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# Teachers, performative techniques and professional values: how performativity becomes humanistic through interplay mechanisms

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, research has pointed to the development of ‘post-performative’ teachers and cultures within the education system. This article provides explanations for how it is possible that teachers marked by performative rationality also hold and enact seemingly humanistic professional values. The study points to three interplay mechanisms that reconstitute teachers’ understandings of the role that the techniques and values play, including a reconstruction of professional values in performative terms. Thus, the article provides an explanation for the alignment of performativity and humanism in ambiguous school contexts.

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## Introduction

There is a large and burgeoning literature on the effects of neo-liberally inspired educational reforms around the world (see e.g. Ab Kadir, 2017; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Mather & Seifert, 2011; Page, 2015, 2017; Perryman, 2006, 2009; Skerritt, 2019; Troman, Jeffrey, & Raggl, 2007; Wilkins, 2015). Such reforms typically operate through the ideology of *performativity* (Lyotard, 1984; cf. Munday, 2014; White, 2006; Wilson & Holligan, 2013), whereby the teaching profession is reshaped and normalised in line with standardised expectations formed by ideological preferences for and definitions of achievements (Jeffrey & Troman, 2011; Perryman, 2006, 2009; Skerritt, 2019): a form of reshaping and normalisation that is typically brought about by means of *performative techniques*, such as key performance indicators, rankings and evaluations. The premise is that such techniques translate the performances of individuals and schools into a set of formal records – typically numerical ones (e.g. Katsuno, 2010; Liew, 2012) – which in turn allows for comparisons to be made and for evaluations and judgements to be formed.

A substantial share of the literature portrays performative techniques in a strongly negative way – typically as a form of force that colonises and terrorises the souls of professionals (Ball, 2016; Lasky, 2005; Tang, 2011). The reason for this is that the techniques are underpinned by an ideology that clashes with the professional values of the teachers, such as holism, autonomy, self-determination, control of standards of

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excellence, collegiality, relational aspects and so on (Down, Hogan, & Chadbourne, 1999; Jeffrey, 2002; Mather & Seifert, 2011; Terhart, 2013; Woods & Jeffrey, 2002).

Recently though, a small but growing literature has started to explore the idea that the teachers of today may no longer perceive performative techniques as having such marked negative effects. Increasingly, in a 'post-performative' era, professional teachers no longer conceive of performativity as threatening or de-professionalising, but rather as a largely normalised and naturalised part of what it means to be a professional teacher (Holloway, 2019; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Lewis & Holloway, 2019; Skerritt, 2019; Wilkins, 2011).

Reasons have been proposed as to how this 'performative turn' has been rendered possible. For example, Wilkins (2011, p. 393) points to how those who become teachers today 'are increasingly likely to be themselves the product of the performative school era'. Hence, when new teachers enter a school, they may already have been shaped by the performative mould, as they themselves have been pupils in the performative schooling system. However, in cases where teachers do embody alternative ideals as they enter the profession, it has also been suggested (and empirically shown) how performativity works to fundamentally re-constitute such ideals, to the extent that the performative ideals become the 'world tout court, the only world' (Davies, 2003, p. 102). Such a reconstitution provides new (often numerical) images of the 'good teacher', but also requires, incentivises and trains individual teachers to constantly use such images to manage, display and profess themselves in terms of their 'data-double' (Holloway, 2019; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Page, 2017). Again, the premise is that a constant exposure to, and mobilisation of, enumerative techniques will enable internalisation of such techniques, resulting in a gradual normalisation and naturalisation of the performative ideals (Wilkins, 2011; cf. Holloway, 2019; Lewis & Holloway, 2019; Priestley, Robinson, & Biesta, 2012).

In this paper, we draw upon and add to this latter stream of research, as we are particularly interested in how such 'post-performative' contexts work. An upper secondary school in Sweden is studied (henceforth referred to as A-school), suggesting that when teachers see the merits of the techniques, they will be more prone to work with them, and adapt them to their own purposes, which, in turn, contributes to reconstituting professional values in performative terms. This is of particular interest in educational systems marked by humanistic approaches and values, where the importance of developing the pupil, engaging in dialogue, care, democratic participation and other issues are not only recommended, but mandated.

