
Citation:

Page, D (2016) Understanding performance management in schools: a dialectical approach. International Journal of Educational Management, 30 (2). 166 - 176. ISSN 0951-354X DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-06-2014-0087>

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Understanding performance management in schools: a dialectical approach

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Abstract

Purpose: the purpose of this article is to provide a dialectical framework for the examination of performance management in schools.

Design/methodology/approach: the article is based upon a qualitative study of 10 headteachers that involved in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Findings: the findings identified four dialectical tensions that underpin performance management in schools: the responsibility to teachers and the responsibility to pupils; external accountability and professional autonomy; discipline of teachers and support of teachers; fixed processes and improvisational practices.

Research implications: this article provides a means of examining the performance management of teachers from an alternative perspective, one that embraces tensions and contradictions and gives headteachers a richer understanding of how teachers are evaluated and judged.

Originality: this article moves beyond the traditional perspective of performance management in schools as a means of subjugation and control and offers an original dialectical framework within which to examine the phenomenon.

Introduction

Performance management in schools in the UK is a relatively recent phenomenon, arriving in 2000 (DfEE, 2000) in a formalised and mandatory form. For the first time teachers became subject to the human resource practices of the private sector, a means to enjoin the needs of the organisation with the needs of individuals for the sake of school effectiveness. The world's biggest performance management system (Mahony and Hextall, 2001), the success of schools was envisioned as the inevitable result of introducing appraisal and the measurement of competence to teachers. However, the effectiveness of the policy itself was mixed with too little understanding of the concepts and practices of performance management (Brown, 2005). The solution was the introduction of new regulations in 2007 (TDA, 2007) that required schools to make explicit the links between organisational improvement and the performance of individual teachers via the collection of evidence including up to three hours of teaching observation per year, staff training and the scrutiny of pupils' work (Morton, 2011).

In September 2013, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government issued the third tranche of performance management legislation (The Education (School Teachers' Appraisal) (England) Regulations 2012) that is also, perhaps, the most controversial. In this iteration, the Teaching Standards are the primary criteria against which teachers are evaluated within appraisal and inform the recommendation for pay progression. Furthermore, the three hour limit on teaching observations has been lifted with headteachers authorised to observe as often as they wish. Finally, to allow the removal of poorly performing teachers more quickly, the monitoring and review period following a formal warning of competence has been reduced from 20 weeks to between four and ten weeks. Taken together with the abolition of the General Teaching Council for England in 2012, these measures have moved teachers from a position of occupational professional to organisational professional, drawing them away from comparable professions such as medicine and law to generic employees (Page, 2013). As such, the measures have attracted a great deal of critical response (NASUWT, 2013; Baynes, 2013).

But it is not just the recent reforms that are seen through a critical lens – while admittedly performance management in schools remains under-researched, where studies do exist they are couched in contexts of performativity, managerialism and marketisation (Gleeson and Husbands, 2003). Here, drawing on a labour process theory framework (e.g. Braverman, 1974), performance management is positioned within the managerial paradigm in opposition to the professional paradigm, a binary opposition that has been well rehearsed in education (Randle and Brady, 1997). Mather and Seifert (2011) for example identify the principles of Taylorism within contemporary performance management that seeks to gain control over teachers by foregrounding the propaganda that improved teacher performance creates a better service to learners, the moral imperative of teaching. From this perspective, schools managers enact their own moral imperative to weed out the bad apples, the ‘challenging teachers’ (Yariv and Coleman, 2005) who shirk their responsibilities and damage children’s learning (Sutton Trust, 2011). Performance management from this critical perspective becomes a millstone for teachers (Forrester, 2011) that relies on performative measures such as league tables (Wilson, Crixson and Atkinson, 2004) or inspections (Perryman, 2009).

At the other end of the spectrum are those studies, admittedly far fewer, that recognise the contribution that performance management can make to teachers and schools. Moreland (2009) found that schools leaders considered performance management a ‘lifeline’ in challenging circumstances, acting as a means to develop teachers’ self-esteem through praise and active celebration of their abilities and achievements. Collaborative approaches could also inform school evaluation by identifying developments in under-performing departments via a model of emergent strategy (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Haynes et al (2003) found that the implementation of performance management had created greater links between the development of individuals and their schools by positioning teachers’ practice within wider organisational concerns. Teacher control of performance management was found to be vital in Down et al’s (2000) study with teachers reporting increased autonomy and control over their own work within authentic performance management practices (Gleeson and Husbands, 2003).

