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The calculated management of life and all that jazz: gaming quality assurance practices in English further education

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines emerging discourses and practices of quality assurance in English Further Education (FE), a sector currently undergoing significant change. Using a broadly ethnographic approach and Foucauldian theories of power, we discuss how 'documentisation' contributes to governance techniques in a specific institutional context. Documentisation, the transformation of concrete practice into discourse, reverses a common-sense view of the role of policy documentation and exemplifies a wide range of practices in both FE and the wider post-16 sector and includes the gamification of quality systems. Our analysis of the conditions and practices out of which the phenomenon appears identifies processes that are shaping present-day experiences and redefining the discourse of quality itself. Moreover, rather than situating compliance and/or resistance in practice *per se*, we argue that it is within the conditions of possibility expressed by such processes that the intertwining of compliance and resistance can best be appreciated.

Introduction

This paper analyses the extent to which contemporary Quality Assurance (QA) practices in English further education (FE) continue to be inflected by practices of Foucauldian governmentality. Focusing on Quality Assurance (QA) practices as a key feature of UK FE, we analyse QA as a driver of normalised practices, contributing to existing debates about power in education. Drawing on interview data to examine present-day QA policies and practices, we identify 'gaming the system' and 'documentisation' (defined below) as central, but fundamentally ambivalent, features of normalisation in FE. Using Foucauldian analyses of the workings of governmentality, we discuss the issues raised for FE and educational governance more widely, showing their potential both as technologies of control and, paradoxically perhaps, of 'other possibilities of being'.

While this echoes a significant body of existing work in this area, it has recently been argued that an important shift in such educational governance is under way. The latter, it

is suggested, constitutes 'the student's inscription into *new forms of governing'* (Simons, 2021, p. 1). Simons' point is that while contemporary forms of education management are often described as independent and emancipatory, they should be understood instead as interdependent mechanisms. Simons also argues that such Foucauldian critiques of rules-based discourse, comprising a 'carceral archipelago' of discipline and normalisation, no longer apply to today's 'Europeanised' education systems. Discipline, he suggests, has been replaced by neoliberal forms of governance and their shift from top down, oppressive systems of educational governance, towards more complex, relational systems of governance (see also Foucault, 2018; Harcourt, 2019).

This claim to novelty is debatable: many have criticised developments in education that reduce it to a purveyor of disciplinary social control. Cultures of performativity, for instance, have often been criticised by those who, like Ball (2003; see also Exley & Ball, 2014), argue that treating education as a problem to be governed has many negative effects. Many have specifically critiqued such developments in the Further or Lifelong Education sector (e.g. Coffield, 1999; Fejes & Nicoll, 2008; Kauppila, Kinnari, & Niemi, 2020; Masschelein & Simons, 2015; Randle & Brady, 1997). Such critics argue that an interconnected set of practices constructs the individual subject of FE as an agent of human capital theory and normalisation. Governmental techniques such as responsibilisation, managerialism and even a sense of abstract indebtedness have been critiqued as techniques of disciplining learning bodies (see, e.g. Becker, 1975; Beighton, 2016; Brown, Lauder, & Cheung, 2020; Fix, 2018; Simmons & Thompson, 2008). Ball and Collet-Sabé's (2021) recent critique of the modern school exemplifies this approach: 'intolerable' institutions, they argue, force subjects into levels and categories, producing 'a set of universals' whereby the today's educational episteme 'ignores, excludes or stigmatises other possibilities of being (or diversities) of culture' (p. 6). Such studies, alongside Simons (2021), underscore the issue's continued relevance to the sector. Specifically, to show how they help understand practices of 'documentisation' and 'gaming', we start with a brief historical background of the issue in FE before pursuing or analysis of interview data that develops these points.

Normalisation in FE policy: a brief history

The UK FE sector offers a comprehensive range of educational and training opportunities for school leavers as well as adults returning to learning.[1] Broadly speaking, despite the UK's 2016 exit from the European Union, FE has traditionally echoed a 'Europeanised' discourse of lifelong learning and its ambitions around social mobility, technical education and a life-wide approach to education as a tool of economic development (see, e.g. Beighton, 2015: Keep, Richmond, & Silver, 2021). FE colleges, a key part of the sector, have spearheaded normalisation processes since they first became independent corporations in 1993: their subsequent reliance on central government funding, accountability-driven managerialism and inspection-led micromanagement of QA processes has frequently been critiqued (Lucas & Crowther, 2016; Naz, 2021b; Plowright & Barr, 2012).

