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## Paper 51

## Rituals of order, blame & redemption: Coping with failing in a working class school

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**Rituals of order, blame and redemption:**
**Coping with failure in a working class school**

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> Here are the steps
> In the Iron Law of History
> That welds Order and Sacrifice:
>
> Order leads to Guilt
> (for who can keep commandments!)
> Guilt needs Redemption
> (for who would not be cleansed!)
> Redemption needs Redeemer
> (which is to say, a Victim!).
> Order
> Through Guilt
> To Victimage
> (hence: Cult of the Kill). . . .
> Kenneth Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion*, pp. 4-5

This paper is about the current regime for the regulation of primary schools in England, and how this regime shapes discourses about success-and-failure, social class and the allocation of blame.

I open with Burke's "Iron Law of History" in order to emphasise the ritual and rhetorical dimensions of educational performance and accountability. Burke offers this poem as a summary of the "moral" of his study of the rhetoric of the first three books of *Genesis:* a "reaffirmation of the foibles and quandaries that all [humans] (in their role as "symbol-using animals") have in common" (p. 5). These foibles and quandaries include (a) a desire for order, hierarchy and perfection; (b) the concomitant frustration of this desire, as a result of disorder, imperfection and transgression; (c) guilt and blame, which result from imperfection; and (d) the process of assuming guilt and/or allocating blame, through mortification and/or scapegoating.

Though I take exception with Burke's assumption of its inevitability, I find his "Iron Law" to be an apt characterisation of the social processes set in motion by the current wave of educational reforms in England, and of some of the problems and possible solutions these processes pose for participants. The National Curriculum has established an order: a set of standards that all pupils must meet, and national testing at ages 7, 11 and 14 to hold schools accountable to those standards. Aggregate attainment scores are published annually in the form of "league tables" that rank schools according to pupil achievement, clearly identifying the system's many "imperfections". This state of affairs

frames and propels public rituals of blame allocation, in which the Office of Standards in Education (OFSTED, the Inspection Agency) plays a critical role.

I explore these dynamics in a case study of how teachers in one working class school coped with their alleged under-performance, and in particular their experience of an OFSTED inspection that gave them the (failing) mark of "serious weaknesses". But first a few words about the relationship between social class and success-and-failure in English education.

*Social class and education in England*

Differences in educational achievement have been and remain highly correlated with social class differences in England (e.g. Reay, 2006; Rothon, 2007). What is the meaning of such correlations? How can they be explained? And how, if at all, should they be addressed? This paper explores how the realm of possible responses to those questions is shaped by current English educational policies and related discourse. Consider, for example, the following, non-exhaustive list of possible approaches to the "social class gap":

1. *Social reproduction*. The social class gap is entirely natural and reasonable: natural for working class children to expect to grow up to working class jobs, and reasonable for teachers to adjust their educational provision accordingly. After all, there are only so many middle class jobs available.

2. *IQ*. The gap represents the uneven distribution of intellectual ability between different socio-economic classes. Middle class parents have generally higher IQ than working class parents, which gives rise to their relative success in the labour market. By and large, children inherit their parents' intelligence.

3. *Cultural alignment*. The social class gap reflects the relative alignment of the school curriculum with middle class cultural resources and values. For example, the ways of speaking privileged by school tend to approximate middle class linguistic practices, while many of the language forms proscribed by school are typical of working class pupils (e.g. the double negative).

4. *Teacher discrimination*. The social class gap results from teacher prejudices: teachers expect that their working class pupils are incapable of achieving high academic standards, and lower their level of instruction accordingly, thereby indeed limiting the potential achievement of such pupils.

5. *Access to resources*. Middle class children have access to better social and material resources for support of their education, including, for example, private tutoring, family libraries, computer and internet access, and nutrition.

6. *Parental support and encouragement*. The social class gap results from different levels of support pupils receive from their home environment. Middle class parents tend

to be more educated, to have higher expectations from their children and to be more involved in their children's education than working class parents.

7. *School selection and self-segregation*. Middle class parents are more adept at obtaining for their children places in "better" schools. These schools are perceived to be easier to teach in, have more qualified teachers, higher teacher retention, etc.

