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# Structure, Agency and School Effectiveness: researching a 'failing' school

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**SUMMARY** *Qualitative data of a 'failing' junior school are used to highlight the ways in which a particular Local Education Authority (LEA) responded to 'serious weaknesses' outlined by a team of Office for Standards in Education inspectors and how staff mediated such LEA intervention. Such mediation will be theorised via the employment of analytical dualism, whereby structure and agency are held to be irreducible emergent strata of social reality. The purpose of this paper is not to complement and buttress the ideological nature of school effectiveness research, but to provide a micro insight into current mediation of macro-level policy.*

## **Introduction: the positivist underpinning of the OFSTED framework**

The current literature on school effectiveness and school improvement has depressingly little to say about the 'ineffective' school (Wilcox & Gray, 1996). This paper, however, explicitly aims to distance itself from the school effectiveness movement. Instead, it aims to provide a case-study account of the ways in which school effectiveness policy is mediated by teachers and Local Education Authority (LEA) advisors. Research on 'school effectiveness' has become a major international industry. As Barber & White (1997) note, although it took over a decade to happen, school effectiveness research has now had a major impact on policy-making at the national, local and school level. Indeed, they write that the then Department for Education and Science

established a School Effectiveness division in 1994 which has become increasingly influential in the years since then. It has sought explicitly to learn from the research ... and to apply its lessons to policy on, for example, failing schools ... *The revival of local education authorities in recent years has been built around the same body of research. Indeed, it would only be a slight exaggeration to say that it saved them from extinction.* (p. 1; my emphasis)

Thus those schools deemed to have 'serious weaknesses' or held to be 'failing'

by Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) inspectors are statutorily expected to be aided by the appropriate LEA. Despite contrary expectations on the part of the staff, it should therefore come as no surprise that the team of three LEA advisors conducted an OFSTED-style inspection of the school over a period of 3 days. The interview data with all staff evince the quite specific, structurally conditioned ways in which the advisors dealt with them. Such structural conditioning is *inter alia* embodied in the OFSTED framework, which is underpinned by school effectiveness research. School effectiveness research is positivist (see Angus, 1993): observable and measurable 'indicators' or 'outcomes' are its staple diet. Yet the commitment to positivist methodology necessarily entails a *non-casual* approach to the study of '(in)effective schools', for positivism disavows that social reality is differentiated and structured and thus deals only with constant conjunctions of observable events.

Indeed, positivism has its origins in David Hume and the British empiricists. For Hume, the external world consists of nothing more than contingently related events. There are no *real* or *necessary* connections between, say, A and B. Instead of A caused B, we have A occurred followed by B. Clearly, to say that A occurred and then B happened does not imply that A caused B. Yet to say that A caused B is to say that the occurrence of A is a necessary and/or sufficient condition for the occurrence of B. As Layder (1990, p. 12) argues, the Humean notion of causality that underpins positivism as expressed in the notion of observable, regular conjunctions of events is not an adequate conception at all, since it reduces to what amounts to a *description* and/or prediction rather than a true explanation of them: a true explanation must transcend the establishment of observed regularities and posit causal or generative mechanisms, which underlie these regularities (conjunctions of events) and actually produce them.

The Humean notion that our knowledge is exhausted by constant conjunctions of events is readily discernible in the school effectiveness literature. As already mentioned, the methodology aims to establish a number of 'outcomes' or 'indicators' on which the performance of schools can be measured. Such outcomes are directly measurable: assessment results, truancy rates, drop-out rates, frequency of graffiti, etc. Indeed, the 'key indicators' of the school's OFSTED report centred round SAT attainment, attendance, exclusions and 'teaching quality', all of which were subject to numerical tabulation (Office for Standards in Education Report, 1996). Those schools that perform well enjoy an examination of *correlations* between directly observable and measurable 'factors' (see Chitty, 1997) in order to provide practical solutions for those schools that are 'under-performing'. Such correlations are implicitly held to *cause* 'successful' schools. Here we reach the overriding flaw, for in effect the research *has no explanatory function whatsoever*. As Davies puts it:

Certain factors may be associated with good performance; but this is not to say that they *cause* them. A good school may be found to have high expectations of its students; but those high expectations may be a

result of having a good student intake over a number of years who are likely to produce good results. (Davies, 1997, p. 33)