Through the 'post-performative' context, the phenomenon of how strongly humanistic values are reconstituted in largely performative terms is addressed in this paper. More specifically, the purpose is to identify and theorise what we see as *mechanisms* that allow for and enable an *interplay* between performative techniques and professional values. The question we ask is: how may it be that 'post-performative' teachers are able to embrace and communicate professional values of a humanistic kind in performative terms?

The answer that we provide suggests that what feeds and forms the interplay is that teachers conceive of the techniques not as enemies, but rather as helpful allies that are: i) plastic enough to accommodate their professional values; ii) natural and useful tools for realising such values; and iii) means for avoiding obstacles to a professional value orientation. Moreover, when such perceptions incite teachers to work with, and mobilise

the techniques for their own purposes, the latter ones become even more appealing and appropriating over time, thereby contributing to the reconstitution of professional values in performative terms.

As for the article structure, the next section reviews extant literature on performativity within teaching practices. Further, we introduce the case and point to methodological considerations. In the empirical parts, our focus is on understanding the mechanisms of the interplay between values and techniques. A concluding discussion finalises the article.

## **The ambiguity of the (post-)performative context**

As argued, performative techniques work to cognitively reshape both professional work and the professional workers themselves (Perryman, 2006, 2009; see also Foucault, 1991; Page, 2015). According to Ball (2003) and others (Jeffrey & Troman, 2012; Priestley et al., 2012), the logic of performativity works through displaying, comparing and judging the performance of individuals and organisations, so as to incentivise, control and transform them in particular ways, in order to maximise efficiency in terms of input–output relations (Lyotard, 1984; Perryman, 2009). When performative techniques visualise teacher performance, they make teachers more aware of what they do and the consequences thereof (Liew, 2012; Perryman, 2006). They also allow for comparisons to be made and facilitate control from a distance. Through comparisons, competition between teachers is possible (e.g. Clapham, 2013; Page, 2017; Wilkins, Busher, Kakos, Mohamed, & Smith, 2012). The idea behind this is to create incentives for the individual teacher, to enhance motivation and stimulate learning (Behn, 2003; Forrester, 2011).

For a long time, the governing of educational settings by means of performative techniques has been associated with various forms of negative reactions and resistance (see e.g. Moore & Clarke, 2016). To exemplify, Katsuno (2010) points to an almost unanimously negative picture of a regime of performance measurement, as described by Japanese teachers. Schools turn into far more competitive, divisive and stressful workplaces following newly implemented control systems, as claimed by Down et al. (1999). Union protests may follow, or individual reactions such as absenteeism, grievances, dull compliance and instrumental attitudes towards performance management (Down et al., 1999; Mather & Seifert, 2011).

One overarching explanation for the negative reception of performative techniques is that they are incompatible with traditionally held ideas about what it means to be a teacher (Down et al., 1999; Mather & Seifert, 2011; Terhart, 2013). Studies such as Jeffrey (2002) and Woods and Jeffrey (2002) suggest a fundamental incompatibility between the humanistic values of the teaching profession and the performative techniques imposed for managerial purposes. Performative discourses, it is argued (Wilkins et al., 2012), deny emotionality and the caring aspects of teaching. They also undermine teacher identities, self-images, autonomy, trust, possibilities of self-regulation, meaning of work and commitment to teaching (Mather & Seifert, 2011; Troman et al., 2007). Practical consequences follow, such as the de-motivation of ambitious teachers (Troman et al., 2007), alienation (Katsuno, 2010), fabrication of performance (Perryman, 2009), feelings of distrust (Clapham, 2013), distortion of relations to pupils (Sugrue & Mertkan, 2017) and the turning of teachers into wage labourers (Mather & Seifert, 2011).

However, given the now relatively long history of performativity within the educational system, signs are evident that at least some teachers embrace the logic of performativity and its corresponding techniques, and even strive towards performing the practices that the techniques invoke (e.g. Englund & Frostenson, 2017). Schools become populated by teachers whose ideals have developed in an education system permeated by neo-liberal norms (Englund & Frostenson, 2017; Wilkins, 2011). Some teachers become true *performers* (Jeffrey & Troman, 2011), adopting the logic of performativity and internalising its demands and functionality. Priestley et al. (2012, p. 106) suggest that this could ‘perhaps partly be explained by the ways in which the teachers have internalised aspects of the culture of performativity so that they appear to them as either inevitable or as impossible to resist’ (see also Ball, 2003). The strength of performativity lies in its perceived inevitability and that it does not allow for resistance or rejection, as it contains strong ideological and systemic pressure to conform (Priestley et al., 2012). The techniques tend to subjectivise performance demands (Ball, 2003; Liew, 2012; Meng, 2009), colonising the self of the professional teacher.

