher and went into teaching to help kids. But if my job depends on it…my car payments depend on it…my apartment payment depends on it…I don't want those kids. (Dudley-Marling and Baker 2012 p. 141)

The allusion to pupils as commodities was also used by one of Ball's interviewees, who felt that pupils were treated as 'mere nuts and bolts on a distant production line' (Ball 2003, p.221).

Performativity

Stephen Ball suggests that neo-liberalism has caused schools to focus on their outward 'performance', defining performativity as follows:

> Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement. (Ball 2003, p. 217)

In this quotation, the link between performativity, accountability and competition is clear: performance is the mode in which schools present their accountability in the competitive field of education. Ball draws on Foucault to argue the importance of examining who controls the 'field of judgement', as he suggests that the decisions around what 'quality' or 'worthwhile' mean are inherently political. Ball argues that performativity has the potential to obscure moral judgements and lead establishments settings to introduce practices just because they look good to outsiders, even if they are believed to be a waste of time or even harmful: 'Not infrequently, the requirements of such systems bring into being unhelpful or indeed damaging

practices, which nonetheless satisfy performance requirements' (Ball 2003, p. 220). Performativity affects the reasoning behind some educational practices: 'Are we doing this because it is important, because we believe in it, because it is worthwhile? Or is it being done ultimately because it will be measured or compared? It will make us look good!' (Ball 2003, p. 220). Ball's teacher participants in the study indicated a '*values schizophrenia*', in which they felt that performativity created a dualism between what they believe in and the pressure to perform in a certain way for outsiders. Ball (2003) argues: 'authenticity is replaced entirely by plasticity' (p. 15), by which he suggests that schools may adjust their malleable values to present the ethos that is attractive to those judging them.

In the next section we will explore how these three aspects of accountability, competition and performativity play out in the research context under review, keeping this notion of values schizophrenia uppermost in our analysis.

The research case study

The primary methodology for our research was a qualitative case study of the creation of an equalities policy at a primary school in East London. The research involved several months of observing meetings with school policymakers, as well as observing pupil workshops in which they discussed equalities issues. The project was designed to explore the process by which the school created their new equalities policy. Previously there were statutory requirements for schools to have disability and race equality policies, as well as to provide evidence of how the school supports children

receiving free school meals (the government indicator for poverty). There were already statutory requirements around race, gender and disability, but schools are now asked to create a broader equalities policy that demonstrates how the school aims to promote equalities for all social groups. In our case study school, staff members, governors and the equalities officer from the borough were involved in creating the policy, and the school wanted to include 'pupil voice' in its creation as well. Overall, we hoped to observe and capture some of the processes involved in the creation of the equalities policy, so that we could understand some of the thought processes behind how equalities are prioritized, and how this intra-acts with the demands to 'perform' equality with contradictory, or what we explore as 'schizoid', effects that elide everyday experiences of inequality in primary school.

In the neo-liberalized 'audit culture', how have equalities issues become quantified?

Observations of school policymakers indicated a reliance on data, primarily test results, to identify inequalities that might exist in the setting. There are external pressures on schools which perhaps led to this school focusing on quantitative evidence to prove they are providing equality. For example, the Office for Standards in Education states the following:

> Equality is integral to the inspection framework and the promotion of equality of opportunity for all pupils underpins the school inspection framework. School inspection acts in the interests of children, young people and their parents. It encourages high-quality provision that meets diverse needs and promotes not just equality of opportunity but improving outcomes for all pupils regardless of background. (OFSTED 2014, p. 4)

This quotation from OFSTED clearly states that schools are required to provide not just opportunities but **outcomes,** the most obvious and measurable outcomes being equal test results amongst different groups. The focus on test results is not new: educational trajectories have long focused on pupils' major exam results or qualifications from O-Levels to GCSEs; however, inspections now place responsibility on the school to a) achieve certain percentages in tests or be deemed 'failing' and b) ensure that all social groups perform equally. Schools are therefore under pressure to demonstrate to OFSTED that their school is meritocratic: that everyone can and does achieve 'regardless of background'. It is perhaps worth noting here that, whilst OFSTED previously monitored **progress** through a 'contextual value added' score, inspection is now purely focused on outcome and achievement.

