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Teacher (In)Discretion in International Schools

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Abstract

The topic of teacher autonomy has been extensively explored in state schools in the West. However, little research has been done on neoliberal discourses and notions of performativity within international schools. From the outside, it might seem that international schools are not subject to the 'tyranny of performativity' due to their relatively autonomous status outside of national education systems. However, I argue that technologies of performativity are reconfigured in international schools in relation to the sociocultural idiosyncrasies of the local context. In order to illustrate this, this paper focuses on three aspects of performativity in an international school in China - the International Baccalaureate (IB) accreditation process, the student appraisal system, and the school appraisal system. This paper ends by briefly proposing the notion of 'teacher (in)discretion' which is theorised as a form of resistance and refusal.

Key words: teacher discretion; international schools; performativity; subjectivity; identity

Introduction

The issue of teachers being controlled or being in control is by no means new. However, there is a perception that in recent years, particularly in the West, teachers' discretionary space to adapt or contest curricula is being inexorably removed. This removal of teachers' autonomy is associated with neoliberal discourses that are taken to pervade all aspects of teachers' lives (Ball, 2003). The conditions under which teachers now work could be summarised in terms of a 'tyranny of performativity' (Ball, 2003) or 'management panopticism' (Ball, 2003). Performance technologies re-orient teacher behaviour to a set of quality indicators, whilst providing the ontological frameworks for teachers to know how to be 'good' teachers (Holloway & Brass, 2018, p. 363). Examples of performance technologies include examination results, school league tables, and school inspections, such as Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) in the UK, which is responsible for inspecting a range of educational institutions, including state schools and some independent schools.

This new 'regime of performativity' not only changes the conditions in which teachers work, but also produces new kinds of subjects and new kinds of subjectivities (Ball & Olmedo, 2012). This can lead to feelings of 'inauthenticity' (Ball, 2003), where commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance. This is encapsulated in the notion of 'plasticity' (Ball, 2003) or the 'elastic self' (Devine et al., 2011). However, subjectivity also becomes a site for discretion and resistance. Within neoliberal discourses, the notion of resistance is positioned as 'irresponsible' (Ball, 2016a) or as it is termed in this paper, a form of indiscretion. However, resistance is in fact fundamentally affirmative in nature. Resistance has been likened to a 'pathway to the maintenance of the dynamic and evolving relation between human beings and their environment' and 'an act of human and societal creativity' (Hviid, 2018, p. 14). Patterns of resistance, it has to be noted, are never invented by the individual teacher, but are found in his or her culture (Ball & Olmedo, 2012). Resistance is an ongoing process of struggle against granted neoliberalisations that creates the possibility of thinking about education and ourselves differently (Ball & Omedo, 2012). However, resistance is not without its drawbacks. Constant struggle can result in 'permanent agonism' (Ball & Olmedo, 2012), as well as potential ridicule, precarity and isolation (Ball, 2016a).

Whilst the topic of teacher autonomy has been extensively explored in state schools in the West, little research has been undertaken on neoliberal discourses and notions of performativity within international schools. Given that international schools are relatively autonomous compared to state schools in that they are largely unregulated by an external agency (Bunnell, 2016), there may be an assumption that teachers in such schools have more discretionary space. It might also be assumed that teachers have more space in which to shape and reshape curricula and to assert alternative teacher identities that challenge discourses of the teacher as a 'dutiful technician' (Giroux, 2003). What I argue in this paper, however, is that the regulatory technologies of performativity and accountability are still very much present in international schools but are reconfigured in relation to the sociocultural idiosyncrasies of the local context. Although the notion of discretionary space is a multifaceted and complex one, I limit my focus in this paper to strategies that teachers utilise in the implementation of curricula, namely student-centred and teacher-directed approaches. Also in lieu of empirical

data, I draw upon my experiences of teaching in international schools.

Before exploring the topic of teacher discretion in more detail, it is advisable to offer the reader an overview of the international school context and how the term 'international school' is operationalised in this paper.

The International School Context

Offering a clear-cut definition of the nature of international schooling and the international school is problematic, not least of all because attempts at constructing a normative set of criteria by which to judge international school legitimacy (Bunnell, Fertig & James, 2016) can never capture the complex and contradictory reality of what is actually happening on the ground. Generally speaking, researchers have attempted to differentiate international schools from national schools by invoking a discourse on international school exceptionalism. This discourse characterises international schools as inherently anomalous due to their autonomy and diversity (Pearce, 2013). However, international school exceptionalism is being challenged by the rise of national schools (sometimes referred to as internationalised schools) that appropriate aspects of international education, such as The International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) or an international perspective (see Bunnell, 2019 for recent debates about definitions of international schools). The IBDP is a two-year educational programme primarily aimed at 16 to 18 year olds and provides an internationally accepted qualification for entry into higher education and is recognised by many universities worldwide.

