Est. 1841 | YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

Clarke, Matthew (2018) Eyes wide shut: The fantasies and disavowals of education policy. Journal of Education Policy, 35 (2). pp. 151-167.

Downloaded from: https://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/id/eprint/3547/

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02680939.2018.1544665

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. Institutional Repositories Policy Statement

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

Eyes wide shut: The fantasies and disavowals of education policy

Matthew Clarke,

School of Education

York St John University

Lord Mayor's Walk

York

YO31 7EX

m.clarke@yorksj.ac.uk

Bio Notes

Matthew Clarke is Professor of Education at York St John University in England and has also worked in universities in Australia, Hong Kong and the United Arab Emirates. His research interests focus on education policy and politics, particularly their implications for teachers, and his work draws on psychoanalytic, political and social theories.

Abstract

This paper examines the tensions between education policy's attachment to notions such as excellence and inclusion and its investments in managerial tropes of competition, continuous quality improvement, standards and accountability that are at odds with and which undermine its attachments. In order to explore these tensions, I draw on the psychoanalytic notion of fantasy, explained through Stanley Kubrick's final film, *Eyes wide shut*. My argument is that while the individual and society are both constituted through unavoidable division, antagonism and opacity, these notions are obscured through the operations of fantasy which holds out the promise of wholeness, harmony and redemption. In particular, education serves as a key site in which these fantasmatic ideals are promoted and pursued, a claim I substantiate via an analysis of the UK government's 2016 White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere*. Specifically, I read the White Paper in terms of five fantasies of: control; knowledge and reason; inclusion; productivity; and victimhood. My argument is that while fantasy is an inescapable element that inevitably structures what we take to be 'reality', education policy might strive to inhabit fantasy differently, thereby finding ways of escaping its current mode of seeing education with eyes wide shut.

Keywords: Education policy, politics, psychoanalysis, Lacan, fantasy

Introduction

Stanley Kubrick's final film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, may initially seem like a strange starting point for a paper on education policy. After all, the film is ostensibly centered around the domestic relationship of a middle-class New York couple – Bill and Alice Harford, a medical doctor and an art director – and their encounters with temptation and struggles with marital fidelity. This would seem a world away from education policy and its concern with pedagogical matters (like curriculum and assessment), social and political issues, (like equity and inclusion), or educational governance matters (like standards and accountability). Yet beneath its warm, Klimtian tones (the comfortable domestic world of the Harfords) and glittering surfaces (the fantastical world of the ritualistic orgies of the elites), *Eyes Wide Shut* engages with questions about the relationship between appearance and reality. Indeed, its paradoxical, oxymoronic title seems to make reference to the slash in the binary "open/shut" echoing the enigmatic line mediating the simultaneous connection and separation of fantasy and reality, sleeping and waking, knowledge and ignorance, life and death, masking and unmasking, routine and authenticity, concealment and confession (Vitek, 2001). Is this so far removed from the paradoxical suggestion, embodied in the title of the English government's recent White Paper (2016) and implicit in much official education policy, that essentially comparative notions like 'excellence' can be generalised so as to be evident 'everywhere'? Such claims are doubly disturbing when we recall education policy's history of "inflated claims about both the fulfilment of the child and the development of society [that] are endlessly broken in practice" (Donald, 1992, p. ix). In this paper I employ Stanley Kubrick's final film as a means of foregrounding the fantasies and disavowals, along with the attendant contradictions and incongruences, inherent in much education policy discourse. In order to illustrate my conceptual argument, I examine aspects of the UK government's 2016 White Paper, *Educational Excellence E*verywhere. My discussion draws on key psychoanalytic concepts, including the Freudian notion of disavowal, involving simultaneous recognition and denial, and the more recent Lacanian notion of fantasy, involving the structuring of reality so as to exclude its contradictions, inconsistencies and disjunctions, resulting in a deeply seductive harmonious fullness and thereby making us more susceptible to ideological capture, as elaborated by theorists in politics and film theory (e.g. Glynos, 2001, 2008; Glynos & Howarth, 2007; McGowan, 2007, 2013, 2015, 2016; Stavrakakis, 1999; Žižek, 1989, 1992, 1997).

Eyes wide shut is perhaps most (in)famous for the ritualistic midnight orgy that Bill illicitly attends and at which, despite donning the requisite costume and mask, he is exposed as an impostor. Indeed, a central theme of the film, as indicated in its title, concerns the ways we may

simultaneously know and yet not know ourselves and others, how we manage, often precariously, our public and private personas , how we experience the tensions between the seemingly smooth surfaces of our lives and the unseemly turmoil concealed beneath and, encompassing all these things, how we may act as though our eyes are 'wide open' when, in fact, they remain firmly shut.

We could also add to this list, following Stallybrass and White (1986), what we might describe as the distinction between the statuesque and the grotesque body. The former refers to the idealized, classical subject – with the maintenance of distance and absence of orifices symbolizing its lack of engagement with the surrounding world – while the latter is worldly, mobile, engaged in exchange with its surrounding social context (Jordan & Haladyn, 2008, p. 185). We see these two bodies in tension in the opening scene of the film as Bill, his back to Alice, checks his tie in the bathroom mirror and Alice, seated on the toilet, asks him how she looks. "Perfect", he responds, absentmindedly, without turning around from his narcissistic self-contemplation. Mildly chastising him – "you're not even looking at me" – Alice seems to know that she is being taken for granted as he foregrounds his fantasised statuesque version of her over the embodied Alice performing bodily functions behind him, offering her what amounts to, not exactly a lie but, a routinized pro forma (Rasmussen, 2001, p. 334). The key point here is that both aspects are essential elements of our embodied, social existence meaning that any attempts at sanitisation– at elevating the statuesque ideal in pursuit of fantasies of wholeness and purity – involve the disavowal of the grotesque other, whose presence is a necessary condition of any dominant ideology's existence. We might say that in the opening scenes of the film, Bill takes the statuesque dimension of Alice for granted, refusing to see or acknowledge the bodily reality underlying his idealized fantasy of her – until, that is, his fantasy is shattered during their post-party, marijuana-induced conversation, during which Alice 'confesses' to her own fantasy in the shape of her imagined seduction by a young marine during a marital vacation the previous year. From this point on – indeed from the beginning of the film until close to its end – both characters remain in the midst of fantasy.