In our case study, the school policymakers immediately used data from test results to identify inequalities. They used a variety of data, primarily through the site RAISEonline, which separates children's test results into different social groups, for example, according to race. An example of a table used by the school policymakers can be seen below.

Key Stage 2 Exam Results 2014:

In observing the school policymakers it could be seen how, at a first superficial level, they deduced the following perception from the data:

'Boys and girls achieve the same SATs results. Generally, every year, there's no gap in results, so gender is not an issue here.'

Here, the use of test results suggests a narrowing of gender issues to specific, measurable outcomes of exam achievement, but as Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2013) argue: 'numbers, as inscription devices are not able to capture the messy, hybrid realities of people's lives today and can elide the complexity of schools in their various contexts' (p. 295). This example could be described as a 'microcosm' for the national attitude to gender gap discourse and a moral panic over girls outperforming boys in exams such as GCSEs evidenced by news articles with headlines such as 'Boys lagging behind girls' (BBC 2014) and 'Are boys catching up with girls?' (Telegraph 2012) as well as policy initiatives such as 'Supporting Boys with Writing' (DfE 2008, see Ringrose 2013). Analysing the statement 'gender is not an issue here' through a feminist lens, one could argue that using test results alone 'rips gender out of a sociocultural context' and creates a context of invisibility and silence around a range of issues related to gender, sexuality and well-being at school (Ringrose 2007, p. 473).

<TABLE 1 HERE>

An intersectional feminist approach (Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Showunmi 2011) questions the limitations of the data that can be used to present the simplified idea that girls are 'doing fine' and enjoying 'success' (Ringrose 2007). For instance, Victoria Showunmi (2011) uses qualitative approaches to challenge the quantitative 'evidence' that suggests all girls are succeeding at school. Showunmi's interviews with black female pupils showed that although black girls were academically successful, suggesting that their race and gender was no barrier to achievement, in reality, their background had a wide impact on their experiences of equality in school. Showunmi's participants demonstrated that ethnicity/gender impacted their aspirations, the ways they were stereotyped and the expectations people had of them: 'loud and destructive', 'there is no individuality when you are black, you are black, she's black, we are all black' (Showunmi 2011, p. 8).

Whereas gender is treated as a non-issue, the statistical 'gap' in achievement between pupils receiving free school meals (indicator for poverty) and those from more affluent backgrounds was treated with utmost concern by school policymakers, who felt compelled to come up with an explanation and response to the presentation of inequality, as evident through observations of meetings:

Meeting One: The head teacher seemed particularly worried about justifying why children from poorer backgrounds achieved lower results. She spoke about the need to explain why, saying: 'I could tell you exactly why each of these children achieved low results.'

Meeting One: Staff seem particularly frustrated because they can 'tell the stories' of each pupil who is underachieving… but the test results suggest they are failing.

The policymakers' responses to the data indicate several things. Firstly, they suggest that the school policymakers involved feel that the data is insufficient: it presents the idea that the school is failing pupils when in fact the staff know there are other reasons which contribute to those pupils' underachievement. This is symptomatic of the 'schizoid' context we are exploring, where the numbers suggest a simple gap and solution, which discounts the knowledge of staff and pupils. Martino and Rezai-Rashti (20013 write about how this process operates in wide-scale international testing and ranking procedures such as the Programme for International Student Assessment: 'PISA acknowledges that there are other influences to socioeconomic disadvantage, such as family circumstances, mental health and housing, but they fail to include them, so accountability lies purely with the school' (p. 598).

Secondly, the comments suggest that the school policymakers are going to focus on the 'rich–poor' pupil gap, even though they view the data as misleading, because they are required to 'justify' the data. Due to the pressure to demonstrate income equality, this issue has thus become prioritized. Using Ball's analyses of performativity and fabrications, one could argue that this situation is an example of performativity under pressure: the data presented becomes the focus. Ball writes: 'Authenticity is replaced by plasticity. Within the education market institutional promotion and representation take on the qualities of postmodern depthlessness – yet more floating signifiers in the

plethora of semiotic images, spectacles and fragments that increasingly dominate

consumer society' (Ball 2000, p. 15). In this context, 'authenticity' could refer to the

children's experiences of inequality, and the data – such as exam results, often

presented as colour-coded, numerated boxes on a spreadsheet – could be the 'plethora

of semiotic images'. However, these signifiers are also limited in that they reduce all

meaning to the measurement referent, which is key in audit and performativity market

driven cultures.

