

# **Exploring how performativity influences the culture of secondary schooling in Scotland**

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the effects of performativity on the culture of a Scottish secondary school, Lochview High School. This is set against a backdrop of the Scottish education policy context which in recent years has been heavily focused on reducing the poverty-related attainment gap, namely through the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC). The analysis of the empirical data is supported by a cultural and ecological framework which emphasises the interwoven and complex nature of the school system. In particular the paper provides a critique of accountability and performative agendas which often run counter to other national agendas, such as the SAC. Through observations, staff interviews (teachers and senior management), and student interviews, task-based activities and group discussions, the data suggests performative and accountability measures are inextricably woven through the education system within which Lochview is situated. Despite this, Lochview provides a case-study of a school which successfully navigates competing agendas. However, it is not without its struggles, but the school community often finds rewards and benefits in the positive school culture which develops as a result of responding to the local community's needs.*

## Keywords

- *Performativity*
- *School context*
- *School culture*
- *Accountability*

## Introduction

This paper reports on a larger mixed method study which set out to explore secondary schools<sup>1</sup> in disadvantaged areas of Scotland which achieve better than expected outcomes for their students. In the first stage of the study, I identified schools located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage which were achieving positive educational outcomes for their students.

Then, I conducted case study research to explore the factors as to why selected schools were 'exceeding expectations' (Hughes 2018). This paper, focused on one case-study school, Lochview High School, will explore the context of one school to illustrate how performativity effects and influences the culture of schooling.

Drawing upon a cultural and ecological framing (Lee 2012), I situate the study within a Scottish policy context where the Scottish Government have placed tackling educational inequalities and reducing the poverty-related attainment gap at the heart of the government's agenda. Through the utilisation of the cultural-ecological approach the research seeks to highlight how performativity can envelope multiple aspects of schooling, supported by the experiences of both staff and students at Lochview High School. This is framed by the Scottish context where the paper highlights the trickle-down effect of global ideas from prominent organisations, such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), to national and local contexts, resulting in numbers not only defining worth, but also effectiveness, and how we come to understand society (Sellar and Lingard 2014; Ball 2015). Therefore, this paper seeks to contribute to on-going debates surrounding the dangers and flaws of performative cultures and policies, as promoted by the ideas of the OECD (Mowat 2018; Piattoeva 2015; Solomon and Lewin 2016; Steiner-Khamsi 2012). In particular, the paper explores how such policies can be at odds with other national agendas leading to contradictions and tensions which filter down to the school level impacting upon those school leaders, teachers and young people.

## **The rise of cultures of performativity**

As global and transnational discourses move towards ever growing accountability measures, the effects of audit culture can be seen in the public sector (Power 1997) with nations encouraged to conform in order to meet specified markers of what constitutes a well-functioning and successful nation (Carnoy 2016). In an education context, nations increasingly call for more comparative educational performance data in order to measure, by proxy, their economic competitiveness with schooling a measure of economic prosperity (Carnoy 2016). As a result the OECD's, and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), top-down global governance of education becomes status quo with the 'economization' of education policy and 'educationizing' of economic policy (Sellar and Lingard 2014; Lingard and Sellar 2016).

Data-driven education reform takes precedence and policy borrowing, whereby countries adopt best practice and policy ideas from another country – usually those attaining highly in PISA – becomes the norm (Chung 2016).

### ***Setting the scene: the Scottish context***

While Scotland has always had its own education system, separate from the rest of the UK, the creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 resulted in responsibilities for education being devolved to the new Parliament. In 2010, the new national curriculum, Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) was introduced in Scottish schools with distinctive features including a developmental approach with a focus on skills and competencies and teachers viewed as agents of change (Priestley and Minty 2013). However, despite the originality of CfE on paper, Priestley and Minty (2013) argue a competence-based curriculum model like CfE is part of a global trend in lining education goals up with economic aims and note that this is a trend influenced by other countries and multinational organisations, such as the OECD and the European Union.

In the era before CfE, Cowie, Taylor and Croxford (2007), chart the rise of accountability and performance management measures in Scottish schooling, and note a rise in ‘intelligent accountability’ in Scotland coincided with an emphasis on accountability processes in school education in England. In their conclusion, Cowie, Taylor and Croxford (2007) highlight the quick and easy nature of accountability processes, such as school inspections and the analysis of attainment data, and in generating *improvement* have proven irresistible to politicians and policy-makers. However, they warn such improvements are often short-lived, illusory and the resulting accountability mechanisms lead to a ‘climate of fear’ (ibid, p. 46).

