

‘Tick boxes are just tick boxes’: Problematizing evidence-based teaching and exploring the space of the possible through a complexity lens

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Zahid Naz 

Queen Mary University of London, London, UK

Abstract

This article seeks to provide a new paradigm for questioning how quality and excellence in teaching practices are understood and evaluated. By combining ideas from complexity theory and Michel Foucault’s conception of polymorphous correlations, I argue that a shift away from the forms of thought that engender reductionist evaluations can become a starting point to redefine the efficacy of teaching practices. By examining teaching practices through data obtained from interviews and classroom observations at a further education college, this article justifies disrupting our current common sense by which quality is defined in the landscape of educational policies and research. It is necessary, first, to try to unsettle the so-called discourse of evidence-based teaching, resulting in the production and dissemination of universalised pedagogical forms. By exploring how ecological factors affect institutional hierarchies and influence teaching practices, I challenge the notion that power relations in education are solely one-directional and oppressive. Insights from theory and teaching practices suggest that there are new forms of power at play, drawing attention to the concept I refer to as ‘transphenomenal awareness’, and offering a more profound understanding of the significance of transcending the confines of pedagogical determinism that presently guides educational policymaking.

Keywords

Complexity, transversality, Foucault, further education, education and power

Corresponding author:

Zahid Naz, Department of Academic and Professional Education, School of Languages, Linguistics, and Film, Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Road, London E14NS, UK.

Email: z.naz@qmul.ac.uk

Introduction

To understand complexity of educational practices in English Further Education (FE)¹, a synopsis of the quality assurance mechanism is necessary. FE sector in England is regulated by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Ofsted uses regular inspections of all schools and FE colleges to collect evidence about the efficacy and impact of teaching and leadership practices. Following on-site inspections, the reports of findings are published so that colleges can use them to improve the quality of education (Ofsted, 2023). In order to judge the quality of education, Ofsted scrutinises an education provider's 'intent', 'implementation' and 'impact'. Intent refers to curriculum and what a college wants its students to learn in a particular sequence. Implementation refers to teaching processes and Impact is the evidence of student progress against curriculum goals set in Intent and the quality of Implementation strategies (Ofsted, 2019). Colleges use internal quality reviews, audits, student fora and classroom observations, on an annual and sometimes termly basis, to prepare for Ofsted inspections. Despite Ofsted's claim that they do not promote or endorse any specific teaching approach, the evaluation criteria employed by both Ofsted and internal Quality departments operate under the assumption that teaching practices are a precise discipline that can be enhanced through the adaptation of sequenced linear procedures (ibid.).

The global trend toward neoliberalising education highlights the importance of discerning strengths and weaknesses within evidence-based quality schemes. In England, this is exemplified by Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework (EIF), which sets teaching standards and introduces new accountability and audit measures. These measures compel colleges to provide evidence of 'good' practice by demonstrating linear performance. For example, an increased focus on curriculum sequencing and students' ability to articulate their progress (Ofsted, 2019) stems for the epistemological reductionism of supposing that all teaching practices are quantifiable, mechanistic and measurable (Naz, 2021).

The adoption of data-led neoliberal measurement approaches extends beyond Further Education, exemplified by the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), signalling a neoliberal shift in UK higher education policy. O'Leary and Cui (2023) critique TEF's instrumentalist approach, highlighting its focus on monitoring teaching quality as a product rather than focussing on the process of teaching and learning (also see Brogan 2020; Holloway 2021; Morrish 2019; Naz 2023). Chitpin (2021) analyses the role of the Ofsted in English schools, highlighting its potential to de-professionalise teachers, thereby undermining local decision-making by entrusting curriculum development to distant experts while educators are still held accountable for student achievement.

This accountability not only 'disconnects' education from the public but also creates an unwavering imperative for individuals to 'perform' and demonstrate efficacy. This results in an environment where metrics of excellence, notably test scores and rankings within hierarchical tables, are perceived as determinants of quality. (Biesta et al., 2022: 1217). The disconnect occurs when the accountability mechanism within a neoliberal system prioritises external mandates and bureaucratic requirements over the specific needs and circumstances of local institutions, educators, and students. Educational accountability often prioritises quantitative measures and the production of evidence related to teaching and learning, sometimes neglecting the individualised needs of different student populations, and sacrificing other educational objectives valued by the public, such as fostering critical thinking, creativity and social-emotional skills.

The so-called evidence-based practice derives its strengths from quantifiable data metrics and makes the notions of quality and excellence appear objectively seductive. Nonetheless, in this system, only certain types of 'data' are considered 'meaningful, valuable, and desirable forms of

knowledge'. The issue is that when accountability measures exclusively equate quality education with measurable data, such as test scores, they fail to capture the multidimensional nature of learning and development. Consequently, data regarding the quality of education within 'neoliberalism are problematic', as they lack consideration for contextual complexities and local traditions (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2019: 726).

The article is divided into three parts. The first section introduces the relevance of complexity theory to educational practices, explores its synergy with Michel Foucault's work, and discusses their combined application in understanding social network dynamics as a research methodology within English Further Education.