Thirdly, through the policymakers' desire to 'tell the stories' of the children, at the

same time as they feel compelled to respond to the measurement results, they actually

reject the quantitative data as a useful tool. They suggest that quantitative data is

unable to present the complex life of a child and the reasons behind their

(under)achievement. However, Gillborn argues:

> A growing trend in education policy and classroom practice is to assume a
> blinkered perspective that focuses on each individual case and denies the
> relevance of the wider picture. In the face of failing statistics, we see a swing
> to the micro. This approach sounds fair enough – judge every question on its
> individual merits – but what this really achieves is a denial of inequality… It
> is only when we stand back from the detail of the individual case (and see that
> certain groups are hugely over-represented in exclusions, in lower sets, and in
> the ranks of the under-achieving) that the racist nature of the processes
> becomes clear. (Gillborn 2001, p. 109)

Gillborn advocates the use of statistics here, and arguably, our observations support

his view that quantitative data around social groups can prevent schools from denying

inequality. But, again, we find this relates back strongly to the idea of 'schizophrenic

values' having to be juggled by staff members, contradictions that can put staff in an

impossible situation caught between large-scale numbers about achievement and

individualism. Since the government uses statistics around performance only in ways that suit them and set up achievement 'gaps' rather than showing evidence of systematic sexism or racism in institutions, individuals can be called to blame in relation to achievement gaps. Neo-liberal informed achievement policies are actually used to attribute success or failure to the individual (Lucey and Reay, 2002).

Taking race as an example, in the relatively recent 2011 riots that engulfed the UK, the prime minister argued:

> 'Let's be clear. These riots were not about race … These riots were not about government cuts … And these riots were not about poverty … No, this was about behaviour. People showing indifference to right and wrong. People with a twisted moral code. People with a complete absence of self-restraint.'
> (Prime Minister David Cameron : 2011)

Here, the prime minister, in blaming individuals' behaviour, essentially removes all sociological factors, such as the connection between welfare, poverty and rioting, and removes all responsibility from the state, such as the suggestion that cuts in services for poorer communities or historic problems around policing and the black community could be responsible for the riots. The message is obvious: this is not the state's fault; this is the individuals' fault.

This approach is also now being used by schools, especially academies (Wilkins 2012). Schools can argue that the reason some pupils fail is because they are lazy, unmotivated, or poorly behaved, for example, and exclusion is increasingly used in secondary school as a means to oust problematic students (Youdell 2012).

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As we found in our observations in primary schools, the neo-liberal accountability pressures on achievement in schools creates a contradictory situation: if a pupil fails, the school owns that failure and is potentially sanctioned for it, and no excuses can be made about the individual. The school is under greater pressure to help pupils succeed, while presumably this should prevent groups, such as black boys who persistently underachieve, being blamed for their failure on an individual basis. However, research indicates that this is not actually what is happening; other policies, such as behavioural policies, can be used to sanction, exclude and further marginalize those groups deemed 'vulnerable' through the statistical achievement data (Youdell, 2012).

What happens in a primary school environment when race and gender equalities are reduced to audit culture measurements?

In the previous section, we noted that school policymakers focused on data such as test results to identify inequalities. However, through the policy formation process, the school also sought to gain children's insights into equalities issues at the school. Here we analyse the pupils' views on equality in the setting and compare these to the equalities issues deduced from quantitative data. The first question pupils were asked was 'What is equality?'

Navid: When everyone's equal.

Satnam: No separate places for black and white people.

Arafath: No one's treated badly, we're all treated the same way.

Navid: Everyone has the same rights, everybody's the same.

When asked how the school promotes equality, the pupils said:

Rizwan: In the playground, there everyone's treated fairly, like you wouldn't make fun of people with disabilities.

Satnam: You might include new children. Everyone should participate.

Navid: You wouldn't tease people about low levels.