Despite the introduction of CfE, and a move towards a more developmental approach to education, accountability practices and cultures of performativity have withstood due to being so embedded in Scottish schooling (Priestley and Minty 2013; Priestley 2014). In a background report prepared prior to the 2015 OECD review, the Scottish Government (2015b) acknowledges the ‘challenge of performativity’ in Scottish education arising from systems of accountability, inspection and scrutiny. These elements of output regulation (school inspections and evaluation of attainment data) persistently remain within CfE – with this emphasised by a new online

benchmarking tool introduced in 2013, Insight<sup>ii</sup>. This tool is packaged as a comparative and collaborative tool which can help to drive improvement, but, as Williamson (2017) argues Insight also acts as ‘performative technologies of competition’ (ibid, p. 84), with schools competing to be seen as positively as possible.

In the wider context, looking back towards the prominence of multinational organisations and global trends, Ozga and Arnott (2019) highlight the ever present influence of the OECD in the current Scottish Government’s educational policy making. These influences come in the form of the OECD reviews in 2007, 2015, with a further upcoming review in 2020-21, and from Scotland’s declining performance in PISA. Mowat (2018), in her exploration of the drive to close the attainment gap in Scotland, highlights how the Scottish Government’s performative agenda is increasingly driven by economic competitiveness and the desire to be ‘the best’. Mowat (2018) illustrates how, in this culture of performativity, the Scottish Government looks to other nations for solutions to the problems, such as the attainment gap. In particular, the Scottish Government have drawn upon the London Challenge, utilising a pick and mix policy approach which may appear to offer a solution to a problem of narrowing the attainment gap, but fundamentally the ‘mix of ingredients...may not be replicated’ which is necessary in order for a policy to succeed (ibid, p.30-31).

### ***Closing the poverty-related attainment gap: Scottish Attainment Challenge***

In 2014, in response to growing awareness of the discrepancy in outcomes of those living in the most and least disadvantaged areas, with the former achieving, on average, significantly lower educational outcomes (OECD 2007; Sosu and Ellis 2014; Bradshaw 2011), the Scottish Government launched the Raising Attainment for All Programme. The aim of this programme was to encourage and foster improvement, and equity, in both attainment and achievement through collaboration among those invested in the educational system (Scottish Government 2018a). In 2015, the Scottish Government (2015a) launched the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) with the aim of achieving equity in educational outcomes and a particular focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Initially, efforts were focused at the primary school level to aid improvements in literacy, numeracy and health and well-being. However, in 2017, this

programme was extended to support over a third of secondary schools across Scotland (Scottish Government 2018b).

The SAC is supported by a number of key policies including Curriculum for Excellence, Getting It Right For Every Child (a national approach to improve partnership between those involved in a child's life) and the National Improvement Framework (established in 2015 with the intention to deliver excellence and equity in Scottish education). Throughout these policies there is an ecological understanding that the local, regional and national contexts impact on a child's world (Coles et al. 2016). Further, reference to the wider system, with the child at the centre, is now commonplace in CfE guidance and National Improvement Framework (see Scottish Government 2017).

### **A cultural and ecological framework for human learning and development**

The ecological approach has its foundations in the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) with the model being used to explore child development within the context of a very complex system of relationships that helps to form their environment (Bronfenbrenner 1979). However, the model has found use in educational practice (Lee 2012; Papadopoulou 2012; Raffo et al. 2010; Mowat, 2018; Smyth and Wrigley, 2013). Indeed, educationalists have argued that the ecological approach provides a useful (re)framing in order to explore, better understand, and address, issues such as the poverty-related attainment gap (Mowat, 2018; Smyth and Wrigley, 2013).