Drawing on Complexity Theory and Foucault, the next section of this article highlights the organic nature of teaching practices in Further Education (FE) colleges, which defy pre-determined curriculum structures and hierarchical mechanisms based on neoliberal forms of governance. The article provides a case for a shift in focus towards contextualised validity in teaching processes through what I call 'transphenomenal awareness'. This perspective challenges the use of reductionist inspection tools to judge an educational setting with numerous interconnected elements and emergent properties.

The final part addresses the consequences and implications stemming from this disparity between the complex nature of teaching and the reductionist evaluation methods. Teachers need to be responsive to the complexities stemming from the uniqueness of each classroom while also demonstrating linear compliance to pass inspection checklists. These conflicting demands could result in the showcasing of strategic compliance as a form of resistance, drawing attention to the new ways of understanding hierarchies. Foucault's assertion that power 'is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere' (1998: 63), employed as a thinking tool, shows the fluidity of power of relations embodied in a range of teaching practices produced for different purposes.

Complexity: A brief summation

Whilst earlier theories such as Rene Thom's catastrophe theory in the 1970s and chaos theory in the 1980s provided a context for understanding the significance of small events in leading to large-scale changes in society; they had their limitations. Catastrophe theory highlighted the importance of small events but lacked explanations for the processes triggering changes within systems. Chaos theory, on the other hand, emphasised the constraints of knowing initial conditions for predicting outcomes but lacked precise parameters for comprehending social phenomena or principles for understanding non-economic activities holistically.

However, complexity theory offers a different approach that is well-suited for researching social phenomena such as educational practices. With its roots in catastrophe theory and further development in the 1980s, complexity theory introduces concepts like 'emergence' and 'self-organisation'. These concepts allow for a deeper understanding of how various parts of a system interact and how these interactions can lead to states of order and stability, despite the inherent complexity and unpredictability of social systems.

In a complex system ... The interaction constituents of the system, and the interaction between the system and its environment, are of such a nature that the system as a whole cannot be fully understood simply by analysing its components. Moreover, these relationships are not fixed, but shift and change, often as a result of self-organisation. This can result in novel features, usually referred to in terms of emergent properties. The brain, natural language and social systems are complex. (Cilliers, 1998: viii)

Complex systems consist of entities with several interconnected components. Examining these components in isolation does not tell us anything about behaviours and properties of these systems. Rather, it is collective actions and interaction of those components in the face of fluctuating conditions that shapes their adaptability with an ecosystem. Complex systems are non-linear and contain emerging properties with intricate, messy and coincidental hierarchical relationships. For instance, any minor modifications within convoluted operations could deliver a range of effects that are disproportional to the origin states which triggered those alterations, but the self-organising nature of these systems continue to function without requiring external control or direction. [Mason \(2008\)](#) argues that in the presence of a considerable degree of complexity within a specific environment, novel properties and behaviours manifest, extending beyond the intrinsic nature of the constituent elements and defying prediction based on an understanding of initial conditions. The recognition of emergent properties and behaviours within complex environments suggests a framework for researching teaching and learning practices, acknowledging their inherent unpredictability and the limitations of predicting outcomes solely based on existing states.

‘Self-organisation’ can be defined as the ability of complex systems to spontaneously and adaptively develop or alter their internal structure to deal with or influence the environment. These systems are not in a state of equilibrium because they continually change due to the interactions between system and its environment ([Olssen, 2004](#)).

Complexity and education

To contextualise this discussion within an educational framework, this paper presents possibilities for examining the process of teaching and learning as a complex system. These possibilities can be afforded to educational policy analysis through complexity theory, illuminating tensions and connection between prescribed teaching standards and everyday practices in the classroom. [Biesta \(2016\)](#) contends that educational systems embody characteristics of openness, semiotics, and recursiveness. These systems are open due to the perpetual porosity of their boundaries with the environment, semiotic in nature as the interactions between educators and learners transcend physical forces and instead rely on the construction of meaning and interpretation. They are also recursive given that the actions undertaken by both teachers and students, as integral components of the system, influence the trajectory of its development. In contrast to resembling ‘stimulus-response machines’, the entities within the system are sentient individuals with the ability for thoughtful deliberation and emotional responses. This autonomy empowers them to choose from a variety of courses of action ([Biesta 2016](#): 204).

On the other hand, quality assurance assemblages assume that the effectiveness of teaching practices can be evaluated based on the business principles of predictability, calculability and linearity, aligning with neoliberal ideologies that promote standardised pedagogical theories emphasising quantifiable outcomes and market-driven metrics ([Tesar et al., 2021](#)). Therefore, teaching and learning policies seek to ensure consistency and comparability in all teaching practices regardless of the embedded uniqueness within diverse pedagogical contexts whereby student progress in terms of ‘Impact’ may not always be proportional to curriculum Intent and Implementation. This exemplifies the substitution of educational approaches to ‘doing’ education with non-educational methods, as teachers are constrained from creating their own curriculum and teaching strategies. Instead, they are compelled ‘to follow commercial scripts based on so-called “evidence” about which teaching interventions are the most effective’ ([Siegel and Biesta, 2022](#): 540).