These different ways of framing the problem suggest very different solutions. For example, if the problem is one of parental support, then schools need to compensate for weaker parents, and/or provide parenting education. Or, if the problem is one of cultural alignment, then pedagogy and curriculum need to be made more relevant to working class pupils. If the problem is one of low teacher expectations, then those expectations need to be raised (e.g. through performance management targets), and other explanations, which might contribute to lowering expectations – i.e. serving as "excuses" for working class pupil under-performance – need to be marginalised.

Over the past two hundred years discourse around the social class gap has shifted, with ideas that were once inconceivable becoming normal, and vice-versa. In the early 19th century school education was a privilege enjoyed almost exclusively by the upper classes, and this state of affairs was viewed as natural by contemporary observers (i.e. #1 above). Thus, for example, in 1807 Davies Giddy attacked suggestions for "giving education to the labouring classes of the poor" as "prejudicial to their morals and happiness… would teach them to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good servants in agriculture and other laborious employments to which their rank in society had destined them" (quoted in Chitty, 2004, p. 5). And, at the end of the 19th Century, as schooling was expanded, educational trajectories were largely class-defined. For example, the Taunton Commission (1876) envisaged

> three grades of secondary school: those for the upper and upper-middle classes, keeping their boys till 18 and giving a 'liberal education' in preparation for the universities and the old professions; those for the middle classes, keeping their boys till 16 and preparing them for the Army, the newer professions, and many departments of the civil service; and those for the lower middle classes, keeping their boys until 14, and fitting them for living as 'small tenant farmers, small tradesmen, and superior artisans'… 'It is obvious,' the Commission commented, in relation to its tripartite grading, 'that these distinctions correspond roughly, but by no means exactly, to the gradations of society.' (Williams, 1965, p. 159).

The 1944 Education Act extended the age of mandatory education to 15 and solidified the tripartite system. However, this post-war settlement marked a shift in discourse, from accepting social reproduction through education as natural and reasonable to the allegedly meritocratic sorting of pupils according to intelligence (explanation #2 above). Pupils were divided according to "aptitude and ability" at the end of primary school into grammar, technical and modern schools. Though this division into academic, technical and practical streams was made on the basis of an intelligence test, in practice the relatively well-resourced grammar schools were populated with middle class students,

while the overwhelming majority of working class pupils were relegated to secondary modern schools (Tomlinson, 2001). While this system was for the most part dismantled in the 1960s and 1970s (and replaced by comprehensive schools), its legacy – differing sets of expectations for different sets of pupils, largely on the basis of class – lingered on.

A major aim of the recent wave of reforms – e.g. the 1988 Education Reform Act and the National Literacy Strategy (1998) and Numeracy Strategy (1999) – was to remedy this state of affairs, by imposing uniform curriculum standards for all pupils. These policies also sought to reframe discourse about educational success-and-failure. Thus, for example, then Prime Minister Tony Blair explained to a National Association of Head teachers conference (2 June 1999) the reasons for low levels of adult literacy and numeracy:

> Why has this happened? Largely, I believe, because of deep complacency on the part of successive governments. Even on the Left, the language of equal opportunities too often went hand in hand with an acceptance of poor standards for the majority, on the unspoken assumption that most school-leavers would go naturally into unskilled jobs - or as women, be outside the workforce - and in either case need only basic qualifications, if any.
> (http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page1446.asp)

Note that Blair targets the "language of equal opportunities" on the Left, implying that "too often" discourse that appeared to be sympathetic to disadvantaged groups actually served as a cover for low expectations (i.e. explanation #4 above). This move de-legitimises social class as a relevant category for thinking and talking about educational attainment. Implicit in Government pronouncements is the accusation that appeals to social class (or race or ethnicity) in discussions of educational failure are cynical, prejudiced or both. Thus, in March 2000, then Secretary of State for Education David Blunkett explained that "there are cynics out there who say that school performance is all about socio-economics and the areas that these schools are located in. No child is preordained by their class or by their gender or by their ethnic group or by their home life to fail" (Carvel, 2000).

