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Research article

# Beyond the 'terrors of performativity': dichotomies, identities and escaping the panopticon

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## Abstract

This article examines the influence of Stephen Ball's work through the eyes of two former teachers turned academics who met through a mutual interest in his paper, 'The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity'. We note our personal reactions to this particular paper and how Ball's body of work has and continues to influence our thinking, careers and research. We note that his highly readable, provocative style of writing and passionate denunciation of league tables, inspections and the associated paraphernalia of control that appear central to neoliberal models of educational governance continue to prove useful in understanding global educational policy. This article also critically engages with the effects of such a seminal paper on the lived experience of the teaching profession. The first author argues that while Ball's writing is useful to understand the pressures and struggles that teachers face, Ball's use of Foucauldian notions such as 'docile bodies' and

'subject-position' can be seen to flatten out teachers, rendering them passive bystanders rather than agentic professionals. The second author revisits and recalls the influence of the paper on her early work, particularly on her concept of 'panoptic performativity', and the impact that the paper, and Stephen Ball's work in general, continues to have on the wider field.

**Keywords** Michel Foucault; performativity; Stephen J. Ball; accountability; performativity; teachers; figured worlds theory

## Introduction

Being asked to write an article on Stephen J. Ball was exciting and overwhelming – how to encapsulate the significance and influence of his work on the field of sociology of education? To use a basic metric, Google Scholar indicates that he has been cited more than 100,000 times, and over 40,000 times since 2017. His work has been immensely important to the field, and to us as academics, but in such a wide-ranging manner that it is hard to narrow it down. Some may have chosen to tell something of the history of the sociology of education and policy sociology in Britain through reference to his work. For us, this seemed unnecessary, given the recent 2021 release of his fourth edition of *The Education Debate*, and the still very current contribution that Ball is making to the field. However, we do note that Stephen Ball (1990b) edited a book entitled *Foucault and Education: Disciplines and knowledge*, drawing upon Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish*. The book claims to be 'the first to explore Foucault's work in relation to education' (Ball, 1990b), referring not only to Bentham's Panopticon but also to his outline of a school where, 'for Bentham, a technology of surveillance and examination applied equally to the teacher and the taught' and where 'the school had to be regularly examined by an inspectorate' (Jones, 1990: 59). While this book was published before the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) was formed in 1992 (Bassey, 2011), Ball discusses the implementation of organisational management techniques as a way of promoting an efficiency model in schools. He argues that these techniques subjugate teachers and remove them from decision-making processes, as 'within such a discourse the curriculum becomes a delivery system and teachers become its technicians and operatives' (Ball, 1990b: 156).

We include this historical reference as it is through an engagement with Stephen Ball's (2003) classic 'The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity' (henceforth TSTP) that we consider Ball's work and, in particular, how his writing around performativity has affected, and continues to affect, so many in-service teachers and academics. Therefore, in this article we take the more unconventional route of exploring the significance of Ball's writing for our careers and our identities, or 'souls', as teachers and academics, and the way that reading his work makes us grapple with our understandings of them.

TSTP perceptively captured changes in educational policy, and their effects on the personal and professional, outer and inner, lives of teachers. In it, Ball described the effects of the introduction of market values, managerialism and performativity into what had hitherto been seen as a values-based, 'vocational' profession. Citing Bernstein (2000), Ball (2003) described this as a reprofessionalisation of teachers, where covenant is replaced by contract. Ball's success in this paper was his use of teachers' voices, albeit taken from other studies, to show the cultural shift that was taking place within schools, and how teachers felt under pressure to conform to new accountability measures, and to perform accordingly. Specifically, he used the voices of teachers such as 'Diane' to describe how a teacher is required to teach in one particular way for an inspection by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), despite believing in a different approach as the most effective (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998, cited in Ball, 2003). This he described as 'fabrication' (Ball, 2003: 224), which he defined as 'tactics of transparency [which] produce a resistance of opacity, of elusivity', and 'versions of an organisation (or person) which do not exist' – they are not 'outside the truth', but neither do they render simply true or direct accounts – they are produced purposely 'to be accountable' (Ball, 2001: 216). He argued that many more fabrications and performative acts were creeping into the role of the teacher, not because they were seen to be of pedagogic value, but because they were a way of being seen to be doing what others wanted to see, a way of being visibly accountable. Ball (2003) argued that these practices not only

changed what a teacher did, but also who they were, and, in doing so, he illustrated how teachers found themselves conflicted and struggling to adapt to the new way of being a teacher. Ball also compared this conflicted teacher to a new type of teacher, 'the new hero manager' who did not struggle but, rather, found a way of making a success of themselves in this new culture.