Lee (2012) proposes a cultural and ecological framework for human learning and diversity which, in its simplest form, acknowledges the dynamic exchanges of individuals influencing settings, but also settings influencing individuals. This socio-cultural approach to the ecological framework emphasises how contexts shape and are shaped by individual, emphasising how ecologies are not singular (individuals are part of multiple, evolving settings or systems) and consist of complex contexts and cultures. Through this model, Lee (2012) argues participation in any setting is inherently cultural as participation in each setting involves 'shared knowledge, beliefs, dispositions, artefacts, and ways of using language' (175). The significance of utilising the cultural-ecological framing in this paper is that it allows for an exploration of how the different levels of a system interact with one another to impact upon everyday schooling

providing a multi-layered and multidimensional understanding. In particular, this paper sets out to explore the Scottish context utilising Lee's model to highlight how schools are inextricably connected with both their local community and wider society and how, as a result, a culture of performativity filters, and permeates, through to everyday life in a Scottish secondary school.

### **Situating the research study: methodology**

This article draws on a subset of the findings of a larger mixed methods project which comprised of two stages. The first stage identified potential case study schools which were located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, but achieved better than expected outcomes for their students. The second stage, which this article focuses upon, consisted of case-study research, in order to explore the context of these identified schools which were purposively sampled from stage one (see Hughes 2018). Through the studying of cases, researchers can piece together, and connect, with suitable theories, the micro (school) and the macro (wider society) worlds (Inglis 2010). Therefore, the value of the cultural-ecological framing within this case-study design becomes more apparent as it allowed me to explore the socio, cultural and environmental factors which interact within the school setting.

In this paper, I focus upon the case-study of Lochview High School where data was gathered between 2015-2016, with all research activities taking place during the school day. During the gathering of data, multiple qualitative methods and activity-based methodologies (Colucci 2007) were utilised – with both young people and staff. Using a variety of research strategies encouraged engagement in the research but also provided a form of triangulation with the various approaches complementing, not duplicating, one another in order to build up a picture of the phenomenon under study (Morrow 2001). The table below (Table 1) details the methods utilised and the data which was gathered at Lochview.

The fieldwork was iterative with each phase of data collection informing the next. As a result, phase one consisted of an exploratory stage with refinement in phases two and three where particular aspects of the school ecology could be explored further (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009).

Method	Numbers	Data
<b>Young people</b>		
Group task-based activities (Colucci 2007) and discussion with young people. Tasks are listed below.	21 young people (across 4 groups)	Audio-recordings of group discussions, individual interviews and completed worksheets/tasks. These fed into narrative portraits of both individual young people and the school (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Recipe for success worksheet (Hertlein 2010)</i></li> </ul>	<i>16 completed worksheets (across 3 groups)</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Card sort activity (Taylor 2009)</i></li> </ul>	<i>16 young people (across 3 groups)</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Vignette discussion (Barter and Renold 2000)</i></li> </ul>	<i>16 young people (across 3 groups)</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Social network maps (Bagnoli 2009)</i></li> </ul>	<i>6 young people, completed during individual interviews</i>	
Individual semi-structured with young people – interviews drawing upon the completed worksheets and tasks and utilising elicitation techniques (Barton 2015)	6 young people	
<b>School staff</b>		
Staff semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann 2018) – including news headlines discussion	5 staff interviews (4 with teachers and 1 with a member of senior management)	Individual interviews (audio-recorded) fed into narrative portraits of both individual staff and the school
<b>School level</b>		
Non-participant observations (Liu and Maitlis 2010)	6 days in total were spent observing	Field notes and research journal notes which fed into narrative portraits

Table 1: Methods used, and data gathered

Prior to commencing fieldwork, good relationships were developed with the gatekeepers of the school, the senior leadership team. In doing so I was able to work alongside these individuals to select young people and staff to be invited to take part in data gathering activities.



Altogether, the paper reports on data gathered from 23 young people and 5 members of staff from one secondary school. All young people were aged between 11 and 16 and were studying in the final four years of compulsory schooling (S1-4). The interviews with teachers included: John, the Headteacher; Sarah, a recently qualified teacher; Anna, a long-term teacher in the school; Melanie, a guidance teacher; and, Adam, a teacher who was a chartered teacher<sup>iii</sup> and had previously taken on short-term senior leadership positions.

The research study was carried out in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) (2011) ethical guidelines and ethical approval for the study was granted by my institution's ethics committee. All identifying features of the schools and participants have been removed and pseudonyms are used throughout this paper in order to protect anonymity.