Such policy analysis often focuses on the disciplinary functions of power, notably top-down interventions and a culture of compliance and regulation (see, e.g. Beighton, 2017; Beighton & Revell, 2020; Exley & Ball, 2014; O'Leary, 2014; 2015). Simons, however, argues that such a top-down understanding is no longer useful. Rather than focus on the power/

powerlessness attributed to individual agents, an education system's complex relationality must be the focus of analysis because such systems are not defined by their constituent parts. On the contrary, practices and phenomena can and do emerge over time – bottom up – because the characteristics of such complex systems condition this emergence. First, in such a system, individual elements are defined by the relations between them: a leader is powerful because of the power they can exert through others in the system, not because their superiority is innate or essential. Second, such systems (and, by extension, their constituent parts, positions and capacities) are inherently unstable and liable to change as new thresholds are crossed. Finally, these systems' complexity implies emergent properties: their characteristics are not defined by their constituent parts and thus new practices, identities, and features can and do appear over time, redefining the whole as a *positive* entity.[2]

This positivity underpins the kind of generative systems presupposed by Michel Foucault's analysis of power. They also suggest that as scholars we must be wary about claiming novelty: just as domains, objects and truth rituals are produced, individuals and knowledge are produced as new thresholds are crossed. We must, therefore, 'cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms' (exclusion, repression, censorship, etc.) according to Foucault (1977, p. 93).[3] Indeed, for Foucault at least, control is *positive* in the sense that it tends to eschew oppression and discipline in favour of actively encouraging expressions of power, energy or creativity. All become deeply ambiguous as a result: while positivity implies potential for novelty, freedom and expression, those who understand this (intuitively or otherwise) can direct it to specific 'biopolitical' ends. Disciplinary power now involves the 'calculated management of life' (Foucault, 1981, p. 138; Foucault, 2001; see also Åkerblom, 2019; Beighton, 2021; Hope, 2016; Lemke, 2001).

In the case of FE, this attempt to harness quasi-vitalistic forces inherent to practice involves observations, audits and discourses of improvement may serve this function. But this shift towards complex systems analysis deserves interrogation, and we approach the issue by analysing empirical data. Starting with the influential discourses and practices of the sector's official regulator, we show below how emerging forms of governing, for instance through 'documentisation', can be identified, raising significant questions for the sector and governance more widely.

Ofsted, FE and disciplinary governance

The UK's Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) is a particularly powerful example of how disciplinary power drives societal normalisation. Introduced by the 1996 School Inspection and Education Act, Ofsted is empowered to inspect FE providers every four years, reporting publicly on their adherence to the standards, criteria and imperatives deemed important at the time of inspection. One (much discussed) constant, however, is that colleges continue to receive an overall Ofsted rating of 'Outstanding', 'Good', 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate' (Ofsted, 2019). While claiming that individual institutions have the right to adapt to circumstances, Ofsted never stipulates exactly how institutions are expected to improve. Instead, pre-emptive compliance with shifting initiatives and agendas both present and future is thus fostered, reinforcing the normalising influence of such mechanisms on both content (the educational offer) and form (the edu-disciplinary process) (Coffield, 1999; Naz, 2021a).[4]

In FE, a bottom-up recruitment of individualism and creative energy is supplementing top-down disciplinary approaches. For example, the recent FE White Paper 'Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth' (DFE, 2021; see also Camden, 2021; COF, 2020, 2021; FAB, 2021) seeks to create channels through which strategic objectives, opportunities, risks, and good practice can be discussed. Where this bottom-up initiative fails, top-down power will be exerted through local intervention or 'unspecified other actions' (DfE, 2021, pp. 53–54). A similar approach is taken by the sector's fundraising agency, which is piloting 'territorial teams' to identify where 'support with curriculum and financial planning' is needed. This support will come from 'specialists within the FE Commissioner team' as well as 'peer to peer support', so that it can be 'tailored to individual needs and planned in agreement with each college' (ESFA, 2021, p. 10). Echoing traditional neoliberal governmental rationality and its tension between state control and individual freedom, such top-down interventions will ensure 'clear line[s] of sight' to facilitate bottom-up 'strategic conversations' (DFE, 2021, p. 53). This apparatus exists to ensure that colleges respond not just to top-down political strategy, but also to adapt creatively and efficiently to discourses of marketisation and individual financial viability from the bottom up.