The concept of performativity is not Ball's, originating with Lyotard's (1984) critique of postmodernism, and developed very differently in relation to gender by Butler (1990), but the way he relates it to teachers' (re)professionalism is original, significant and provocative. To us, it changed the field: 'teacher professionalism' is bland – but that title drew us in with its bold language – teacher's soul, terror. We wondered how the title had come about, and Ball told us, in a personal communication on 19 January 2022, that the paper's use of 'performativity' drew on Lyotard and Foucault:

The former emphasising the materiality of surveillance and the commercialisation of knowledge and the latter changes in academic/teaching subjectivities. So 'terror' comes from Lyotard and 'soul' from Foucault. For Foucault, the body has a real existence, but the 'modern soul' is a recent invention. There are limits to how you can punish the body, but the soul allows new possibilities ... The soul is a metaphor for our inner-self, how we understand ourselves, our relation to ourself. So, my argument is that performative systems work on the soul so that we relate to ourselves differently, as neoliberal teachers or academics.

Cited over 6,000 times since 2003, and over 500 times in 2021 alone, the paper remains current and resonant. As Clarke (2013: 230) comments: 'The visceral – and eviscerating – effects of neoliberal education policy reforms on the professional identities of teachers have been documented by a number of authors but never more powerfully than in Ball's (2003) account.' Nearly 20 years after its publication, Ball's radical, readable critique of accountability structures in schools appears to have a lasting resonance with many postgraduate students, particularly those (like our own former selves, and like the students we currently teach) completing professional postgraduate awards while also working within schools as teachers, managers and leaders. Some of its many citations involve the paper itself being the focal point (see, for example, Clarke, 2013), others use the language of 'terror' and 'the teacher's soul' (Meng, 2009; Holloway and Brass, 2017; Raymond, 2018). Ball himself wrote a follow-up paper based on emails he had received from teachers indicating 'ways in which his writing on performativity "spoke" to their experience and aligned with their sense of fear and anger' (Ball and Olmedo, 2012: 96). Our article is very much a personal account of how Ball's paper influenced our professional lives, as teachers and academics. The most obvious influence is the very existence of this co-written article, as we may not have met without TSTP. Doing her EdD, inspired by Ball's work on performativity and by TSTP, Claire discovered Jane's writing on teachers experiencing performativity, equally inspired by Ball, and – finding it had resonance with her work – requested that Jane examine her thesis. The viva was in November 2019, and, so memorable were the conversations at the viva, that when Jane was asked to contribute to this special issue of the *London Review of Education*, a collaboration with Claire on this paper seemed the obvious choice. Much of what we say here is co-written, but, even so, it is written from our own perspectives. We like to think that we are building on the teacher voices used in TSTP, and Ball's concept of the soul or 'inner self', recognising and experiencing forms of terror in these personal accounts.

The article starts with our individual stories of being a teacher who recognises a tension with performativity in their work. We contextualise our stories within the educational policy government directives at the time of these 'awakenings' and note at the start of each section whose story is being heard, and therefore who is responding to Ball.

## Accountability, performativity and terrors

It might be useful at this point to outline a little of the individual contexts and timeframes in which we, the authors, were working. I, Jane, became a teacher in 1992, a time very much signifying a significant shift from perceived teacher autonomy to accountability (Morley and Rassool, 1999; Tomlinson, 2001; Gillard, 2018). In England, Gleeson and Gunter (2001) characterise the period from the 1960s to the mid-1980s as one of 'relative autonomy'. In this period, teachers were accountable to themselves through informal reflection and peer review. They worked within curricula established by head teachers (with influence from examination boards for the senior years), and there was some voluntary appraisal of their teaching performance. Any evidence about performance was collected informally, and there was a professional

emphasis on ethical commitment. In the 1980s and 1990s, under the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher (1979–91), there was an emphasis on the use of markets and free enterprise to produce and distribute the goods and services wanted by consumers with a minimum of regulation. In education, central government took over the functions normally performed by local government and teachers. The solution to the educational problems of urban areas was seen to lie in creating a 'market' in education, and many of the provisions of the Education Acts of 1986 and 1988 were thus intended to enhance the choice of 'clients'. Alongside the apparent devolution of power to individual schools, there was also a strengthening of the powers of central government, most noticeably in the establishment of the National Curriculum.

Between 1988 and 1994, there was at least one Education Act passed per year, which led to teachers becoming 'a technical workforce to be managed and controlled rather than a profession to be respected' (Tomlinson, 2001: 36). Since the 1988 Education Reform Act, there has been a shift in accountability from teacher professionalism, characterised by accountability of teachers to themselves, their colleagues and their students (self-regulation), to accountability to agencies such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Ofsted and the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) – subsequently the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), and currently the Teaching Agency. This accountability has intensified year on year, as, since 2000, teachers have been controlled by what Gleeson and Gunter (2001) call 'productive autonomy'. There have been numerous Education Acts, White Papers and Green Papers, which Horder (1995: 16) refers to as a 'dizzying flurry of change', and teachers are now accountable through formal audits of student learning outcomes controlled by senior management. Teaching is controlled by a national curriculum (generally followed even by Academies, which have notional freedom to opt out; see Mansell, 2016), and by a performance framework that is backed up by performance management, pay and target-setting. Evidence about performance is based on student outcomes and classroom observation, students become objects and targets, and the head teacher and senior management team are publicly accountable. This is the development of an evaluative state (Neave, 1988) under the gaze of a 'so-called independent watchdog in the form of Ofsted' (Elliott, 2001: 192).