Contributing to this discursive shift is an eclipse of social class more broadly, which is attributable to a number of additional factors (cf. Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Skeggs, 2004): (a) the changing labour market, (b) the blurring of cultural distinctions between traditional social classes, (c) the displacement of class by gender and ethnicity as critical categories of difference, (d) disagreements within the academy about how to measure socio-economic class, and (e) the growing influence of the class-neutral school effectiveness paradigm (Rassool & Morley, 2000).

How do teachers cope with this changing discursive environment? Below I explore this question in the context of a case study of Low Tide Primary School, a "failing" school catering to pupils from primarily working class backgrounds.[1]

*Low Tide Primary School*

Low Tide Primary School is a relatively large (almost 400 pupils) community primary school serving a village which has for all intents become a suburb of a Southern English city. During the 2003-2004 academic year I conducted an extended case study of the enactment of the National Literacy Strategy in the school, including participant observation in literacy lessons in four Key Stage 2 classrooms (8-11 year-olds) and in the school more broadly, formal and informal interviews, audio-recording of lessons, and individual and group feedback conversations on the basis of transcripts of classroom interaction (for details see Lefstein, 2005, in press). Although the issue of social class and educational success-and-failure was not a focus of that study, it regularly appeared in my field-notes, especially in the lead up to an OFSTED inspection in January 2004. In what follows I describe the school's pupil intake and standards of achievement; the teachers' negotiations of perceived pupil needs, policy expectations and Headteacher pressures; and the OFSTED inspection.

According to the 2004 Ofsted report, "pupils [at the school] come from a broadly average socio-economic catchment area" and "free school meals eligibility is below the national average". However, teachers at the school claim that the pupil cohort is at greater relative disadvantage than suggested by these statistics. Indeed, the data – at least for the one Year 6 class in which I spent the greatest amount of time – seems to support their claim. Table 1, which is based on "autobiographies"[2] written by pupils in this class, presents the breakdown of parents' occupations. The relatively low incidence of high socio-economic status occupations, which tend to be associated with higher levels of education, is counterbalanced by a relatively high rate of employment.

*Table 1. Parents' occupations – Mr Thompson's Year 6 class*

<table>
<tr><td>Research site</td><td>Percentage</td><td colspan="2">Labor Force Survey – England (2003)[3]</td></tr>
<tr><td>Professional/managerial</td><td>19.6%</td><td rowspan="2">Higher and lower professional and managerial occupations, and intermediate occupations</td><td rowspan="2">44.0%</td></tr>
<tr><td>New economy (telecommunications)</td><td>5.4%</td></tr>
<tr><td>Skilled trades</td><td>21.4%</td><td>Small employers, Lower supervisory and technical, semi-routine occupations</td><td>30.1%</td></tr>
<tr><td>Unskilled labour</td><td>32.1%</td><td>Routine occupations</td><td>9.7%</td></tr>
<tr><td>Not employed</td><td>3.6%</td><td rowspan="2">Long-term unemployed</td><td rowspan="2">16.2%</td></tr>
<tr><td>Student</td><td>3.6%</td></tr>
<tr><td>No data provided</td><td>14.3%</td><td>--</td><td>--</td></tr>
<tr><td>Total</td><td>100%</td><td colspan="2">100%</td></tr>
</table>

Note also the low incidence of "new economy" jobs. The economic and social transformations commonly associated with globalisation, migration and the information economy seem to have passed over the Low Tide Primary school parent population. Not only are the majority of the parents employed in traditional working class jobs – the most common occupations were in construction, deliveries, and childminding – 80% of the pupils in Mr. Thompson's class were born in the same local hospital. The ethnic background of over three quarters of the pupils in the school is White British.[4]

The school had begun falling behind its local competitors in 2001, and in the 2003 local league tables it ranked 24th out of 35 schools (down from 15th in 2000). In particular, its Maths attainment scores were a cause for concern, with only 54% of Key Stage 2 pupils achieving the required level 4 in the 2003 tests (as opposed to 73% nationally). The school's literacy attainment was better, but still below average and below target: 70% achieving level 4 compared to 75% nationally.

In an effort to change these trends the Local Educational Authority (LEA) hired in the middle of the preceding school year a new Headteacher, Kathy Boyle. Boyle had a reputation for renewing failing schools: she assumed her previous post at a nearby school after it had been found to have "serious weaknesses" by OFSTED. Four years later Mrs. Boyle was credited by the local paper with engineering a "dramatic turnaround". That school, incidentally, was nestled in a public housing estate and was generally assumed to be working with a much more challenging population than Low Tide in terms of socio-economic background and social problems.