Normalisation and documentisation

This type of self-surveillance, or 'conduct of conduct' through disciplinary measures (Foucault, 1982, p. 790), is striking in that FE accountability is ensured by documented *conversation* rather than material practice *stricto sensu.* On one hand, these practices can seem highly oppressive. For example, in England, the efficacy of pedagogical practices is established through the measurement and quantification of how well organisations and individuals demonstrate and especially document compliance with the prescribed criteria used during inspections. Documents produced during such inspections are wide-ranging and generate proliferating acronyms. Teachers re-write lesson plans, course profiles, yearly SoWs (Schemes of Work) and curriculum sequencing; Managers revise and adapt SARs (Self-Assessment Reports), and QIAPs (Quality Improvement Action Plans), and Ofsted records observations which feed into a final written report. These documented practices, produced for verification purposes at various stages of inspections, determine staff and organisational performance and also provide material for publicity. Such self-regulation of conduct documents evidence of compliance ('good' and 'outstanding' practice) rather than create opportunities to discuss and evaluate local priorities in individual colleges. Effective pedagogy exists only insofar as it is displayed in data, spreadsheets, plans and inspection documentation.

This phenomenon often characterises the kind of performance culture which, for Ball (2003) inflects institutional practices. A drive for measurable performance leads to an emphasis on management measurement rather than improvement *per se*. In FE specifically, it can produce 'semiotisation', whereby the pursuit of documentation eclipses the practice it is designed to represent (Beighton & Revell, 2020). It has also been ascribed more broadly to institutions' adoption of rationales external to them: Bornemark (2018) for example suggests that, when practice has to be documented in order to be considered complete, an 'empapered world' appears. This 'empaperment' entails two problems: on one hand, its simplistic logic misrepresents the complexity of knowledge and especially

its essential correlate, not knowing; on the other hand, it results, for Bornemark, in a deepening of surveillance and control culture.

On the other hand, however, the complexity of the system implies that teachers and organisations can also resist such documentisation. In FE, this means adapting practices (and crucially the documentation thereof) to generate documented compliance for QA purposes. This transformation of practice into discourse is first shaped by discursive and strategic agendas such as those pronounced in the 2021 White Paper and ESFA guidance mentioned above. Typically, it is further modelled into action plans for future interventions *in situ*. A *documentised* sequence of norms thus ensures that the institution can simultaneously conduct itself as objects of policy discourse and subjects of compliance rather than purely compliant subjects. Thus, while ostensibly free to govern according to local needs (DfE, 2021), colleges are dynamic systems which positively participate in control, accountability, and so on. It is this potential for positivity that we examine through our data, below.

Methodology

This paper draws on data collected as part of a detailed investigation into the connections between quality assurance policies and teaching practices in a London-based FE college. To understand the extent to which such self-regulation still represents a significant form of governance, this paper examines data which highlights how normalising processes manifest themselves in day-to-day FE practices.[5] Situated in a General Further Education college in London, serving a working-class community with relatively high numbers of ethnic minorities and significant levels of unemployment. The purpose was to explore the ways in which different teachers determine, evaluate and describe their practices in relation to policy discourses about FE.

A broadly ethnographic approach was taken participant observation, policy analysis and personal reflection were supported by iterative, semi-structured interviews. Specifically, we asked teaching staff and senior managers how different initiatives such as observations and audits are used to improve and assess quality of teaching, learning and assessment practices. Teachers were interviewed, observed in their classroom, and interviewed again after the observations.

Ethics

Permission to carry out research was granted by the Head of Quality at the college and approved by the ethics committee at Canterbury Christ Church University. In sum, there were no issues of confidentiality, ethical dilemmas, privacy, informed consent, social justice and power relations.

Data collection

The data collected from the participants were lengthy, rich and wide-ranging.[6] Although all were asked the same base-line questions, different levels of detail were found in participants' responses. We carried out a detailed exploration to select the parts which responded to key objectives of the study and /or further sharpen the focus of the analysis.

As a result of this process, this paper focuses on five of the interviews whose consistent themes and insights offered deeper understanding of QA processes, practices and attitudes. These five interviews reflected a wide range of experience with specific and relevant examples embedded within extended answers and therefore were the most suitable for this study.