Rizwan: Staff might take advantage of disabled children; I'm not saying it happens here, but they might give someone smaller portions if they're disabled because they can't stand up for themselves.

Tanisha: No limits to books, everyone of all ages can borrow whatever they want.'

Rizwan: Everyone gets the same amount of food, they have equal play time.

Navid: We're allowed to have democratic votes on things, like voting on what rewards we want.

Some of these quotations link well to the Equalities Act's 'protected characteristics' such as ethnicity, which are monitored quantitatively through test results. Importantly though, the children's thoughts go beyond the protected characteristics, including 'axes of difference' such as 'being new' or 'having low levels', so they bring new aspects to the policy discourse here. Whilst the adults focus on the characteristics measured by the government, the children bring in those and more, suggesting that

they have a more intersectional perspective than the adults or perhaps that their reality evidences a complexity of equalities that go beyond governance expectations and beyond what can be quantified.

Whilst 'gap discourse' dictates that school policymakers must focus on gaps in statistics, a fairly abstract notion for children, the pupils have a wider, more holistic attitude to equalities and well-being. The pupils' examples are rooted in their everyday reality: issues that occur in the playground and the school lunch queue, which offer more practical examples of equalities as lived experience. We want to introduce several further examples of how students' experiences related to equalities issues refute the comparative statistically driven logics of performativity audit culture.

Gender

The following conversation was observed in a workshop with School Council members.

Session 3:

The children saw some other, very young, boys and girls playing together in the playground.

Satnam: Wow that's nice they're playing together; it's easier for young kids [boys and girls] to play together because they don't know the consequences.

Teacher: What are the consequences?

Navid: Because sometimes you get picked on for being friends with girls.

Satnam: It's partly because the other kids think you might fancy them.

Navid: Other kids think we might do bad things.

Teacher: What do you mean by bad things?

Satnam: They figure out about… you say it Navid!

Navid: Um, kissing.

Satnam: Yeah, but worse, you know, S-E-X. If you're friends with a boy, they spread rumours that you're doing it even when they're false.

Teacher: So are you saying that when children realize that boys and girls can have sex, they start teasing each other for being friends with boys or girls?

Navid / Satnam: Yeah.

Teacher: So when would you stop being friends with boys or girls?

Satnam: Um, probably about Y3.

Navid: But you know what, it's good for boys and girls to be friends with each other; it's good to be used to it for when you're older, for when you have to get married.

Teacher: But do you have to get married?

Both: In our culture yes; in our religion you have to, so it's good to get used to it.

This conversation between two pupils illuminates gender complexities and nuances that are totally bypassed in the achievement gap discourses. Firstly, the pupils show awareness of sexuality which impacts on the social cohesion of boys and girls as

friendships become 'romanticized' (Kehler 2007; Renold 2003). Renold writes: 'simple mixed-sex interactions like borrowing a pencil or helping with a class-task could be (hetero)sexualised (usually by teasing the boy/girl involved that they 'fancy' each other)' (Renold 2003, p. 190). This is an example of how qualitative data has identified an equalities issue that cannot be drawn from the quantitative test results that the school policymakers used. Nonetheless, gendered power relations and sexuality are clearly issues identified strongly by the children. Furthermore, this conversation suggests that equalities issues need to be contextualized and are intersectional. The pupils involved within this conversation are Muslim, as are 90% of the pupils in the school. Within this context comments such as 'in our religion you have to [get married]' and 'get used to it' need to be viewed intersectionally to observe how religion, gender and sexuality intersect to produce equalities issues (Youdell 2012). For example, one could argue that these comments suggest heteronormative attitudes or issues around arranged marriages in the community.

Race/Religion

'Ethnicity' is often presented as a 'variable' in data such as exam results, although statistics are often discredited (Cross 2007; Gillborn 2010; Bradbury 2013) as assessments are seen as far from neutral. The pupils' views on race and ethnicity were far too complex to be presented as a point on a graph.

Tia: If there's someone on their own, whatever their religion, you ask them to play with you.

Teacher: How would you know their religion?

Tia: Their skin.

Tara: If you're friends with someone from another religion, you might get bullied by others; they say bad things are going to happen to you.