In 1992, I was working in an inner London school, and the teachers there were not the 'post-performative' professionals (Wilkins, 2011) of later decades. There was a sense of resistance to the new compulsory National Curriculum, a resentment, particularly in the history department in which I worked. This was because what was perceived as a successful programme of content, tailored to the interests and lives of our diverse student body, and all its resources, had to be replaced by new compulsory content. Looking back, though, there was still a sense of freedom, particularly in those subjects not bound by having to prepare for the Standard Attainment Tests (SATs), and assessment was informal and less rigorously scrutinised. It was not until I moved schools in 1999 that I faced the 'terrors' that Ball (2003) describes, as I worked in a school undergoing the intensive inspection regime of Special Measures. I found working in an institution so heavily policed and controlled by inspection emotionally draining. Once, in the middle of an inspection, I was sitting exhausted in the staffroom and saw a copy of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* on a table. I flicked through and read the following passage in which O'Brien, the representative of the state, describes power to the captive Winston, who is the embodiment of Everyman:

always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever. (Orwell, 1989: 230)

To me, this was exactly what being inspected felt like. This sparked my interest in power, and its effects on teachers, which led me to Foucault. I recognised inspection, and especially Special Measures, as a classic manifestation of power/knowledge, as inspectors are credited as experts with specialist knowledge of effective schools, and with the power to praise or punish. I was especially struck by Foucault's writings on Bentham's Panopticon. Foucault suggests that Bentham's Panopticon, a design for a model prison, can be seen as a metaphorical disciplinary mechanism that operates through a variety of institutional apparatuses and discourses. In the Panopticon, individual cells were arranged around a central tower. By the use of backlighting, a supervisor could observe every cell without the 'inmate' knowing if they were being watched or not. Bentham (1787: iii) called this 'a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind in a quantity hitherto without example'. He wrote that 'the object of the inspection principle is to make them not only suspect, but be assured that whatever they do is known even though that should not be

the case' (Bentham, in Miller, 1988: 43). Thus, institutional authority is invisible, but the objects of power, which in a school are the teachers and students, are visible and supervised. So used are the prisoners to being constantly watched, that they modify their behaviour. The discourse of accountability and its normalising power are internalised. For me, at the time, the perpetual threat of inspection took away from any sense of professional freedom, as everything we did, all lessons planned and taught, all work marked, commented on and displayed, seemed dictated by the gaze of inspection. This led to a feeling of disempowerment and a sense of a mechanistic delivery of lessons that allowed no room for innovation. I was one of the casualties of this regime, leaving the school, and, indeed, leaving teaching. I left the profession in 2002, the year before TSTP was published, and thus I was an example of, as Ball (2003: 216) described, a teacher who found my values 'challenged or displaced by the terrors of performativity', although it was not until I read TSTP that I was able to articulate that through the conceptual notions he introduced.

Having left teaching in 2002, I started a PhD, and I was increasingly drawn towards reflections on my experiences as a teacher, and thus to Stephen Ball's writing, which gave my experiences theoretical and conceptual context, and helped me in the application of abstract theory to the professional lives of teachers. I will trace some of this later.

## Appropriating accountability, performativity and Ball's description of their terrors

I, Claire, began my Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in 1998, six years after Jane, and a year after New Labour had come into power on the premise of an 'Education, Education, Education' manifesto (Ball, 2021b: 95). My final assignment analysed the *Teachers: Meeting the challenge of change* (DfEE, 1998) Green Paper, and what this might mean for new and established teachers. Education was changing, and I was a new recruit. In my first staff meeting as a student teacher, I heard grumbling about attending an upcoming parents' evening until 7 p.m., and I voiced a very unwelcome opinion that lots of people in industry worked until that time as standard. I was told that I did not understand – and I did not. I did not understand the marking and planning that would take place that night on top of the parents' evening, or the pressures encountered in the classroom as children became anxious about what their teachers would say to their parents, but more than that, I did not understand that I was bringing market values into that meeting. I did not understand that, as a child who started school in 1978, I had experienced most of the significant educational reforms as a recipient. My memories included being given milk in infant school, days off secondary school during the strikes in the 1980s, and the introduction of the National Curriculum and GCSE examinations. I went to a local school that served the local community, and my parents stayed well away from the school gates, respecting the opinions of the teachers who worked there, unless they were invited in. I started 'university' in 1992, having applied to a polytechnic, and I took out some of the first student loans, but I got a free university education. Fees were introduced the year after I left, and, although my peers and I discussed how much we disagreed with them, I did not understand how important it was that I should use my student voice, while I had it, to help those that were to follow.

My entire education had been caught up in reform, and I did not understand what it was like for those to watch from the outside, or from the inside, partly because my teachers shielded me from the way that it affected them, and partly because I was being shaped by it. The same was true for how I became a teacher. I accepted the fast pay rises as teacher salaries were reformed, and I quickly found promotions as middle management became increasingly prominent in schools. In fact, I was a part of that reform, as I received substantial training to lead citizenship and personal, social and health education (PSHE), with a focus on the Every Child Matters agenda and the Healthy Schools Awards.