Thus to Fielding, 'the isolation of variables is particularly susceptible to distortions typical of atomistic understandings of the social world which tell us nothing about the interactions, interconnections and contradictions of lived reality' (1997, p. 140). The salient point to be emphasised here is the essential *atomistic* social ontology that positivism presupposes; this Fielding rightly picks up on. For an atomistic ontology denies that society is a structured *sui generis* whole, that structure is irreducible to agency yet simultaneously dependent upon agency for its causal efficacy. Instead, we are dealing only with individuals and their contingently related daily doings. Indeed, the Humean theory presupposes a conception of people 'as passive sensors of given facts and recorders of their given constant conjunctions, which has the corollary that knowledge can always be analysed in a purely individualistic way' (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 50). Thus positivism's implicit sociology is methodologically individualist. Analytical dualism (Archer, 1995, 1996; Layder, 1997; Willmott, forthcoming), to be discussed, entails in contradistinction that social reality is *stratified*, that structure and agency constitute two irreducibly emergent strata whose distinctive powers and properties invite the methodological employment of *analytical* dualism. Analytical dualism is not the same as Cartesian dualism, for structure and agency are not disconnected 'substances', like Descartes' mind and body; they are necessarily interdependent but can be analysed dualistically because of their distinctive powers and properties.

It is thus unsurprising that many critics (Angus, 1993; Ball, 1990, 1995; Chitty, 1996; Davies, 1997; Elliot, 1996; Hamilton, 1994) of school effectiveness research have charged its proponents with 'ideological commitment' since OFSTED's positivist framework presupposes a particular social ontology that is congruent with Margaret Thatcher's famous dictum that 'there is no such thing as society'. Notwithstanding the belated recognition of the importance of social class, school effectiveness researchers remain committed solely to what goes on in schools; that is, observable events and outcomes—rather than social processes that entail irreducible generative mechanisms—which are intrinsically tractable to statistical measurement. A research methodology that denies the irreducibility and relative endurance of social structure *necessarily* entails an overly voluntaristic hue. Hence the intimate connection between right-wing policy and school effectiveness research for *structured* inequality is denied or played down, thereby providing a nicely varnished stick with which to beat school staff. Indeed, positivist ontology enables the finger of blame to be pointed firmly at individuals for underlying social structures that necessarily delimit the extent to which inner-city schools can achieve high SAT scores etc. are automatically ruled out of ontological court. School effectiveness proponents *are* culpable of ideological commitment precisely because their research findings and concomitant policy prescriptions aid concealment of inequalitarian social structures.

### Researching a 'Failing' School: the need for analytical dualism

The irony of the employment of analytical dualism to analyse the mediation of structural constraints on the part of the LEA advisors and staff alike is that such constraints are erased out of existence by the ontological presuppositions of OFSTED's positivist framework! In a nutshell, analytical dualism disengages the emergent powers of people from those of the 'parts', i.e. social structure (Archer, 1995). The parts are emergent (relational) properties that are held to have relative autonomy *vis-à-vis* agency. Such autonomy is derived from the *internal relationality* of structural emergent properties. As discussed above, positivist methodology will not countenance any notion of necessity, thereby removing the ontological basis of the irreducibility of social structure. For methodological individualism maintains that social entities such as banks, armies, universities, schools etc. are *reducible* to statements about individuals. The notion that structures (schools, universities, etc.) are both irreducible and prior to their makers and relatively enduring is immediately taken to entail reification. Yet this is simply a tempting *non sequitur*. To maintain that structure is *of its own kind*, that it has *sui generis* properties, is not to reify it. *Sui generis* emergent properties only arise through the *combination* of internally necessary relations. Such relations necessarily presuppose individuals for their relative endurance and causal efficacy.

