

Cultural Shifts in Teaching with Teacher Professionalism

Yun Kong

Abstract—The article is organized in four sections. The first describes the range of reforms and initiatives; the second summarizes the nature of the critique; the third presents a culture of learning and new data profiling the orientations of one new segment of the teacher workforce; and a final section evaluates the implications.

Index Terms—Cultural shift, New professionalism, Performativity, Workforce remodeling.

I. INTRODUCTION

Descriptions of and concerns about the shift to more managerialist and performance-focused approaches in education can be found in many countries including, for example, the USA[1], Australia and multiple European countries[2]. This has also been matched by a determination among policy-makers to identify and lever upwards the measurable achievements of pupils. Enhanced teacher performance has been publicly espoused as an indispensable route to pupil achievement, and it is in this context that an accountability ethos relating to teachers has developed.

The nature of the critique takes several forms, but in essence it challenges what it characterizes as the relentless diminution of the professional autonomy of teachers at the hands of prescriptive and regulatory governments and presents the notion of teachers merely ‘performing and conforming’[3].

The two stances—the reform drive on the one hand and the adamant critique of it on the other—have resulted in something of a stand-off and stalemate. However, a number of recent developments may now be favouring the growing acceptance in practice of much of the reform package. Specific among these developments is the changing composition of the teacher workforce.

The purpose of this article is to assess this possibility by examining a sample part of this new wider workforce and its willingness to engage with various aspects of the reform agenda.

II. THE RANGE OF REFORMS

Teachers’ standard frameworks, improvement strategies

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Yun Kong is with Teacher Development Center Zhejiang Ocean University Zhoushan 316000, China (phone: +86-580-2550029; fax: +86-580-2550029; e-mail: kykongyun2005@126.com).

ranging across all four key stages of education, linked to target-setting and time-frames and overseen by the Office for Standards in Education inspection service, were other regulative devices employed. Systematic performance management of teachers and an overarching strategy to shape workforce reform have also served to effect cultural change and expectations relating to ‘new professionalism’ [4].

Seven post-holder roles in schools were defined, with accompanying competences, these latter being grouped into ten fields. The framework has been reworked and expanded in detail in new Professional standards, effective from 2007. The reworked structure includes greater definition of teachers’ proven capacities and role analysis, this to include post-threshold posts located at the top three grades of the Upper Pay Spine and Excellent Teacher and Advanced Skills Teacher roles. The case presented was that ‘Systematic performance management is key to achievement in organizations. In schools it motivates teachers to give of their best and provides school managers with the tools to deploy and develop their staff most efficiently’[5].

These premises still drive the modernization agenda: new reward systems for ‘excellence’ in teaching have been systematically developed since the threshold payperformance procedures of 2000. Moreover, the recent teacher regradings related to Teaching and Learning Responsibility posts, to replace a range of payments to teachers in schools for administration and other management roles, strengthen the trend of linking improved pupil standards to teacher remuneration.

III. THE CRITIQUE OF ‘PERFORMATIVITY’

Crucially, it is not just the technicalities of particular initiatives which have been targeted but their underlying logic. Critics detect the attempted imposition of an alien architecture of managerialism in place of traditional professional values. One of the most trenchant critiques has been mounted by Stephen Ball over a number of years [6]. Similar criticisms have been directed at the new performance culture which has given rise to performativity[7]. This culture has been attacked as concocting a ‘Punch-and-Judy professionalism’[7], the ‘principle of performativity’ [8]concentrating power at the centre.

Teachers are required to organize themselves in relation to targets, indicators and evaluations devised by others [9]. The ‘enterprising self’ [10]invests in upskilling the self and demonstrating required skills. The low-trust relationship in the employer–employee relationship, an accent on accountability and the blame culture that can accompany it

[11] fracture, it is argued, the 'professional' tag that both teachers and government use in relation to the roles and responsibilities traditionally used to describe post-holders in teaching. Trust, then, in teachers' professionalism, it has been contended, has effectively been displaced by 'performativity'[12]. Attempts to secure enhanced teacher outputs through performance management have been criticized as politically motivated and ineffective and part of the 'New Public Management' agenda[13].