Classroom teaching and learning are intertwined with shifts in quality assurance paradigms rooted in ‘legitimate knowledge’, influencing current policies, exemplifying simultaneities where

practices and policies coexist but are often perceived as separate phenomena, as suggested by Mason.

Such simultaneities tend to be seen as coincidental, but not co-implicated. Thinking in the perspective of complexity theory challenges these modes of interpretation [by offering] useful insights into the projects of education and educational research.

(Mason, 2008: 7).

The idea that simultaneous events might actually be intertwined and influencing each other in complex ways is also present in Foucault's work about the relational nature of social phenomena.

Foucault as a complexity theorist

Michel Foucault, a prominent French philosopher, is not typically considered a complexity theorist in the sense that his work predates the formal development of complexity theory, and he did not explicitly engage with complex systems terminology. However, his ideas contribute to the non-linear and incidental way in which discourses shape knowledge, subjectivity and social practice. For example, the inherent uncertainty of complex system is evident in the way individuals and groups interact with different components of their environment, relying on one another, each influencing and being influenced by the others.

The intricate relationship between elements, which may be seen as separate, can be positioned within Foucault's 'play of dependencies', which becomes central in understanding the 'polymorphous cluster of correlations' (Foucault, 1978: 13) in social processes.

'I would like to substitute this whole play of dependencies for the uniform simple notion of assigning causality and by suspending the indefinitely extended privilege of the cause, in order to render apparent the polymorphous cluster of correlations'.

(Foucault, 1978: 13).

Here, Foucault proposes replacing the idea of a single cause with a complex network of connections to reveal diverse relationships between factors. In teaching practices, this complexity is evident as multiple elements interact to shape outcomes, challenging simplistic notions of causality.

Examining associations amongst ideas, objects and processes within discourse formations, Foucault scrutinises linkages between political, social and economic factors. Foucault used his analytic devices to understand process that resulted in discursive labels such as 'the mad', 'the sane' and the 'the rational' in 19th century psychopathology. We can use these thinking tools to understand the discursive formations that result in contemporary labels in the context of FE teaching and inspections. For example, quality improvement schemes can be understood as discursive strategies employed to shape teaching practices, and these policies are often underpinned by dominant political discourses of the time.

A teaching and learning space operates as a complex social structure defined by change, emergence and 'auto-eco organisation' (Smith, 2013:567). The genesis of change can be traced by exploring connections between the elements of ecology which triggered those initial changes. Each social space needs to be contextualised and there are no universalities in this process. As Foucault (1972: 200) puts it:

If I suspended all reference to the speaking subject, it was not to discover laws of construction or forms that could be applied in the same way by all speaking subjects, nor was it to give voice to the great universal discourse that is common to all men [*sic*] at a particular period. On the contrary, my aim was to show what the differences consisted of, how it was possible for men [*sic*], within the same discursive practice, to speak of different objects, to have contrary opinions [. . .] in short, I want not to exclude the problem of the subject but to define positions and functions that the subject could occupy in the diversity of discourse.

Foucault's rejection of uniformed patterns and universal discourses at a particular time in history goes into the heart of emergence discussion, which draws attention to variations in subjectivities and discourses. This refutation of standardised models is supported by a connectionist viewpoint on instructional approaches whereby a range of interpretive possibilities can be tied to a particular social environment as mooted in complexity theory. This refusal involves a departure not only from singular modes of classroom operation but also from ingrained hierarchical structures, thereby enabling diverse forms of governance that can facilitate deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in 'local knowledges' (Tesar et al., 2021: 5). Acknowledging the 'multiplicities of local realities and paradigms' will establish a platform for intricate methodologies surpassing 'binary and singular ways of knowing and being', thus fostering innovative forms of resistance and fostering receptivity to diverse perspectives. (ibid: 6–7). The multifaceted nature of pedagogical operations – in which the growth of ideas and relationships is rhizomatic – refutes any established boundaries and hierarchies stemming from reductionist modes of thinking. This transgression of fixed domains draws attention to the conception of transversality.

Transversality

Foucault's idea of the 'play of dependencies' invites us to consider the interconnectedness between institutional forms of knowledge and the power effects created by novel forms of adaptations in teaching practices. Transversality encourages us to examine how traditional forms of hierarchy, such as institutional authority, are confronted by unique forms of dissensus in subtle ways, challenging the dominant forms of knowledges about quality of education. This decentralisation of power highlights emergent practices responding to quality standards beyond prescribed agendas, while the complex nature of educational practices reshapes power dynamics, involving diverse forms of resistance and interaction among individuals and their environment.

In other words, transversality marks the possibility of contesting contemporary a priori solutions and pre-determined constellations of power. Here, we begin to consider how transformation of things and practices over time affects intersection of spaces which embody social change. Examining these transformations enables us to untangle connections and interactions between different elements and move beyond static categories assigned to subjects and entities. Transversal lens paves the way for a reinterpretation of variables and interactions within a network. Foucault's idea of transformation facilitates an analysis with a capacity to look beyond presupposed hierarchical structures and takes us even further by uncovering the unpredictability of ecological changes. For Foucault, power is transversal rather than oppressive

Power comes from below: that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations and serving as a general matrix – no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body.

