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Control of Teachers Under Conditions of Low-Stakes Accountability

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Control in the Age of New Public Management

The term “control” evokes fantasies of subjection, menace and distrust and of being “dirty work”, even though the need that schools as public institutions be held accountable is hardly ever put into question. If the school is a normalising institution and the control of young human beings is a central task of teachers’ work, then to control teachers means to control the controllers (Maulini & Gather Thurler, 2014). To discuss questions of teacher control, one might adopt a normative perspective by asking how much control is needed or by assessing the quality of particular forms of control. Instead, my interest here is in the relationship between governing regimes and technologies of control as well as in their effects on the subjectivation of teachers. Concretely, the focus is on the forms of control of teachers within governing conditions that are not dominated by high-stakes testing and which may be called “low-stakes” regimes (Altrichter, 2017, p. 212). It is well known that high-stakes accountability produces an atmosphere of performativity and control in schools (Ball, 2003). In contrast to the unintended effects of high-stakes accountability, low-stakes conditions seem to exert less pressure and to provide higher degrees of autonomy for teachers. Thus, do high-stake regimes take teachers “under control”, while low-stakes conditions leave teachers “in control”?

To explore teacher control under the conditions of low-stake accountability, I relate the question of control to the context of New Public Management (NPM). NPM is understood as an umbrella term for the dominant managerial trends by which public administration, including education, has been reformed in recent decades. The discussion focuses on how the idea of autonomy received a prominent position within NPM-influenced educational policies and how it is related to the transformation of teacher control. It is inspired by Foucault’s notion of governmentality as theoretical lens. With this term, Foucault (1993, pp. 203-204) refers to governing technologies far beyond state activities as a heterogeneous set of institutions and practices by which humans are directed, including how they lead themselves. Based on a relational approach to power, the term governmentality addresses a complex interplay of technologies of domination and processes of self-

formation. In the present, freedom and individual autonomy, condensed into the configuration of “the enterprising self”, have risen to a dominant governing technology at a distance (Rose, 1992). From a governmentality perspective, the alleged dualism of freedom and constraint inherent in the dichotomy of teachers being “under control” versus “in control” gives way to questions about the particular practices of control and how they are related to self-technologies.

NPM and the Rise of School Autonomy

Starting in the 1980s and 1990s, NPM policies launched the reform of educational governance on local, national and transnational scales. To authorise NPM as a solution for unresolved problems, its advocates denigrated the traditional administration of education as anachronistic, ineffective and inefficient. Resuming an economistic argumentation, they accused educational administration to be overly concerned with input control while neglecting its output. NPM approaches promised that the devolution of responsibility from central authorities to schools would ensure that schools adapt to local needs and hence improve the quality of education (Buschor, 1997). In return for the autonomy granted, schools would be accountable for the results achieved. NPM policies claimed to no longer patronise teachers as public servants subjugated to a hierarchical administration but to reconceptualise them as self-reflexive professionals of innovative learning organisations.

NPM policies travelled around the globe and merged with national and local traditions to very specific governing assemblages (Gunter, Grimaldi, Hall, & Serpieri, 2016). Not only in the Anglophone world, but also in Latin America and Asia was schooling turned from a public good into a commodity, which could be individualised, privatised and put into competition in (quasi)markets. In return, state authorities control school performance based on large-scale testing or school inspection and sanction schools if they fail to achieve the targets. In contrast, a majority of countries in Western Europe, such as Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France, Italy, Spain, or Finland, modernised educational governance without adopting high-stakes regimes (Gunter et al., 2016; Wilkins, Jordi, Gobby, & Hangartner, 2019).

Nevertheless, these countries introduced new controlling instruments similar to those introduced in high-stakes regimes, such as self-evaluation, new forms of school inspection, performance standards and school leadership. What are the effects of this hybrid assemblage of new and old technologies of control and accountability in the context of low-stakes conditions?

Changing Relations of Local Control of and in Schools

NPM rhetoric of devolution and school autonomy sincerely stirred up local accountability relations in contexts with a traditionally decentralised school governing regime such as in Nordic countries or Switzerland, NPM policies transferred responsibilities to control schools from state bureaucracy to the municipalities; in practice, however, the charges were mainly delegated to school leaders and superintendents (Hangartner & Heinzer, 2016; Moos & Paulsen, 2014). As a consequence, the devolution of responsibilities shifted power relations within local arenas: The power of educational experts was strengthened at the expense of democratically elected school boards that represent the local population in school governance. Even though school boards have been renamed as “strategic bodies” by NPM discourse, they in fact lost their former power (Kofod et al., 2014; Rothen, 2016). Local accountability thereby has been transformed by a managerial logic: teachers give account to the headteacher, who is subordinated to a chief officer in the administration, who gives account to the municipal council (Skedsmo & Møller, 2016). Contrasting its own rhetoric, NPM devolution policies reduced the involvement of the local population in the control of schools, thus undermining democratically legitimised accountability relations (Hangartner & Svaton, 2013).