Following this, and again, some researchers have even begun to talk about the ‘post-performative’ era (Holloway, 2019; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Skerritt, 2019; Wilkins, 2011), claiming that the constant use of and exposition to mainly quantitative techniques have enabled internalisation of performativity. In fact, within some school contexts, a gradual normalisation of performativity seems to have taken place (Holloway, 2019; Lewis & Holloway, 2019; Priestley et al., 2012; Skerritt, 2019; Wilkins, 2011).

Strikingly, however, and despite the potential emergence of a post-performative era, a *parallel* discourse exists that not only recommends but requires the teaching context to be organised according to humanistic or ‘pupil-centred’ principles and ideals. Whereas performativity is claimed to be an ‘assault on child-centred philosophy’ (Woods & Jeffrey, 2002; see also Ball, 2016; Jeffrey & Troman, 2012; Moore & Clarke, 2016), a paradox of the ‘post-performative’ era is that there is a parallel existence of a discourse strongly emphasising the need to develop the pupil, engaging in dialogue, care, democratic participation, and other issues of strongly humanistic or ‘pupil-centric’ kind, exactly the opposite of what performativity undermines, according to previous studies. To exemplify, in the Swedish national curriculum for the upper secondary school, it is stated that the national school system

should promote the development and learning of students, and a lifelong desire to learn. Education should impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based. ... The task of the school is to encourage all students to discover their own uniqueness as individuals and thereby actively participate in the life of society by giving of their best in responsible freedom. (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013, p. 4)

In contexts such as the Scandinavian one, schools are even legally committed to following requirements and expectations representing a humanistic and participative ideal.

One conclusion of this reasoning is that within performative school contexts, there is *ambiguity*. In explicitly (post-)performative contexts, this ambiguity involves the difficulty of enacting professional values of a humanistic kind, at least seemingly in contradiction to the prevailing logic of performativity. It is to this ambiguity that we turn in this paper, as we ask ourselves how it may be that ‘post-performative’ teachers are able to

embrace and communicate professional values of a humanistic kind. As will be detailed later in this paper, we provide an answer in terms of a number of *interplay mechanisms* between performative techniques and professional values. More specifically, it will be argued that the identified mechanisms contribute to the reinforcement and reconstruction of professional values, such as dialogue, care and equality, in line with performative rationality, which, in turn, explains how it is possible to concurrently enact performativity *and* humanistic values in one and the same school context.

## Methodology

A case representative of the ambiguous school context described previously is A-school, a Swedish upper secondary school. A-school was contacted during the initial phases of a research project on performance management in the educational sector. Ten principals of Swedish schools were interviewed about how they looked upon, used and adopted performative techniques relating to individual teacher performance. A-school stood out as particularly oriented towards performativity. A request to interview teachers working at A-school was granted by the principal, which made it possible for us to perform a case study, interviewing, all in all, eight people working at the school during late 2014 and 2015. The school is comparatively small, with around 300 pupils and some 25 teachers and administrative staff. It is one of around 15 schools run by a private education organiser, which is itself part of a much larger private company group running many schools at various levels in Sweden. At the time of the interviews, A-school had been established only some five years ago. Most programmes are vocational, and the majority of teachers are female. Consequently, all but two interviews were made with female staff (Table 1).

The respondents were identified through a chain starting with the principal. All but one respondent worked at the school. In the case of the former employee, she was explicitly mentioned by current employees as one with substantial insights into the performative culture of the school after having worked there for some four years. The interviews lasted from one to one and a half hours. They were recorded and transcribed and in relevant parts translated from Swedish into English by the authors.

Another source of information, provided by A-school, was documents covering various policies and instruments relating to individual performance evaluation, such as course evaluations and customer satisfaction surveys. Through them, we got an overview of the general performative techniques used by the school. In addition, they were used as input for the interviews, making it possible to formulate specific questions concerning each technique (course evaluations and so on).