There is nothing sinister or mysterious about the notion of structure as an emergent property possessing *sui generis* causal efficacy. The defining feature of structure is simply its internal relationality. This is what Durkheim meant when he compared the liquidity of water to society, for the properties and powers of society cannot be reduced to individuals; equally, water cannot be reduced to hydrogen and oxygen, since the latter constituents as separate entities are highly inflammable yet when combined possess distinctly non-flammable properties! Water as an emergent, irreducible entity is such in virtue of the fact that hydrogen and oxygen *necessarily* presuppose each other and when conjoined produce powers that are irreducible to such gases. Let's take the example of the school in which I conducted a 5-month period of participant observation. The individual actors who teach, study, clean, etc. in the school reproduce the school in their daily activities, yet are causally affected by that which they reproduce. Such causality resides in the *social relations* of teacher/pupil, cleaner/cleaning supervisor. These social relations are irreducible, for the powers and properties that pertain to individual actors *qua* individuals are modified in fundamental ways. This modification arises from the combination of internally necessary relations, that is, teacher presupposes pupil, cleaning supervisor presupposes cleaner. The daily behaviour of the actors who fill the latter positions is *structured* in specific ways. A teacher cannot give him/herself an official SAT self-assessment just as a pupil cannot revoke the decision of a SAT examiner. Such powers do not reside in the properties of actors *qua* individuals but in the social relations that simultaneously presuppose such actors for their enduring efficacy.

Hence, one can talk about the agential *mediation* of structure, because

emergent properties only work *through* people, not *in spite* of people (the error of reification). Thus when I asked the deputy headteacher why she did not use her position of formal authority to ask for clarification concerning the advisors' report that 'she was doing OK', she replied that

We don't actually receive the report. So you can't clarify anything ... [The head] and I were given a report to read half an hour before the Governors got it ... and we went through it and picked up about 6 different things I disagreed with and so did [the head]. And we then said well we want this changed and we want this changed. Then they read it to the Governors. The Governors then had to give their copies back in, so that these amendments could be made umm any that they agreed with so that we could disagree with the facts if they were wrong; but we couldn't disagree with any judgements that were made ...

The reply that neither herself nor the head could disagree with any of the advisers' judgements constitutes a stringent constraint. Unlike Giddens' structuration theory, where there is an emphasis upon agency having the ability 'to do otherwise' (see e.g. Shilling, 1992), analytical dualism eschews the truistic dichotomy of constraint/enablement and instead focuses on the stringency of constraints versus degrees of freedom. In order to theorise the stringent constraint that the head and his deputy came up against, the notion of the intrinsic ability to do otherwise is of no use. Of course, the head and his deputy could walk away, but this would then invoke a *structured* penalty in the form of a disciplinary hearing and possible dismissal. To maintain that agents can *ever* do otherwise entails a dubious psychological assumption, namely the agents will ever be prepared to pay quite hefty prices, and that ultimately structure has no determinate influence—in this case the impediment to challenging advisors' judgements of teachers' ability. Analytical dualism does not, however, entail an implicit determinism, for both the head and the deputy could exit the concrete structural situation at any point in time. But again this would entail a rather dubious psychological assumption that structuration theory entertains, namely that structure does not have the determinacy to supply agents with reasons for maintaining, challenging or transforming the status quo.

Indeed, structural emergent properties have to be *mediated* by agents to have any causal efficacy. They do not operate above-and-beyond us like some suprahuman entity. The degrees of freedom that actors enjoy depends upon their structural location. Thus, the head will have certain powers at his/her disposal that a newly qualified teacher will not. Such powers may remain unexercised or exercised but unperceived. To reiterate, the power to invoke a disciplinary hearing against a member of staff exists in virtue of the irreducible social relations that constitute a school or indeed any other form of organisation. Thus, whilst all members of staff in the school complained about not being informed that the 3-day visit by LEA advisors would be akin to an OFSTED inspection, there was nothing they could do. Of course, there remained the possibility of complaining to the Education Director, but to do so would have

simply made matters worse. Structurally, the advisors had the upper hand, and this was strengthened by the precarious position of the school, of which all staff were palpably aware.