My argument in this paper is that this mutual dynamic of fantasy and disavowal that we can see at work in *Eyes Wide Shut* is also at work in the tensions between the official, idealistic, but fantasmatic, face of education policy discourses and the often disavowed violence and domination inhering in and resulting from education policy when it attaches itself to fantasies such as those discussed in the second half of the paper.

But *Eyes Wide Shut* also offers itself up to a more optimistic reading, whereby, during the course of the film, the two main characters gradually remove the masks that they, like us, don in response to the soporific effects of daily routine. And although this unmasking confronts them with some uncomfortable truths about human desire and the challenges it poses to notions of moral rectitude and marital fidelity, their recognition of human frailty and fallibility also strengthens their mutual commitment and renders them capable of living with their eyes less tightly closed (Hoffman, 2007, p. 59). In similar fashion, my contention is that engaging with the fantasies and disavowals that work to preclude recognition of the contingent, contested and conflictual nature of education policy, might enable us to see it, if not with eyes that have been fully-opened, then at least with eyes that are only partially and intermittently shut. First, however, we need to explore the notions of fantasy and disavowal in greater depth and detail.

Fantasy and disavowal: Education, Education, Education

For all of us as educators, it is important to consider the question of why education has become such a central concern of policy makers in recent decades – think of Tony Blair's response to questions about the nature of his government's policy priorities in the run-up to the 1997 election: 'education, education, education'. When New Labour made 'education' its catch-cry, there was no need to explain their understanding of the term. Education was emptied of any concrete, specific meaning, while simultaneously quilting together and articulating a number of other signifiers, such as 'wealth', 'success', 'excellence', 'aspiration', 'productivity' and 'knowledge', in order to represent an idealised universal value, binding state, nation and society together in the name of a fullness-to-come[1] (Glynos & Howarth, 2007).

In this sense, education is a classic example of what, following Laclau (1996), we can describe as an 'empty signifier'. Such a signifier is emptied of specific, concrete meanings in order to embody an aspiration (necessarily fantasmatic) towards completeness, fullness and harmony, a yearning for an ideal social order. Empty signifiers are not an aberration but a fundamental aspect of any (political) order of discourse. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, a signifier may be empty but it nonetheless guarantees the community's consistency by virtue of its nature as "a signifier whose signified is an enigma for the members themselves – nobody really knows what it means, but each of them somehow presupposes that others know it, that it has to mean 'the real thing',

[1] It is important to note that New Labour should not be seen as responsible for emptying education as a signifier; rather, they were exceptional enthusiasts in a process that has been part of modern education since its inception.

and so they use it all the time" (Žižek, 2002, p. 58). Empty signifiers thus serve to bind together and articulate a range of other signifiers within a particular discursive formation and, despite their enigmatic nature, to bind together members of a community.

Returning to Blair's master/empty[2] signifier 'education', it is critical to consider to what extent the relative demise of redistributive economic policy, the demonization of the welfare state, and the fraying of the social safety net account for the correlative emphasis placed on education as the vehicle for equality – or, as it has now been reframed, as a vehicle for equal opportunity. In other words, is education, as the path to individual opportunity and social redemption, regardless of circumstance or disadvantage, now the core fantasy of society (Peim, 2012) – the vehicle through which we seek to connect with that intangible and indefinable something, that extra-discursive entity that we believe lies deep within us and that ultimately defines us? If this is the case, then an unfortunate consequence of the grip of this fantasmatic rendering of education is that it leads us to confront the educational challenges we face in reductive and therefore wholly inadequate ways.

Importantly, the psychoanalytic notion of fantasy does not refer to pure illusion that can be opposed to solid reality. Instead, it refers to reality as structured by illusion. As Žižek argues in relation to the terms proposed in another film, *The Matrix*, fantasy is neither the blue pill, i.e. pure illusion, nor the red pill, i.e. the reality behind the illusion, but a third pill representing the *reality in illusion* itself (Fiennes, 2006). This means that we can never step entirely beyond fantasy per se; but we can become more aware of the particular fantasies structuring our reality and thereby seek to gain some critical distance from them.

But even with this effort, fantasy remains deeply seductive. In the various forms it takes, fantasy works to reassure us of the existence of order and purpose in the world – of the notion that there is some underlying meaning which makes our universe complete. This can be interpreted as offering both closure (a foundation of meaning exists, life has a purpose, someone has a plan) and openness (utopia is possible, even if we haven't created it yet). This simultaneous presence of openness and closure, of yes and no, embodying paradox and contradiction, is key to the psychoanalytic notion of disavowal.

[2] For a signifier to act as a 'master' signifier it must empty itself of attachments to specific signifieds (Laclau, 1996, p. 39) and in this sense, master signifiers are also 'empty' signifiers.