In addition, we reflected on our notes from classroom observations to juxtapose teaching practices with the participants' own views of the nature of their experiences in the interviews. The data from these participants provided more insights to complement what we had observed in the classroom. In classroom observations, we were able to examine teaching practices and the extent to which they were influenced by quality processes in much more detail. The data collected during observations added to the depth of certain interviews more than others, so to keep the analysis focused, interviews with more insights, detail, examples and certain common themes were selected. This interpretation was carried out by exploring connections and comparing and contrasting components (Wellington, 2000).

After transcribing the interviews, close reading facilitated identification of key themes and details that reflected or informed the questions in hand. The transcripts were broken down into chunks to assign meaning in the context of the themes that emerged in all the data in the original sample. A close examination of available evidence related to QA practices produced a qualitative description of the emerging discourses in this setting. This approach also allowed us to generate further theses while retaining the focus of analysis within the guiding parameters of the study (i.e. a focus on connections between discursive structures, observed practices and wider institutional discourse) as well as any emerging themes that further informed this analysis. Contemporary forms and practices of normalisation, and particularly the structural functioning and diversification of power relations which implicate personal choice, individual success and satisfaction, were examined.

Our analysis shows how QA interventions and sites of resistance are linked by a cluster of normalising effects. Chief among these, we argue, is documentisation. Referring to the reconfiguration of concrete practice into discourse, documentisation instrumentalises the observations, reports, plans, spreadsheets and schedules that represent such a significant administrative workload in college contexts. Documentisation, we argue, is central to defining and normalising practice and can be considered a significant form of governance in FE.

Data

Our data shows that observation practices are used as a tool of governance, notably giving senior managers and inspectors an opportunity to define good practice and how it should be delivered. However, the stakeholders who put their faith in this inspection model often seem to provide a one-dimensional perspective based on sometimes crude solutions to some of the multifaceted and complex challenges within the FE classroom. This leads to accounts that express two approaches to governance: the deployment of a form of 'biopolitical common sense' on one hand, and a more disruptive 'gaming' of the system on the other are presented thematically below.

Biopolitical common sense

Robert[7], the Chief Executive Officer at the college, is an Ofsted inspector. He was in no doubt that perpetual scrutiny of teaching practices in and outside the classroom ensures documentary compliance:

> I tell [my Director of Quality] that you need to make sure we are 100% compliant, we need to make sure we are checking. Are we checking action plans, are we checking it's happening?

Compliance, here, is not just evidenced by 'action plans' but represented by them: if it's documentised, it's happening. The grading system is part of this reconfiguration, wherein the symbol of practice (a grade) takes precedence because, unlike individual practices, it has 'huge implications' as Robert commented:

> If you get a low grade, it has huge implications for you, so I think that drives a fear factor to an extent but having said all of that I think Ofsted does drive improvements. I do.

Two points here stand out. First, compliance in teaching, learning and assessment practices can only be achieved through observation procedures: these go beyond traditional classroom observations and include audits and learning walks and, ultimately, reconfiguration into a grade. Second, this internal monitoring is a form of self-regulation enacted to bring practices in line with the Ofsted's graded inspections. Robert accepts that the process is fear driven, but justifies Ofsted's role, as he says, as a force of improvement. This *administration of fear* encourages teachers to align practices with prescriptive priorities from policy makers and abandon professional preferences to facilitate the documentation of better grades. As a consequence, teaching practices are presented as a wholly natural response to regulatory demands based on a contemporary vision of quality in education displayed and documented as discursive common-sense.

Such 'displays' are familiar to teachers such as Abigail, an ESOL[8] teacher with 14 years' experience. Their power lies in being a defining feature of *any* working context:

> You know there's an element of *putting on a show in all lines of work* you know. *You put on a show* and *show the best parts* of your job to the people there. That's *part of the working world* I think to do that. (Our emphasis)

To guarantee this performative display, contemporary forms of normalisation are integral to a quality apparatus which influences perception and instrumentalises teachers' creative potential rather than affecting the body through force. And since teachers' expectations align with the demands of 'common sense' according to which physical bodies behave in specific ways, the quality apparatus is a site of positivity which imbricates power, resistance and contestation.