Performance management, therefore, can on the one hand be seen as a mechanism of subjugation, stripping teachers of professional autonomy and imposing ever more sophisticated strategies of surveillance upon their work. On the other hand, performance management can be seen a means to prioritise the needs of learners and professional development by maximising the quality of teaching and removing incompetence whenever it is found. In part, such a dichotomous approach is the result of the twentieth century’s concern with management as a science (Storey and Salaman, 2009) that had no patience with ‘dilemmas, ambiguities, paradoxes, tensions and contradictions’ (Collinson, 2014). The problem is that by viewing performance management in binary terms, the complexity of the reality in schools is only ever partial and fails to capture the lived experience of teachers, students and senior managers adequately. With such an opposition between the two perspectives, what is needed is a dialectical approach that views performance management in terms of tensions and contradictions rather than reifying one perspective or the other. A dialectical approach – defined by Mumby (2005, p23) as ‘the dynamic interplay and articulation together of opposites’ – allows us to understand performance management as a series of interrelated tensions that operate within schools. Mather and Seifert (2011) highlight one important dialectic that operates in relation to performance management, that of power relations between managers and the managed. This article, however, argues that while the dialectic of power and resistance is essential to the debate, performance management in schools should be seen as a series of related dialectics to appreciate its complexity:

1. The responsibility to teachers and the responsibility to pupils;
2. External accountability and professional autonomy;
3. Discipline of teachers and support of teachers;
4. Fixed processes and improvisational practices.

By viewing performance management as a dialectic, we can then examine the dilemmas and tensions that senior school leaders must negotiate when designing the systems and processes by which teachers are judged, supported and sometimes disciplined.

Methodology

This aim of this research was to examine headteachers' interpretation of the 2013 performance management reforms and its impact upon the procedures of evaluation and judgement of teachers. Interviews were held with 10 headteachers across three local authorities, five in secondary schools and five in primary schools. Purposive sampling was used to select schools in a range of settings in terms of socio-economic context. There were four female heads in total, three in primary and one in secondary and all schools came under the local authority apart from two secondary academies. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews of between 60 and 107 minutes that were recorded and transcribed in full and analysis was via open coding to identify the major themes before selective coding took place. As well as interviews, I was given a guided tour in three schools that included taking me into lessons as part of impromptu learning walks, walking through newly built open plan learning spaces and glass-encased classrooms. Field notes from these walks were written as soon as I left each of the schools and analysed in tandem with the interview transcriptions.

Responsibility to pupils and responsibility to teachers

The first dialectical tension to be considered is one of responsibility to pupils and the responsibility to teachers.

Tom (primary): It's that balance – what's in the students' interest is not always in the staff interests. It's making that balance. I think if you start your position with 'we're here, we're incredibly privileged to be in the position where we can transform people's lives by what we do'...and that's a huge privilege but in order to be effective you've got to make sure your staff are treated well and are treated as professionals

Keith (secondary): [Performance management has] got to be highly professional and sensitive to individuals without allowing poor teachers to detrimentally impact upon children's lives.

On one side there is the moral imperative towards pupils, the very 'service-users' for whom teaching exists. On this side sit notions of altruism, pro-social motivation (Grant, 2007) to meet the needs of young people, to help them develop as learners and citizens, to prepare them for the rest of their lives.

James (secondary): I've always felt that if I'm in the back of a class and I'm thinking 'hmm not sure if I'd be happy with my own children in this class' then I have a moral duty to do something about it.

Here are discourses of self-sacrifice, of continual teacher improvement and resilience in the face of perpetual emotional labour.

Keith (secondary): People work here because they choose to work here and they understand what the college is all about, they understand the ethos and they're here because of their commitment to the students. What I make clear to staff is if you want to work to rule, go somewhere else – this place is about total commitment.

Here also is the narrative of the 'bad apples' that spoil the teaching barrel, the lazy, the indolent and the incompetent who obdurately refuse to improve, shirking their vocational responsibility to pupils.

Madeline (primary): Poor teaching is devastating because it lets down other members of staff – most important it lets down the students and we can't afford to have students who are not going to progress because of poor teaching, they only have one chance.

In contrast, the other end of the dialectic concerns the responsibility towards teachers. While few would argue against the moral imperative of meeting the needs of pupils, care must also be taken not to use the moral imperative to push teachers beyond the boundaries of their hardiness (Kobasa, 1979): increased assessment, curriculum change, extended reporting, all blur the line between home and work with working outside of school becoming the norm. In this study, the headteachers expressed their responsibility to their staff simply in terms of treating their staff well:

Anthony (secondary): Fundamentally at the heart of good performance management is the relationships you develop within the organisation. If people trust you, then they're more likely to recognise their own weaknesses and work to overcome those weaknesses rather than if they don't trust you... you set out with the best will in the world: consensual management, relationships, giving people a voice and working on that.