I accepted every new initiative without question, including the introduction of student targets and tracking, as I wished that someone had noticed when my A level grades started to slide at sixth form college. It was only when I had children of my own, and in particular when my eldest started nursery school in 2010, that I started to ask more questions. This was another time of educational reform, and it coincided with me starting a master's in education. I was less open to change; I was disheartened to see funding withdrawn from projects, such as a multi-agency drop-in centre for students in the school that I had worked on, and I saw hard-working students underachieve in their GCSE examinations because the rules had changed mid-course. As the economy and my morale slumped, I started to question what I was doing and who I was doing it for. It was at this time that I first read TSTP.

When I first read Ball's (2003) paper, I did not realise how profound an effect it would have on me, as I was still caught up in the system, but it did provide me with a vocabulary that I found useful. As I engaged with academic writing about my teaching practice as a part of my MA in education, I found that the concepts of the teacher's soul being affected, or even terrorised, by performativity resonated with me and helped me to find ways to discuss tensions in my practice. It helped me not only to consider, but also to reflect on and articulate the way that I was working and the way that I was being asked to work. It was also around that time that I received my first low grade in a quality assurance assessment in the secondary school where I worked. A 15-year-old student, who I will call Lee, had been interviewed by an assistant head teacher and, when asked, claimed that he did not know his GCSE target grade. According to the assessment grid, this meant that I was not doing my job properly. What did not make sense to me at the time was that we discussed target grades often in our lessons, and I agreed them individually with each student. When I asked Lee if he knew his target grade in our next lesson after his interview with the assistant head, he promptly told me what it was. I was exasperated. When I asked him why he had not shared it with the assistant head, he told me that he had felt embarrassed, and so said nothing. This created a flurry of activity on my part. I set to work creating coversheets for all student exercise books with target grades, and spaces for grades throughout the year, so that the target could be seen, along with the progress that was being made, and the next steps that students needed to take to improve. Any question that might be asked in the future could easily be answered by any student I taught by looking at their unopened exercise book. Students spent a lesson sticking these on the front of their books and filling them in, but it felt hollow. We were doing this for me to attain a higher grade, not them. I was the one who was being assessed.

I embraced the terms 'performativity' and 'fabrication' (Ball, 2003: 215), and I started to use them in my assignments as I described 'tensions' in my practice. I started to notice the areas where I performed for others, but did not notice my desire to please as I did so. I noticed changing conversations in the classroom and the staffroom, but I did not notice how much I was a part of them. Without realising how much I had embraced the educational reforms that I had been part of so far, I used Ball's words to express how I resisted performativity, and how fabrications allowed me to do so. I am, or I was, a language teacher, and I took his words and used them as my own, as he had described the feeling of oppression that I felt so well, again without noticing that they had been written during the educational reforms that I had not questioned. I applied 'performativity' and 'fabrication' to a time when educational reform was delivered without additional funding, and when teachers were caught up in a second wave of a 'discourse of derision' (Ball, 1990a: 18) which legitimated hyper accountability and lack of autonomy by blaming teachers not only for perceived falling educational standards, but often also for the problems of society itself. Ball (1990a: 18) describes the discourse of derision as follows:

This discourse of derision acted to debunk and displace not only specific words and meanings – progressivism and comprehensivising for example – but also the speaker of these words, these experts, specialists and professionals referred to as the education establishment. These privileged speakers have been displaced, their control over meaning lost, their professional preference replaced by ... parental choice, the market, efficiency and management. A new discursive regime has been established and with it new forms of authority.

In this context, the focus on being consistently Ofsted-ready meant that I had so little autonomy that I could not even decide which colour pen to mark in (Barkham, 2016).

In 2014, I started a doctorate in education, and also started to work as an associate lecturer at the same higher education institution, in addition to working part-time as a teacher. I was straddling different worlds and approaches to education, and my stories of teaching surprised my fellow doctoral students and new colleagues. Could there really be a senior leader email suggesting that all students who forgot their black pens would instead be given 'the purple pen of shame' for the lesson? Did I really buy every student I taught a red pen for Christmas, so that their books would show that they had responded to my feedback, which I had been obliged to write in green ink?

Ball's (2003) descriptions of performativity and fabrication, and the tone of the paper, therefore spoke to me. It made me question what I was doing, and who I was doing it for, and in a way this was empowering. I liked the emotive writing, and I liked its warning: for me, it was a little like a call to arms, and it felt different reading about this in a respected academic journal than hearing people moan in the staffroom. Ball gave authority to the sense of unease that I had. He explained and addressed the performative discourse in education, which I was reacting to rather than reflecting on, and he said that it

was not OK. The centrality and wide reach of Ball's paper shows that Ball was not only talking to me, but that my personal story is indicative of a wider reaction among educators to the performative discourse.