Disavowal involves a form of double consciousness in which we simultaneously see and don't see, remember and forget, acknowledge and deny. Disavowal is a pervasive psychosocial process that typically arises in response to a perceived threat to unity, harmony or coherence (Taubman, 2012, p. 18; Freud, 1940 [1938]). In other words, disavowal operates as a response to threats to the integrity or viability of our fantasies. To take an everyday example, we disavow our knowledge of the harmful effects of smoking and drinking when we smoke and drink, rejecting the knowledge that threatens to undermine our preferred picture of harmony between our present enjoyment and our future wellbeing. But disavowal is also pervasive in politics. We see it when, for instance, recognition of privilege, disadvantage and inequality is rejected because of the threat such recognition poses to a preferred view of society as a harmonious ensemble with common interests, collective values and shared purposes. Disavowal is also embedded in the politics and practices of education. For example, disavowal operates when we feel a frisson of enjoyment on receiving above average student feedback ratings, or when we experience a surge of pride as our publications are accepted and our citation rates climb, forgetting that such seemingly innocuous instances secure our complicity in the machinery of neoliberal performativity. We see disavowal at work when, for instance, the role of middle-class values and socioeconomic power in educational success are denied and reframed as purely personal characteristics of aspiration, resilience and resolve. The consequence of such disavowal is that social discrimination and economic exclusion are rendered invisible in the interests of preserving a putative but fantasmatic egalitarian meritocracy. Yet the disavowed exclusion and discrimination do not go away; they return and are internalized, by both victims and perpetrators, as personal failure (Ryan, 2017). In such cases, we see the dynamic identified by Stallybrass and White at work, whereby the grotesque is expelled, lest it contaminate the statuesque ideal, only to return in unconscious form as a hidden injury that renders its victims susceptible to the judgmental gaze of the dominant ideology.

Policy logics of fantasy and disavowal

Educational Excellence Everywhere is a key document that set out the UK Conservative government's education agenda from 2016 to 2020 with the aim of embedding signature neoliberal policy priorities, involving the elevation of market-like rationalities of calculation, comparison and competition as state-endorsed norms (Davies, 2017), within the practices and structures of education. These priorities include remodeling of the entire English school system along marketized lines, intensifying structures of accountability, and refashioning education as an essentially private good (Forum editorial board, 2016). The significance and ambition of the

White Paper is reflected in the range of issues it addressed, including chapters on teacher education, educational leadership, the structure of the school system, school improvement, curriculum, accountability and funding. But as the preceding discussion has, I hope, made clear, education policy is deeply entangled in the operations of fantasy. Despite the "dominance of functionalist, systems theory perspectives and the technically rational implications for policy which follow from these" (Prunty, 1985), policy does not – indeed, cannot – just seek to provide technical solutions to pre-existing problems. Rather, policy is tied up with the workings of desire (Moore, 2006) and the simplifications of fantasy (Wright, 2012): "policy desires or imagines change – it offers an imagined future state of affairs, but in articulating desired change [it] always offers an account somewhat more simplified than the actual realities of practice" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 5). Part of this simplification process involves identifying a neutral notion of the common good, a desired or imagined future that represents the public interest or the public good. Yet notions of the 'public good' are inevitably fantasmatic, insofar as they simplify and gloss over the contestations and antagonisms that contour society. In 'reality', "our societies are never harmonious ensembles. This is only the fantasy through which they attempt to constitute themselves. Experience shows that this fantasy can never be fully realized. No social fantasy can fill the lack around which society is always structured" (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 74). One consequence of policy's persistent attachment to the fantasy of society as a harmonious ensemble is the disavowal of whose interests it actually represents.

Fantasy is not something that is buried away, deep inside policy, but typically appears 'out there' on the surface of discourse (Žižek, 1997). Take, for instance, the 2016 White Paper Department for Education, 2016), *Educational Excellence Everywhere*. The title of the White Paper conjures up a sense of reaching the rainbow's end – of achieving a harmonious and 'full' state of affairs in which failure, scarcity and disadvantage have become things of the past. Yet tellingly, education is never defined or debated in the policy document, in terms of its aims and purposes, although assertions are made about how it 'unlocks opportunity' and functions as 'the engine of social justice and economic growth' (p. 5). Without such debate as to what constitutes 'good' education the White Paper reverts to the default assumption driving much education policy in the neoliberal era, i.e. that good education equals 'good' (i.e. high, rising) results in standardized achievement tests. This leaves the notion of excellence as a cipher, a tautological, non-referential term (Royle, 2003, p. 55; Readings, 1996), masking the fact that all it does to describe a school or education system as excellent is to say that it is excellent at being excellent (Royle, 2003, p. 55). In the terms discussed earlier, excellence is an example, *par excellence*, of an empty signifier – a

signifier that functions "like the fake rabbit in the greyhound races, to sustain endless progress towards an excellence with no real referent or value" (Taubman, 2012, p. 21). The third term, 'everywhere', only serves to entrench the obfuscation, not least by contradicting and undermining the comparative logic embodied in 'excellence', thereby exposing and underscoring the latter's emptiness. And the empty, fantasmatic journey continues when we read beyond the title and encounter multiple references to 'world class' education, 'great teachers', 'great leaders', all contributing to a 'dynamic', 'school-led' system offering 'gold-standard qualifications' and characterized by 'freedom' and 'autonomy'. What such relentless celebration ignores is how classification is always a double-process, how any positivity is always structured in relation to its negation, its inverse. In the case of education policy, this means that any desirable subjectivity is necessarily constructed through the simultaneous positing of subjectivities – of schools, teachers, students, parents and communities – that are deemed to be failing, coasting or requiring improvement. In the remainder of the paper, I employ the notions of fantasy and disavowal to analyse the White Paper, highlighting five specific forms that fantasy takes in the policy document.

Fantasies of control

Education policy is inextricably connected to issues of politics and power in relation to educational institutions and society. As Prunty put the matter over three decades ago, "educational policy-making is an exercise of power and control directed towards the attainment or preservation of some preferred arrangement of schools and society" (1984, p. 3). Yet, as argued earlier, social reality is irredeemably complex, contingent and contested and a significant strand in policy studies recognizes the limitations this places on the policy's ambition (e.g. Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012; Clarke, 2012, 2014; Lindblom, 1959, 1979; Webb & Gulson, 2015, 2016). Despite these limitations, arising from the complex, contingent and contested nature of social reality, education policy understandably yearns for intelligibility, predictability and certainty. One of the key ways policy seeks to simultaneously expel and disavow complexity, contingency and contestability is through fantasmatic assertions of control. For instance, in 2012, Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, asserted as part of her *National Plan for School Improvement* that "by 2025, Australia should be ranked as a top five country in the world for performance of our students in reading, science and mathematics and for providing our children with a high-quality and high-equity education system" (Gillard, 2012). Employing similarly assertive language, the foreword to *Educational Excellence Everywhere,* states:

> Where great schools, great leaders and great teachers exist, we will let them do what they do best – helping every child to achieve their full potential. Where they do not, we will step in to build capacity, raise standards and provide confidence for parents and children. We will put parents and children first. We will set high expectations for every child, ensuring that there are no forgotten groups or areas and we will focus on outcomes (Department for Education, 2016).