(Foucault, 1981b: 94)

Through this lens, life becomes a site of possibilities in which the interdependence of one component with others makes the assemblage of power complex and transversal. In complex systems, transversality of hierarchies cannot be understood without analysing conflicts and agreements emerging from interactions between materialities and human agents and the power effects leading to new subjectivities. In the context of teaching and learning, a system which mainly attributes power to senior managers and focuses on quantifiable outcomes in isolation instead of relational links and interaction between components, could be seen as an attempt to oversimplify processes that are inherently complex and transversal.

According to [Olssen \(2004\)](#), Foucault perceives power as mobilised, employing the strategic metaphor of the game in relation to both language and power.

Language it is played ... Relations of power, also, they are played; it is these games of power (*joux de pouvoir*) that one must study in terms of tactics and strategy, in terms of order and of chance, in terms of stakes and objectives ([Foucault, 1994](#): 541-542).

These games embody both freedom and constraint. Players must respond in obligatory moments, like when dealing with an opponent's kicked ball. Despite rule limitations, the game allows for limitless moves. Strategic players exploit rules to their advantage, showcasing inventiveness and improvisation within constraints ([Olssen, 2004](#)), highlighting the necessity to evaluate the quality of education within the framework of complexity, openness, and indeterminacy rather than calculability, measurable efficiency, and predictability. Ultimately, what emerges from these possibilities is a completely different view of teaching practices – different from that straightforward and so-called evidence-based approach which sees them as a reproduction of previous practices that took place in similar settings. Each setting within each classroom of each college has its own conditions of existence emerging from unique demands which cannot be understood through the notion of reducibility encompassed in Ofsted's EIF and other internal quality regimes.

In utilising the conceptual framework outlined by Complexity and Foucault's perspectives on power dynamics, this qualitative study aims to explore the intricate connections and potential conflicts between teaching practices and quality improvement policies within a Further Education (FE) college setting. The study contends that a holistic understanding of teaching practices necessitates an appreciation of their context-specific nature, which transcends the standardised frameworks imposed by external evaluative mechanisms such as the Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework (EIF). By foregrounding the unique conditions and emergent dynamics within each classroom and college setting, the study aims to challenge the reductive tendencies inherent in conventional quality assessment paradigms and foster a more nuanced discourse around pedagogical effectiveness and improvement strategies.

Research context and design

The focus of this study was to investigate how different teachers individually determine, evaluate and describe their teaching practices against a backdrop of policy discourses. The data presented in this paper derive from a case study of an FE college in London as part of a detailed exploration of the teaching practices and quality improvement policies. The strategy used throughout was of a predominantly ethnographic nature whereby unstructured observations, policy analysis and personal reflections were supported by data collected in semi-structured interviews.

Out of 15 teacher participants approached through informal discussions, 8 were selected based on their extensive experience of classroom observations and quality audits. Two senior leaders, one of

whom served as the CEO of the college and was also an Ofsted inspector, and the other as the director of quality improvement, along with six teaching staff members, participated in the interviews. The interviews extended over a period of an hour to 90 min each time on college grounds. Teaching staff were also observed in their classrooms and then interviewed again after the observations. I included six conversations that echoed the themes covered for the analysis in this article. All participants possessed significant tenure in educational roles within Further Education contexts, each accumulating over 5 years of experience and having undergone multiple inspections and audits. Additionally, both senior leaders had accrued over 15 years of experience in FE settings.

The primary research questions – ‘How do inspection policy agendas influence teachers, and in what ways are quality assemblages connected with pedagogical practices?’ – informed the development of a short interview questionnaire wherein educators were prompted to articulate their day-to-day teaching practices and any adaptations necessitated during internal and external inspections.

Through iterative readings of interview transcripts and subsequent application of open and focused coding techniques, discernible patterns and thematic threads emerged, directly aligning with the research objectives and inquiry. Responses from interviews yielded meaningful data with varying levels of detail about different aspects in each interview. Thoroughly examining all recorded conversations following transcription, relevant details were identified. To meet the objectives, set out in the study, I conducted an investigation to ferret out elements closely linked with the focus of the analysis in this article. Therefore, the data analysed in this paper present an array of insights, a wide spectrum of experiences accompanied by extended replies with specific and fitting examples, making them the most relevant choices for this study. Along with the specific examples from interviews, triangulation of data achieved through the juxtaposition of these examples with notes from classroom observations and post-observation reflections was used to enhance conclusions about quality process used to improve teaching practices.

The research received approval from the College’s Director of Quality and CEO, and was also endorsed by a UK university’s Ethics Committee, following a thorough assessment ensuring compliance with ethical considerations regarding privacy, consent, social justice, and power dynamics.