## Resisting Ball's description of the teacher's soul

What began to change for me, Claire, was that I started to look more closely at what Ball (2003) wrote, and I found that although he spoke to me, and gave me words that I latched on to, he did not speak *for* me. Instead, I started to worry that he was speaking through me.

Ball's (2003: 221) argument that 'working within a performative culture' creates 'a set of dualisms and tensions', such as 'a potential "splitting" between the teacher's own judgements about "good practice" and the rigours of performance' was something that I wanted to write about. Performativity is presented as one of three 'policy technologies', which 'involve the calculated deployment of techniques and artefacts to organize human forces and capabilities into functioning networks of power' (Ball, 2003: 215, 216). This statement could be described as an 'authoritative discourse', that is, assumed knowledge that we are subjected to, which is monologic in nature and externally persuasive (Holland et al., 2001: 29). I adopted this view of performativity, despite not believing that 'performance has no room for caring' (Ball, 2003: 224); I did not believe that 'the policy technologies of market, management and performativity leave no space of an autonomous or collective ethical self' (Ball, 2003: 226) or that teachers had become 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1979, cited in Ball, 2003: 219). While I believed at the time that there was a risk of these issues permeating into the experience of being a teacher, on reflection I would now argue that I was using Ball's paper as a new authoritative discourse. This is because I did not critically engage with the aspects of Ball's paper that I preferred to ignore, and instead adopted its widely used terminology to support my academic writing without unpicking it or challenging it. Consequently, I wrapped up the parts of it that were 'tightly interwoven with [my] own word' (Holland et al., 2001: 182) with other integral parts of his argument that were not. In some ways, it could be argued that I was being 'ventriloquated' (Holland et al., 2001: 185; Ball, 2003: 218) by Ball, as my own message came packaged within his vocabulary, and therefore the additional meanings that were attached to his words.

On further interrogation, I have found that there is a disconnect with the way that Ball (2003) and I describe the effects of performativity on the lived experience of the teacher, as, for example, I do not believe that I lost or sold my soul when I was still a teacher, even though I found his descriptions of the performative discourse and its potential to change how one feels about one's role and professional identity incredibly useful. There is also a contradiction which cannot be ignored: one of the binary options that he describes for teachers is to sell your soul or to leave the profession. It is difficult to argue that his paper should show a more complex picture with a range of choices, when I have seemingly proven his point by choosing one of these two options through leaving the secondary school classroom. Feeling that I had stretched out Ball's term 'performativity' as far as was possible, and yet still needing more flexibility or nuance in my writing, I found that I could no longer use his words without questioning the message that they carried. I needed to find a way to make them my own, which, for me, meant moving away from how the teacher, but not how performativity, is theorised.

## Theorising the teacher's soul differently

Despite the above comments about where I, Claire, did not align with aspects of Ball's (2003) theorising of the teacher's soul, I have continued to read and interact with much of his writing. In his chapter 'The necessity and violence of theory' in the *Routledge Doctoral Student's Companion*, he describes Foucault and Bourdieu as 'the two theorists I find most provocative, productive and "useful"', but says that 'I do not want to mimic or emulate these writers ... I want to be challenged by them and to struggle with the frustrations to certainty that they present' (Ball, 2010: 69). Ball's paper had challenged my way of thinking, and I had started to lean on it, rather than to challenge it, but I now needed to find a way to look within it. I started to look for a theory that had a similar resonance to the Ball paper, where 'I read a line or a paragraph, and it is like the author stretches out a hand from the page towards my own hand, and I think "yes, I think that too, that expresses something that I have never been quite able to capture with words"' (Ball, 2010: 69).

When I started to read identity and agency in cultural worlds theory (Holland et al., 2001), it felt that the outstretched hand could help me to move forward with Ball's paper and explore the tension between



discourse and a desire for agency. Figured worlds theory has been applied in education literature 'to explore identity in learners and teachers ... and the ways in which people negotiate multiple identities in the cultural worlds of schools and classrooms' (Bennett et al., 2017: 249). It is based on a premise of four contexts of 'practised' identity: figured worlds, positionality, the space of authoring and making worlds (Holland et al., 2001: 271). Building on Foucault and Bourdieu, Ball's favoured theorists, Holland et al. (2001) argue for a joining of social and constructive theories to explore how identity and action are 'inextricably linked to power, status and rank', and to the dominant discourses within the 'figured world', similar to Bourdieu's field, in which they are enacted. In this way, rather than using binaries, a continuum is used to open up spaces for understanding how human actors are 'developing at an interface, within the interplay between the social and embodied sources of the self, in what might be called the self-in-practice' (Holland et al., 2001: 32). Holland et al. (2001) draw upon sociocultural theorists Bakhtin and Vygotsky to show that people are often forced to 'improvise' when placed in new and/or difficult circumstances, and that there are spaces to respond to and with the discourses that inevitably surround them, rather than being determined by them.