But how have teachers themselves understood these changes and how have they responded? There were signs of the kind of culture change that performance pay and other linked mechanisms were designed to engineer. The concept of 'teacher professionalism' is subject to constant change and it is becoming evident that the familiar polarized arguments in the literature about 'control versus autonomy' will, arguably, have to respond to an emergent shift in teacher behaviours and interpretations.

IV. A CULTURE OF LEARNING

Everyone is a learner: students, teachers, parents, and administrators. The value of learning and improving is part of what keeps the school moving forward. Boloz met often with teachers from one of the four units for a "curriculum conversation." Together, they explored new ideas by discussing articles or books, viewing DVDs of new approaches, or observing individual teaching episodes. The dialogue offered fresh perspectives on curriculum, instruction, and learning. Teachers were esteemed as professionals, always seeking innovative ways to serve their students.

These ritualistic occasions are focused on improving instruction and serving children, but they also reinforce trust, collaborative decision making, and a shared sense of purpose. Staff have become more of a team, more skilled at diagnosing and solving learning problems, and more committed to the school and its community.

Child-focused curriculum and instruction are prized and reinforced through voluntary focus groups that pursue relevant topics in depth. Sometimes topics originate from teachers' direct observations of classroom needs, but they are also prompted from close examination of performance data. For example, ten teachers might examine new techniques for teaching poetry; another group might discuss alternative ways of teaching writing to first-graders.

Students as Leaders

Students are also active shapers of cultural ways. The "Tourguide Program," for example, is an ongoing tradition. First- and second-grade students guide visitors around the school, highlighting student work, explaining the presence of community weavers, and showcasing school awards. The petite guides are articulate and well prepared to enlighten visitors about the special features of the school and the unique values they share. Youthful guides become both purveyors and consumers of their own culture and history. Students help others become more proficient readers and are the editors, photographers, and writers for the school newspaper. They are engaged and energized by the school.

Although learning is important, it is also important that students have fun. Activities that promote learning must also be engaging and fun, making the classroom culture a joyous one. Another important tradition that supported kids and built ties with the community was the "Caring Adults" program. Everyone was encouraged to volunteer who was willing to identify a student who seemed lost or in need of some attention.

Fortifying Cultural Roots

Past events may influence present cultural practices in dramatic fashion. Learning the history is critical to acquiring a robust understanding of the culture of a school—it is not simply an occasional social gathering of old storytellers. Knowing one's history replaces amnesia with mindfulness; rootlessness with purpose and direction.

One of the first things a physician or psychotherapist does prior to an appointment is to review a patient's history. It is an important step in making an accurate diagnosis of a current condition by understanding the physical and psychological grounding of the present situation. Likewise, before tinkering with a culture leaders need to initiate, one way or another, an in-depth and comprehensive history of their school. Most often, it is wise to make this a public event rather than a private undertaking with inclusion of all adults, or students, who work in the building. There are many approaches. A school principal in New York State, for example, turned over half a day of the opening day staff-development event to veteran teachers. Their job: recount the school's fifteen-year heritage. The staff had prepared extensively with old photos, videos, and artifacts from prior curricula. After the successful event, the principal observed: "It had a profound influence on newcomers, but an even stronger impact on the old-timers. I guess the only thing worse than not hearing about the past is knowing the history without anyone to tell it to."

Responses from a new workforce?

As noted in the previous sections, most of the debate has been conducted by educational analysts on both sides. Less well heard have been the voices of serving teachers. It is notable that the study by Mahony et al. (2004) revealed the subtle and changing views expressed by the teacher practitioners concerning the links between professionalism and the performance elements required of them. In order to examine this further, it seems appropriate to consider how new entrants into the widening teacher workforce understand and respond to these values and technologies. Statistics relating to new entrants confirm that this is a significant trend. Data from the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE) reveal that of the newly qualified teachers (NQTs) registered with them in 2005, only one-third were aged 24 or below (and therefore unlikely to have had experience of these systems). Of the remaining two-thirds, 31% were in the age category 25–29 and the greatest percentage, 35%, were in the age category 30 and above (GTCE). The School Teachers' Review Body (STRB), responsible for reporting to the government on issues of pay and conditions in teaching, has confirmed and welcomed this trend of greater numbers of career changers entering the teaching workforce (STRB). The welcome is necessary, it can be argued, in a work context

in which one in five NQTs leave the profession before reaching their fourth year of teaching and that 45% of the teaching workforce is due to retire within the next fifteen years.