Janet (primary): I can't ask any of these teachers or teaching assistants to work any harder than they do. They've all been emailing over the weekend, they do care about the children, they all work hard, I can't ask them to do any more than they do. I don't know what other job you'd be expected to do that to be honest... it is ludicrous.

This dialectic is therefore a question of how far teachers should be pushed via the mechanisms of performance management to meet a school's responsibility to its pupils.

External accountability and professional autonomy

The second tension is between external accountability and the professional autonomy of teachers. Throughout this research the spectre of Ofsted loomed large and external accountability was to them rather than to other stakeholders such as parents.

Interviewer: Where did the design for your performance management process come from?

Sue (Primary): It's a response to Ofsted really, it was some advice from our improvement partner, he often comes in with good ideas, he'd shown us something that another school was doing last year and we really liked it and I'm hearing anecdotally that other schools are moving towards that now in response to Ofsted changes.

Anthony (secondary): What we're saying to staff now is they have to be consistently good. In the past we would've put up with a satisfactory but basically we can't now because that won't get us through Ofsted.

The performativity of the education sector raises external accountability to a supreme value with measures such as Ofsted inspections, league tables and benchmarking acting to make the performance of schools highly visible. In this regard, schools become metaphorically glass organisations (name withheld for anonymity), allowing continual surveillance and beatification (Gabriel, 2005). Performance management can therefore be seen in terms of surrogacy, carrying the imperative of external accountability via unlimited classroom observations, learning walks and pupil feedback attempting to realise the Ofsted standard of effective teaching.

Martin (primary): When I'm walking round the school, I'm not just walking round the school. If my deputy is walking round the school we're looking, we're looking at what Ofsted would see, what we're looking at is the standards of the learning, the standards of the behaviour and all those sorts of different things cos that's the name of the game. And that's been the approach really, this is the game we're all playing and you have to be aware of it.

The driver here is perpetual improvement, a means to meet the standards determined by the government and by Ofsted but also the standards expected by parents. Inevitably, this end of the dialectic pulls away from the notion of professional autonomy, the teacher as expert in their classroom domain, selecting the most appropriate pedagogical strategies according to their judgement. As such, teaching risks becoming a homogenised approximation of the 'Outstanding' lesson, despite the protestations of Ofsted that there is no one right way to teach (Ofsted, 2013).

Keith (secondary): We've made it clear to staff exactly what Ofsted are looking for, we went through the framework with staff at the beginning of the year. I'm sending out a reminder at the beginning of term two, look this is exactly what Ofsted are looking for. Make sure your books are marked in the way they should be marked, targets are on the cover, up to date, etcetera etcetera, you know, a good starter, chunk the lesson down, if someone's observing you play the game, review the learning at least once or twice while the person's there so the person understands what the lesson is all about, learning objectives on the whiteboard then we have all, most and some which should be levelled, make sure the students know what the levels are.

Yet professional autonomy was not entirely curtailed by external accountability. Many of the participants enthused about their high performing teachers, practitioners who were creative and risk-taking in the classroom. In these cases, the high success rates of their students acted as a performance-management deterrent: the skilled teachers were rarely observed, rarely had their students' work checked – in essence, the better the teacher, the more likely they were to be left alone to excel. Professional autonomy was therefore a result of meeting and exceeding the expectations of external accountability measures. Yet this was not the only evidence of professional autonomy – in more routine cases headteachers were incorporating professional autonomy into the performance management process itself, especially around appraisals. All of the participants encouraged their staff to identify the areas they wished to develop and, perhaps more importantly, how they wished to develop:

Madeline (primary): We ask staff to come to the performance management with their thoughts about career progression and anything within their own teaching, anything they've seen in the wider world that appeals to them in terms of moving them on.

Discipline and support

The third tension is between performance management as a means of discipline and as a means of support. Once the methods of data collection on teacher performance have enabled school managers to make a judgement of quality, this tension moves to the fore. With the General Teaching Council for England abolished and incompetence managed at the organisational level rather than regulated at a national level, performance management provides the tools for poor teachers to be disciplined. Formally such discipline is found in capability procedures:

James (secondary): It's probably worth saying I set my stall out to what my expectations were right at the beginning and I relentlessly followed those up... we've got 12 staff that have gone who were part of a capability procedure so they either resigned in the middle or wanted to make a compromise but they all went into capability, that was the trigger that moved them on so I don't accept that it was difficult to remove staff.