Relations between Mrs. Boyle and the teaching staff at Low Tide were tense at the beginning of the 2003-2004 academic year. Central areas of controversy included Maths groupings and attainment targets. The school had been accustomed to grouping pupils by ability; Mrs. Boyle favoured heterogeneous grouping, which she argued would raise the standard for weaker pupils. Teachers disagreed, and appealed to the Board of Governors, who decided to leave the matter to individual teacher discretion. Performance management negotiations over attainment targets were similarly controversial: teachers believed that Mrs. Boyle's targets were unreasonable, setting both them and their pupils up for failure.

The question of what could reasonably be expected from Low Tide pupils and teachers was a frequent topic of discussion in Upper School staff meetings (the four Year 5 and 6 teachers, with whom I worked most closely) from October to December 2003. Most of the teachers felt that Mrs. Boyle did not appreciate the task she was setting them, and that teaching the prescribed National Curriculum objectives to the pupils in their lower Maths sets was only possible if they were to completely ignore these pupils' current levels of mathematical ability. Moreover, not only would the pupils learn little Maths in this system, one teacher described the "certain failure" they would experience as cruel. Some teachers questioned Mrs. Boyle's motives, accusing her of sacrificing the children to protect herself in anticipation of the OFSTED inspection, which would undoubtedly inquire into what the Headteacher had done to raise the school's substandard Maths scores.

Why were so many Low Tide pupils seemingly incapable of progressing at the rate set by National Curriculum Mathematics objectives? Though social class was rarely invoked directly, it was implicit in many of the teachers' explanations. They were critical of the National Curriculum and National Numeracy and Literacy Strategies, which had been written for "average" children, and as such were not well-suited to the school's pupil

intake. One teacher, Mr. Thompson, explained the current problems facing the school as the result of shifting demographics (in an interview with me on 21 November 2003):

> MR. THOMPSON: But things have changed, you know, the actual dynamics of the children we're bringing in are different now. Originally, when I first came here, we were still – I mean it's a socio-economic thing, the children that we had at that time were from mature housing, middle class, stable families, and those children have grown up now, but the people who live in those houses are still there. The children have left home, gone to university or wherever they've gone, whereas our intake is more from a mobile community, and more from the council housing, those people that change quite regularly… It's not something that I'm thinking about in the sense that those children are any worse or better but there is a different type of child coming into the school, and I think it affects, and it has affected, and maybe we haven't changed with that. We don't tend to look at that. I don't think you do, do you? A child is a child, that's coming into the school. And the quality of them -
> MR. LEFSTEIN: How do you think it's changed, let's say that you're right that the trend is moving from very well established houses to much more mobile communities, with a lower socio-economic background, what sort of changes does that necessitate from the school?
> MR. THOMPSON: Well, it does involve – it's a classic case, if you read up about it you'll know that the encouragement from home is different, not always, but there is a general trend towards that. You know, so, you are chasing around after things like homework and diaries and things like this. Children are expected to grow up a lot quicker, they're not allowed to be children for very long, they're street children. You've got all those issues that arise. They're poor but not in the same way that poor used to be poor, you know, they have things, they've got TVs and videos and things like that, but they haven't got somebody to sit with them in the evenings to talk about their day. It's a general thing.
> MR. LEFSTEIN: The big question is, then, what are schools supposed to do about that?
> MR. THOMPSON: The issues, and my philosophy about it all, is to value all the children, basically, and you make of them what you can. I think sometimes we're fooling ourselves that we – I think, government-wise, they're considering the fact that we can make 90% of our society average and above, and that's just ridiculous. …I think we're doing a disservice to the less able children with the present system, the government aspect of it, and nobody's seeing that, you know, that we're aiming for these heights instead of looking at those particular children that could benefit society by getting a good deal at this stage.

Such explicit discussions of socio-economic class were rare, but Mr. Thompson's concern that the current system of high standards for all children was damaging for the less able was shared by at least two of the three other teachers in the Upper School staff. I should also note that these comments were made in private, in an interview, and that neither Mr. Thompson nor any of the other teachers voiced such reservations about pupil abilities in public forums such as full staff meetings.