Gaming the system: resistance/compliance

Accordingly, this imbrication involves a multitude of scenarios impacting wider areas of teaching practices. Different sites of possibilities enable teachers to select, develop or otherwise inflect teaching practices for observation, enabling a certain gaming of the system. However, the implications of improvement through documentary compliance raise fundamental issues about the nature of the effects of contemporary disciplinary practices characterised by agency and creativity. For example, Emma (an ESOL and

Sociology teacher), changes the focus of her lessons when she is being observed. Writing and reading lessons, she says, do not lend themselves well to the observation criteria:

> I can go into a writing-based task and well, it's all very heads down, very … the energy of the room needs to [be] toned right down because that's what students need at that time … so is that outstanding? If an inspector came in and saw this going on, would they think there was not enough engagement?

For Emma, changing the focus of lessons becomes an important part of preparing for observations and their *quantitative* assessment of 'how much' engagement is happening. She therefore plans a 'speaking-focused' lesson:

> [I]f it's a speaking class, obviously it's easier to see if it's outstanding because there's engagement, there's loudness and discussion … and all that jazz. That can be impressive for an observer.

This deliberate focus on activity, noise, and 'all that jazz' produces an entertaining spectacle, raises the profile of the teacher and meets (preconceived) inspection expectations rather than meets student needs. It exploits the documentisation of practice and suggests that individuals knowingly 'game the system' of governance which they know is relational rather than simply oppressive.

Similarly, Abigail aligns teaching practices with normalisation, which often occurs by inscribing practice in text. Taking the much-discussed practice of displaying learning outcomes for students, she says that:

> If somebody told us we couldn't write aims and objectives on the board anymore, we had to write something else, then obviously we would write something else.

The processes of normalisation in this context are powerful precisely because they involve textual inscription. Here, this inscription is systematised and highly visible, and compliance manifests itself in teachers' own strategies and rationalities on display for any form of formal or informal inspection.

This inscription is also mentioned by Sean, who teaches maths to ESOL students. Sean prepares marking and feedback samples for audit, sometimes by taking work home. This practice is not sustainable, however, because teachers are not given time to do it and thus short cuts are used:

> You know that this teacher is trying to *get through* an audit rather than show their fantastic marking and that's the case.

Abigail makes the same point about teachers showing compliance just before an inspection by using individual strategies, notably to 'get through' audits. The teacher is thus able to instrumentalise and resist relations of power in this way because she is aware not just of the disciplinary gaze, but also of its limitations and consequences:

> It's about perception, it's about giving the perception that what is going on behind the doors is outstanding [students] are trained to pass exams. I think teachers are now just trained to pass inspections.

Such self-referring 'perception' echoes the tendency to constantly inscribe, display and document, and is reflected in Audrey's comments about observation:

> If I am being observed, I would definitely make sure that my lesson plan … includes every single detail so you know I would write a lesson plan … come back to it the next day, change it, check it, add something, take something out. Take[s] quite some time but for you *to orchestrate* that lesson for the observer you do think more sort of showing what you can do.

For Audrey, who teaches accounting, this orchestration can be understood as resistance to the rationality behind a quality dispositif in FE which is viewed as legitimated discursive practice. It echoes Sean and Abigail's distinction between day-to-day practice and that produced specifically for audits and observations. Teaching practices are in line with the managerial directive rather than linked with students' learning needs: in theory this leads to the production of docile subjectivity by enabling teachers to make compliance more visible for an external gaze. Nonetheless, when they find themselves hidden from the gaze of quality control mechanisms, the focus shifts from blanket conformity to selective compliance as 'gaming the system' becomes an option. This data demonstrates how modern forms of governance extend throughout what Sean, Abigail, Audrey and Emma will describe as 'orchestration', 'a game' or 'a perception': 'all that jazz' which serves to taunt the inflated Inspection ego.

This raises questions about the efficacy of quality agendas and the universality of implicit demands embedded within them. If complex practices are assessed through isolated pedagogical encounters in an isolated and linear fashion, teachers create possibilities by reorienting their practices for display and documentation. This imbrication of regulation and resistance is discussed in the following section.

Intertwining of self-regulation and resistance

This data supports Simons (2021) point, above. Rather than seeking examples of 'oppression' in practice, noticing the multiple strategies whereby resistance can work through active engagement and selective compliance offers a more accurate picture of QA practices. It highlights emerging systems of governance that involve practitioners rather than simply objectifying, victimising or othering them. Our analysis is concerned with these descriptions of the ambiguities within current practices of governing.