**Table 1.** Respondents.

Position	Subjects taught	Male / female	Number of interviews
Principal	N/A	Female	2
Assistant principal	Media, communication	Male	1
Head teacher	Social science, religion	Male	1
Teacher	Spanish	Female	1
Teacher	Social science	Female	1
Teacher	Vocational subjects	Female	1
Teacher	Social science, religion	Female	1
Former teacher	Mathematics	Female	1

Analytically, the transcriptions of the interviews were studied in detail by the researchers. Based on our pre-understanding of the literature on performativity in educational settings, the material was sorted into categories corresponding to two themes. *First*, it was of importance to identify the teachers' opinions about the performative techniques of the school. Through this analysis, the performative culture of A-school and the teachers' acceptance of it could be substantiated. *Second*, the empirical material was coded in order to find quotations and/or parts of interviews relating to professional ideals (what the teachers considered to be a 'good' teacher). As an example, the following quotation can be used:

Of course you are influenced by the performance dialogue. You want to perform, right? And I mean, if it's about your salary, of course, most people want money and then it goes without saying that you want to perform better. But you shouldn't forget that we are basically there for the pupils.

The quotation contains both an opinion about a performative technique (performance dialogue), and the reasons for the positive evaluation of it (performance orientation, economic motivation), as well as a professional ideal (being there for the pupils) of a humanistic kind. Through the analysis, it was possible to identify a relatively positive general opinion about the performative techniques and to identify professional ideals of essentially a humanistic kind, for example, a high esteem for dialogue, equality and care for the pupil.

The last step of the analysis involved clarifying the connections between the teachers' ideas about performative techniques and how they perceived of professional ideals. Essentially, these connections concern how the teachers relate performative techniques to professional values (and vice versa). Three connections were identified in the empirical material on the basis of quotations that contained references to both the performative techniques and the professional ideals. To exemplify, another quotation is illustrative:

If you get nice feedback from the pupils it matters, of course, to . . . , and you [notice] that also on the study performance of the pupils, that if you have succeeded with a class that you can see it on their results.

Success (being a good teacher according to the professional ideals) 'inevitably' implies that you see it on concrete results and feedback through performative techniques. How can we understand such a relationship? In the example given earlier as an *instrumental* quality of the performative techniques. A *sine qua non* relationship exists between the techniques and what it means to be a good teacher. Success leads to results. If there are no results, you cannot infer success. Since the one is not thought without the other, they go together and presuppose each other in an interplay. This is one example of the three identified relationships (the other two of accommodating and visualising character) that we describe as *interplay mechanisms*. That is, and as will be further detailed later in this article, the techniques and values work through each other (Katsuno, 2010), not independently, but as reinforcing and reconstituting entities.

## Empirical findings

### *A school context of performativity and humanistic ideals*

As noted, performative techniques such as course evaluations and a customer satisfaction survey are used at A-school. Such techniques represent an ideal expressed by the local school management in various ways. For example, when recruiting, finding staff that are willing to adopt performativity is important. A-school's principal explains:

We are extremely open about this when recruiting. Then we emphasise that this is the way we work. If you cannot accept working in that way, quite frankly you shouldn't be with us, then you should work somewhere else. Otherwise you don't feel well.

Importantly, when talking to the teachers, they do not seem to disapprove of the extensive use of performative techniques. On the contrary, they seem to have embraced them and the competitive climate that they seem to create. To quote a former teacher of the school:

I don't know if A-school has ever employed anyone who hasn't had a competitive mind. For real, that is.

The same teacher goes on to explain which teachers that fit the description:

Well, I would say young people, really driven, engaged, that want to show their abilities.

Another teacher, still working at the school, provides an expression of a competitive approach and relates it to the course evaluations:

Of course you want to perform well and reach good results. The evaluation that I think gives me most is the course evaluation by the pupils. Because they are the ones that we are there for. And that is where you want to get good results showing that they are content with what you teach and what you convey. That they have actually learnt something. That is the funniest one [evaluation] to reflect on afterwards. A coaching talk with the principal – who is not always in the classroom and does not see all the progress that every individual, every pupil, makes – is not as valuable for me as a person. What this course evaluation – that the pupils complete – says is of more worth to me.