In the research reported here, a sample was selected comprising participants in a school teaching-experience scheme for undergraduate and postgraduate Associates from a range of universities and disciplines and for mature entrants with other occupational backgrounds. The initiative, known as the Student Associates Scheme, began in 2003, a substantial variant of earlier pilot schemes. The aim of the study was to investigate the Associates' experiences of and responses to the raft of initiatives as discussed above. As newcomers to teaching, and with experience in many cases of other work contexts, their responses to the new performance culture in schools was viewed as potentially revealing.

V. RESEARCH METHODS

The research design was based on an attempt to capture both a wide range of views from across the selected population and to combine this with some in-depth analysis of a more select group of schools and individuals. Accordingly, a survey instrument was used over a three-year period from 2008 to 2010 in Zhejiang Province; 30 school visits were conducted; analysis was made of over 500 Associates' Training Profiles and of their scheme evaluation responses; data from their secondary school placement mentors were also scrutinized. The research data also included school placement case-studies written by participants. In brief, the scheme was designed to increase the number and quality of recruits into teaching. It sought to do this by enabling Associates already in higher education to make experience-aware decisions about career options in education.

The scheme also aimed to widen participation of groups under-represented in schools. Another aim was to enable the predominantly mature, already career-experienced student participants to make a significant contribution to the life of their placement schools, using their developed skills and prior knowledge and experience. A further aim of the scheme was to attract those Associates already studying a 'priority' subject at degree level such as mathematics, science, design and technology, and geography. The research reported here attempted to test the responses of these mainly mature Associates, people already familiar with other work contexts and performance patterns, at a time in their careers when they first encountered teaching as a work practice.

VI. FINDINGS

The findings are organized into three main themes which reflect the axis of the debates outlined above. These three themes are explored under three headings: perceptions of performance; asset-building and the enterprising self; and autonomy and creativity.

Perceptions of performance

Having their performance analysed and summarized by

mentors and other staff colleagues did not seem to worry these mature practitioners. Many had come from different work contexts including accountancy, the police force, the health service, manufacturing and so on, where performance measurement was an accepted, routine feature of work life. They were encountering and entering a changing culture in schools where the measurement of performance of individual staff has increasingly become the norm, albeit one still robustly contested in the literature. These were often 'second chance' potential joiners to the profession. They were focused on achieving a new career identity and although, like most new joiners of organizations, they were inclined to look anew at prevailing practices and to pose fresh questions, they were found not to query the performance processes of the new work environment.

The use of the language of business within education such as targets, objectives, delivery, inputs and outputs, assets and added-value that has exercised critics was treated unproblematically by the experience-rich respondents in this study. They were adept in the use of this language in their own accounts. There was much reference also to activities, and target-setting for and with pupils. This was largely seen as uncontentious, except where difficulties emerged in terms of organizing or fulfilling them. The performativity critique stresses the deadening effects of working to targets, curriculum prescription and tight time schemes. However, in none of the diverse data sources on these new entrants—profile evaluation report, case-study or face-to-face interview—were these raised as issues or as verbal asides. Teaching sections of lessons, with support, to contribute to pupils' achievement, and to be assessed while doing it, appeared a welcome and rewarding facet of Level 1 work, particularly. Rewards were of different kinds and one of the best, for many of the Associates, was the perception that their highest 'performance', particularly at Level 1 of the scheme, related to individual or small groups of pupils and the view that they had succeeded in making a personal values-oriented impact as well as a pedagogic one. This aspect and connected others will be taken up further in the next section.