Teachers' confidence in their assessments of what could realistically be achieved with their pupils was undermined by the confidential "PANDA" (performance and assessment) report received by the school at the beginning of the 2003 school year. This report compared the school with schools in similar circumstances (i.e. between 8-20% eligibility for free school meals). The results are displayed in the table below: a mark of D (below average) for English, and E (well below average) for Mathematics and Science.

*Table 2. Attainment at Key Stage Two: Comparison with National Benchmarks for Schools in Similar Contexts (source: Low Tide PANDA report, 2004. The bold numbers reflect the school's achievement; the non-bold numbers are the national percentages at the different percentiles listed.)*

**Schools with more than 8% and up to 20% FSM**

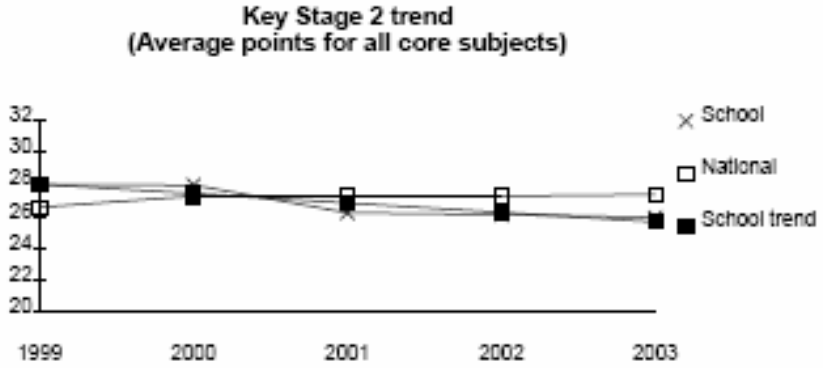
***Table 6.5 Percentage of pupils achieving each level***

**Percentage of pupils reaching level 4 or above**

| **Percentile** | 95th | Upper Quartile | 60th | 40th | Lower Quartile | | 5th | Interp-retation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| English (tests) | 94 | 85 | 81 | 75 | **70** | 69 | 55 | **D** |
| Mathematics (tests) | 94 | 83 | 78 | 71 | | 65 | **54** 51 | **E** |
| Science (tests) | 100 | 95 | 92 | 88 | | 84 | **80** 71 | **E** |

Moreover, whereas the five-year national trend reflected a slight rise in scores, the school trend exhibited a downward trajectory. The following table, reprinted from the PANDA report, summarises this picture.

*Table 3. Key Stage 2 trend (Average points for all core subjects)*




Headteacher Boyle frequently used the PANDA report in her attempts to persuade teachers that change was both necessary and possible. In particular, she pointed to the fact that most schools in similar circumstances perform much better as an argument for raising teacher expectations. And, as I noted above, the PANDA evidence figured prominently in the Upper School teachers' discussions and carried considerable weight. However, some teachers questioned the accuracy of the data, claiming that free school meals' eligibility did not adequately capture the nature of social disadvantage in the local

community, which enjoyed high levels of employment and, as a result, low levels of poverty.

The PANDA report reveals an element of duplicity in government rhetoric. On the one hand, socio-economic class was proscribed as a legitimate category in public pronouncements about educational success-and-failure. On the other hand, in confidential communications with teachers, government appealed to comparative data that situate school performance in socio-economic context (as indexed by percent of pupils entitled to free school meals). Likewise, in the school, discourse changed as it moved between public and private spaces. In public arenas, teachers stressed the importance of high expectations and avoided mention of pupils' social context or class background, while in private they confided their doubts about their pupils' chances of overcoming the disadvantages posed by their working class backgrounds. Teacher reluctance to speak about their pupils' social class has also been observed in other studies (see Dunne & Gazeley, in press).

*The OFSTED inspection*

Given their poor performance in recent national tests, Low Tide teachers and LEA officials were naturally concerned about the OFSTED inspection scheduled for January 2004. Moreover, against the backdrop of struggles between Headteacher and teachers over whether and how the school needed to change, the inspection was seen by many teachers as an opportunity to prove themselves, to demonstrate their competence. Likewise, shortly before the Inspection Headteacher Boyle shared with me her hope that the external inspection might help shake teachers out of their complacency, and serve as a catalyst for self-evaluation and rethinking of teaching practices.