Due to the iterative and sequential design of the study, data analysis occurred alongside and concurrently with data collection in order to develop the phased fieldwork. All interviews and group discussions were audio-recorded. I frequently listened back to the audio-recordings to note themes and ideas during the data gathering stage. A coding system was adopted with particular names, activities, places and words categorised under appropriate code names. These codes were regularly compared to ensure similarities and differences were noted – as well as allowing for new and emerging themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Further, at the end of fieldwork, narrative portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) were developed for the young people and staff that had taken part in an interview. These narrative portraits condensed audio-recordings down to a two- or three-page document which aimed to preserve the words of participants while also highlighting key ideas and themes arising from the recording. From these narrative portraits, and my researcher fieldnotes, ethnographic vignettes were developed for each of the participants but also for each case-study school, in order to show the intersections of the my own and participant's factual and subjective experiences (Urry, Sanders and Munford, 2015).

The following section provides a brief contextual overview of Lochview High School and its surrounding area.

## ***Lochview High School***

Lochview High School (referred to as Lochview throughout the paper) is a state-funded<sup>iv</sup>, non-denominational<sup>v</sup> and covers all six years of secondary education. The school has a student population of which over 20% live in one of the most deprived areas in Scotland – and has high rates of eligibility for Free School Meals (a common proxy indicator for poverty, see Audit Scotland 2014). The school located in a large Scottish city which has historical associations with heavy industry and has suffered from deindustrialisation. In recent times, the local community has experienced regeneration with gentrification and affluence now sitting alongside issues of social and economic deprivation, unemployment and social exclusion. However, there is a distinct feeling of community and a sense of individual identity, separate from that of the city itself, as a result of the long and diverse history. Lochview has an approximate student roll of 1,000, with a large number of English as Additional Language (EAL) speakers. Positive leaver destination figures were ‘exceeding expectations’ compared to similar schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas with the majority of students going on to employment, Higher Education (HE) or Further Education (FE).

## **Findings**

This section starts with a discussion of staff views and experiences at Lochview, a school where staff beliefs and actions often acted counter to performative and accountability procedures and policies. This is not without its issues and staff highlight the difficulties they face in catering to performance management based demands, whilst prioritising the needs of their students. This section then moves on to examine the experiences of young people attending Lochview.

### ***The experiences of staff***

We live in a society where we like to measure things. And...what we can measure counts and what we can't measure, sadly, doesn't always count. But, hey, that's the challenge of balancing out which we face every day.

John, Headteacher, Lochview High School

At all levels of the staffing system, from senior management to support teachers, staff reiterated the need for the young people in the school to be their priority. As part of this outlook, staff frequently spoke of their beliefs regarding success and academic achievement. One teacher, Melanie, viewed success as doing one's best, no matter what it was, and that attainment in exam results was a secondary consideration.

Getting through life and being content with what you've got. That's being successful...sometimes you just need to step back and see if you are fulfilled in the moment and that's all that matters...and if you strive to be better at it every day.. giving 100% everyday, then that's success.

Melanie, Guidance Teacher

These beliefs cemented in the idea of individual success, and placing the young person at the heart of their own unique, individual pathways, were shared by other staff at Lochview and ran counter to prevailing ideas surrounding maximising attainment and performative discourse. However, teachers were aware of policy and political pressures which filtered down through political and educational decision-making, and culminated in various demands on their roles as teachers. Below, both Sarah and Adam, who were at different stages of their teaching careers, highlight these pressures.

There is pressures from everyone, and it filters through to us, like senior management has pressures from the council and the council have pressures from the government. But, I think, we get pressures and we get pulled in like five different directions everyday – children, agencies, parents/carers, other staff, senior management – it's constantly juggling. It's great when you're on it and you feel like you can do it and you're just like 'boom, boom, boom – tasks done', but when you're having one of those days where you're tired or stressed or just things are taking longer to do you can just feel like you want to climb under your desk and hide because what do you prioritise?

Sarah, Recently Qualified Teacher

It's never ending. You always have something that needs to be done, someone to please, someone to answer to, someone to apologise to, markers and performance indicators that we need to meet.

Adam, Chartered Teacher

Despite competing demands, the teachers who were interviewed remained adamant that their primary concern was their students. Teachers told me that, at the end of the day, they were there to help the young people achieve their best. For those working outside of senior leadership this was easier to accomplish as they viewed their role as one where the students were their key focus.