As suggested by the quotation, teachers in A-school also express something beyond a mere competitive attitude. This teacher points to the pupils and claims the course evaluation to be an instrument of worth, relevant in relation to what she perceives to be important: an ideal to be there for the pupil, to work and make efforts for the pupil. Even though competitive, the teachers say that the main reason for why they work at the school is, ultimately, the pupils. The above-mentioned teacher explains:

Of course you are influenced by the performance dialogue. You want to perform, right? And I mean, if it's about your salary, of course, most people want money and then it goes without saying that you want to perform better. But you shouldn't forget that we are basically there for the pupils.

Another teacher explains how she sees her job:

Now, I am good at [laughs] building relations to my pupils, or I have noticed that, because I am such a person, I care about the person and I see the entire person and everyone's equal worth and such things. So, that affects me, influences me. Because I feel bad if [not].



She continues:

Motivation, building relations to the pupils. I find that very important, that you create mutual respect in order to build confidence, that you show that 'I want to help you to go further'.

What these quotations reveal is an essentially mixed picture. The ideals of performativity are shared by the teachers; they are not only managerial. But when relating to their work, the teachers sincerely focus on the pupils and their development. You are there to motivate the pupils, to make them grow. It is the professional responsibility of the teacher. Another teacher expresses this somewhat differently, focusing on the pupil's development.

You always have to try to make it as good as possible for everyone. ... You have always, I would say, the pupil's best in focus and you want them to learn as much as possible. Sometimes you don't succeed for one reason or the other. Such is society. But you must never give up. That is the way it is.

In other words, the school context shows signs of being *both* performative and to express humanistic ideals about the pupil. In this case, it is not only mandated by an external party (the government, the principal education organiser or someone else), but also endorsed by the teachers themselves.

### **Analyzing the interplay**

Through the picture given here, we see a context where teachers express professional ideals (to be there for the pupil) simultaneously with positive appreciations of the performative techniques. Another way of putting it is to say that the performative techniques and the professional ideals do not belong to separate universes, but are understood jointly, in relation to each other. They go together. However, taking the analysis one step further requires us to explain how this is possible.

Next, we do this through pointing to three features of the performative techniques, namely their ability to: i) offer opportunities for interpretations of features consonant with professional values; ii) appear as natural and useful tools for realising such values as expressed through performativity; and iii) work as means for avoiding obstacles to a professional value orientation. As said, these qualities constitute three underlying *interplay mechanisms* that support the teachers' construction of professional values in relation to the techniques (Table 2). This is further analysed later in this article.

**Table 2.** Analytical understanding of the interplay mechanisms.

Overarching qualities of performative techniques	Interplay mechanism
i) Offer opportunities for interpretations of features of techniques that are consonant with professional values	Accommodating
ii) Appear as natural and useful tools for realising professional values as expressed through performativity	Instrumental
iii) Work as means for avoiding obstacles to realising a professional value orientation	Visualising

### **Accommodating mechanism**

The first feature refers to how (at least some of) the performative techniques are ‘plastic’ enough to *accommodate* professional values held by teachers. In fact, they are even constructed to allow for teachers to define (or adapt) their content and have an impact on their use. We interpret this as a specific quality of the performative techniques, to offer opportunities for interpreting the features of techniques in a way that is consonant with professional values.

In particular, this is evident in cases where the teachers reflect on the use of techniques in relation to *pupil voice*. Pupil voice implies *participation* of the pupils, where the results are used in other contexts, for example in the coaching talks with the principal. From the perspective of the teacher, this is not necessarily negative. One teacher argues:

Here the pupils complete this evaluation, and then you have that together [the principal and the teacher], when you come to these coaching talks with the principal. ... And I think [having it] is a great advantage because it is the only time that the pupils themselves [give their opinion]. And then, as a teacher, I get to know that, okay, now I’ve got 20 people that are not happy about this. Then I have to do something about it, I have to change, we have to straighten things up and change it in this way.

That is, the performative technique *opens up for expressions and opinions*. Even though no teachers claim to be happy about negative criticism, they value the opportunity of feedback higher than the potentially negative aspects of it. The teacher continues:

And that is what I say to my pupils. It is the only time you can exercise your influence.

Evidently, this particular teacher exhorts the pupils to give their views. They can influence. Influence is also a *normative idea* of how pupil participation should come about and be organised. Pupil voice is part of the ideal, both from a participative (‘democratic’) perspective and a pedagogical one. Another teacher argues:

I make my own evaluations with the pupils on my courses. There we have, at least my pupils and me, a very straight communication. They say to me, ‘I don’t get anything of this, this, I don’t understand’. They can say that to me, and ‘this lesson didn’t give me very much because we have been talking about this so many times, it gave me nothing new, I had to repeat, and so on’. So, at least once a week I try to evaluate myself together with the pupils. They are evaluating their own performance.