This ambiguity (which is inherent in the existence of possibility, change and positivity within mechanisms of control) reflects an ongoing debate about the precise nature and contemporary relevance of panopticism as a critical concept. Following Foucault (1977), panopticism developed as a disciplinary technique whereby *the fear of being seen* induces a culture of self-monitoring, surveillance and control. This approach – or rather its misrepresentation(s) in the secondary and tertiary literature – has influenced so much writing in education generally (and FE in particular) as to induce eye-rolling boredom (Caluya, 2010, p. 621; see also Hodgson & Standish, 2009). Indeed many argue that a 'post-panoptic' logic now pertains: panopticist mechanisms such as transparency, monitoring and the internalisation of the gaze have been replaced by seduction and the normalisation of self-surveillance: the latter has replaced the actual need for surveillance practices which, in any case, do not actually produce the consistently docile subjects it desires (Boyne, 2000; see also Beighton, 2013; Lyon, 2006; Proudfoot, 2021).

Such concepts, while not new, remain relevant. While panopticist mechanisms certainly persist, they do not create reliably docile subjects and provide, on the contrary,

spaces of resistance. Phenomena such as normalisation, fostered through practices of 'documentisation', are indeed crucial in shaping the present-day governing dispositive. But precisely because they are *positive* in the sense that they actively create subjectivity in messy, unruly ways, they allow FE teachers to claim to be 'gaming the system' by creating a space for both resistance and contestation. By showcasing compliance when they are being observed, these performances construct teachers as political subjects, albeit temporarily. These disembodied representations of their teaching selves are available for scrutiny, but also allow a distance from regulatory demands and teaching responsibilities which resolves the tensions between what they believe is good for students and what is required by QA. In this sense, the nature of normalising processes through disciplinary techniques at the heart of contemporary quality apparatus provides a particular subject position at the teachers' disposal. The strategic, temporary deployment of a particular subjectivity is guided by the situation and obligations placed by different discourses at different times. Paradoxically, it is deviance from usual practices which engenders compliance by generating the documentary evidence which QA, following a flawed *pars pro toto* logic, conflates practice and 'all that jazz'.

Certainly, teachers feel they are actively creating other possibilities when their practices are being observed. However, it would be naïve to suggest that such practices are produced *ex nihil* by autonomous agents. For Foucault (1991, p. 11) such actions express 'patterns' which are 'proposed, suggested and imposed' by one's culture and social group. In this sense, resistance – as an integral aspect of self-regulation – itself contains power effects because it functions by making teachers part of the quality apparatus from the inside as opposed to instigating professional confrontation and opposition from the outside. However, while it is possible to postulate that such patterns simply 'emerge' in complex systems, our data portrays a more dynamic relation between structure and agent. It shows how compliant FE teaching communities are constituted by these practices while simultaneously drawing attention to the sites of possibility in which things could be otherwise.

Indeed, teachers have become adept at producing the evidence required in their practices in order to pass observations and audits. Thus teaching in the classroom and marking and feedback practices evidenced during Quality Reviews and inspections bear little resemblance to their day-to-day practices, since documentisation involves displaying different types of practices for different purposes at different times. Documentisation is a thus key manifestation of intertwined power effects produced by a regime in which bottom-up, productive practices vie with their top-down, normalising equivalents in positive ways. There are no oppressed and trapped subjects in this game: the quality apparatus enables teachers to use their agency and *work with* rather than *against* the regime of power.

Sites of possibility

This relational aspect of documentisation enables us to reimagine Further Education as a site of possibility. Characterised by careful management of teaching practices and a range of processes, it produces and displays calculated compliance when needed rather than ensuring compliance at all times. The monitoring techniques deployed by the present quality apparatus in FE gives birth to teaching practices that may be compliant and

non-compliant at the same time, leading to the creation of specific types of conformity with QA policies and enabling a reconfiguration of the notion of quality itself.

As such it is a dynamic field of tension wherein educational practices create new possibilities of refusal, reform and games of power. This challenges Ball and Collet-Sabé's (2021) critique of school, which sees the structural mechanism of institution as the cause of the problems we face. On the contrary, FE teachers work adaptively with the existing mechanisms to change courses of action and practices to engage *positively* with the (pseudo) rationality of QA systems. Paradoxically perhaps, teachers who are not entirely convinced of the efficacy of such systems can in fact challenge them through their engagement with it.