Holland et al. (2001: 170) build on the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism to say that we use our 'inner speech' (Bakhtin, 1981: 145; Vygotsky, 1978: 57), which they refer to as an 'inner voice' (Holland et al., 2001: 219), to address external voices and that this is powerful, as:

In the making of meaning, we 'author' the world. But the 'I' is by no means a freewheeling agent, authoring worlds from creative springs within. Rather, the 'I' is more like Lévi-Strauss's (1966) bricoleur, who builds with pre-existing materials. In authoring the world, in putting words to the world that addresses her, the 'I' draws upon the languages, the dialects, the words of others to which she has been exposed. One is more or less condemned, in the work of expression, to choices because 'heteroglossia', the simultaneity of different languages and of their associated values and presuppositions, is the rule in social life.

In effect, we are both liberated and constrained by the voices of others. Inner speech addresses social rules, and words or narratives that carry values with them, and it answers them. Social and personal values are carried in the words of others (Bakhtin, 1981), and we use our inner voice to grapple with the many voices that we hear in order to make our own meaning from them. While we are limited to the words, values and presuppositions to which we are exposed, we are able to make our own meaning from them. Our inner voice appropriates, resists, accepts and rejects certain aspects of the meaning that is offered to us, so that these are not binary choices. When we express ourselves, we choose words from the 'simultaneity of different languages and of their associated values and presupposition' (Holland et al., 2001: 170), but as we put these words together, we author them. We mix their initial meanings with other words, or interpretations of the same word, so that they shift slightly. We add the meaning that we make to the meanings that they hold, so that we author them. 'Dualisms' then mutate, so that more possibilities exist within them. Even when we are presented with 'either/or' choices, we interpret these choices according to our own understanding of them so that there are slightly different options available to us within these margins of choice.

Figured worlds theory therefore makes it possible to see: 'where – along the margins and interstices of collective cultural and social constructions – how, and with what difficulties human actors, individuals, and groups are able to redirect themselves' (Holland et al., 2001: 278). As such, figured worlds theory allowed me to write with some hope. I could not align with the idea that teachers only had binary choices, as this was not my experience. Just like the snapshot of my practice being classed as substandard due to a student choosing not to answer a question to which he knew the answer, I could not be snapshotted into the person that Ball (2003) describes, who chose to leave the profession. The snapshot represents something fixed, and this was not how I saw teaching practice, or who I was (and continue to become) as a teacher, and now a lecturer. Figured worlds theory has given me a way to express and explore this tension, and therefore to stretch, expand upon and unpick Ball's (2003) paper, so that I can continue to make meaning from it. It also helped me to understand where some of my tensions were coming from.

Understanding that Foucauldian theory was a lens that I found useful up to a point, but that I also found restrictive, has really been the second most liberating thing after reading and starting to write using TSTP. It is also part of the reason why I was drawn to Jane's body of work, as she has moved the debate forward, not only coining phrases such as 'panoptic performativity' and 'post-panoptic perpetual readiness for inspection', which describe the current environment in which teachers are working and developing, but also giving voice to teacher motivation and reasons for attrition. I am undoubtedly

shaped by Stephen Ball, and I feel that he has enabled me to find my academic voice, and to better use my own and other teachers' voices. This is not only from his writing, but also in his willingness to reply to my (albeit limited) direct messages through ResearchGate or answering questions at conferences, and indeed corresponding with us during the development of this paper. Ball is, and chooses to be, provocative and challenging, and he makes me question systems and structures that I had not thought to. This provocation for me, however, has led me to question how teachers are portrayed in his 2003 paper and to worry that it is so widely cited that teachers have been positioned unhelpfully as 'docile bodies' and 'technicians of behaviour' (Foucault, 1977: 294; Ball, 2003: 219) in a way that flattens them out, almost making them appear to be two dimensional caricatures of the teaching professionals that I have worked with and now teach. I feel that this is the fallout from his paper: that to show and confront the 'slouching beast' of neoliberal education (Ball, 2016), where teachers are audited to such an extent that they begin to self-regulate, and to accept and reproduce the (not so) new discourse, he removes the concept of teachers having an individual professional identity, which they negotiate themselves, and also implies that teachers have no agency.

My research interests are in the lived experience of being a teacher, so that I am flipping the focus for the terrors of performativity to the teacher, but not their Foucauldian 'Soul' (Rose, 1989, cited in Ball, 2003: 217), rather their professional identity and agency. Ball has helped me to find and articulate this distinction, and therefore to locate what I find to be, if not a gap in aspects of the performativity and accountability literature, then interstices and a space to write.

In recent years, I have noted that Ball's (2013: 146) writing has turned to 'later Foucault', where he argues that the reading of Foucault in education studies stresses the 'impossibility of freeing oneself from power relations', but that, in Foucault's later work, 'subjectivity, ethics, resistance and freedom are interwoven in complex and multi-layered ways', so that we constantly interrupt ourselves to understand the way that we are governed in order to be able to act differently. This, he argues, can be done through the 're-writing of the self' (Ball, 2013: 146), a concept that has similarities to Holland et al.'s (2001: 178) appropriation of Bakhtin's 'authoring the self', particularly as he explores the teacher Walter 'authoring [his] ethical self' (Ball, 2017: 69). Despite the differences in the ways that Ball uses Foucault to theorise the teacher, and my choice to turn to Bakhtin and figured worlds theory to do so, I feel that I am re-writing myself through engaging with a range of Ball's writing, and that 'later Ball' presents teachers as having a possibility of freeing themselves from the way that they are governed by performative measures that was not present in his 2003 paper.