This small conversation suggests that pupils have conflated religion with skin colour, highlighting a lack of awareness about race and religion, but furthermore it suggests that religious prejudice might exist within the school. Again, this is context specific and intersectional. The OFSTED guidance on equality prioritizes outcomes, but these quotations bring that into question. Firstly, it ignores equality of experience for all religious groups. Secondly, the outcomes measured are test-achievement focused, and they fail to measure whether the pupils have the religious tolerance to work cohesively in our diverse, multicultural society, which would appear to be essential in a climate where schools are expected to monitor extremism and promote 'British values'.

Meritocracy

Though the pupils would most probably be unaware of the quantitative measures used to identify the income-based inequalities in their school, they seemed to subvert the idea of meritocracy in our observations. Considering the huge focus on levels both nationwide and within this school, it is noteworthy that the pupils referred to them just twice.

Peter: You wouldn't tease people about low levels.

Tia: Children who are good at sports get picked more.

Rebecca: Yeah, that's unfair.

Tia: If you are good at football, you get to be on the school team, so you can play after school, go to matches…

Peter: If you have low levels, people won't want you to be in their group.

Katie: Yeah, you might be picked last for groups.

Schools, and the school inspectors, focus on improving achievement: aiming for higher percentages of pupils to reach certain levels. Nowhere in our observations, and rarely in policy, do adults refer to equality for lower achievers, but the children here mention this group several times. The children show a protective attitude, suggesting that you 'wouldn't tease people about low levels', and they show concern for the social impact of 'low levels', but they never refer to the need to raise pupils' levels, in contrast to the policymakers' attitude. The pupils also express resentment of 'elitism' within football: they are advocating equal opportunities for everyone, regardless of ability.

To summarize, the pupils' insights suggest that the equalities issues they experience go far beyond the issues that can be interpreted through data on exam results: they cannot be presented quantitatively. Firstly, some of the equalities issues raised, such as 'being new', are not measured, and therefore they are absent from the data adults use to identify inequalities. Secondly, whilst the test results for boys and girls were

equal, this does not mean that there are no gender issues in the school. The gender issues were complex and irreducible to a table or statistics; there were issues with equality of experience. Thirdly, the test results measure equality of **outcome** in a very narrow, purely academic, way: they fail to indicate whether the pupils have the skills to be cohesive citizens, for example, whether they are tolerant of religions and ethnicities. Finally, the government, OFSTED and schools present equalities as the ability of all groups to reach top levels, whereas the children wanted everyone to be treated equally **regardless** of their level, which is perhaps an ideological clash between the pupils and the policymakers.

In a 'neo-liberalized' society, perhaps the prioritization of equalities issues by various actors equates to their currency in the actors' world. Governmental policymakers arguably focus on school outcomes, such as test results, because they know that in our neo-liberal society, qualifications hold currency in the job market, whereas even a great deal of **progress** in school won't really be credible if the **achievement** isn't good enough. In this line of thought, it could be argued that the pupils are not 'forward-looking' in their identification of equalities issues, because what matters and what holds currency in their world at age 10 is different to what matters in the adult world. However, I would argue that this discredits some very valuable insights they give, because certainly many of the equalities issues they raise have broad implications for the future. For example, in the borough where the school is situated there is high unemployment, particularly for women, and the issues around marriage being obligatory in 'our culture', the lack of cohesion between boys and girls and the inherited prejudice around socializing with different religious groups have huge

potential implications not only for pupils' social futures and how we are progressing

as a society but, in economic terms, their employability too.

Equalities outcomes

Towards the final stages of our equalities case study, we turned to the **outcomes** of

the policy formation. As noted previously in the chapter, outcomes are of high value

in the neo-liberal school because they are pivotal to performativity and accountability.

One of the outputs of the equalities policy-formation process was the creation and

distribution of posters around the school. The local education authority designed and

printed hundreds of copies of these posters on glossy paper, aimed at informing pupils

about the new equalities policy. What makes this poster particularly relevant is that it

is a very typical example of the types of display schools use to communicate equal

opportunities.