I referred in my introduction to policy's long history of broken promises in relation to the fulfilment of the individual and the development of society. Yet, this patchy record notwithstanding, the choice of language here is categorical – we *will build* capacity, *raise* standards, *set* high expectations, *ensuring* that there are no forgotten groups. Of course, the confidence of the assertions masks the impossibility of the gaze: for the future selves of the intended 'targets' or beneficiaries of the policy are hardly likely to point to the policy in years to come and hold the politicians making these claims to account. And even when targets are more amenable to realisation, they are still more often than not missed, as in the UK government's targets for teacher recruitment that have been missed over five successive years[3]. This problem is exacerbated by policy makers' penchant for framing targets in bold, ambitious terms (Lingard & Sellar, 2013). But almost by design, any of policy's shortcomings, in terms of its logical unfolding or its ability to meet its own targets, are not seen as reasons to rethink policy agendas, so much as they provide a rationale for the intensification of those same agendas as the presumed solution to the problems and pressures initiated and installed by them in the first place (Ball, 2008; Slater, 2015). This may seem irrational; but the rationality of policy is another of its fantasies.

Fantasies of objectivity

Almost as if to mask its ideological saturation and to convey as sense of being guided by objective knowledge and reason, *Educational Excellence Everywhere* places considerable emphasis on the importance of evidence. By itself, 'evidence' appears 84 times in the document, while 'evidence-based' appears 27 times. To bolster the impression of scientificity, the term is often conjoined with terms like 'rigorous' or 'firm'. But to be 'rigorously' informed by evidence surely requires weighing up evidence from a range of sources and acknowledging the diversity and complexity of the field; whereas the White Paper presents us with cherry-picked evidence from ideologically sympathetic sources and could thus be described as 'policy-based evidence making'.

[3] Richardson, H. (2017). 'Teacher training target missed for fifth year in a row in England'. www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-4218703

One instance can be found in the discussion of 'a world leading curriculum for all', where we are told that "cognitive science has shed fresh light on long-running debates about whether a school curriculum should focus more on 'knowledge' or 'skills'" (p. 89). The discussion in this section cites a single US scholar, Daniel Willingham – author of the best-selling book, *Why don't students like school?* (2009) and someone former secretary of state for education, Michael Gove, described[4] as having written "the definitive guide to weighing evidence, especially scientific evidence, in the debates around education reform". Willingham valorises knowledge and facts in schooling and derides teachers' attempts to make connections between curriculum and students' lived experiences. But as Lew Zipin (2017) and others argue, an emphasis on decontextualized disciplinary knowledge sacralises dominant knowledge, attributing to it superior epistemic power over other knowledge, while overlooking how the relevance of disciplinary knowledge can be enhanced by putting it into dialogue with the life-based knowledge and experience of learners. But such considerations are conveniently swept aside by the repeated deployment of terms like 'evidence' and 'scientific', just as questions around the politics of knowledge, including judgements as to whose knowledge counts and who gets to make such judgments, are masked by the deployment of vague but empty terms like 'academically-rigorous' and 'world-class'.

Another of the signature fantasies of education policy in the neoliberal era involves claims of promoting curriculum that combines the best of the past with the cutting-edge of the present so as to prepare students for their futures in the 'knowledge economy'. In this vein, *Educational Excellence Everywhere* declares its determination "to embed a knowledge-based curriculum as the cornerstone of an excellent, academically-rigorous education" (p. 88), one that "is forward-looking while [also] equipping children with core knowledge about the best that has been thought and written – balancing three Shakespeare plays and the study of a broad sweep of British history, for example, with a world-leading computing curriculum" (p. 89). But as this emphasis on nation and nationalism implies, the underlying vision of the curriculum is one of reconciling state, society and individual into one harmonious national community – a project that overlooks the fragmented nature of history and society as a threat to this vision and thus disavows its own partial and interested character: "the curriculum set out in government reforms and reaffirmed in the white paper is little more than a traditional reassertion of a conservative, content-filled timetable, dressed up as a commitment to a 'world-class education'…largely determined by what neoliberal and neoconservative elites decide constitutes 'official knowledge' (Forum editorial board, 2016, p. 145).

[4] https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/secretary-of-state-for-education-michael-gove-gives-speech-to-iaa

Yet what if we were to take seriously the notion that the individual and society are both constituted through unavoidable division and antagonism, and as such can never be fully self-transparent? In this case, rather than presenting obstacles to be overcome, these antagonisms might be recognized as affording the opening for meaningful education. This entails education finding ways of responding to the paradoxes and enigmas of existence that we all experience, rather than limiting itself to the transmission of reliable information to students with purportedly fixed, knowable identities or seeking (fantasmatically) to close various social 'gaps'. Within this alternative notion of a responsive 'education for misfits', disciplinary knowledge would not disappear but would be reframed as a series of templates or structures, which schools, teachers and students might draw upon. But educational practice might also mine the disavowed, disregarded and overlooked materials that lie scattered across diffuse cognitive, affective, experiential and embodied realms (Taubman, 2012). Critically, rather than disavowing the threatening paradoxes, tensions and contradictions of existence, or seeking refuge in a fantasmatic utopianism, such an education might think to ask unanswerable questions and engage in infinite conversations in order to re-imagine, re-symbolise and re-construct alternative individual and social worlds.