### **The 'Failing' School: background and research methodology**

The OFSTED inspection was carried out in July 1996 over a period of 5 days. At the time the school had 206 boys and girls on roll aged 7–11. As the OFSTED report mentioned, the catchment area has mainly local authority housing and 'high levels of economic and social deprivation: 54.4% of pupils receive free school meals and 18% live in overcrowded conditions, nearly twice the national average' (Office for Standards in Education, 1996, p. 6). The 'key indicators' in the report focused firstly on results at Key Stage 2, and then looked at levels of attendance, number of exclusions and 'teaching quality'. The school came bottom of the 'league table' in its area, with 38% of children achieving Level 4 or above in English, 14% achieving Level 4 or above in mathematics and 44% achieving Level 4 or above in science. The main findings of the Report are as follows:

Most aspects of the management of the school are sound, although there are some weaknesses ... The management responsibilities of staff are not always appropriate and in some cases do not match their expertise. Staff development lacks rigour and some staff feel they lack support. There is insufficient monitoring of both teaching and the progress of individual pupils, other than those with SEN ... Pupils enter the school with low levels of attainment and generally make progress in acquiring basic skills. However, there is a high proportion of unsatisfactory teaching and more able pupils do not progress to the higher levels of attainment. When these facts are linked to the generous level of funding, the school gives unsatisfactory value for money. (Office for Standards in Education, 1996, pp. 4–5)

Following this Report, an Action Plan was drawn up under the supervision of the LEA advisory team and was to be evaluated by the LEA team in June 1997. I spent 3 weeks in school almost immediately after the LEA advisers had conducted their OFSTED-style evaluation of the implementation of the Action Plan. The 3-week participant observation period was intended initially as an experiential prelude to a whole-term period of participant observation, which I completed last year. It was not my intention to interview staff about their experiences of the LEA 'inspection', in view of my somewhat limited knowledge both of the school and the staff. However, some teachers were keen for me to talk to them about their experiences, as they were aware of my interest in school effectiveness and were keen to have a 'good old moan'. And so I thought it judicious not to waste such an opportunity! At the time I was concerned that each would merely reiterate what was said by the first interviewee—that all would make sure each story was congruent with the general feeling of dismay

and anger at the way in which the three LEA advisors conducted an OFSTED-style inspection without asking appropriate questions *vis-à-vis* the Action Plan and providing constructive feedback. However, as I quickly found out during both periods of research, the staff 'culture' could hardly be described as 'collaborative', as one where all staff worked professionally to achieve the ends of the Action Plan.

Indeed, before starting my 3-week period of participant observation and interviewing, the head announced his decision to take early retirement and a senior member of staff expended a considerable amount of time informing a small clique of staff about the temporary replacement; namely a current head with a reputation as a 'trouble-shooter', a woman who 'got rid of 6 staff' within the first term of arriving at a similar, 'failing' school. As the incumbent head was leaving, some staff felt able to talk quite freely about the 'poor management skills' of the head. The hearsay talk about the temporary appointment of the new head palpably unnerved all staff, many of whom were used to 'doing their own thing'. As one senior teacher remarked, '[the head] never came in to see what we were doing ... that was the problem!'. The head himself commented that one of the LEA advisors recommended that he treat his staff 'like children':

... one of the advisers she said to me teachers are like children ...  
You've got to treat them like children. Well I'm afraid I just can't ...  
You see there's no way that I'm going to change to be like that. So  
that's one of the reasons I took the decision I did [i.e. to take early  
retirement] ...

From my 5-month period of participant observation of the staff, it became clear that many deep-seated resentments precluded professional interchange and discussion; indeed some staff never entered the staff room at lunch time. In fact, the 'trouble-shooting' head completely reorganised staff meetings in order to reduce the high level of confrontation among some staff. Yet interestingly, all were aware that if matters did not improve, namely SATs scores, then the school would close within 2 years. This, however, did little to attenuate staff schisms and provide the impetus towards improved monitoring and self-evaluation. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and analysis draws upon interview transcripts and fieldnotes of observations and discussions with staff.

### **Evaluating the Action Plan of a 'Failing' School: Local Education Authority advisors, structural constraint and missed opportunity**

Given the positivist underpinning of OFSTED [1], and the utilisation of such methodology to analyse ineffective schools and provide solutions, it is not surprising that the LEA advisors, constrained by the latter, conducted an OFSTED-style approach to evaluating the school's current progress. Moreover, such an inspection was concerned with observing (measurable) outcomes. Thus, the focus of the LEA team was on differentiation, lesson planning and the assessment of outcomes. As Ball (1990) points out, the parameters of OFSTED



operate judgements within the input–output logic of the commodity form, and displace and *exclude* other criteria of judgement. The positivist paradigm simply cannot accommodate *unobservable* phenomena, for example a child’s innate ability or indeed inegalitarian social structures that place contextual limits on academic achievement, despite the fact that each OFSTED report makes reference to socio-economic intake. The deputy head, herself a Year 6 teacher, together with her Year 6 colleague, openly admitted that they are now ‘teaching to SATs’, something which they emphasised was at odds with their commitment to child-centred learning.