Complexity in the interplay of policy frameworks, teaching practices, and power dynamics

Integrating Foucault’s ideas with a complexity lens enables a nuanced exploration of simultaneities in teaching practices, revealing connections among seemingly unrelated events (Davis, 2008), including their manifestation in inspection agendas and their association with socio-material conditions within specific classrooms. These agendas tend to assume that teachers teach, and learners engage with information in the same way regardless of the context, overlooking the complexities of constraints and opportunities that shape students’ modes of thought and teachers’ responsive instructions in a particular setting. This may result in conflicts between teachers’ ability to comply with policies and their duty to engage with the requirements of certain social aspects. This complex interplay between quality and individual can be understood in Julie’s² (English teacher) discussion when she asserted:

...good teaching is sometimes good because [of] what the learners are doing. It’s the mood the teacher is in. It’s the mood the class is in, and I know theoretically it comes from the top. You know *the mood!*

The correlation between a teacher's mood and its potential impact on student learning serves as an illustrative example of phenomena that may appear coincidental but are not necessarily seen as co-implicated. The prevailing approach to educational policy often fails to recognise the interconnectedness of such factors, treating them as isolated entities. However, Julie's statement implies that the quality of teaching cannot be divorced from students' willingness to engage with the content, as well as the wellbeing and motivation of the teachers. This appears to hold not only in Further Education but also in Higher Education, where achievement and failures are ascribed to the students themselves, rather than their social or economic situations (Tomlinson Enders and Naidoo, 2020). Julie's final point about the mood, emphasised with rising intonation, strengthens the connection to the key point that there may be a number of factors influencing student and teacher motivation levels. Therefore, it could be argued that unexpected societal issues or financial strains affecting students' lives outside the college could impact an individual's engagement in the learning space and the conduct of lesson procedures. Madeline, who is an ESOL³ teacher, put forth an idea somewhat analogous to this, but still quite distinct.

You have to do your assessment for learning. You have to pull them up if they're late ... you have to be upstanding, you have to walk around, monitor when perhaps you've got a headache. So, you do all of those things, but I think once you know you are supposed to do them, then you can.

The understanding of what holds significance in a given moment shapes a teacher's conduct in the classroom, illustrating the influence of ecological dependencies on their bodily actions to effectively guide the lesson procedure. In this example, Madeline illustrates how the teacher's awareness of pedagogical responsibilities, embodied through physical actions such as monitoring students and maintaining discipline, reflects the interconnectedness of mind, body and the immediate environment as she navigates the demands of teaching, exemplifying 'transphenomenality' (Mason, 2008). It displays links among apparently distinct elements, necessitating a thorough examination of unpredictable factors typically associated with seemingly disparate levels of explanation.

In the examples above, Julie's view considers the students angle, while Madeline takes a vantage of the educators. These two observations about seemingly distinct aspects of the same phenomena, which despite not being directly linked with quality of teaching, still work in tandem with teaching acts and draw attention to factors operating according to constantly changing demands within local networks. Mutual associations of various elements in these networks play a vital role in how teaching practices and their quality wholly depend on '*alea* (chance) as a category in the production of events' (Foucault, 1981a: 69). We see this in Julie's and Madeline's observations regarding 'the mood', 'students' well-being' and the occurrence of 'headaches' show the significance of interconnected elements within the classroom environment. This highlights the notion that teaching practices and their quality are largely contingent upon incidental factors.

Any quality checks are unlikely to be capable of truly capturing all the intricacies surrounding the complexities of this phenomenon. What gets observed in the classroom is an embodiment of how a teacher's subject knowledge (what they know), pedagogical skills (what they are capable of) and performance (what they actually do) within the class interact as well as an embodiment of the effects produced by this mutual interaction. The existing inspections paradigms situate teaching practices in an evidenced-based territory wherein it becomes extremely difficult to distinguish deliberate attempts of self-regulation for inspection purposes from regular teaching practices that fall outside the scope of an external gaze.

A maths teacher, Peter, talked about the impact of variables on his day-to-day teaching, particularly in relation to students' behaviours and attitudes. He said that sometimes

it becomes almost impossible to teach anything because students keep disrupting [me] and other quiet students.

Peter draws attention to another factor of classroom and learner management constraints, contingent upon student characteristics, and how they determine the flow and smoothness of teaching progression. Further exploration into the connection between various learner personas and their tendencies was undertaken in Julie's depiction of teaching methods:

Some years [you get] a lumpy class and other years you get a passionate flying class...it is remarkable how that lesson would be different depending on the class...I think if one comes out saying 'wow that was outstanding', *it's got so much to do with the moment and good fortune* and where is that class today, where you are today. It's got such a *lot of chance*. Probably more likely is our outstanding teachers are probably not outstanding when they are being observed.

With so many 'it depends' attached to practices as it is exemplified here, any attempts to understand teaching practices in mechanistic and linear fashion are unlikely to yield desired results in terms of assessing quality of education. The efficacy of inspection mechanisms is brought into question by Julie's point about how practices alter when they are closely monitored. The 'here and now' of how a teacher reacts in the face of either lumpiness or passionately flying audience, complexifies teaching, learning and assessment procedures, introducing new possibilities which may lead to unexpected outcomes beyond the scope of how quality of education is currently framed in the description of curriculum 'Intent' and 'Implementation'. This illustrates how teacher-policy framework interactions are influenced by performativity and accountability cultures, shaping teacher professionalism. Ensuring quality through reductive lenses may well serve performance management purposes – albeit it is not informed by transphenomenal awareness as it does not encapsulate the story of the connections between individuals' minds and bodies and the relational significance of simultaneities and transphenomenalities which influence the public display of teaching practices. Therefore, improved quality in this context needs to be viewed beyond the pedagogical binaries such as 'outstanding' and 'inadequate' – judgements frequently used to evaluate quality of education.