Fantasies of inclusion

In common with previous policies such as *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003), the White Paper claims to serve the interests of 'all children' impartially. But the disingenuousness of this claim and the reality of its divisive logic, are tellingly revealed in its assertions about differentiation of provision. Take, for instance, the statement that "if autonomous academies or MATs wish to deliver the national curriculum in their schools, they can do so confidently. But we also want academies to use their freedoms to innovate and build more stretching and tailored curricula, to meet the particular needs of their pupils or their local area or the particular ethos of the school" (p. 90)[5]. Coded within this and other statements is an attachment to outdated notions of fixed, innate ability (Forum editorial board, 2016; Stobart, 2014), which functions as something to which teaching needs to be accommodated and which requires marketisation, and the 'freedom' to exercise 'choice', in order to distribute educational

[5] Academies are state-funded schools in England that are directly funded by the Department for Education and thus independent of the local education authority. A multi-academy trust, or MAT, is a group of academies that operate as a single legal entity. See: http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07059/SN07059.pdf

excellence – and with it, life chances – more efficiently than was possible in the bad old days of "unnecessary bureaucratic interference and central prescription" (p. 25).

In a similar manner, the term 'talented' is frequently applied to teachers and leaders in the policy, reflected, for instance, in talk of maximising teachers' 'talents' (p. 17). Here the concept of talent reflects the managerialist origins and orientation of much recent education policy; but it also provides a convenient rationale for undermining the importance of an in-depth, theoretically-rigorous and critical culture of teacher education. After all, if 'good' teachers are born rather than 'made', why waste time and resources trying to improve on, or compensate for, the varied range of innate ability, other than providing a basic form of 'training'?

Yet the White Paper cannot ignore the issue of inequality, which has become a growing concern of even such organisations as the OECD – hardly a hotbed of radicalism. In line with this concern, one of the characteristic strategies of neoliberal education policy in recent years has been to evince concern about issues of exclusion and inclusion. The White Paper rehearses this move in its claim to be "unapologetically ambitious for every child, no matter what their background, prior attainment or needs" (p. 88), as part of the government's mission of "spreading high standards across the country" (p. 53). The effect of such repeated declarations is to create the impression that only this government and its supporters – and certainly not its critics, who, for perfectly good reasons, may resist this particular discourse – care about standards and are willing to undertake the challenge of spreading them across the country (Forum editors board, 2016, p.145). As Stallybrass and White note, "one of the most powerful ruses of domination [is] to pretend that critique can only exist in the language of 'reason', 'pure knowledge' and 'seriousness'" (1986, p. 43), or in this case, 'standards'. The effect is to render criticism that does not adopt the discourse of standards illegitimate and irresponsible in its unwillingness to champion high standards for all pupils. This is despite the fact that standards are enforced through competitive examinations which require some to fail so that others may pass. In the callous and cruelly-optimistic (Berlant, 2011) practice of encouraging aspiration on the one hand, alongside a commitment to a ruthless form of competition that takes no account of structural inequalities or systemic injustices on the other, we see the stain of obscene enjoyment that resides within the structures of political power and symbolic authority. Exclusion and selectivity are officially denied in policy, but as in Stallybrass and White's analysis of the unconscious reappearance of the grotesque, these elite logics return to haunt practice.

Indeed, it is in relationship to issues of inclusion and social justice more widely that the stain of obscene, excessive enjoyment residing within the symbolic authority of policy is perhaps most evident. We might think here of the intense pressures placed on students in the name of individualised notions of aspiration and achievement, particularly in communities afflicted by poverty whose members are deemed to lack aspiration – an accusation reflecting an ideology of individualism and individual responsibility that denies the systemic violence which produces poverty in the first place (Allen, 2014, p. 238). We might think of the personalisation of teachers' 'responsibility' for their students' test scores and the relentless pressures on them to improve results under threats of 'elimination', as school leaders relentlessly embrace and enforce the ideology of standards, "misrecognising the external provenance and homogeneity of this mission as contextual, personal and unique" (Courtney & Gunter, 2017, p. 413). We might also consider the cruelly optimistic promotion of a culture of success, underpinned by a belief that all can succeed and everyone can be a winner, in a context where university places and well-paid jobs are limited by the structures of the economy and in which one school's or one student's success must inevitably be accompanied by another's failure. Alongside these developments, the education sector has witnessed a surge in the popularity of punitive disciplinary regimes. Such regimes have been enabled by the empowerment of school 'leaders' and the fetishising of another empty signifier, 'leadership'; but they also bear the stain of obscene, excessive enjoyment embodied in 'efficient' management practices involving the reduction of colleagues and students to disposable human capital. It is as if the system is so determined to sustain the fantasy of England as a meritocratic, inclusive society – the realities of historic structural inequalities and the injustices of neoliberal capitalism, with its cold, brutal logics of competition, notwithstanding – that it has to keep ratcheting up the pressure on individuals and institutions in its efforts to make reality live up to the fantasy.

Fantasies of productivity

Anxieties around productivity are at the heart of recent education policy. Thus, *Educational Excellence Everywhere* asserts, "the better educated our society, the fairer, more cohesive, *productive* and innovative it can be. This is vital to Britain's position in the 21st century. Our education system must compete with those around the world – because while we improve, so do they" (p. 8, emphasis added). Similar anxieties were foregrounded in Australia's 'education revolution', which, in its ministerial foreword, highlighted "the central role that education plays in the economic and social strength of our nation. Education not only drives productivity but also empowers individuals to reach their full potential, and helps overcome disadvantage"

(Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p. 5). These emphases reflect a key feature of what Pasi Sahlberg refers to as the 'global education reform movement' (Sahlberg, 2011), namely the remaking of education institutions in the image of the business or the corporation and the associated infusion of education policy and practice with the values and logics of the market. Central among these logics is the fantasy of unlimited growth and "the possibility of having more than enough of what we desire" as a way of escaping the trauma of scarcity (McGowan, 2016, p. 203) – in other words the fantasy of transcending the finite limits of our existence. In education policy terms, this translates into absurdity or farce, such as when England's former Secretary of State for Education, was asked by the Chair of a Select Committee in the context of Ofsted's ratings of schools, "if 'good' requires pupil performance to exceed the national average, and if all schools must be good, how is this mathematically possible?", to which the Secretary of State, with eyes wide shut, responded, "by getting better all the time"[6].