School Autonomy and Leadership

School autonomy policy reconfigured “the school” from a public institution into an organisation and by doing so fundamentally transformed the technologies of supervision, control and accountability. The rhetoric of school autonomy transferred the concern of autonomy from the individual teacher to the organisation. In consequence, leadership turned into a central governing technology, even in traditions where hierarchies within school teams had been largely absent until the recent past (Gunter et al., 2016). Headteachers, who in the German-language countries for example had been senior teachers with administrative duties only, are now positioned as superiors of their former colleagues. While before, school inspectors, as “street level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 1980), had been responsible for the supervision of individual teachers, headteachers within the school now are in charge. As a result of this, teachers have become more

closely and intimately controlled. A reform that started with the critique against hierarchical control and promoted the empowerment of local actors, in fact initiated the hierarchisation of peer relations within schools. It comes as no surprise that teachers today criticize that NPM-induced *school* autonomy policy resulted, in everyday practices, in a loss of (informal) *teacher* autonomy.

As the representatives of the school as organisation, school leaders are positioned in between the teaching staff, local and central authorities and the local public. Headteachers find themselves in an ambiguous position between conflicting expectations: Policy makers push headteachers to initiate school development and to implement reforms, while teachers urge headteachers to protect them from work overload. Positioned between control and autonomy claims, school leaders are requested to motivate teachers to develop their practices to aims largely defined by policies. Under low-stake conditions however, the possibilities of headteachers to sanction teachers are severely limited and their power lies largely within their persuasive abilities. Regardless of whether headteachers see their mission as controlling or supportive, when they expect teachers to change their practices, they might face passive or active resistance. It is a “simple, but often shamefully concealed truth” that teachers under low-stakes conditions, by and large, resist reform initiatives (Terhart, 2013, p. 486). This is all the more so in times of teacher shortage. Thus, the relationship between leadership and teacher autonomy is not a zero-sum-game, and an increase in the responsibility of headteachers does not necessarily result in teachers losing power. Being under pressure from above and from below, headteachers not only have to push their teachers but also try to influence the authorities to adapt policies to the routines in schools.

Teacher Autonomy, Changing Models of Professionalism and Control

The perception that teachers had more autonomy in the past and thus were in control, rises from the ethos of occupational professionalism dating back to the 19th century (Evetts, 2009). This model highlights the autonomy of knowledge-based service practitioners, whose engagement in fields of uncertainty demands expertise and discretionary judgment. Teachers, however, never had the power to define and to control their own standards but were generally subjected to state supervision. Nevertheless, surveillance, by school inspectors and local school boards for example, remained intermittent and teachers therefore largely remained unobserved in their daily routines behind closed classroom doors.

Present day governing regimes address teachers as professionals, thereby evoking the model of *occupational* professionalism. However, the meaning of a professional is different in the context of the school as an organisation: *Organisational* professionalism is imbued with technologies of control, such as hierarchical distribution of responsibility, quality control, target setting, evaluation, audit and performance review to measure professional competence (Evetts, 2009). Thus, it thoroughly transforms technologies of control and self-control: Teachers, then, have to take responsibility for organisational learning and thereby to evaluate, self-reflect and optimise their teaching. Organisational professionalism subjectivates teachers as active, responsible individuals that “will be ruled by themselves, by becoming a truly reflective practitioner under the subtle persuasion of governmentality, dominated yet free” (Perryman, Ball, Braun, & Maguiere, 2017, p. 755). Similarly, the rhetoric of “distributed leadership” seduces teachers by the idea of agential change, which veils its managerial agenda to harness staff commitment for predetermined reforms (Hall, 2013). Organisational professionalism, therefore, exploits professional autonomy as a technology to govern individuals at a distance and to foster appropriate work identities and conduct within an accountability network (Fournier, 1999).