I prioritise the kids because at the end of the day that's why we are here [as teachers].  
The Headteacher can deal with all the others – the angry people.

Melanie, Guidance Teacher

On the other hand, the Headteacher had to regularly and effectively deal with the competing demands of being held accountable to Local Authority expectations and, simultaneously, providing an environment best suited to the young people of the school.

I could get more ticks against my name and the school if...I'm not wholly driven by the statistics and ticks against my name and the school. Of course, I'm held accountable... If my attainment doesn't improve, at the rate politicians want it to improve, then I'm held accountable for it, but it's a perverse incentive. We do it for individuals. We are here for them. What is the best thing for individual young people? It's about individualised approaches for young people and the community.

John, Headteacher

In the above excerpt, John highlights the performative demands of schooling where he highlights the contradictions between catering to measurable, performative demands or accommodating the needs of students and the local community. In their interviews Adam, John and Melanie spoke of 'never being good enough' (Melanie) for school inspectors as well as in each August when exam attainment results were released. They acknowledged that the

constant need to improve could be demoralising, if it was not for the young people who staff saw flourish during their schooling at Lochview as a result of individualised pathways. This passion for teaching is detailed later in the paper, however, catering for the local community and the young people was evident throughout the school. The staff organised worked alongside local youth leaders in order to encourage participation from those deemed to be at risk of disengaging with schooling. Further, the school developed links with local businesses and organisations to provide students with a diverse range of volunteering and work experience opportunities throughout their school education. During my observations, and informal conversations with staff, the range of opportunities on offer was commonly cited as part of the package that Lochview offers young people in order to equip them with experiences that extend beyond exam results, but are still valid and valuable. This was viewed by staff as part of an approach to develop a love for learning amongst students which extended beyond school education.

...It [lower than expected attainment and qualification results] does not mean the young people did not find their experience valuable or useful which will take them further in their lives and beyond compulsory schooling. School should be more than about pure attainment. Sadly, we don't live in an age, or a context, where that's much recognised.

John, Headteacher

Looking beyond the school to the structures, including the policies and curriculum, supporting their practice, John was critical of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). He appreciated the ideas and aims of the curriculum on paper, but in practice the curriculum did not meet these intended aims.

The curriculum, the structure, if you follow it by the letter, does not allow for it [individualisation]. It says it does and you can try, but it's restrictive and you're still bound to traditional focuses of attainment where young people achieve Nationals, Highers and Advanced Highers<sup>vi</sup>.

John, Headteacher

In particular, John spoke of how the aims of CfE intended to move away from a content heavy and outcome based curriculum. However, in certain subjects John, and the teachers at Lochview, found these fundamental ideas remained under the new curriculum.

Curriculum for Excellence was supposed to be less content heavy but in some subjects like Maths and Science it's more content heavy than before. We work right up to the last minute to cram in all the content. It's stressful for us, the pupils, it's stressful for the Head as we then email telling him how stressed we are and then when results come in it's stressful for all of us all over again as we find out if we've been able to cram in enough into our year of teaching. Death by worksheet. Death by textbook. We need to jump through all the hoops at present.

Adam, Chartered Teacher

Priestley and Humes (2010) have detailed how the CfE policy is full of contradictions. They note CfE has elements of a developmental (or process) curriculum but also has components of broadly defined content being expressed as objectives. In particular, referring to accountability procedures and quality improvement systems which have remained with the introduction of the new curriculum, Priestley and Humes (2010) argue such mechanisms inevitably pressure schools to monitor and evaluate attainment data and, as a result, encourage staff to teach to the test.

Despite these pressures and demands, from what I observed, Lochview was a caring and nurturing environment, where children and young people were encouraged to flourish and become the best individuals they could be. This tended to not be led by accountability and performative agendas, but instead was guided by the passion and reflexivity of staff grounded in a need for social justice.

I always say only people who love teaching can stay in this profession because otherwise there's nothing keeping you here.

Adam, Chartered Teacher

A majority of the people are in this job because they're hugely passionate about it. You couldn't do it if you weren't, you'd just burn out. Being able to make a difference and see

young people progress and achieve. It sounds cheesy but it's so worthwhile. The kids get me through, especially when at the end of the year when you're just a bit jaded and counting down to the summer holidays.