Although there are many different types of international school, this paper focuses specifically on what Hayden and Thompson (2013) refer to as *Type C non-traditional international schools* which have also been referred to as *internationalised* schools. The reader is directed to Schippling (2018) and Bunnell (2019) for more information about the different types of international school and debates regarding terminology. Internationalised schools have emerged in part due to the effects of globalisation which has led to a growing international focus in some national school systems, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region (Hayden, 2016). For the affluent middle-class of countries such as China, an international education is considered to be both superior to that available in their own national system (Hayden & Thompson, 2013) and a means to securing a competitive edge for their children (Hayden, 2016).

For the purposes of this paper, the term international school is operationalised in relation to internationalised schools in China that offer the IBDP. These schools could also be conceptualised as the prototypical secondary school of the future due to their national (student body and organisational structure) and international (international curricula and expatriate teacher) focus. China now has 106 officially recognised IB World Schools, with 86, the vast majority, offering the Diploma Programme (IBO, 2016). The International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) quote research from the university of Hong Kong which shows that of 1, 612 students who attended 14 IB World Schools in China between 2002 – 2012, 71.6% attended one of the world's top 500 universities (Lee et al., 2013). This acceptance rate is not lost on the parents of Chinese students who enrol their children into internationalised schools as a way to accrue *cultural* and *social capital* for their children despite the staggering costs of doing so and the less than inspiring job market that awaits students on their return (Yang, 2015). The notion of universal values and international-mindedness, which for many international educators are defining characteristics of international education, appears to have little significance for many educational stakeholders.

Technologies of Performativity in the Internationalised School

Whilst international schools are not required to undergo the kind of inspection associated with Ofsted due to their relative autonomy, they are nevertheless accountable in other ways. In order to illustrate this, I focus on three aspects of performativity in Chinese internationalised schools: The International Baccalaureate (IB) accreditation process, the student appraisal system, and the school appraisal system.

The IBO Accreditation Process

Any international school that wishes to enter students for the IBDP needs to be accredited by the IBO. The accreditation process is complex, involving amongst other things the preparation of numerous documents, participation in professional development, and two school inspections – an initial informal verification visit, and then the actual appraisal itself (see IOB, 2016 for a more detailed description of this process). There are also follow-up visits to ensure that the school has actioned any improvements that have been recommended. Given that there is a lingering (mis)perception of international schools as forces unto themselves due to their operating outside of regulatory control, gaining IB World School status conveys much needed 'institutional legitimacy' (Bunnell, Fertig & James, 2016). This is particularly significant for internationalised schools in China whose clientele (affluent middle-class Chinese) buy (into) international education in order to accumulate social and cultural capital (Lowe, 2000).

Based on my experience of the IB accreditation process in an internationalised school, the process could be likened to one extended performance or 'fabrication' (Ball, 2003). The school administration went to great lengths to engineer an internationally-minded campus. Posters of the IB Learner Profile (a set of ten attributes that underpin and unite the IB's curricula) were duly put up around the school. Signs reminding students to speak in English were strategically placed. Blank wall space was filled up with students' work. Incentives, in the form of monetary gifts, were offered.

However, like any performance that slavishly seeks to replicate the original down to its minutest details, the resulting production struck me as artificial, inauthentic, and even a little absurd. *Fabricated excellence*. The façade masked the machinery of manipulation and regulation. For example, teachers were scheduled to be interviewed in pairs (one expatriate and one Chinese). This was not arranged by the inspectors, but by the school administration. Such a configuration ensured that the teachers effectively policed each other during consultations. My colleague made it clear to me that I should stick to the script. The inspectors' inquiry of whether we had any criticisms of the school were met with an awkward silence. There was one outspoken teacher who dared to speak up about what he perceived to be the school's authoritarian approach to management. However, he was discretely 'let go' before the inspection, thereby silencing any alternative narrative that might inconveniently have emerged during the inspection and jeopardise the conferment of institutional legitimacy. Once the inspection was over, the performance ceased. The school reverted to being a 'Chinese' school. The mandatory posters of the IB Learner Profile and reminders that students should only speak in English were duly taken down. IB authentication was duly conferred on the school. Red envelopes were duly given to staff for a successful appraisal.

Student Appraisal System

However, it has to be noted that the consequences of the IB inspection are only temporary. More permanent and therefore more significant in terms of positive/negative impact on teachers' discretionary space is the internal appraisal system. Because internationalised schools are typically run for-profit, they are accountable to their clientele – namely, the students and most importantly their parents (Hayden, 2006). Many internationalised schools appraise teacher performance through student evaluation, with bonuses and sometimes contract renewal contingent on obtaining a good result.