In the weeks preceding the Inspection all the school's attention was focused on preparations. Written guidance circulated by the Headteacher emphasised that "it is the *evidence* of what the inspectors see, hear and read which will influence what is written in the final inspection report" (emphasis in original). As such, teachers were instructed to gather or create that evidence: a coordinator's file, a diary of work done, photo albums, collections of student work, etc. "Stunning" wall displays, including in the room provided for Inspector meetings ("they won't help but notice this"), are crucial and should be labelled with "a clear explanation of what aspect of the National Curriculum the work covers".

The first priority was to "show them your best teaching". Emphases in this regard included lively pace, differentiation of tasks, extending the strongest pupils, and lesson plans that are "very detailed and clearly show the intended learning objectives". The general expectation was that OFSTED was primarily interested in judging the quality of instruction, and that if that was good, the school would be all right.

Over the course of the three days the five Inspectors observed 39 lessons, of which 4 received the mark of "very good", 21 "good", 11 "satisfactory", 2 "unsatisfactory" and 1 "poor". As the positive appraisals began to stack up – reports were rushed into the staff room after each observed lesson – teachers began to smile and even relax a bit. It

appeared that they had weathered the storm. So most teachers were surprised when, despite almost two thirds of the individual lessons having been judged "good" or "very good", the school received the failing score of "serious weaknesses" in the overall Inspection judgement. The report summarises its evaluation as follows:

> Low Tide Primary is an improving school that provides an acceptable standard of education but still has serious weaknesses. The main weaknesses are the pupils' unsatisfactory achievement and the well below average standards that pupils have achieved at the end of Year 2 and Year 6 in the last three years. The headteacher provides good leadership and has clear vision for the school's improvement. The leadership and management of senior staff are at present unsatisfactory. The quality of teaching over time is unsatisfactory, although much good teaching was observed during the inspection. Currently, because of its serious weaknesses, the school gives unsatisfactory value for money.

To substantiate its critique of "pupils' unsatisfactory achievement" school's the report reprinted select data from the school's PANDA report:

**STANDARDS ACHIEVED**

| Results in National Curriculum tests at the end of Year 6, compared with: | all schools | | | similar schools |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2003 |
| English | D | C | D | D |
| mathematics | E | E | E | E |
| science | D | E | E | E |

*Key: A - well above average; B – above average; C – average; D – below average; E – well below average.*
*Similar schools are those whose pupils attained similarly at the end of Year 2.*

Note that the selection of data and related gloss downplay socio-economic context, which was so central to the PANDA report, at least in the way it was read by Low Tide teachers. First, while most of the comparisons in the original PANDA report were with similar schools, the OFSTED report highlights the comparison with all schools. Second, the category "similar schools" is inaccurately defined as "those whose pupils attained similarly at the end of Year 2". (The PANDA report includes contrasts both to schools similar in terms of eligibility for free school meals and to similar schools in terms of prior attainment; however, the scores listed here are from the comparison on the basis of free school meals.)

A question is raised by the report: if the teaching observed during the inspection was good, then how do the inspectors know that the "quality of teaching over time is unsatisfactory"? The main evidence of course is that test scores in the last three years have been well below average. But still the discrepancy between the good teaching observed and these low test scores needs to be explained, and responsibility assigned. Logically, there would appear to be at least four ways of resolving this issue:

1. *Blame the assessment mechanisms: either the Inspection observations or the tests are not representative*. The Inspectors are undoubtedly aware that teaching over the course of the three days observed was not wholly representative of what goes on in the school on a day-to-day basis (to put it mildly), but acknowledging this problem would of course undermine the inspectors' legitimacy (or the legitimacy of the tests).

2. *Blame the pupils: the school's intake are not capable of performing at requisite level; teaching is good, but learning is poor.* As I noted above, this is the explanation favoured by many of the teachers. However, it is problematic, both substantively and symbolically. Substantively, the school is being compared to schools with pupils from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. So, unless the measures on the basis of which schools are compared are flawed, it is reasonable to expect that the school's cohort is no worse than those of the comparison schools. Symbolically, of course, acknowledging that the educational system is incapable of giving all pupils the same opportunities is of course unacceptable, as discussed above.