Pupil voice is, for this teacher, also self-imposed. It is a way for the teacher to improve and adapt, as well as a pedagogical means (‘evaluating their own performance’) to make the pupils reflect on what they are doing. The problem relating to the performance evaluations is not, basically, negative feedback. Rather, the downside is that not all pupils participate or, as one teacher puts it, use their right:

I think, there is an advantage to be evaluated by the pupils. The downside is that not all pupils know, or they don’t use their right to this. Perhaps they are tired of school and then everything is bad.

Pupil voice, in other words, is something that the performative techniques allow for. It sustains a *right*, according to this teacher. It is congruent, for that reason, with a participatory ideal cherished by teachers that talk about it. The right is *exercised through voice*, which is done through the performative techniques. That is, performative

techniques accommodate, allow for or even mandate pupil voice. Through the course evaluations and the customer satisfaction survey, the pupils express their views anonymously. Importantly though, whereas the course evaluations are more directly aimed at the teacher's performance, the customer satisfaction survey refers to the entire school situation of the pupil. In both cases, however, the performative techniques, according to the teachers, turn the pupil into a speaking partner. What is possible (and compulsory) to do through the techniques is interpreted in the form of the realisation of a normative ideal for the teacher–pupil relationship (democratic, participative).

### ***Instrumental mechanism***

If the first interplay mechanism points to the possibility to see the techniques as tools that accommodate professional values, the second mechanism is about realising such values through the techniques. That is, *through* the techniques, values and ideals are manifested. Since the techniques assist in achieving these, they are essentially *instrumental* in nature. However, when looking at how teachers talked about how they interacted with the pupils, it was evident that these pupils were not necessarily 'ends in themselves'. Nor did the pupil's development, growth, self-esteem or self-realisation – however important – exist as entities *independently* from the techniques. The techniques were 'the law'. You actually had to *use* the techniques to realise such values. You could only achieve relevant ends through them, implying a *reduction of other alternatives* to reaching the ends.

Examples of this include the ways in which teachers clearly related the building of relationships to the outcomes visualised by the performative techniques:

If you have succeeded with a class you can see it on their results.

That is, no other definitions of reaching the professional values existed apart from through the techniques. Notably, such instrumentality also transcends the context of teaching. Even though teaching may be a harder issue in some contexts, with some pupils, and in some classes, no excuses relating to context are valid. The techniques convey that circumstances do not matter. You should care and take action whether or not circumstances are advantageous. Performativity, thus, transcends the context.

What the pupils think of you is the only thing that counts.

When focusing on what counts and shows up in the evaluations, it becomes less important *what* is measured, as suggested by one of the teachers:

If the results [from the pupil surveys] are good it doesn't really matter what is being evaluated.

Succeeding with the pupils was more or less equated with *reaching more performative outcomes* as defined by the performative techniques. One example of this comes from a teacher who refers to the interest in the subject as an aspect of the context of teaching (an extended version of one of the earlier quotations):

If you get nice feedback from the pupils it matters, of course, to . . . and you [notice] that also on the study performance of the pupils. If you have succeeded with a class you can see it on their results. That also goes for a teacher who has considerably worse results, but that may

also be a consequence of the interest in the subject. But it's part of our role to catch the interest of the pupils, so it all falls back on us pedagogues.

In this quotation, you find an acceptance of the responsibility of the teachers to catch the interest of the pupils. The techniques inform you about how you have succeeded. They do not lie. It does not matter whether the context is tough. The problem is not the technique. Rather, the contextual realities and opinions of the pupils are up to you to affect and deal with. If you arouse interest, you will get better results.

The same teacher elaborates on this. If the pupils are there (in the classroom), it is the teacher's responsibility to make them happy and content. Who they are and the knowledge that they possess becomes irrelevant:

If my pupils are content and happy with my teaching, I will make them perform and pass. Because they will ... If only I have my pupils in the classroom I know I can help them to reach their marks.