The wash back effect of student and parental expectations has a number of consequences for the notion of discretionary space in internationalised schools in China. The need to receive a good evaluation can result in teachers choosing to play it safe by giving the students what they think they want rather than giving the students what they need to succeed in external assessments and beyond at university. Teacher performance becomes a performance. In such a context, professionalism is reconfigured as conformity. Teacher discretion becomes a form of indiscretion, a deviation from the script. I recall receiving a disheartening student evaluation which highlighted my use of student-centred activities, such as group work, as a weakness of my teaching. This was particularly perplexing and frustrating to me at the time, as my experience of education, as well as my training as a teacher, led me to believe that student-centred learning was a universal strategy for teaching and learning. Whilst the negative evaluation spurred me on to be a more 'authentic' teacher in the eyes of the students by adapting my teaching to be more didactic in nature, I nevertheless felt a niggling sense of inauthenticity. This could also be understood as a form of cognitive dissonance (Shaules, 2007) when 'cultural difference does not "make sense" or it threatens to undermine our view of reality' (p. 63). My performance as a teacher had something of an ironic resonance. Adopting teacher-centred strategies may or may not have increased my students' academic performance on high stakes examinations due to being in continuity with their beliefs, but I wasn't performing an 'authentic' self, so much as performing a 'sanctioned' or a 'conferred' self. This condition has been referred to as 'values schizophrenia' (Ball, 2003) where judgement and authenticity are sacrificed for impression and performance. After all, performativity demands a performance.

In Chinese international schools, getting this performance just right is made all the more complicated due to cultural discontinuity. The notion of cultural scripts can help to explain this. Cultural scripts refer to a generalised piece of knowledge that resides in the heads of teachers and students and are based on 'a small and tacit set of core beliefs about the nature of a particular subject, how students learn, and the role that a teacher should play in the classroom' (Stigler & Hiebert, 1998, p. 2). In the Chinese context, cultural scripts are informed by sociocultural elements that include a dominant exam-orientated culture and traditional exam-orientated approaches to teaching and learning that take the form of didactic or teacher-centric approaches (Tan, 2015). However, the IBDP has been shown to be predicated upon western assumptions about teaching and learning that could be described as constructivist in nature (Bullock, 2011). From my experience, expatriate teachers' cultural scripts tend to reflect the philosophical underpinnings of the IBDP, thereby necessitating the use of student-centred activities, such as pair work, peer assessment, and the co-construction of knowledge as strategies that they perceive to be consonant with the learning outcomes of the IBDP.

However, this often leads to dissonance which can have a negative impact on teachers' wellbeing and self-efficacy.

School Appraisal System

The school appraisal system ostensibly seeks to be 'objective' but in reality is just as partisan, if not more so, than the student evaluation system. For example, the appraisal system of one school in which I worked was based on eight competencies which were rated against three standards: approaching standard, meets standard, and exceeds standard. The standards were divided into four categories: *Plan* (demonstrating secure subject and curriculum knowledge and setting high expectations), *teach* (applying the most up-to-date research based strategies and meeting the needs of non-native speakers of English and Chinese), *assess* (making accurate and productive use of assessment), and *reflect* (reflecting on practice in order to learn and promote improvement). Like many appraisal systems the world over, this one was largely *technocratic* in nature – that is, based on the assumption that teaching and learning is largely demonstrable in nature and therefore measurable by a set of observable criteria by which a teacher's professional ability is judged. The head of the department scheduled one classroom observation towards the end of the first year which was negotiated with the teacher. Whilst teachers did not get to choose what they were appraised on, they did have the freedom to choose the class and the topic. This gave teachers a chance to construct a 'perfect' lesson that dutifully met the required standards.

However, once again, the appraisal is a performance. Once again it is *fabricated excellence.* Unlike everyday teaching, which is characterised by the unexpected and the imperfect, the one-off appraisal is carefully choreographed. The appraisal performance is the embodiment of 'plasticity' (Ball, 2003). What is being appraised is not the teacher's ability to educate individuals, but rather their ability to bend and contort themselves into whatever shape is currently deemed to be 'best practice'. That is, *the* approach that is the latest panacea for maximising student outcomes, typically measured quantitatively in the form of examination results. Not surprisingly, many teachers adopt a pragmatic approach to the appraisal system. For its duration, they 'perform' in a way that is congruent with the criteria and then once over they revert to their preferred way of teaching.