3. *Blame the past: the school used to perform poorly, but has begun improving since the new Headteacher arrived less than one year ago (and improving schools takes time).* While this explanation makes a lot of sense, it runs counter to the OFSTED mandate, which is to judge the school's performance for the entire four-year period since the previous inspection. But then this issue raises questions about the usefulness of on-site inspections: since 1500 days of school cannot be judged on the basis of a three-day inspection, then why not simply go by SATs scores?

4. *Blame an intangible but significant aspect of school functioning: teaching is good, but other aspects of the school's operation get in the way of good teaching being translated into high achievement.* This was the path chosen by the Inspectors: teaching is good but curricular standards (of expectation) are low. "The school's target-setting process lacks rigour and teachers are not using the results of assessments to ensure that pupils are sufficiently challenged." Similarly, principal subject coordinators were singled out for having "too little impact on the standards in their subjects".

This discussion raises questions about the point of the inspection (as noted in #3 above). If the SATs tests provide the best indication of how well a school is doing – and, de facto, they are the indicator relied upon by the inspectors – then why spend all the money and time on on-site inspections? It would appear that part of the answer relates to the OFSTED's symbolic functions in the accountability regime. Symbolically, labelling a school as underperforming is insufficient – it leaves open the crucial questions about who is to blame and what must be done. The OFSTED inspection final report provides closure and therefore an opportunity for catharsis by assigning blame, guiding participants to specific points of action and administering punishment: the public shame of a failing report, and additional inspections to monitor progress. In the case of Low Tide Primary School the OFSTED Inspection effectively ended the struggle between teachers and Headteacher over performance standards, as attention turned to dealing with the urgent tasks set by OFSTED: preparing an action plan that addressed the weaknesses

identified, and acting upon the basis of that plan so as to satisfy the Inspectors that would be periodically monitoring the school until it was deemed to be no longer at risk.

*Conclusion*

This paper has explored how educational discourses around success-and-failure and social class are shaped by current policy and rhetoric. In the case of Low Tide Primary School, many teachers viewed their pupils' relatively low achievement as the natural outcome of those pupils' working class backgrounds. Official discourse engaged with these views in complicated ways. Public rhetoric rejected all attempts to tie pupil achievement and social class, though the confidential PANDA report did to a certain extent address teachers' explanations by comparing the school to schools with similar levels of poverty. Ultimately, the public rituals of league tables and OFSTED inspection "decided" the issue by identifying the school as failing, and blaming the teachers (especially in their capacity as subject coordinators).

In some ways this case is an accountability culture success story: ineffective teaching practices were exposed, and unproductive, discriminatory teacher views were refuted. However, while the accountability regime and rituals were used by the Headteacher to move teachers to action, they did not enable the sort of professional conversation that would have helped solve the problems they brought into view. By marginalising social class, the accountability system polarised and limited the discussion. It focused attention on the question of whether or not working class pupils could achieve at expected levels, rather than the substantive issues of why these pupils struggled to succeed, and how they could be better supported.

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[1] Pseudonyms are used to identify the school and teachers.
[2] These one-page autobiographies were written by all the pupils according to a predetermined template for public display. Twenty-eight of the 31 autobiographies contained data for at least one of the parents.
[3] This comparison of the distribution of occupations among parents of Mr. Thompson's pupils with national statistics provides only a general point of reference, since key details were not supplied in pupils' autobiographies: specific role in a sector (e.g. supervisory vs. technical), whether they were self-employed, etc. Moreover, the high rate of missing data further complicates this picture: were details omitted inadvertently or because the parent was unemployed? On the other hand, according to census data for 2001, the rate of unemployment the ward in which the school is located is only 2.1% – compared to 5.8% for Great Britain generally (official labour market statistics, labour market profile, www.nomisweb.co.uk). Finally, to confuse matters further, the ward-level census data do not corroborate the significant differences between the distribution of occupations found in Mr. Thompson's class and the national distribution.
[4] The largest minority group is "Black or Black British – Caribbean" (3.0%).