And so I find myself writing about the importance of TSTP for me, my career and the way that I understand myself, as a teacher who has left the classroom, but not the profession. I cannot do so without writing about Stephen Ball's writing as a body of work, a toolbox (Foucault, 1974) even, which can be used to better critically engage with key discourses in the field of education. When teaching the first unit of our part-time MA in education, I use Ball's (2003) paper to create a rich conversation about what 'performativity' is and how my students experience it, but also as a way to explore what it means to be a teacher and make choices within the performative discourse. It is an important text that sits alongside others, including *The Education Debate* (Ball, 2021b) and several of Jane's, but it is, perhaps purposefully, the one that gets the strongest emotional reaction, and one which encourages critical engagement, reflection and identity work. At the time of writing, I also noted how often I refer to Ball's body of work, as both starting points and areas to stretch my students' thinking about education and how it is theorised. I have grown to enjoy the way that his writing troubles me and forces me to grapple with the complex. His academic work both offers me the outstretched hand and makes me struggle with frustrations to certainty, but not in a binary way, rather in a way that forces me to think differently, creatively even, and consider where – along the margins and interstices of collective cultural and social constructions – how, and with what difficulties I might be able to redirect myself. As such, despite my description of pushing against aspects of TSTP, Ball's writing helps me not to feel determined by discourse, but able to better navigate and respond to it.

## The ongoing significance of TSTP

Stephen Ball's work, and in particular TSTP (Ball, 2003), continues to have significance and relevance. In my own work (Jane), I followed Ball in recognising performativity as a complex and contested term. I define it as a disciplinary technology that uses judgements and comparisons against what is seen as

efficiency as a means of control. A culture of performativity leads to performances that measure efficiency, performed not for intrinsic worth and usefulness, but to demonstrate that they are being done. This is manifested in the need for teachers to demonstrate student progress, even if there is no progress (yet) to demonstrate, or if such demonstration takes time from teaching, and making genuine progress in learning. Performativity is inseparably joined with the emergence of the power of the evaluative state, accountability in education policy and transparency to the public gaze: 'the eye that knows and decides, the eye that governs' (Foucault, 1963: 88–9). According to Elliott (2001: 194), 'performative cultures presume that the performance of core activities within organisations can be made transparent to the public's gaze on a continuous and sustainable basis through the technologies of audit.' Performativity is the regime of rituals, such as inspection, audits and interviews, and routines, such as meetings and record-keeping (Ball, 2001). Power (1994: 7) argues that performativity 'signifies a displacement of trust from one part of the economic system to another, from operatives to auditors'. Panoptic performativity is a term that I first used (Perryman, 2006) to describe the culture engendered by an inspection regime in which teachers and students feel as if they are constantly being observed, and perform accordingly, in order to escape the regime.

My more recent research attempts to explain why, given that accountability can be shown to have negative effects on teachers, students, systems and also on retention, it is so widely accepted as 'a good thing'. It is the link between accountability and performativity that 'ratchets' (another word I use which is inspired by Stephen Ball (2008)) up the pressure through performative accountability, when teachers must account for every aspect of their professional lives. This is made possible by the acceptance of performative discourses, and also by the shift from disciplinary power to governmentality and self-governance.

Foucault (1991) used 'governmentality' to describe a range of procedures and techniques used to guide and control conduct. Here, 'government' is not just about national and local political control; it also refers to the self. Therefore, it is also how and why the self shapes its own conduct in particular ways. As well as being controlled and disciplined by accountability mechanisms, teachers position themselves in particular ways to act upon their own conduct in order to fit the system, and to adapt to changing policy contexts, such as inspection frameworks, curriculum requirements and testing regimes. This moves them further away from their teacher selves and what they thought teaching would be, and creates a discourse of disappointment. I trace the development of this concept on the ground, from the school/teacher performing just for inspection, to self-governed individuals who are accountable for every aspect of their professional lives to the detriment of their very souls.

Unlike when I started, and perhaps echoing more Claire's experience, teachers in schools are judged according to how they evidence their effectiveness. This has moved from being an intermittent and irregular external judgement by outside observers such as Ofsted to a permanent internal gaze. This has been achieved through the strengthening of pastoral power, an angle I explored with Ball in a paper on translation of policy (Perryman et al., 2017), and it has led to performative regimes which appear benign, but which are all pervasive and exert more, rather than less, control.