All staff felt less pressured than they did when OFSTED conducted their 5-day inspection. Indeed, all staff were told that the LEA team were to conduct their 3-day evaluation on an informal basis. This, however, turned out not to be the case and was the source of much resentment and disappointment for all staff. As the deputy put it:

But it was supposed to be we were told it was informal, they turned up and it wasn’t ... and umm they just came in, graded your lesson, made comments on it and left again which is exactly what OFSTED did ...

A newly qualified teacher echoed this:

But the style of the inspection was the thing that nobody was prepared for; cause we’d been told that it was going to be very informal and they were just looking at the core subjects ...

The issue of feedback from advisors was a source of disbelief and anger on the part of most staff. One of the two newly qualified teachers received constructive feedback from all three advisors, but conceded that ‘most people didn’t get it and I think I only got it this time because I was new ...’. In fact, staff, *only* after collective protestation, could only sign up for a brief conversation about lesson gradings with one of the advisors. Whilst the LEA inspection was described by all as OFSTED-style, the actual way in which the advisors observed some lessons belied this.

RW: But did they ask any sort of relevant questions whilst they were in here?

DH: They didn’t ask any questions, no. They came well they *did*, because umm the one rule about OFSTED is they’re not supposed to disturb your lesson ...

RW: Oh right.

DH: So you’re supposed to do your lesson and then if they want to catch you for 5 minutes afterwards, that’s fine. Not while the children are in here. The one advisor actually pulled me out of teaching a group to ask me something about my file ... about special needs file which he should *never* pull me out ummm and asked me all these questions ... He *knew* he shouldn’t have done it. But because it wasn’t really an OFSTED, they did it ...

Here, the LEA team, whilst operating within structurally conditioned parameters, opted not to conduct a full OFSTED-style evaluation of teaching. This decision is derivable from the structural powers at the team's disposal, powers which are buttressed by the inability of the staff to question their formal, one-way evaluative approach because of the 'poor' OFSTED report. However, the LEA advisors are not at the structural mercy of the State and indicative of this theoretical proposition is the way in which they 'evaluated' the nature and extent of differentiation. The staff, however, *were* at the mercy of the LEA and had no means of redressing what was felt to be a half-hearted and poorly executed LEA evaluation exercise. Differentiation, of course, has been the watchword of the early 1990s and has taken its place among the key criteria for effective classroom practice (Kerry & Kerry, 1997). The immediate problem to be resolved by staff was the relatively poor SATs scores. The OFSTED report (1996) discussed the lack of staff support *vis-à-vis* lesson planning and 30% of teaching was described as less than satisfactory. This provided the backdrop to the LEA inspection. The staff quite reasonably expected an in-depth assessment of differentiation and planning, yet were subject to a formal assessment during which only snippets of teaching practice were observed and graded. Moreover, issues such as children being on task were simply derived from brief observations: instead of talking to children and teachers, the advisors on the whole made brief visits to classes.

This was hardly a recipe for 'improvement' and indeed constitutes a missed opportunity for many staff, who genuinely were aware of the need for improvement and were keen to receive constructive criticism and practical advice.

DH: ... Science is very much I mean I *did* differentiate all the way through and I did they did all these investigations ... But he sat at this table, he saw *this* activity. But he didn't look. When they moved from this table, after 20 minutes, he didn't follow the group round to see how they used that information. So in the report he wrote 'closed questions' ...

RW: Did you get a chance to say to him 'well if you'd ...'

DH: No. Nothing at all, which is where he should have said 'why did you do this?' oh because then they could go on to that table and investigate using that knowledge ...