This refashioning of education reflects the wider project of neoliberalism that has sought to elevate market-based principles and practices of measurement and calculation to state-endorsed norms (Davies, 2017, p. 8). Yet what is this thing, the market, in whose image education has been advised, exhorted, and cajoled to remake itself? Is it not another fantasy? Ever-present in media and political discourse, the market seems "so definite and comforting in its phenomenological presence… [yet] if it exists at all it is as a conjuncture of distribution entirely dependent upon remote processes of production and consumption… [which]… gives the illusion of independent identity, of being a self-sustaining totality" (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 27). To the extent that productivity relies on the market, drawing sustenance from its powerful logics of measurement and calculation, it too is, 'in essence', another empty signifier, another illusion structuring our reality. In other words, productivity is a fantasy whose claims to wholeness and self-sufficiency rely on the expulsion of the non-recognised but necessary 'non-productive' other, in the form of all those aspects of activity and experience that can't be calculated and measured. As Will Davies (2017, p. 10) writes in relation to neoliberalism, "a wholly calculable, measurable world is only possible on the basis of particular non-calculable, immeasurable values or vocations. Hence, efforts to replace politics with economics, judgement with measurement, confront a limit beyond which they themselves collapse". For education, the tragic results of overlooking this insight – or rather of looking with our eyes wide shut by disavowing the violence on which the fantasy of productivity relies – have included the diminishment or exclusion of those areas involving embodied, affective or artistic expression

[6] http://www.pubications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmeduc/uc1786-i/uc178601.htm

that are less amendable to measurement and calculation and are misguidedly deemed to make a lesser contribution to economic growth and national productivity than areas such as science, technology, and mathematics.

Fantasies of victimhood

The nationalistic emphasis in the White Paper was mentioned above in relation to its claims to provide academically-rigorous, world-class knowledge. Aligning itself with the practice of 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992), the White Paper mobilizes the newly discovered – or rather, newly minted, post 9/11 – entity now known as 'fundamental British values'. Key among these values are tolerance and respect. But as Wendy Brown points out, "designated objects of tolerance are invariably marked as undesirable and marginal, as liminal civil subjects or even liminal humans; and those called upon to exercise tolerance are asked to repress or override their hostility or repugnance in the name of civility, peace, or progress" (2006, p. 28). Tolerance necessarily implies the delineation of boundaries in relation to what is acceptable or relevant – boundaries which those on one side have the capacity to monitor, shift or harden while those on the other side are positioned as passive objects. This is part of a wider dynamic involving the demonization of the marginalized other – the immigrant, the scrounger, the 'chav' – while the dominant majority lays claim to the status of victims.

British values are defined in at least two ways in the White Paper. In the first instance, they are conflated with character, as in the statement that the national curriculum will be complemented by "character traits and fundamental British values that will help them succeed: being resilient and knowing how to persevere, how to bounce back if faced with failure, and how to collaborate with others at work and in their private lives" (p. 88). It is worth noting in passing that such characteristics, particularly resilience, are hallmarks of the neoliberal subject, who, rather than seeking to influence, supplement or replace others' agendas, merely adapts herself to them (Chandler & Reid, 2016). The reference to 'collaboration', meanwhile, is ironic in a system that pits individuals and institutions against one another and in which high-stakes testing and accountability are always based on individual rather than collective performance.

Elsewhere, fundamental British values are defined in two instances as "democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual tolerance and respect of those with different faiths and beliefs" (p. 97 & p. 107). In the first of these two instances, these values are conjoined with a requirement to develop "the knowledge, critical thinking and character traits that enable pupils

to identify and challenge extremist views" – the one and only appearance of the word 'critical' in the White Paper. But the point for *this* paper is that what we see in these repeated formulaic phrases in documents like *Educational Excellence Everywhere*, irrespective of their questionable effectiveness, is part of a larger agenda residing within counter-extremism policies. This agenda is based on the co-optation of teachers and other state-employees into surveillance functions, as we see in the UK's Prevent legislation, and is underpinned by notions of national victimhood alongside the promotion of fantasmatic narratives of national exceptionalism (Fekete, 2017; Kundnani, 2014). Such policy agendas echo what bell hooks (1994) describes as "the collective demand for harmony" (p. 65) – a demand which is not merely imposed but which taps into pre-existing, yet socially, psychically and symbolically constructed, orientations. One consequence of this demand is to induce practitioners to "act in complicity with that brand of contemporary, chic fascism that evokes romantic images of unity and solidarity, a return to traditional values, while working to deny free speech and supress all forms of rebellious thought and action" (p. 72). In other words, such policies serve to legitimate and entrench the strong, authoritarian state, and its agenda of profit and privatisation, thereby protecting the neoliberal state from threats to its very underlying raison d'être; but we also see the haunting of the statuesque nation-state-society by its grotesque other, in that the state's policies work to destroy social empathy, by feeding suspicion and hostility toward the migrant, the stateless or the refugee and thereby undermining the democratic fabric of our society.