Associates' perception of teacher performance was often a telling mirror image of values and opinions given by mentors and others. What was valued very highly, by both Associates and mentors, were the daily enactments of the dedicated teacher, mediating knowledge and understanding through a high quality professional relationship. This itself was shaped by particular social values and a personal belief in the possibility of change and progress in individual pupils, whatever the organizing 'performance' strictures that might have to be accommodated. Associates recognized the important link between positive personal and social relations with pupils and the learning and growth processes that could ensue from this. This relationship, one that went far beyond the technical and factual, to include the motivational and aspirational in its widest sense, was actively presented to the Associates in their placement schools.

Looking beyond the required objectives of the present, and encouraging the development of strong personal values and choices, was a refrain in the responses of Associates and

mentors. It was evident that 'performance' was neither unidimensional, finite nor unambitious in these accounts. Indeed, they seemed remarkably congruent with enduring images of the teacher's role and its capacity to redeem and raise the bar of 'achievement' in a multifaceted sense.

Notably, though, even where there were difficulties, and achievements were slower to appear, similar responses relating to perceptions of performance were in evidence. Teacher-as-enlivened-performer, enacting and modelling desired values and attitudes, as well as disciplined producer of improving pupil outcomes, was a commonly occurring rendition of what was needed and valued by pupils and staff colleagues. There seemed no deep tension emerging in attempting to mesh the two strands—of rigorous application to course and key stage regulation and creative approaches to them—commonly identified in the performativity literature as mutually dissonant.

Asset-building and the enterprising self

Centrally prescribed curricula, lesson structure prescription, publication of schools' formal achievements, performance monitoring and other mechanisms have been viewed in the literature as reducing the value and capacities of the kind of teacher espoused by the Associates in the section above. In this environment, spontaneity, exploration and problem-solving have all been seen as devalued. At the same time, as the writers in the enterprise literature have noted, workers are increasingly expected to remake and reimagine themselves as mini-entrepreneurs willing to be responsive to fluid market conditions, adding value to their market 'self' and enterprise against a background of regulation and prescription[14].

So what was found from these respondents? Analysis of the Associates' own evaluations, case-study explorations, interview transcripts and mentors' reports revealed much reference to the language of value and adding to it, in the context of regulation, and perceptions of 'performance' and teacher professionalism. The asset support that local business and specialist status could give to schools was robustly flagged in the documentation collected for the case schools. This secondary activity was allied to the development of a purpose-built construction centre on the school site 'to provide facilities for both pupils and the local community to study the trades and professions of the construction industry'. What emerged strongly from the data, as in the first section focused on findings, was a willing use of the evaluative language and frameworks of the business world, by schools, mentors and Associates. Clear, too, were the perceived benefits of an array of partnership arrangements in maximizing opportunities and outcomes, tangible and other, to staff and pupils and the local community.

Adding value to themselves was certainly a dynamic factor, and expressed both by mentors and Associates. So, too, was adding value to the assets of a department by contributing skills and volunteer services beyond school hours, this expressed illustratively of Associates as 'doing x . . . rather than hurrying home'; 'always looking to better himself'; 'attending to many aspects of school life outside the remit of the scheme'; and 'far exceeding our expectations in terms of all that she was able to do'. It is an irony, perhaps, given the

performance and asset-adding culture embedded in school life, that trust relationships still appeared as crucial to much that occurred between pupil and Associate and between Associates and mentors and other department colleagues.

References to teamwork and being a good team player were frequent, as was the view of this capacity as an essential tool for the teacher role and the successful outcomes sought. The value of the asset (the Student Associate) was seen as enhanced when used in this way. This capacity was thus highly valued, being seen as at the heart of the job and its requirements. The sense of partnership and its benefits in the teaching and learning process were evident in the data: So: 'In Super Learning Week we worked together in the DtT team to ensure the pupils were safe, well behaved and happy'; and the learning has been two-way. One mentor commented of the Associate: 'She has certainly given the department new ideas to develop further the science curriculum'; another that 'F has vast industrial experience in publishing and IT which she has drawn upon to make constructive suggestions about improving learning'; and a third reported: 'G is a dedicated, hard-working and influential member of the science department team . . . prepared to learn and willing to ask [and has] fully involved herself in the life of the department'. In relation to this context (national, regional and school-specific), it was clear accumulatively, through the data, the capacities that mentors wanted and appreciated in the Associates. They valued a range of skills across the regions of 'performativity', and incorporating abilities that elicited and used trust relations within the workplace.