The other newly qualified teacher commented that the first half hour of a maths lesson was observed by an advisor. Here she felt she was wrongly held not to be differentiating:

... at the end he said that he didn't see any differentiation in what they were doing so the work wasn't pitched at the children's individual levels and I said that well it was to a certain extent because there was a different group doing different work who I knew *definitely* couldn't cope with it ... But I was introducing a new thing that they'd never done before with me and that was drawing graphs and reading data. So

I wanted them all to do the same thing so I could see what they could do first and then after that I would differentiate! And so when he said this I explained why I was doing it and he sort of ummed and ahed ...

A member of the Senior Management Team commented that

But for the two maths lessons one advisor came in here: one was at ten o'clock and the lesson finishes at ten past ten ... but he missed the ... from nine o'clock the introduction at nine he missed all their work. But it was a finishing-off time and he said, you know, there was a lack of differentiation. But at the end of the lesson I had given them all the same sheet to find out what they'd learnt ...

The SMT member said that one lesson was graded 'good' because all were working on task. Yet as she rightly pointed out, he only *assumed* that by looking round the classroom: he didn't go round and check. The extent to which OFSTED methodology had been taken on board by the LEA team is exemplified by our discussion of two children experimenting with water (see below). One of the main criticisms of SATs is its negation of child-centred learning—the emphasis upon measurable outcomes or performance rather than competence and learning processes. Indeed, Scott (1997) makes the important point that measurements of performance do not refer to levels of competence reached by the pupil and that the gap between competence and performance for individual pupils varies and cannot be measured. During my 5 weeks' participant observation of the two Year 6 classes, which were preparing for SATs, the teaching was exclusively centred on the digestion of facts and how strategically to answer SATs questions. Indeed, the deputy head was an examiner last year and talked at great length to Year 6 about how one pupil could not receive any marks on a circuits question as the lines on a battery were not close enough. Thus, the slow and laborious process of finding out, of teacher *qua* facilitator, had no place in the Action Plan timetable: *SATs scores had to be improved*. The following excerpt exemplifies the role that LEA advisors, in this case-study, have now adopted in response to changing macro factors.

RW: Umm. Did you feel that they asked you yourself any umm relevant questions or was it just a question you know I'm coming in to look at you ...

TJ: They didn't ask umm one of them asked what levels I think the children were at and he did comment it was a science lesson and there was the first lesson they'd done on floating and sinking so they were two children ... you can imagine which two! I was just letting them play with a bowl of water and he said what level are those children, how are you extending them? you know ... and what is the purpose of that activity. He obviously didn't like it at all and I said well, my view is that before children can actually carry out the science experiments they have to be allowed to see through play ...

about the properties of water. I said I think that's a very valuable thing because you know because he had his hand up like that and was just watching the water go like that and then he keeping his hands together and seeing if it would come through and I said I thought that was a very valuable activity ...

Another member of the SMT commented thus:

HR: I didn't get asked *anything*. The only thing I got asked oh I did get asked two questions: one was by one advisor who'd got the wrong date on his watch! So he was muddled about what the date was! [RW laughs] And the other one was were they ... what was going to happen to the reading group the DISTAR group had gone out. Were they going to be doing handwriting when they came back? At the time I couldn't remember at what the hell time they came back anyway! And yes we were doing handwriting and they were just going to muddle in with it, you know! umm and that's probably why we got written down that handwriting wasn't differentiated! [HR laughs]

All staff accepted the reality of the pressing need to improve SATs, despite its negation of child-centred learning. The teacher who talked to me about children learning about the properties of water was deeply committed to child-centred learning, as exemplified by her response to the LEA advisor. However, she was not a Year 6 teacher and thus was under considerably less pressure than the two Year 6 teachers. Here we witness agential resistance to the anti-child-centred learning logic of the SAT philosophy. Yet the LEA 'inspection' was clearly intent upon focusing staff energies on improving SATs and teaching towards the establishment of measurable assessment situations. Part and parcel of the drive towards measurable outcomes is the necessity of differentiation: identify appropriate levels of ability, target them and measure the relative efficacy of targeting. However, the way in which the LEA team evaluated teachers' attempts to improve differentiated planning and assessment procedures clearly undermined the hopes and current efforts of all staff. This will no doubt send a depressing *frisson* down the backs of those in the School Effectiveness Division. Indeed, one of the 'factors' held to be causally constitutive of 'effective' schools is *communication* between staff. This was palpably absent at the outset of the LEA evaluation.