Discussion and Conclusion

> Alice: Maybe I think...we should be grateful...
> Bill: Grateful...
> Alice: ...that we've managed to survive through all of our... adventures... whether they were real... or only a dream.
> Bill: Are you sure of that?
> Alice: Am I sure? Only as sure as I am... that the reality of one night... let alone that of a whole lifetime... can ever be the whole truth.
> Bill: And no dream is ever... just a dream.
> Alice: The important thing is...we're awake now... and hopefully...for a long time to come.
>
> The ultimate ethical task is that of truly awakening: not only from sleep, but from the spell of fantasy that controls us even more when we are awake (Žižek, 2006, p. 60).

On returning home from his nocturnal odyssey, Bill turns off the Christmas lights that have been a prominent feature of the film – a signal that the fantasy is over (Hoffman, 2007) – and enters the matrimonial bedroom to find Alice asleep with the carnival mask, which he wore to the orgy and which he subsequently mislaid, placed on his pillow next to her. Recognizing that he has been unmasked, Bill breaks down and sobs to Alice that he will tell her everything. We do not witness his confession but the film's final conversation, as the couple fulfil their parental duties by taking their daughter Christmas shopping, suggests a muted optimism in relation to their prospects for resisting the spell of fantasy. Indeed, the clear message of the film seems to be that it is not so much the presence of complex, conflicted and unwilled desires, but their masking through unacknowledged and reductive fantasies, that threatens the integrity of our relationships.

As we have seen, fantasy involves the assertion of an imaginary scene in which the inconvenient dislocations, incongruences and inconsistencies of social life seem to be overcome. But because these dislocations are endemic to reality, the fantasy remains just that – a fantasy. Indeed, it could be argued that a policy document like *Educational Excellence Everywhere* functions like pornography, in that insofar as it seeks to offer everything it ends up offering very little. However, the dangers of remaining mired in fantasy go beyond the obvious ones of delusion and misconception and include the scapegoating of individuals and groups deemed responsible for the (inevitable) non-realisation of the (impossible) fantasy scenario. This is all the more likely in the neoliberal era with its embrace of individual responsibility for one's place in the social structure, underpinned by "that bankrupt opposition between social and psychic processes which emerged from an ideological division of the subject from society in nineteenth-century bourgeois thought" (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 197). A focus on fantasy and the construction of reality in terms of impossible fantasmatic scenarios, such as those found in *Educational Excellence Everywhere* and other similar expressions of neoliberal education policy, has the potential to interrupt this process by exposing the obscene enjoyment that ideologically-driven fantasy relies on, and which it must either defensively disavow or risk its own disintegration. We might think here of students whose aspirations to participate in higher education cannot be fulfilled owing to disavowed structural inequalities and logics of scarcity and competition, which ration educational achievement and excellence along familiar lines of class, race and gender, thereby safeguarding access to elite universities for those from privileged social and educational backgrounds. The skewed nature of this dynamic is misrecognized as 'meritocracy', while the obscenity of extreme wealth and privilege are masked by the way it is aped as a model and elevated as an aspiration for the rest of society, despite its worth relying on its scarcity value. In

order to challenge such patterns, critique needs to not only confront or refute ideology but also to "reveal the key role that fantasy plays in our experiences" in order to expose ideology's fantasmatic underside and undercut its psychic grip (McGowan, 2007, p. 44; Glynos, 2001).

So what is the alternative? Opting out of fantasy altogether is not an option, given the way fantasy structures our very sense of the world, protecting us from confronting the constitutive lack, or non-fullness, in our own selves and in the social order. In this vein, it is important to be alert to the temptation for critique to engage in its own version of fantasy, in which everything would be wonderful if only we could return to some putative golden era of democratic education or if we could just get rid of the elite class of neoliberal policy makers; alas, there was no such golden era while all of us, not just elite policy makers, are complicit in one way or another in the destructive logics of neoliberal education policy. But perhaps, as a starting point, rather than denying our fragility and fallibility in the face of an irredeemably complex and contested world and disavowing our complicity in the messy and uncomfortable aspects of individual and social existence, we might seek to avow the fantasies that we construct and subscribe to in order to avoid that discomfort. Returning to Kubrick's film, if we can't live with our eyes wide open, we might at least try to keep them less wide shut. This entails focusing our attention on the multitude of inconsistent fantasmatic elements that ideologically-driven policies promise to deliver (Žižek, 2006, p. 56) such as, for instance, the commitment to enact the necessarily scarce notion of excellence in education 'eveywhere' in a system governed by logics of competition. It entails taking cognisance of the fact that the performative power of policy is an effect of our investing it with the aura of authority, which can be undercut by our indiviudal and collective disinvestment in it (Žižek, 1992, p. 33). This in turn entails addressing these challenges collectively in concert with others, for it is only by constructing alliances with others, focused around common concerns, that effective resistance can occur (Allen, 2008; Ruti, 2015). None of this is easy, and there are no simple, non-fantasmatic solutions to be found; but the alternative of keeping our eyes wide shut to the distortions and obscenities of power by disavowing the fantasies of policy is surely less palatable.