They chiefly valued personal honesty; strong subject knowledge; interpersonal skills of a high order; the ability to strike up meaningful professional relationships with pupils and colleagues (this closely allied to a warm and easy-going disposition); the capacity to reflect upon practice and to adapt it; a willingness to listen and take up advice wherever possible; a flexible approach to teaching and changing circumstances; the capacity, as indicated above, to function well as a team worker and the ability to use initiative and any special skills and experiences they had brought with them to the school and classroom context. These were all meaningful assets which could be used and amplified in a work context that required high level trust relations to do so. 'Performativity', in the critical sense outlined in an earlier section, appeared signally less important compared to the values dimension of teaching, often asserted by critics as absent from the menu of a 'new professionalism' that is characterized by regulation and directive. The values facet, in fact, emerged often as a central driver for Associates applying to the scheme at all and in identifying 'success' in their placement performance. Numerous Associates cited the forging of positive relationships with pupils and (often) the pupils' subsequent progress as pivotally important to them in their placement, and as the chief source of satisfaction they gained from it. So, too, was its congruence with the potentially special role of the teacher in children's lives. Articulating a commonly held view, one mentor observed of a former youth worker: She has approached the 'vocation' of teaching in a very realistic way, understanding from the outset that it was always to be a combination of technique,

subject knowledge, experience and a genuine interest in children. Our school ethos places the teacher–pupil relationship as central to the success of our Associates. M has fully embraced these ideas and seems very comfortable within that framework.

And tellingly: ‘As a mature student, M also demonstrates a more holistic approach to the educational process which can sometimes be lacking in younger students.’ These Associates often served to open up, through their previous careers, dynamically rich perspectives on aspects of the National Curriculum. Ethnically diverse teachers are sought in greater numbers by the TDA and are actively encouraged into this scheme as a preparatory initial step. One Associate, a former United Nations worker, observed: ‘My ancestry (Asian) and travels in four continents seemed very interesting to the pupils. I was able to show them the various parts of Asia through stories of my travels and first-hand experiences, giving them different viewpoints.’

The reduction of autonomy and creativity

There tends to be an assumption in the critical literature that these two elements are interdependent. When a teacher has ‘autonomy’, this allows ‘creativity’ to operate. In the polarized debates about teacher autonomy, there is often minimal discussion of what ‘creativity’ might look like in the current educational context. It is offered rather as ‘lost’ and redolent of better, past times in education. In some scenarios it appears simply as the freedom of the teacher-as-professional to act entirely independently in the classroom. However, the cultural climate change in education means that the era of the isolated teacher is effectively gone. The issue is complex. Developing and measuring the capacities of pupils is the work of the teacher, but the stimuli of development have to be creative and resourceful since pupils are young people whose co-operation and desire to learn and achieve are needed in the classroom teaching–learning relationship.

It is in the processes of enquiry and learning that attention can be given to creativity. There was little sign in the data that this had been deadened or reduced in value. Indeed, it could be argued that there is an even greater need in the new educational era for an increase in creative ways to securing pupil gains and the other formal outcomes referred to above. The ability to manage constant change has become central to success in the school context, as is reviewing what has been done and adjusting planning and teaching to take account of findings and effects. The ‘performativity’ critics might well argue that these ‘needs’ have been largely imposed upon teachers through regulation and directive. However, as the responses to theme two, outlined above, might suggest, a wide range of these varied ‘needs’ are personal, challenging, outside the more narrow confines of curriculum specifics but certainly a pronounced part of the remit of a teacher’s role and, to these Associates, a strong attraction to the job.

Beyond the expectation by department colleagues that Associates would have sufficient subject knowledge to engage at an appropriate level with different groups and classes of pupils, it was notable that it was relational skills and creative ways to engage with pupils that featured in the data as paramount for these embryonic teachers.