Julie's point about 'good fortune' and 'chance' requires an analysis of how teachers' subject knowledge and skills may not always be reflected in Ofsted's three 'I's – Intent, Implementation and Impact. There are a wide range of factors stemming from students' levels motivation and external influences that link with a teacher's ability to diverge from initial plans based on the changing demands – mentioned by Julie, Peter and Madeline – which may be seen as coincidental but not complicated. Nonetheless, a decontextualised approach of assessing teaching practices will always associate quality with student outcomes, implying that a teacher who delivers high-quality instruction is bound to produce higher success rates and favourable student results (Barnes and Cross, 2021). Yet this indiscriminate approach to teaching quality is unhelpful owing to the interdependent and coincidental association between an array of factors.

This is the point. The idea that that inspections provide a 360-degree overview of teaching quality appears to be naïve because polymorphous correlations resulting in unpredictable outcome fall outside the purview of audits and observations used to measure what cannot be measured. Alex, who is the CEO of the college and also an Ofsted inspector, mentioned the pressure on inspectors:

As an inspector, people often forget we are under a lot of pressure as well. You know you are going into an organisation; you have got no clue about the organisation. You have got to make judgements in less than four days. In my opinion, and you are under so much intense pressure, and everything has to be driven by evidence.

This observation is noteworthy because it highlights that not only teachers but also inspectors face significant pressure. Inspectors must navigate numerous demands by adopting a so-called evidenced-based reductionist approach to evaluate practices that are inherently multifaceted and complex.

Assessing an organisation without prior knowledge is daunting, given its complexity. Inspectors face challenges in evaluating various components such as classrooms, student demographics, and financial health and other variables that could be ‘unobservable’, using standardised criteria. Limited timeframes, typically 4 days to make key judgements about the whole institution, hinder a comprehensive understanding of a college’s operations, leading to practices being viewed in isolation.

Julie provided an example of how examining particularities of the locality and their correlation to components, as well as how these may be mis/judged through an observer’s vision.

Last year, I had [a student] who got a grade 9⁴ [and] someone who got a grade 2 and I was more proud of that grade 2 than anything in that class. But if you had come into that class, you would have thought what is that learner doing? Well, I can tell you that learner is doing brilliantly. They are slightly autistic, they are engage[d], they are sharing ideas. Actually, they are here, *they are here* (sentence stress) – that is a success that they’re rocking up. So that unnerves me; the new Ofsted thing unnerves me because you know you can’t go to the Ofsted person and say I know I know they are not learning very much but you know they have come to every single lesson you know. That – would be a black mark.

The juxtaposition of the CEO’s comment about lack of time with Julie’s example above draws attention to the challenges of understanding the multiplicities of strands and unravelling ‘connections, encounters, blockages, plays of forces, strategies, etc. that at a given moment establish what consequently comes to count as being self-evident, universal and necessary’ (Foucault, 1987: 104). The situation of the autistic learner may well be true for other students with undiagnosed learning needs. This demonstrates that when teachers must address emergent student needs, such as those stemming from autism, it may disrupt conventional teaching practices and may hinder the achievement of ‘outstanding’ lesson status due to discrepancies between planned lessons and delivery. The use of so-called evidence-based approach, mentioned by the CEO, suggests that these situations are likely to lead to an outcome that is undesirable for a teacher or the department where these students are signed up. The issue with these standardised models of evaluation is that they not only overlook the emerging needs of learners, but they also restrict the professional autonomy of teachers and hinder the implementation of learner-centred and culturally appropriate teaching (Brass and Holloway, 2021). The crux of the argument here is about rethinking how quality of education is assessed, so a revised approach to assess teaching would need a ‘breach of self-evidence’ – the process described as ‘eventualisation’ by Foucault (ibid.). Eventualisation in this context will provide a starting point whereby curriculum ‘Impact’ may not be straightforward representation of the quality of ‘Intent’ and ‘Implementation’.

Julie’s explanation about her student’s grades and Peter’s description of his students’ disruptive behaviour on a particular day provide examples of individualised events and instances. When confronted with these occurrences, teachers prioritise meeting students’ emerging needs instead of

adhering to prescribed standards of quality apparatuses (Norman 2022). These individual occurrences are unpredictable in structure and contingent on specific circumstances (Frank, 1992). Practices that are specific to one classroom, department, or college at any given time are connected with localised psychosocial and material conditions; therefore, their efficacy in terms of visible impacts cannot be established without considering the uniqueness, indeterminacy, openness and irregularity that defines those educational sites. Teaching practices are not reproductions of previous events and thus are irreducible. Recognising the historical psychosocial and material phenomena embedded in local conditions at a specific point in time is precisely what I refer to as ‘transphenomenal awareness’, a concept that should form the core of any inspection framework.