<FIGURE 1 HERE>

Fig. 1: Primary School Equalities Poster (unpublished)

There are several ways to use the critiques of neo-liberalism we have been developing

in the chapter to analyse this poster. Firstly, the image on the poster shows a variety

of cartoon animals of different species, shapes and sizes. Though we cannot be sure

what the intention behind this image was, it is reasonable to suggest that it adopts the

'no matter what we look like, we are all the same' equalities trope. Following this

argument, this image could be viewed as a 'fabrication' (Ball 2003), because, as Ball

argues, whether true or not the purpose of the poster is to signify equality. It is a quick visual representation of the ethos the institution needs to present. We see an over-arching message that colour/shape/size/gender/species mean nothing, and no matter what we look like we are all the same – but these are neo-liberal messages! Images like these invoke a discourse of meritocracy, that we are all equal. But they are devoid of context and meaning – they are what Stuart Hall might call an empty or floating signifier. Animals are notorious for filling this function in children's storybooks, to de-racialize (a purple elephant) and de-sexualize (gender and sexually neutral, one of each species) subjectivity (Chetty 2014). Some of the effects of this use of animals are to deny or mystify the ability to think about social complexity in relation to structural inequalities according to race, class and gender.

By viewing this image through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens we can consider how the poster is purposefully 'colour blind.' In this case, endemic racialized power differentials in British society are *purposefully* obscured through the use of the brightly coloured animals rather than realistically coloured human children attending the school. CRT investigates institutionalized racism including the tactics of white supremacy, privilege and power in UK society (Gillborn 2014. Through this lens of CRT we see that the poster: 1) Wilfully obscures attention to racism or racial power differentials in society (colour blind); and 2) Suggests that just because people are different, that does not mean they are not also somehow equal (meritocracy). Gillborn (2014, p. 2) notes in relation to wilfully denying racism in educational processes that 'neo-liberalism typically works through colour-blind language that dismisses the saliency of race-specific analyses'.

These logics, as we have suggested above, are again schizoid and confusing as they fly in the face of staff's and children's own lived experiences, which are infused with ideas of race and power. For example, in the workshops, pupils had conversations such as the following:

Staff member: How would you know their religion?

Pupil: Their skin.

But these nuances and confusions about how race and skin are read by the children are not addressed through the metaphor of multicoloured animals. As Chetty (2014) argues about popular picture books that tackle 'race' issues:

> The story's irony is that it removes difference at the very point that it highlights it – that is to say, it removes a particular kind of difference (social inequality) whilst highlighting another (superficial bodily markers), which, once decontextualized, is rendered socially insignificant. And so a book about difference becomes in fact a book about sameness, consistent with 'color-blindness'. (p. 20)

Even more ironic is the fact that animals are not the same. They each have their position in the food chain, and some are more powerful, faster and stronger than others, which perhaps contradicts the idea that pupils are all the same and their successes can be based around the same exams. As the now-famous aphorism suggests:

> 'Everybody is a genius, but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree it will live its whole life believing it is stupid.' (Albert Einstein)