'Playing the game' and 'putting on a show' exemplify this way of doing things: as a mode of resistance, it is not in opposition to power but integral to it. The formulation of this type of resistance is informed by 'common sense' stemming from social structures and discursive practices articulated by other teachers and the wider discursive context. Power is thus exercised by all and compliance procedures acquire both specific meanings and new possibilities. It assists the formulation of a counter-conduct which *works with* rather than against the contemporary forms of normalising interventions such as observations and audits. This highlights the fact that a quality apparatus is never static and can therefore be the source of new fields of possibilities of action leading to other ways of being within it. QA offers possibilities of change as well as occasions for counter-governmentality through the reconfiguration of power relations as a field of tension rather than oppression.

Is the Regulator gaming the system?

There seems little doubt that the Regulator, Ofsted, is part of the machinery of 'documentisation'. It is difficult to imagine, moreover, how information about quality might be collected, codified and disseminated without such a translation of practice-to-paper. It is also likely, however, that teachers are not the only ones gaming, or at least instrumentalising, the system. A recent raft of Inspections has significantly downgraded many institutions previously exempted from inspection because of their 'outstanding' performance (Ofsted, 2022). Doubtless, in the quest for quality improvement, the organisation might claim that the top grades are now tougher, although as Chris Russell (Ofsted's Director of Education) admits, this does not imply that provision has actually got worse (The Guardian, 2022). Indeed, other interpretations are at least possible: Amanda Spielman, the Regulator's Chief, is on record saying that the number of Outstanding grades would fall substantially on the grounds that this would be 'more realistic' (Schools Week, 2021). This implies that norm-referenced evaluation and political messaging requirements can supersede the pseudo-objective, criterion-referenced measurement in Ofsted's own frameworks when expediency demands it. The truism that 'removing a school from scrutiny does not make it better' (Ofsted, 2022) merely states the obvious, suggesting that other, politicised connotations may underpin it. If Ofsted wished to game the system, consciously imposing tougher grades on exempted schools would provide self-justification for both the organisation and for those invested in it, especially when faced with a 'growing clamour for reform' about its 'flawed, dysfunctional and damaging' methods (Coffield, 2022).

Conclusion

Our analysis of normalisation and disciplinary practices is still relevant in contemporary educational debates about practice. However, it also highlights that novel forms of resistance are intertwined with contemporary power relations and that, consequently, the latter must also be investigated from within. Change can be brought about through resistance facilitated and made possible by power rather than resistance to it. The FE college in particular exemplifies the potential of such counter-governmentality and, notably, the positivity of practitioners as agents of change.

It is well known that, for Foucault, '[p]ower comes from below' (1981, p. 94) because, without some idealised binary opposition between the powerful and their subjects, such power relations must emerge from tangible bottom-up activity. Modern power is not therefore essentially oppressive, but works to provide conditions in which teachers also exercise power in ways that allow possibilities to emerge, positively. Teachers can thus be 'engineers of conduct' (Foucault, 1977, p. 294) in a new era of disciplinarity which fosters other possibilities of being and contributes to the production of new subjectivities. In this case, through subtle, rather than confrontational, practices of documentization, discursive experience is (also) produced by the political conditions of teachers' own understanding of their work. It provides a means of evading disciplinarity and implies limitless possibilities of rethinking what quality in Further Education means. As Foucault (1982), in one of his Deleuzean moments puts it, 'there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight' (p. 794).

Notes

1. Ofsted, the sector's official regulator, identifies the FE sector with a range of training providers, colleges and various skills-oriented post-16 and adult training programmes (Ofsted, 2022).
2. For further discussion of such systems in this context, see Beighton (2015).
3. Foucault's repeated discussion of various forms of positivity (not least in his early work) is a significant and sometimes underplayed aspect of his thinking (e.g. Foucault, 1972; 2015).
4. The 2019 Augar Review and 2021 Skills for Jobs White Paper put the economic needs of the country at the centre of FE operation and place an emphasis on filling the skills gap as the key focus of FE training and learning. However, FE providers are now expected to work more collaboratively with local authorities and stakeholders rather than compete with each other by offering duplicate courses to secure funding (see, e.g. UCU, 2021).
5. The irony that research such as this participates in the very processes of documentisation under scrutiny will not have escaped the reader's notice.
6. Pseudonyms have been used to identify 'Robert' (College Principal and Chief Executive Officer); 'Audrey' (ESOL and accounting teacher); 'Emma' (ESOL and literacy teacher); 'Sean' (ESOL and maths teacher) and 'Abigail' (ESOL teacher).
7. All participants' names have been anonymised.
8. English for Speakers of Other Languages.

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