For teachers, the quality apparatus poses a dual challenge. The first centres on demonstrating discursive compliance designed to fit the inspection regime, while the second concerns with meeting the multifaceted pedagogical demands of their immediate context. The latter involves a transgressive inscription of their role in ways which subvert the balance of power. This transgression stems from the use of reductionist assessment tools for evaluating the effectiveness of an inherently complex process of teaching and how it reconfigures power relations. The remainder of this article will explore how power is embodied in teaching practices when they are used as instruments of resistance, and how dispersed power effects are constituted through new possibilities for discipline and conformity.

Teachers’ strategic adaptations, rediscovering hierarchies and transversal relations

As a complex system, self-organisation becomes evident in educational practices with the spontaneous emergence of adaptations in teaching, by which teachers evolve in response to changing conditions, exhibiting dynamic and often unpredictable behaviour. The emergence of adaptive modifications in practice without any external guidance becomes noticeable when teachers adopt a highly strategic approach, modifying their practices to demonstrate efficiency and quantifiability in order to cope with the inspection pressure. They navigate the various demands by strategically gaming the system (Beighton and Naz, 2023). In this manner, educators meet ‘multiple demands’ by sustaining their instructional methods (Bingham and Burch, 2019: 402), and manipulate them as necessary, thereby giving rise to a paradoxical situation.

Quality improvement policy of the college mentions ‘Learning Walks’ which are 15 to 20 min short observations carried out by managers. Learning Walks ‘are intended to be short temperature checks and to provide developmental feedback [however] this clause requires a degree of professional judgement’⁵. Director of Quality at the College, James, also said that Learning walks help his department identify areas of improvement in each department. However, the question remains how transphenomenalities swirling around students’ previous learning and behavioural trajectories, their cultural capital and local material conditions can be gauged in a 20-min observation based on a reductive approach. A policy used for assessing an inherently non-linear process through a linear approach suffers from the disadvantage of prioritising the visibility of unified symmetrical compliance without taking the relational constraints and opportunities into account. In the following excerpt, Peter described the tension for him in terms of meeting the performative demands and also his professional view about observation criteria as a ‘game’

If I was doing something as tricky as quadratic equations, I would probably... create some kind of card sort for that or some kind of group activity even though I personally believe, it’s not the best way to teach quadratics so therefore you could argue [students] are losing out. Because in reality what would be better

would be for me to stand there, explain to them and get them to work together on a few worked questions but that would not get me a grade 1⁶ ...[So] I wouldn't put myself at that risk. I would ... create something that was sort of all singing all dancing even though I didn't believe in its merit really.

Peter freely acknowledges that all of his unobserved teaching does not meet policy requirements because he needs to do what is 'best' for his students. He has to change that approach when he is monitored in order to 'get through' the quality checks. In this context, teachers' work exhibits a fluid demonstration of standards, influenced by their own interpretations. What goes unnoticed and remains unobserved actually shows '...teachers' embodied and very personal professional standards of practice that are too 'materially complex' for formal representation as competency – such as predicting the effect of a flavour on a particular dish' (Fenwick, 2010: 128). Their unnoticed curriculum 'Implementation' practices go beyond prescriptive compliance as they are deeply rooted in their own responsive intuition and expertise. Their transphenomenal interaction with curriculum, policy, students and local entities cannot be easily measured through standardised representations but it does reflect local interplays that define the crucial realities of their teaching.

This adaptation to meet the expectations presents a form of self-organisation, as one of the key features of open and complex systems. Teachers' ability to reorganise their course of action and engage with the environment to manage or influence it without external control (Cilliers, 1998), when observable to an external gaze, informs our understanding of contemporary hierarchical relations, consisting of new forms of power which may not always be oppressively authoritative. In the context of De Certeau's (2011) concepts, this exemplifies how teachers utilise strategies to subvert policy, or envision alternative ways of implementing them. It is the teachers' marginalised position in the policy making process and/or the neglect of the nature of their pedagogical processes that enables them to employ their practices for producing a form of creative resistance, placing them in a new light wherein their reactive participation constructs an alternative possible face of policies in their professional domains. In essence, educators possess the capacity to orchestrate circumstances wherein their subtle non-compliance can be interpreted as a manifestation of power effects. The selective use of 'all singing all dancing' compliance is an act of resistance that serves to destabilise and unveil the underlying fragility of quality assurance frameworks, thereby affording opportunities for subversion. (Foucault 1998).

The point is that strategic showcasing of practice is an inevitable consequence of measures that seek to quantify a phenomenon that is processual, emergent, random and unquantifiable. Madeline illustrates how her pedagogical preferences clash with aspects of policies designed to improve her teaching:

I think I'd say I am completely compliant, but I don't think those are the most important things to be measuring really deep down and I don't think the students think they are either ... *tick boxes are just tick boxes, aren't they?* We get two days' notice [before audits and observations] and there are certain things that are requirements ... I do comply but I comply in my own way a lot of the time.

Madeline is very clear about what is important and what counts for her as a teacher and her students. The two-day notice period provides that flexibility to manifest compliance in her 'own way'. She is able to bring her practice in line with the requirements, but the 'box-ticking' approach does not alter her professional view which informs her regular modes of conduct. In fact, her counter-conduct creates a space for productive resistance which is an integral feature of disciplinary power excreted through governing techniques (Foucault, 1991). The operation of power facilitates

Madeline and Peter to negotiate their way through the requirements of performance management apparatus as well as the demands stemming from pedagogical logic.