Thinking about issues of gender and sexuality, arguably some of the points in the poster do relate to pupils' comments about fairness for boys and girls, but these are abstracted to the point of obscurity – no one would dispute them, but what do they mean? Indeed, the aims are very closely linked to the language of the Equalities Act 2010, which leaves us wondering if there would be space on this poster for actually addressing the messy, sticky issues that pupils raised, such as the romanticization of boy/girl friendships or territorializing space according to gendered bodies and sport (football). Kelley writes that when we involve children in the policymaking process, 'typically, we are seeking a response to or endorsement of an idea that already exists' (Kelley 2006, p. 37). Perhaps a neo-liberal effect on pupil voice is that the pressure on schools to perform and be accountable is so intense that it leaves no space for ideas that hold content about particular issues, such as childhood sexuality, which are deemed too risky to engage with (Renold et al. 2015). So what we find is a schizoid contradiction (Renold and Ringrose 2011), an artefact that symbolically performs an equality objective at the same time as it obscures its actual referent, which is to promote equality amongst children who, because of differential relationships to axiomatic structures/discourses and relations power, are not equally positioned to climb up Churchill and Cameron's social ladder. Significantly, negotiating these highly contradictory policies and practices is also felt keenly as a schizoid pressure to perform equalities in ways that do not address the lived relations of inequalities among staff and teachers and students attempting to work in these contexts.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, research from our case study school in East London gave rich, qualitative insight into the ways neo-liberal discourses impact (infect, interrupt) equalities practices in schools. We can deduce from this research that some of the key impacts of neo-liberal trends are increased competition, accountability and performativity that force, at least this school, to focus on quantitative results as the key indicator for inequalities. Furthermore, our research found that the subsequent **effects** of over-reliance on quantitative data in neo-liberal equalities practices are multiple and contradictory. Some of the effects included the pressure to 'perform' equality, which staff experienced in a schizoid way, since they were meant to focus on issues such as a 'rich-poor' pupil 'gap' but discount their own knowledge of the complexity of class-based and economic social inequality. Regarding gender, as has been evident in years of 'failing boys' panics in the UK (Epstein et al. 1998), the quantitative statistics in this school that rendered gender a non-issue did not match pupils' comments on the issues that affected them, shoring up contradictions between the statistical evidence and lived experience. Rather, we illustrated that pupils noted a multitude of gender- and sexuality-related issues affecting them that the focus on exam results between girls and boys wilfully ignores (Ringrose 2013). Likewise, we illustrated how racial power and difference were made invisible in the equality policy poster, using Critical Race Theory to raise questions about institutionalized racism.

Our research indicates that the neo-liberal focus on outcomes potentially leads schools to over-invest in 'fabrications' that signify equality but fail to grapple with issues affecting children. Overall, our research raises questions about neo-liberal pressure to

identify equalities issues quantitatively and points to the need for a strongly intersectional approach that considers the complex play of indicators around race, religion, social class, gender and sexuality and ability in thinking through issues of attainment.

Turning to recommendations of our research, we feel it is important to conclude by mentioning some of the potentially positive aspects of the policy-making engagement process that are of course not reducible or able to be captured in the poster we examined. As Maguire, Ball and Braun (2011) have noted, policy enactment is a messy process, and many issues were brought to light and grappled with in a productive way. For instance, as referenced throughout the chapter, the pupils' comments widely alluded to a number of gender issues within the school: the boys' awareness of 'oppressive masculinity' and the prohibition of male emotion, the segregation of boys and girls in the playground, the sexualization of boy/girl friendships, the stereotyping of girls and the heteronormativity of the schooling. Once the policymakers were made aware of the pupils' views, they took them seriously. School policymakers have presented several assemblies about gender, and they refused to relegate gender to a non-issue as had happened at the beginning of the process where the statistical comparisons between gender results on exams was the only measure of equality. Policymakers actually listened to the pupils' comments on gender and noted that they were important and needed addressing. Promoting gender equality around sports, for instance, was written into the policy, taking into account pupils' idea that sports could promote gender equality. The school heavily promoted the women's World Cup, assigning each class a team to promote women's sport, and

they took the girls football team to a women's event at a stadium. This suggests a very high level of investment of time and energy from the school, and of participation from pupils, showing the desire to address equality. The powerful impact pupils' insights into equalities had on this school's practice (and the school's willingness to listen to those pupils) can be seen as a strong example of the potential that exists to address equalities beyond simplistically showing evidence of lessening 'gaps' in quantitative data.

And yet the remnants of the policy push to compare and equalize around a binary formation of gender comparisons, for instance, remained. One staff member expressed concern, saying: *'We've gone gender mad, but I think we've done too much about "girl power"; we need to talk about how boys are affected by male stereotypes too.'* In our view this statement is useful to conclude with because it powerfully underscores the need for further equalities work that can keep challenging the boys vs. girls mentality (and the range of other 'gap talk' showcased by Gillborn and others) that comes out of statistical comparisons of achievement by group. The statement demonstrates, then, just how important it remains for policymakers to look beyond neo-liberal-fuelled data and tick-box outcomes to think about pupils' experiences and teachers' views in order to truly grapple with inequality as power differentials organized around intersecting aspects of race, class and gender; differentials and power relations that are not reducible to comparative points on an 'equalities objectives' graph.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Primary School Key Stage 2 Test Results (2014) unpublished.

Figure 1: Equalities Poster (2015) unpublished.