The changing frameworks and constantly shifting standards, expectations, emphasis and judgements have led some to question, in a debate that bears Ball's imprint, the notion that panoptic performativity, and consequent overt simulation, is still possible. Post-panopticism has arisen as a counterpoint to, and criticism of, Foucauldian notions of panopticism. Panoptic performativity took the panoptic metaphor and linked it to the notion of performativity. This meant that inspection was not just about surveillance, but also about the threat of surveillance, and it engendered a regime in which schools self-govern their performance. Post-panopticism arises from the idea that playing the game of panoptic performativity leads to simulation. Hence, Courtney (2016) argues that changes in inspections have made inspection regimes increasingly post-panoptic. He identifies six characteristics of panoptic regimes – permanent visibility, clear expected norms, a goal of compliance with these norms, demonstration of compliance (which may lead to gaming), self-policed fabrication and market compliance. He contrasts this with the characteristics of post-panopticism in inspection, coining the term 'fuzzy norms' to describe the uncertain and transient nature of the measurements of accountability which 'disrupt subjects' fabrications that had been predicated on stability' (Courtney, 2016: 627). Page (2017: 4) also argues that conscious and total visibility exists as changes in technology and in social norms have led to the democratisation of, and willing participation in, surveillance, 'permitting the surveillance of everyone, not just specified groups, and not just for specific reasons – data are collected on everyone as routine'. Page (2017: 4) argues that, due to the high-risk status of inspections for school leaders,

'where once surveillance was temporal, focused on specific times and activities, teachers now work within an environment of normalised visibility'. We feel that this is even more heightened now, as we move forward through and with the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly as teaching can and does take place through screens directly into students' homes, and teachers can be assessed not only on their marking and lessons in their classroom, but also on their digital lessons and podcasts. These additional pressures mean that Claire's figurative 'snapshot' of her practice becoming visible and perpetuated is now quite literal, with the teacher's home environment becoming visible to the student and observer – an extra layer of identity exposure and blurring of personal and professional boundaries in a post-panoptic performative discourse.

Meanwhile, Ball continues his radical work. In a recent paper entitled 'Against school: An epistemological critique', Ball and Collet-Sabe (2021: 12) argue:

As Foucault suggests we cannot conceive of alternatives within the discursive possibilities we currently inhabit. Rather, we are bound by epistemic rules and closures that enable and constrain us to think within certain versions of what is and might be true – the conditions of possibility of modern thought, established practices of remembering and forgetting, an exteriority that is prior to any conscious activity of a meaningful subjectivity.

Despite this, Ball and Collet-Sabe (2021: 1) describe the school as being in itself an 'intolerable institution'. No tinkering around the edges here – the call is for 'the need to refuse the past once and for all, rather than reform it'. Other publications by Stephen Ball include a paper on the neo-digital classroom (Ball and Grimaldi, 2021) and a book on perceptions of the constraints on teachers (Ball, 2021a). He continues to be prolific, influential, provocative and, for some, controversial.

## Conclusion

It felt quite daunting to be writing an explorative, rather than a solely appreciative, article on Stephen Ball, whose work, as demonstrated above, still resonates, and who, although retired, is still very much an active thinker in the field. We therefore decided to email him an early draft, and his comments were typically supportive. He explained that he wrote TSTP originally to clarify his own ideas about what was happening to teachers and, particularly, about the work 'done' on teachers by regimes of performative accountability:

The key point I was trying to make was that what the regime was doing was not just changing what teachers do, but who and what they are, their relation to themselves, their social intelligibility, and thus how they understood, talked about and enacted educational processes. I was pleased with the paper but had no particular expectations about its reception. Soon after publication I gave a talk at an NUT [National Union of Teachers] event outlining my argument, there was much nodding and afterwards a woman came up and said 'I resigned from teaching 6 months ago, now I know why I resigned, thank you'. That to me is the worth and 'impact' of scholarly work, to provide tools for people to think with, to think about themselves and the situations they find themselves in! (S.J. Ball, personal communication, 18 January 2022)

This article illustrates how TSTP and Ball's other scholarly writing has provided us with these tools, while still allowing us to trouble and problematise not only the situations and the opportunities to understand ourselves, but also the effect of his writing on our ability to do so. This is in keeping with his view, when commenting on our draft, that:

the paper should be used and troubled, I hope people are provoked to respond or run with my writing rather than just like it and follow it, this and other pieces are starting points, strings of dots, possibilities for thought rather than simple claims about an empirical world or definitive statements. Around the time of TSTP my writing did begin to shift toward a different kind of register, more provocative, more intended to make it impossible not to respond, in some way. (S.J. Ball, personal communication, 19 January 2022)

The paper certainly provoked us both, initially supportively, helping us find a conceptual framework within which our frustrations with accountability were positioned, and later to argue with and against in our own academic writing. We have written about TSTP as one paper that has affected us, as teachers who

decided to leave the classroom for a tangential career in academia. We conclude by noting that our personal interactions with TSTP are much more than two interlinked stories. Ball's outstretched hand through his body of work offers potential for others to make sense of sites of tension, and to find their own possibilities of thought. Our reflections and responses to his provocations in different places and at different points in time indicate the far reach of the significance of Stephen Ball's contribution to the field of educational and social policy on their research, practice and professional identities. This paper might be considered an invitation for others to tell their own stories of the personal and wider reaching impact of Ball's body of work.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

The authors conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with BERA Ethical Guidelines 2018.

### Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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