What was significant was that few of the headteachers had ever had to follow capability procedures through to dismissal; in most cases, as James suggests above, poorly performing teachers negotiated 'compromise agreements' in which teachers agree to resign in return for money (Philipson, 2013).

Frank (secondary): It's terminating their employment and protecting yourself from any legal comeback so they leave and there is an agreed reference and a sum of money... the cost benefit analysis is 'I'd rather they were gone, it's better that we get rid of them than try and turn it around and do something that gets them performing better'.

Yet performance management also contains the tools to offer support and the headteachers were keen to foreground this:

Sue (primary): I think it's important that there's a hierarchy they go through so it could start with the key stage leader working with them and supportive planning meetings, more frequent scrutinies, a bit of team teaching

perhaps, some demonstration teaching, taking the member of staff around and observing with them. If you've got someone who's willing to improve and listen then they will.

Support was the default position when teachers were identified as under-performing and headteachers usually began with internal peer support which was considered an authentic means of professional development within a nurturing community of practice. Often this would involve peer observations and mentoring but it also involved some coaching by the headteacher themselves:

Tom (primary) I did have the view that everybody should be given the opportunity to improve so we had a coaching programme, I personally coached all the unsatisfactory teachers and I coached him for the whole of last year and he became securely satisfactory and was making progress.

Teachers were reported to be highly agentic in their own performance management, identifying their own areas of weakness and articulating their own support needs. Usually this occurred during appraisals with teachers preparing by evaluating themselves against the teaching standards and presenting a plan for how they could improve their practice and invite further evaluation:

Nicola (secondary): Staff are asked to self-identify on the various strands of the teaching standards which bit am I not quite so strong on and then how would I go about improving on that so again, bit like we just said on the performance management sheet they have to fill in, it would be a case of let's go back to the homework and differentiation, actually I don't think I'm particularly hot on that, how could I improve on it well I know my colleague in science does some really good work, if we sat together for half an hour and she showed me what she's done I might be able to adapt some of those ideas to my own work and I could then ask my line manager, ok, we've just done our homework could you look and see if you think there's an improved outcome

Formal processes and informal practice

The final dialectic is between the formal processes of performance management and the more improvisational informal practices of performance management. Teaching observations, appraisals, pupil feedback and capability mechanisms are clearly delineated and formal, fixed both in terms of process and timings: teachers are aware when their appraisal will be and who will conduct it and formal teaching observations are usually scheduled in advance, often in negotiation with teachers. These fixed processes also included 'learning walks' where senior school leaders or their delegates would walk along corridors and go into classrooms for short periods to observe practice. In most of the schools such learning walks were fixed – in Sue's primary school learning walks were weekly; in Keith's secondary school learning walks happened every lesson with senior leaders operating on a rota system.

However, there are also those elements of performance management that are improvisational and spontaneous. While learning walks are sometimes fixed, many senior leaders will

regularly walk around their schools, popping into classrooms, chatting to pupils and looking at work.

Martin (primary): Then again drop ins – I’m in and out of the class anyway for 10 minutes at a time doing other things. I say to staff, you realise when I come in your room I’m looking. Even if I’m talking to you or passing on a message I will making a judgement as to what’s going on in your room but that’s performance management so much that’s more standards and I’ll come back and ask ‘what were you doing? I didn’t quite get that’. They are aware of that these days

Kate (primary): I don’t do official learning walks but I do walk round the school quite a lot, mainly because I like to be involved with the children so I’ll sit and talk to the children and you do pick up – the children here are very vocal [laughs] and we do encourage that.

Each visit will present opportunities to evaluate teachers and while not fixed processes, they provide a means to manage performance depending on what is discovered. What was also evident was that students were being involved in the evaluation process during these ‘drop-ins’, with their feedback informally informing the judgement of the headteacher. Elsewhere the informal elicitation of student evaluations was evident outside of the classroom. Keith personally interviewed students as a motivational tool; however, students would often reveal judgments about their teachers:

Keith (secondary): I don’t ask [about teachers] but they will tell me – I say I don’t ask, I would go through the subjects and say ‘ok, English: your target is C, currently you’re on a D, are we going to do it?’ Sometimes they say ‘no’ and I say ‘why is that’ and they say ‘I need some help’. Sometimes they say ‘I’m going to do it’ or ‘I’m going to get a B’ then I say ‘who’s your teacher’ and that’s when they will tell me things and most of the time they will praise the staff.

All of the headteachers in this study moved freely within this dialectic but not in a random way. Fixed processes were set in stone at the beginning of the year but the improvisational practice was bespoke, a response to the needs and abilities of individual members of staff. Where there were concerns, there was an increase in ‘drop-ins’; where teachers were skilled, they were allowed to work within the formal processes alone.