This facet made pupils interested and participative. Indeed, without this, achievement was limited since pupils shape what is done and ‘achieved’ in a lesson. Moreover creative teachers demonstrate this phenomenon quite differently, as might be expected. For example, another Associate made the point that: ‘I understand the importance of making learning fun and promoting a positive attitude towards your subject. The teachers had different ways of doing this. I used some of these in my lessons. It helped the pupils enjoy the lesson.’ Not all reports were so positive and they highlighted the responsibilities of tailoring ‘creative’ approaches to different groups of pupils unable or, in some contexts at times unwilling, to take up what was on offer. Finally, one Associate noted the complex route to learning: ‘how short-term targets are set, interesting activities scheduled; how teachers stimulate curiosity through questioning; and how they showed interest in their pupils’ views and interests’. This synthesis indicates no easy description of ‘creativity’ in the debates relating to an appropriate mix of teacher professionalism and regulation. The interplay of pupil motivation, the personal values of the expanding range of professional adults in schools, such as these Associates, things learned and understood by pupils in a trust relationship, were, in these accounts and responses, interlinked and complexly so.

VII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The overall conclusion is that these new entrants to the teaching profession—mature, experienced career—changers—were relaxed about, and accepting of, the rationale, language, practice and technology of targets, competence, performance measurement and standards. These are the constituent elements of a revised mode of teacher professionalism. The presence of these new classroom workers, part of the wider workforce remodelling thrust, now embedded among the established professional context, might be expected to have a ripple effect and a cumulative impact. In a number of respects, the findings of this study challenge the more pessimistic versions of the performativity critique. The Associates were at relative ease with targets and with evaluations of their performance. At the same time they expressed a strong value commitment to creativity in their lessons and had aspirations for a rounded education for their pupils. They do not appear to have become reduced to ‘commoditized’ actants. On the other hand, more than one interpretation of the findings is possible. It might be argued that they point to a teacher workforce which has migrated into a new phase of self-monitoring and self-control. From this Foucauldian perspective control has become internalized and is more insidious. Alternatively, it might be suggested that the lack of direct resistance from teachers is indicative of ‘resigned compliance’ [15]. There is little support in the data gathered for this study, however, to support the latter thesis. Both in their written submissions and when interviewed and observed in their school settings, the Associates showed few signs of this while demonstrating multiple signs of enthusiasm and engagement.

It should be noted that the study is not representative of the

teacher workforce as a whole. Its insights are drawn from mature new potential entrants to a constantly widening workforce in teaching, those on a taster teaching study and scheme as well as on data drawn from school teachers acting as their mentors. Other, established teachers who have lived through previous value systems and different forms of organizing and who have not acted in a mentor role in any initial teacher education scheme may hold contrasting views. But the importance of the new workforce in driving a shift in attitudes and established practices should not be underestimated. If other new entrants are similar to those studied here, then there are clear indications that teachers can maintain creative practice while operating within formal routines of performance management, targets and measured standards. We may be witnessing a cultural shift—a new workforce sculpting a new mode of professionalism.

Such sentiments flourish in a culture where learning and caring are valued and where stories, rituals, and ceremonies provide zest and buoyancy to the world's most sacred profession. School leaders can make a difference by restoring hope, faith, and a shared spirit to the place called school. Strong cultures produce dense leadership—every member becomes champion, visionary, and poet. As teachers and parents become leaders—cultural icons for the deeper values of the school—the school becomes more than a building with instructional materials. It becomes an institution with history, values, purpose and pride, stories and beliefs.

School cultures are complex systems. Leaders need the skills and knowledge to uncover a culture's deeper history; the techniques to assess current conditions and values, and, most important, the ability to be symbolic leaders, reinforcing cultural values and ways in their daily work. For some leaders, these skills can be developed on the job; others will develop them through preparation programs. But many leaders will need in-depth professional development opportunities with adequate time to reflect, analyze, and interpret their culture. Schools that are toxic should be provided the support, leadership, and charge to renew themselves. Schools those are dangerous to the health and learning of students and staff alike need to be transformed or

reformed into positive, meaningful institutions. And, finally, schools that have a rich and robust culture need the strength and resources to nurture and sustain their valued institutions.

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