Even though pupils may be badly informed and lacking knowledge, their responses reflect genuinely what they feel and think about the teacher and the teaching. The pupils are never considered to be wrong as such. How they feel about the subject and the teacher, and what they think is difficult, are just as much facts as anything else. Another teacher expresses this in the following way:

Then, during the first weeks I just check off, 'okay, this is what you are like, this is what you think is fun, this you know before', and then I have created new material and a new structure and so on. So that is why I am always thinking about the pupils' feedback all the time.

What is striking in this quotation is that the teacher emphasises her own responsibility to adapt, and to catch the interest of the pupils. Furthermore, the voice of the pupils should not be questioned. It tells the teacher something 'true' about the pupils, what they like, think is fun and already know (or not).

All this leads to pressure on the teachers. But the performative techniques are not blamed for this. Rather, they are an indicator and a legitimate tool. For at least some teachers, and consonant with the competitive climate, this pressure is not necessarily negative. The pressure comes with something else, an energetic drive to improve and to develop. One excerpt from a teacher, referring to a colleague who has received an offer from another school, vindicates this:

I asked him today, 'What are your reasons for staying?' ... 'The joy of work, that this pressure makes us perform and that we think of pedagogy when we are at home too, that we always think of how to reach the pupils even better all the time.'

Pressure (through the techniques) makes you rethink and work to reach the relevant ends. The techniques do not stand in opposition to the ends. Rather, they become means through which you can attain them.

### **Visualising mechanism**

Furthermore, another quality of the techniques is that they make you overcome potential obstacles to being a professional teacher. They are not only 'plastic' and instrumental (cf. the first two mechanisms), but also helpful in *visualising* the teacher as such. In A-school,

performative techniques were perceived as enabling in the sense that they visualise to others what and who the teacher is, 'good' or 'bad', as defined by the scores. They include information content helpful to understanding what and who the good teacher is through *visualisation of performance*. Such visualisation entails removing obstacles to exposing the individual teacher as a successful one, that is, obstacles such as classroom walls, specific contexts, and so on. It becomes highly important how outcomes are perceived by important others (e.g. the principal or teacher colleagues). As explained by one of the teachers:

Because it [i.e. what the pupils think] reaches the principal too.

When it becomes important what other people think about the individual teacher, the visualisations become something that needs to be managed. That is, the techniques become instrumental to managing how results are perceived. As suggested by one of the teachers: 'And that is what the principal should see, that you do a good job with the pupils.' Or, as summarised by the same teacher:

So really, everything comes back to us wanting to perform better as teachers so that the results will be good when talking to [the principal]. And it really doesn't matter whether it is [the principal] who has set the goals or not, because you want to perform [i.e. have good numbers], it's as simple as that.

Through the system, the pupils become 'legitimate judges' of what the teachers do. Through the evaluations, they become participants, and overcome obstacles to identifying the teacher as well- or ill-performing. The pupils' evaluations lead to concrete consequences. A quotation from a teacher is a telling one:

If you have a bad score on these questions that the pupils have answered, then you can have a dialogue with the principal on how you can develop. What sort of assistance do you need? Do you need some kind of support, so that you can go on and still develop together with the pupils?

The responsibility is not only to develop the pupils. The teacher should also show a readiness to develop her- or himself. The scores reveal something about what you, as a teacher, need to develop. As the teacher suggests in the quotation, she bears the responsibility to be flexible, malleable and to change if required. The pupils are not to blame if the reviews are negative. The evaluations, thus, even out the 'imbalance' of the marking system through which the teachers one-sidedly evaluate and rank the pupils. In such a sense, the performative techniques even out hierarchies and 'foster equality' (cf. the second mechanism). But importantly, the visual dimension of this specifically relates to the teacher as such, and his or her achievements. Through reducing the obstacles, the performative techniques show, proclaim and corroborate that you are good (or not), also to important others.

As expressed by the same teacher, the performative techniques sustain development and improvement through making visible:

What you use these [evaluations] for, then, is to . . . , we have talks, the principal and me, for example, when she has these as her basis. Then we go through this, looking at it, how you have developed, if your scores are good or bad. And frequently you bring up the things that you are worse at, not the one that are like 'Wow, how well it turned out'.

In this sense, the system creates on par relationships between the teacher and the pupil, through which improvement comes about. As another teacher puts it:

Yes, of course it affects. And I mean, if I get feedback like, well, that I, I talk too fast, of course I want to improve that. Because it reaches the principal too. And if there is something that disturbs the pupils, then they lose their focus on learning. They direct it to my talking too fast. And I mean, of course I have to improve that, to reach better results with the pupils, which gives me a better result in the end with regard to [the evaluation by] the principal.