Discussion

Performance management in schools is far more than a set of policies and procedures and any reductionist approach to the subject should be avoided. Too often performance management is considered through a binary lens as a means of achieving school and student success on one hand or a means of subjugating and de-professionalising the teaching workforce. Instead, performance management in schools should be seen in dialectical terms, as a series of tensions and contradictions that are enacted within the school community affecting students, teachers and senior leaders equally. A dialectical perspective can embrace learning walks as a means of driving up standards as a moral imperative while at the same time acknowledging the impact of surveillance upon a professional workforce; it can recognise that performance

management may assist in achieving good or better in an Ofsted inspection while simultaneously eroding a sense of professional autonomy in the classroom; it can foreground the tension between disciplining a poorly performing teacher who is negatively affecting the success of their students while at the same time offering a means of supporting struggling teachers keen to improve; finally it can recognise that performance management may be informed by the formal processes of lesson observations and data analysis while concomitantly being informed by the informality of 'drop-ins' and discussions with students. By viewing performance management as series of dialectics, we can move beyond the traditional dialectic of manager and managed to explore the complexity of pragmatics and power.

A dialectical perspective on performance management allows us to see the central position of the headteacher who is, ultimately, the arbiter of the official and unofficial procedures, interpreting government policies within the context of their own school. As such, headteachers are responsible for planning improvement within the tensions and contradictions that a dialectical perspective highlights. This therefore highlights the danger that performance management may be designed in the headteachers' image, reflecting their perceptions, perspectives and proclivities. This research has highlighted a wide variety of practice from those headteachers who observe far less than three hours per year to those who observe over six times a year in addition to learning walks every lesson and student feedback sessions that function as an additional means of evaluation. While the reduced prescription of the 2013 reforms to performance management may have freed headteachers to produce bespoke systems, they may also have created increased potential for ever more intrusive surveillance and monitoring of professional practice.

Yet that is not to suggest that the formation of performance management processes is a result of the perspectives and proclivities of headteachers alone – the dialectical design of performance management is also informed by the individual context of each school. In schools that are in special measures or were graded as 'requiring improvement', the dialectic was skewed towards those aspects which were concerned with external accountability over professional autonomy and prioritised the responsibility to pupils over the responsibility to teachers. However, in these cases the two remaining dialectics – discipline-support and formal processes-informal practice – were highly individualised rather than being systemic, with the approach taken depending upon the abilities and attitudes of individual members of the teaching team. Of course, here the judgement of headteachers was crucial and was relied upon to decide whether a teacher could improve with support or whether capability or compromise agreements were deployed.

A dialectical perspective allows us to see performance management as highly idiosyncratic, despite policy regulation, tailored to the needs of individual schools and individual teachers. However, the potential for idiosyncrasy may also embrace a darker side that creates opportunities for abusive supervision (Tepper, 2007) and workplace bullying (Einarsen et al, 2011). While there was no discussion of this darker side of performance management in this study, the perspective of teachers experiencing the idiosyncrasies of the system in their school may provide a different story. What is essential then is that the articulation and enactment of performance management is underpinned by ethical leadership and management (Brown and Trevino, 2005) that embraces issues of organisational justice (Greenberg and Colquitt, 2005), especially when ethical leadership has been linked to improved performance (Walumbwa et al., 2011). To an extent, the very visible methods of teacher evaluation employed by the headteachers in this sample are a means of raising fairness by creating a

culture of normalised visibility (name withheld for anonymity) for all staff whereby a range of evaluative methods are employed to assess teaching ability. However, normalised visibility is no antidote to abusive supervision and the targeting of members of staff who are judged to be incompetent. The potential for bullying is even more acute for those teachers who enter the hidden paradigm of performance management, the dyadic conversations that present compromise agreements as an alternative to beginning the competency procedure.

Conclusion

Performance management in schools has become truly embedded within organisational practices, a means of achieving the success of students and the requirements of Ofsted and the Department for Education. Yet the binary consideration of performance management suggests that it retains the character of its source (the private sector), analysis remaining largely within the opposition of manager and managed, the subjugator and the subjugated. Such a reductionist approach fails to adequately capture the complexities and tensions of performance management in schools that are a direct consequence of schools' difference from the private sector. A dialectical perspective not only allows us to problematize performance management, it also allows us to understand performance management in schools as distinct from other sectors, especially business sectors. It allows us to understand teaching as distinct from other jobs, as more than a role of production that can be enhanced through scientific management processes. A dialectical perspective on performance management, by highlighting complexity and tensions, provides a reminder of the highly skilled nature not only of teaching but being a teacher.

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