References

Allen, A. (2008). *The politics of our selves: Power, autonomy and gender in contemporary critical theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Allen, A. (2014). *Benign violence: Education in and beyond the age of reason*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Aristodemou, M. (2014). *Law, psychoanalysis, society: Taking the unconscious seriously*. London: Routledge.
Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., & Braun, A. (2012). *How schools do policy: Policy enactments in secondary schools*. London: Routledge.
Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Brown, W. (2006). *Regulating aversion: Tolerance in the age of identity and empire*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Chandler, D., & Reid, J. (2016). *The neoliberal subject: Resilience, adaptation and vulnerability*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
Clarke, M. (2012). Talkin' 'bout a revolution: The social, political and fantasmatic logics of education policy. *Journal of Education Policy, 27*(2), 173-191.
Clarke, M. (2014). The sublime objects of education policy: Equity, quality and ideology. *Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education, 35*(4), 584-598.
Commonwealth of Australia. (2008). *Quality education: The case for an education revolution in our schools*. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Retrieved from http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/Programs/Pages/QualityEducation-ThecaseforanEducationRevolutioninourSchools.aspx.
Courtney, S. J., & Gunter, H. M. (2015). *Get off my bus!* School leaders, vision work and the elimination of teachers. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 18*(4), 395-417.
Davies, W. (2017). *The limits of neoliberalism: Authority, sovereignty and the logic of competition* (Revised ed.). London: Sage.
Dean, J. (2009). *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Department for Education (DfE). (2016). *Educational Excellence Everywhere*. UK: HMSO.
Department for Education and Skills (DfES). (2003). *Every child matters*. London: The Stationary Office.
Donald, J. (1992). *Sentimental education: Schooling, popular culture and the regulation of liberty*. London: Verso.
Elster, J. (1983). *Sour grapes: Studies in the subversion of rationality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Fekete, E. (2018). *Europe's fault lines: Racism and the rise of the right*. London: Verso.
Forum editorial board. (2016). Educational excellence everywhere: Forum's response to the White Paper. *Forum, 58*(2), 135-154.
Freud, S. (1940 [1938]). Splitting of the ego in the process of defense (J. Strachey, Trans.). In J. Strachey (Ed.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 23, pp. 275-278). London: Hogarth Press and Institute for Psychoanalysis.
Gillard, J. (2012). *"A national plan for school improvement", Speech to the National Press Club, 03 September, 2012*. Canberra: Press Office. Retrieved from http://www.pm.gov.au/press-office/%E2%80%9C-national-plan-school-improvement%E2%80%9D-speech-national-press-club-canberra.
Glynos, J. (2001). The grip of ideology: A Lacanian approach to the theory of ideology. *Journal of Political Ideologies, 6*(2), 191-214.
Glynos, J. (2008). Ideological fantasy at work. *Journal of Political Ideologies, 13*(3), 275-296.
Glynos, J., & Howarth, D. (2007). *Logics of critical explanation in social and political theory*. London: Routledge.
Hobsbawm, E., & Ranger, T. (Eds.). (1992). *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Hoffman, K. D. (2007). Where the rainbow ends: Eyes wide shut. In J. J. Abrams (Ed.), *The philosophy of Stanley Kubrick* (pp. 59-83). Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press.
hooks, bell (1994). *Outlaw culture: Resisting representations*. New York: Routledge.
Jordan, M., & Haladyn, J. J. (2008). Carnivalesque and grotesque bodies in *Eyes Wide Shut*. In G. D. Rhodes (Ed.), *Stanley Kubrick: Essays on his films and legacy* (pp. 182-195). Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
Kubrick, S. (1999). *Eyes wide shut*. Los Angeles: Warner Bros.
Kundnani, A. (2014). *The Muslims are coming! Islamophobia, extremism and the domestic war on terror*. London: Verso.
Lindblom, C. E. (1959). The science of" muddling through". *Public administration review, 19*(2), 79-88.
Lindblom, C. E. (1979). Still muddling, not yet through. *Public administration review, 39*(6), 517-526.

Lingard, B., & Sellar, S. (2013). 'Catalyst data': Perverse systemic effects of audit and accountability in Australian schooling. *Journal of Education Policy, 28*(5), 634-656.
McGowan, T. (2007). *The real gaze: Film theory after Lacan*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
McGowan, T. (2013). *Enjoying what we don't have: The political project of psychoanalysis*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
McGowan, T. (2015). *Psychoanalytic film theory and The Rules of the Game*. London: Bloomsbury.
McGowan, T. (2016). *Capitalism and desire: The psychic cost of free markets*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Moore, A. (2006). Recognising desire: A psychosocial approach to understanding education policy implementation and effect. *Oxford Review of Education, 32*(4), 487-503.
Prunty, J. (1984). *A critical reformulation of educational policy analysis*. Geelong: Deakin University Press.
Rasmussen, R. (2001). Eyes Wide Shut: The waking dream. In *Stanley Kubrick: Seven Films Analyzed* (pp. 330-357). Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
Readings, B. (1996). *The university in ruins*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Rizvi, F., & Lingard, B. (2010). *Globalizing education policy*. New York: Routledge.
Royle, N. (2003). *The uncanny*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Ruti, M. (2015). *Between Levinas and Lacan: Self, other, ethics*. New York: Bloomsbury.
Slater, G. B. (2015). Education as recovery: Neoliberalism, school reform, and the politics of crisis. *Journal of Education Policy, 30*(1), 1-20.
Stallybrass, P., & White, A. (1986). *The politics and poetics of transgression*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Stavrakakis, Y. (1999). *Lacan and the political*. London: Routledge.
Stobart, G. (2014). *The expert learner: Challenging the myth of ability*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
Taubman, P. M. (2012). *Disavowed knowledge: Psychoanalysis, education, and teaching*. New York: Routledge.
Vitek, J. (2001). Another squint at "Eyes Wide Shut": A postmodern reading. *Modern Austrian Literature, 34*(1-2), 113-124.
Webb, P. T., & Gulson, K. N. (2015). Policy scientificity 3.0: Theory and policy analysis in-and-for this world and other-worlds. *Critical Studies in Education, 56*(1), 161-174.
Webb, P. T., & Gulson, K. N. (2015). *Policy, geophilosophy and education*. Rotterdam: Sense.
Wright, A. (2012). Fantasies of empowerment: Mapping neoliberal discourse in the coalition government's schools policy. *Journal of Education Policy, 27*(3), 279-294.
Zipin, L. (2017). Pursuing a problematic-based curriculum approach for the sake of of social justice. *Journal of Education*(69), 67-92.
Žižek, S. (1989). *The sublime object of ideology*. London: Verso Books.
Žižek, S. (1992). *Looking awry: An introduction to Jacques Lacan through popular culture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
Žižek, S. (1997). *The plague of fantasies*. London: Verso.
Žižek, S. (2006). *How to read Lacan*. London: Norton.