The professional teacher ideal is communicated through the techniques. The third mechanism, thus, connects not only to desired ends related to the pupil, but to the very exercise of the teaching profession.

## Concluding discussion

A general conclusion of the article is that in A-school, it was possible for the teachers to embrace both performativity as an ideal *and* professional values of a humanistic kind, at least as interpreted within the specific context of performativity. The reliance on performative techniques (course evaluations and customer satisfaction surveys) was based on the belief that they did not contradict, but *manifested* the humanistic values articulated by the teachers and presumed in the ambiguous school context. There was, essentially, an *interplay* in the sense that the techniques and the professional values (including what it was like to be a good teacher) were understood not only as co-existing, but also as ‘inseparable’ and supportive of each other. A *sine qua non* relationship prevailed. For example, to get confirmation that you were on the right track (caring for the pupil, and so on) you had to get good scores, and, furthermore, you reacted on such scores, in particular the not-so-good ones, in order to get better evaluations next time. What to achieve (ultimately the teachers’ ideals) was specified and expressed in a recursive process of evaluation. This, we see as an interplay that was possible through the three identified mechanisms. As these mechanisms came into play, the positive perceptions of performative techniques became self-reinforcing.

This is also a clue to understanding why performative teachers (and schools) can claim allegiance to professional values usually seen as highly contrasting with the ideology of performativity. The interplay mechanisms allow for a *reinterpretation* or *reconstitution* of professional values in light of the performative techniques. This also makes it possible to participate in and sustain the humanistic discourse that also characterises the school and the education system.

Based on these findings, we propose that performative techniques (and the values underpinning them) and teachers’ professional values are not fixed opposites but co-constructed and, in this sense, ‘inseparable’ entities. They work through each other (Katsuno, 2010), and as they do, they may reinforce and reconstitute each other. In fact, the current case shows how teachers come to see performative techniques as rather appealing tools, ‘plastic’ enough to align with, and even reinforce, humanistic values, although in performative terms.

Arguably, these findings provide three distinct contributions to our understanding of the relationship between performative techniques and professional values. *First*, we offer empirical insights into a context in which teachers are *performers* in the sense that they

have internalised performative ideals as a ‘natural’ ingredient of what it means to be a teacher (cf. Wilkins, 2011). In contrast to earlier studies (Down et al., 1999; Mather & Seifert, 2011; Skerritt, 2019; Terhart, 2013), we suggest that the performative context may be ambiguous in the sense that it also contains and reconstitutes professional values and ideals not usually linked to performativity.

*Second*, even though earlier studies (Holloway & Brass, 2018; Lewis & Holloway, 2019; Wilkins, 2011) have identified teachers as performative (or even post-performative), the study provides an explanation for how these teachers reconcile humanistic values with performative techniques. Due to the identified mechanisms, the performative techniques do not collide with, oust or replace the humanistic values. Rather, the values are reconstituted into something that is not only congruent with, but reflected in, visualised and accommodated by the techniques.

*Third*, the study partly solves the paradox of how it is possible to combine performative techniques with professional values usually understood as being in stark opposition to the logic of performativity that underpins the techniques (cf. Ball, 2003; Jeffrey, 2002; Smyth, 2006; Tang, 2011; Woods & Jeffrey, 2002). How performativity works as an overarching technology (manifesting itself in various techniques) has been discussed (Liew, 2012; Perryman, 2006; Wilkins, 2015), but we deepen the discussion on how this comes about within ambiguous settings. Within (and through) the performative rationality, a change *in* values may be seen. Put somewhat crudely, humanistic ideals converge with the ideology of performativity through the workings of the identified mechanisms. Indeed, one may argue that such ideals and values are not ‘genuinely humanistic’ if they are constructed and filtered through performative rationality. However, our point is not to arrive at a definitive conclusion about what these values really are, but to identify how the construction of such values is possible in relation to the performative techniques.

Some limitations deserve attention. Our results refer to a specific school where we focus on teachers that represent a performative mind-set. Other settings, marked by stronger ideological conflict, may show other patterns. Future research would contribute through showing how techniques and values feed and form each other over time and in particular contexts.

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