It would be fair to say that more effective communication between LEA advisors and all staff would have provided a congenial environment in which constructive criticism and/or praise would have facilitated the OFSTED-induced aim of achieving 'value for money'. What a more informal LEA approach would have ignored, however, is the reality of the socio-economic background of the pupils. During my 5-month period of fieldwork, many a staff meeting initially had to deal with depressing social services issues and children in need of 'positive praise'. For many children, simply reassuring them that they are safe

and cared for was a time-consuming task; SATs results simply took second place. The issue of whether one boy who had tried to commit suicide because of family problems could achieve Level 3 at SATs would have been met with complete disgust by staff. But despite the evident need for staff to deal with 'home problems', the new Head was adamant that the school's past 'social work' ethos be firmly discarded. This is the harsh reality that working-class schools now have to face: make sure you're not bottom of the SATs League Table or face the possibility of closure. As the outgoing Head poignantly remarked during interview, whilst he was confident the school would not be bottom in the League Table during the next batch of SAT examinations, somebody else would be.

However, the purpose of this paper has been to give a case-study snapshot of the ways in which an LEA advisory team responded to an OFSTED report that referred to 'serious deficiencies' that, if not remedied, would lead to closure. Without wishing to give ammunition to the School Effectiveness Lobby, for they demand what is structurally impossible, the case-study school did have 'deficiencies' that were readily tractable to remedial action, e.g. providing advice on differentiation, devising assessment opportunities, etc. Yet as the above data indicate, such remedial action was not forthcoming from the agency statutorily empowered to undertake it. One of the principal limitations of this case-study is, of course, the lack of interview data with the LEA advisors. It would have been useful to ascertain the extent to which OFSTED criteria were the guiding force behind their 3-day 'inspection'. One can only deduce this from informal discussions with staff, observations and the interview data. Finally, it goes without saying that it would be useful to have data on other 'failing' schools in the process of receiving LEA advice. Nevertheless, the employment of analytical dualism has shown how structural properties are mediated by agency in a non-deterministic way. The LEA team were not *compelled* to undertake a formal evaluation of the school's current attempt to implement its post-OFSTED Action Plan. If they wanted to keep their jobs, of course, they had to undertake some *form* of evaluation. The salient point I wish to emphasise is that any ethnography is about agential interpretation and activity *within* contextual limits.

### Concluding Remarks

This paper has tried to delineate the ways in which an LEA has responded to the needs of a 'failing' school and how the school mediated the former's response. *Contra* the closed system ontology of positivism (Bhaskar, 1997), educational systems are *open*, as my ethnographic work graphically illustrates. Of course there are contextual limits to what LEAs and schools can respectively do, but such limits do not *determine* what goes on, they differentially *condition* agential activity. Thus, one could not have predicted the formalistic response of the LEA in my case-study in which two-way communication was conspicuously absent and classroom observations inadequate. The current structural framework embodied in OFSTED and the various Education Reform Acts, *inter alia*,

condition the activities of LEAs and schools. The LEA in this instance had to evaluate the school's performance in relation to its Action Plan, such evaluation had to take into account the OFSTED framework. Such a framework, as discussed above, is underpinned by positivism and hence focuses solely on the observable and measurable. This was exemplified by the LEA's 3-day evaluation. Whilst from my own data one could not disagree that there was room for improvement, I wish to reiterate that there are *limits* to what can be realistically achieved in a working-class school. The School Effectiveness division, however, implicitly denies such limits.

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### NOTE

- [1] As Hamilton (1994) notes, in 1994 the School Effectiveness and Improvement Centre of the London University Institute of Education was commissioned to summarise current knowledge about school effectiveness and respond to the request for an analysis of the key determinants of school effectiveness. Whilst the Institute of Education recognised against OFSTED that causality cannot proceed on the basis of a straightforward linear model, '(t)he notion of key determinants is abandoned, to be immediately replaced by "key factors" ... The key factors are packaged in an "accessible [i.e. tabular] format". The preamble to this table denotes them as "correlates of effectiveness", whereas the table itself is headed "eleven factors for effective schools"' (p. 55). Here, of course, the focus on correlates reflects its implicit positivism.

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