There is, then, an argument to be made for viewing teaching as one continual performance. It is just that some performances are more 'authentic' than others. The dramurtological aspect of identity has been much remarked upon (Goffman, 1959). From this perspective, individuals do not 'reveal' an essential self as much as 'perform a preferred self, selected from the multiplicity of selves or persona that individuals switch between as they go about their lives' (Kohler-Riessman, 2001, p. 12). Or in the case of performativity, a *sanctioned self*. Performing an authentic or preferred self requires time and discretionary space. This self needs to be written. It involves revisions, rewrites, and rejections. It also requires courage because discretion is all too easily misconstrued as indiscretion. In contrast, performing a sanctioned self requires the recitation of a plastic self. Both are performances, but some performances are more authentic than others.

Teacher (In)Discretion?

Whether discretion is desirable in an internationalised school is really dependent on which perspective one adopts. From the students' and parents' perspective, the idealistic aspects of international education (such as fostering international-mindedness) are of secondary importance to its instrumental value in facilitating global mobility. From a market-driven perspective, aspirant middle-class parents position themselves and their children as customers who are consumers of education. Within the competitive for-profit market of internationalised schools in China, granting teachers too much discretionary space (in the form of student-centred approaches to teaching and learning) may be perceived by parents and students as a form of indiscretion and therefore likely to be deemed undesirable. It is also worth bearing in mind that internationalised schools are far more ubiquitous in China than they used to be. As the paying customer, parents know they can easily take their money and children to another school.

However, as an 'oppositional intellectual' I believe that education should be connected with 'the imperatives of social responsibility and political agency' (Giroux, 2003, p. 9). Whilst the pragmatic reality of international schooling cannot be ignored, notions of social justice, interculturality and global citizenship are also significant. Finding a balance, however, can be schizophrenic. If I teach according to my beliefs, I may not be recognised as a teacher as my assumptions about learning and knowledge are not in continuity with those of my students. My discretion is indiscretion. By the same token, adapting a 'sanctioned' identity may produce the desired neoliberal outcome (responsibility and the right performance), but lead to a sense of inauthenticity. Therefore, the question of discretionary space cannot be understood in objective terms only as something that is inherently (un)desirable – it also has to be understood as the product of many stakeholders' perceptions which are also informed by cultural scripts. However, the notion of authenticity/inauthenticity would need to be explored in more detail. For example, if authenticity is culturally conditioned, would a sense of inauthenticity signify a disjuncture between past socialisation and present work

conditions? Moreover, is the notion of being authentic a relatively new demand placed upon the modern subject?

Deciding on which perspective (parent, teacher, student, principal, learning goals) to utilise is as much an ethical and emotional consideration as it is a pragmatic one. Given the right conditions, teachers would not be forced to choose between one or the other but rather be empowered to utilise discretionary space as a site for the construction of new subjectivities. Whilst teachers may be compelled to adopt didactic approaches to teaching, it does not preclude the utilisiation of student-centred approaches. There is still room for discretion in this scenario, but within the constraints of having to continually perform in a way that resonates with Chinese parents' and students' beliefs about knowledge transmission. The discursive space of the school could be seen as comprised of modalities. These modalities include, but are not limited to, how the classroom is decorated (such as posters or displays), the arrangement of desks (in pods or rows), the nature of teacher questioning (open or closed), frequency of homework, teacher posture and intonation, and so on. Even if a teacher is constrained by technologies of performativity, such as the appraisal system, there is still discretion to manipulate these modalities in order to negotiate more freedom to embody (or perhaps perform) an authentic teacher self.

Conclusion

So much of what goes on in the classroom occurs out of sight, inside the heads and hearts of teachers and students. Teaching is above all else an emotional endeavour. When teaching is authentic, it allows for the development of 'emotional work' – investment in authentic selves and the capacity for professional empathy (Day, 2018). When it is inauthentic, it becomes 'emotional labour' – the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display (Day, 2018). Ethical forms of accountability need to start with the teacher – the teacher as a feeling human being and not, as is currently the case, as an automaton or skilled technician. It is true that internationalised schools are run for profit and therefore 'keeping the customer satisfied' is certainly a priority. However, internationalised schools are considerably more autonomous than national schools, and the discretionary space this affords should be exploited in order to develop teachers' professional identities. I sketch this space as 'teacher (in)discretion.' On the one hand, it reflects a judgmental neoliberal stance towards discretion as irresponsibility. On the other hand, it is a 'plurality of refusals, resistances and struggles against local fixations of power' (Ball, 2019, p. 4), such as regimes of performativity. It is a counter narrative that challenges neoliberal discourses of responsibility and performativity. It is a defiant demonstration and deconstruction of freedom that dares to propose alternative ways of authoring one's self as an educator. It is, above all else, an assertion of negative ethics – a refusal to 'accept the grounds on which subjectivity is proposed within dominant discourses and a willingness to subvert them' (Ball, 2019, p. 4).

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