Stella, An Accounting for ESOL teacher, said that with experience she had become good at writing lesson plans for observations and ‘ticking boxes’.

...as years go by... you equip yourself with strategies to cope with planning so that you can tick the boxes that are expected of you to tick so this is how I cope.

The adaptation of managerial directive when it is needed by the system and responding to students’ needs when she is outside the range of a disciplinary gaze, provides a solution which corresponds with Foucault’s negation of universal principles and unified identities. Power is enacted through the incorporation of different discourses into practice resulting in the production of new subjectivities showing compliance and dissensus simultaneously. Specific effects of power are represented through different forms of knowledge which shape possibilities for action rather than power being a coercive thing used to enact force.

A conceptualisation of the college as a site of power informs our understanding of how power operates through a network of relationships and practices, rather than being held by a single individual or group. This interconnected network of this complex system extends across various spaces, generating practices, local policies, and knowledge through interactions among diverse elements that result in the emergence of new forms of power effects.

In this context, power relations are not hierarchical or top-down; instead, the impacts of power originate from specific locations and chance occurrences, allowing for the emergence of diverse teaching practices. This advances a polymorphous understanding of determination, aiming to unveil the ‘play of dependencies’ (Foucault, 1978: 13) within the social process.

The distribution of power through different forms of interactions enables novel forms of resistance to managerial control without openly challenging the mechanism of quality surveillance. It is in this sense that power is not necessarily repressive or negative but can also be productive and enabling. The complexity of teaching and learning engenders a space for this transversal re-configuration of refusal in which teachers constitute and fabricate themselves through counter-practice (Naz, 2023). Teaching practices are complex so are hierarchal relations. For sure, the apparatus of power in this case is transversal rather than vertical, productive rather than hegemonic and dynamic rather than static and absolute.

Concluding thoughts and implications for policy making

As neoliberal forms of governance seek to impose linear systems for assessing the quality of education, educators manifest nuanced ways of resistance due to the incongruence between such frameworks and the inherently non-linear nature of teaching and learning processes. Learning trajectories often defy predictability, with teaching practices frequently deviating from expected linear progressions. Students’ newly acquired knowledge does not uniformly translate into immediate applicability for them. As a result, the discernible resistance exhibited by educators through their self-organising capacity to enact varied teaching practices draws attention to the multidimensionality of power dynamics, enabling educators to navigate educational settings in diverse manners.

This juxtaposition highlights the inherent problems associated with employing quantifiable evidence-based evaluation tools for ensuring educational quality, primarily attributable to two key factors. Firstly, the linear nature of quality and excellences schemes stands in stark contrast to the

inherently dynamic and contingent nature of educational practices. Secondly, educators may strategically adopt varied instructional methods to demonstrate compliance with external evaluation standards yet revert to localised pedagogical approaches once external scrutiny dissipates. Such practices exemplify a form of resistance characterised by strategic engagement with institutional frameworks rather than overt opposition to what is being imposed on them from above, working to relocate power effects – created by practices – in a transversal rather than vertical fashion.

The so-called evidence-based pedagogy needs to be constantly challenged, questioned and problematised. The alternative is available. I have sought to explain how educators' persistent efforts to renegotiate their professional practices and reconceptualise their roles within the hierarchical landscape can serve as a starting point for redefining the notions of quality and excellence in education. More challenging yet is the task for educators to engage in boundary-pushing actions to reimagine their ontological positioning in relation to their personal and professional contexts. (Hood and Tesar in [Reader et al., 2020](#)). From where we stand today, we need to equip ourselves with what I call 'transphenomenal awareness' which involves recognising fluid connections among various constituents in teaching and managerial domains, including quality assurance of curriculum design and delivery, student engagement and instructional methods. This brings us to the point of finding the space of the possible by taking a step back from the supposed scientific reductionism, abandoning the atomistic models of quality assurance, and exploring alternative avenues for more holistic educational policymaking.

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ORCID iD

Zahid Naz  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2180-4764>

Notes

1. The Further Education (FE) sector in England refers to educational institutions that provide post-secondary education and training beyond the compulsory schooling age, typically for students aged 16 and above. These institutions offer a wide range of courses, including vocational qualifications, apprenticeships, A-levels and adult education programs, catering to diverse learner needs and contributing to skills development and workforce preparation.
2. The six participants are pseudonymous, so no real names have been revealed.
3. English for Speakers of Other Languages.
4. In GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) exams, grade 1 is the lowest while grade 9 is the highest attainable.
5. Cited from the College Teaching and Learning Policy.
6. In graded observations, grade 1 signifies 'outstanding', grade 2 denotes 'good', grade 3 indicates 'requires improvement' and grade 4 represents 'inadequate' practice.

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Zahid Naz is a Lecturer in Academic and Professional Education at the School of Languages, Linguistics, and Film at Queen Mary, University of London, UK. Prior to this, Zahid worked in further education in various teaching and management positions for 15 years. Zahid has taught internationally on preservice and in-service teacher education programs. His research interests concern complexity, Foucauldian discourse analysis, and discursive practices in higher and post compulsory education.