Low-Stakes Technologies of Accountability and Control

Even under conditions of low-stakes accountability, NPM school autonomy policies have been followed by centralised, data-based technologies of control. Educational authorities expose schools to large-scale testing of student performance used in international comparison or for state monitoring – however without seriously sanctioning schools for disappointing results. Nevertheless, a recent study in Germany on low-stakes conditions shows that data-based feedback on student performance might produce unintended consequences which resemble the effects of high-stakes regimes. Even if schools and teachers are not threatened by direct sanctions, standardised testing and feedback of results to schools produce undesirable effects, such as teaching to the test at the expense of long-term educational processes or the exclusion of students with poor performance (Thiel, Schweizer, & Bellmann, 2017). In addition to testing instruments, new school inspection systems were installed in Germany, Austria and Switzerland during the last two decades, both replacing and supporting bureaucratic supervision by traditional inspectorates. The modernised school inspection in German-language areas operates ambiguously between an accountability logic of output control and the support of school self-evaluation (Altrichter, 2017). In a context of low-stakes

accountability, evaluation-based inspection enjoyed a short flourish only, as in view of high costs and rising doubts about its impact, it attracts increasing criticism (Altrichter, 2017). School self-evaluation, which is often presented as a “softer” alternative to school inspection, transfers the logic of data-driven control into the intimate relations within schools, thus transforming control into self-control (Ozga, 2009). In between the impossibility to control the outcome of teaching and a sterile control of its procedures, evaluations and self-evaluations produce data and accounts that neither can account for teaching practices nor have the power to change them (Perrenoud, 1996). Although evaluations and self-evaluations perform mere rituals of verification, they enact disciplining routines that generate an atmosphere of performativity and control (Power, 1999).

Control Exerted by Teachers

Hybrid assemblages of governing technologies within low-stakes accountability regimes do not only transform the technologies by which teachers are controlled, but they also instigate an intensification of control exerted by teachers. Learnification with its focus on standards, competencies and effective learning, produces an increasing demand of control exercised by teachers – also under low-stakes conditions (Biesta, 2012). It seems that the narrowing of education to pre-specified learning outcomes confines teaching to organising, coaching and controlling the self-organisation of students, while the things of education are delegated to textbooks and learning apps. Learnification requires teachers to assess and to document students’ performance and learning in increasing details with formative, summative, diagnostic and prognostic assessments. Teachers are demanded not only to assess the knowledge acquired by students but also their self-technologies, such as self-regulation, efficacy or motivation. The demand to control the self-optimisation of pupils does not only produce conditions of performativity shaping the subjectivation of students, but recursively contributes to the self-disciplining of teachers.

Not to Be Controlled Like That

My explorations started with relating teacher control to its respective conditions of accountability and by rhetorically asking whether high-stake regimes take teachers “under control”, while low-stakes conditions leave teachers “in control”. Without neglecting the far-reaching distinctions between high- and low-stakes accountability regimes, I tried to show that NPM policies have been transforming the technologies of control far beyond high-stakes regimes. Within low-stakes conditions too, the former bureaucratic supervision of the disciplining society has given way to indirect forms of domination that work by data-driven instruments of evaluation and feedback, leadership and self-reflection.

Viewed from a governmentality perspective, these technologies of control work at a distance to govern the conduct of teachers and alter their subjectivation to make them governable. NPM-influenced governmentality works not only through technologies of domination, but also engages the self by harnessing the teachers' sense of autonomy, transforming it into self-control. Moreover, these governing imperatives lead teachers to adopt the same technologies of control and to transform the practices by which they guide their students, including the need to motivate them to self-direction.

Within low-stakes conditions however, silent resistance to the NPM governmentality is widespread. Teachers are experts in translating policies to suit their own needs, often reverting to previous practices (Strittmatter, 2014). Constant re-education of teachers is a

waste of time and demoralising. Teacher resistance, in the sense of “not to be governed like that” (Foucault, 2007) might critically engage with the regimes of truth of NPM forms of control. Instead of immunizing oneself against change per se, resistance might take the autonomy provided by NPM regimes for its nominal value to critically scrutinise the policy agenda itself. Such a form of resistance might instil teaching with a perspective on content and purpose of education. It might deliberate on questions of justice, equality, inclusion and democratic citizenship; however, it causes teachers to abandon autonomy within the walls of the classroom, to engage in collegial reflection. Such a critical attitude could deconstruct the transformation of autonomy into a self-disciplining technology and reclaim autonomy as emancipation.

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Judith Hangartner is a social anthropologist and sociologist, working at the University of Teacher Education in Bern, Switzerland. After fieldwork on mobile pastoralism and shamanism in Tajikistan and Mongolia she turned to educational research, where she has been studying the working conditions of teachers from different angles: Her research subjects include teacher burnout and the local governance of public schools. At the present, she and her team are carrying out a project on the governmentality of self-directed learning, which asks about how the dispositive of autonomy is moulding the work practices and subjectivities of teachers. For further information, see:

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