Melanie, Guidance Teacher

However, with this passion, and the desire to make a difference to the lives of the young people at Lochview, came a cost of longer working hours. Anna highlighted how this led to a struggle in achieving work-life balance.

There's not a teacher worth their salt who works 35 hours in a week. No way. It's a lot, lot more. Even when you're not physically doing the hours, you're thinking about. You could say our jobs are hugely focused in 8 to 5 with teaching and speaking to parents and carers, but you've got lesson plans and marking to do in the evenings. That hidden stuff that people think just appear. I know some people take it home with them, but I stay here to keep work and home separate. It means long, long days. Of course, then you've got life stuff on top of that...like I'm moving house. When do I get to pack boxes and move house?!

Anna, Teacher

Despite the accountability and performativity pressures faced by the staff at Lochview, the school could be said to be what Dewey (1907) defines as a natural social unit in that it is '... [a society] held together because they [the people] are working along common lines, in a common spirit, and with reference to common aims' (27). This can be seen in the excerpt below from an interview with Melanie.

I was pretty shocked when I moved here at how tight a community it is here. I came from another school and it had nowhere near the sense of identity and community belonging that Lochview has. I think that's what is so great here as a school is so central to the community. People are proud to be from here. They love their community. It's not without its issues – like the social and economic deprivation – but I think that brings communities closer and gives a greater sense of belonging. We try to encourage and

foster that identity and community feeling as it can really help propel students to succeed.

Melanie, Guidance Teacher

Earlier in the paper I highlighted the context of the school and local community, and it is worth discussing how the history and socio-economic struggles of the community have injected a sense of pride into young people as they see their community begin to flourish and undergo regeneration. Some researchers discuss the need for schools to foster strong links with community leaders and key stakeholders in the local community (Ainscow 2005; Chapman and Sammons 2013). However, perhaps what is needed, as suggested by the success of Lochview's community connections – often taken forward by Melanie – is strong community foundations: with every member of the community, and not just those with an element of power and influence. Thus, not simply embedding the school into the community, but also embedding the community into the school. As can be seen in the above sections, this was often done through school staff acting counter to performative procedures and policies in order to build, and foster, an environment where young people felt nurtured and respected.

### ***The experiences of young people***

Lochview offered students, staff and the wider community a lot more than measurable, performative outcomes. Young people spoke of the school providing them with an inclusive and caring environment where they felt able to speak to staff concerning most issues. This was frequently done under the knowledge that staff would listen and support them in dealing with their problems. The

Abigail: I know I can speak to Ms. Smith [Melanie] about things that are happening at school or home...

Heather: yeah, when one of our friends was having problems at home she was always there for her, but also like us as well so that we could help our friend too.

Chloe: Oh, yeah, Mr. McDonald was really helpful with that too. Even just making you laugh when you go along to the girls football [an extra-curricular activity]. You have



a laugh with your friends, others you didn't know before in different year groups and him.

S1 group discussion

In my discussions with young people, when asked about their feelings towards exams and testing, they voiced particular concerns about this area of schooling. However, they shared that this was one of the few issues that they did not disclose to staff as the young people generally accepted it as part of their school experience – a necessary evil. However, across all discussions, young people spoke of a fear of high-stakes assessment and stressed their concern about the pressures they would face when sitting exams. For one third year (S3) student (who would be sitting national level examinations in his fourth year, S4), this pressure was interwoven with a worry about future opportunities and possibilities alongside a feeling of disappointing others.

David: With exams, there's so much pressure to get it right. If you fail, it's the end of the world. It's not, but it feels like it.

Researcher: Why does it feel like that?

David: Because then you can't do things. It stops you being able to do things like uni[versity] or, like, you feel rubbish about yourself. You might let people down or something...

Jordan, S3, individual interview

For many of the young people these worries, and pressures, were a result of seeing the effects of high-stakes assessment on elder siblings. For others, it was based on their prior experiences of class tests in which they struggled to 'memorise' the 'information' required to 'pass the test'. These issues were discussed in each of the group discussions with young people – with many raising their personal struggles with remaining calm and managing their nerves before sitting class tests. In particular, one student, Connor, raised concerns about 'cramming stuff in my brain so it sticks long enough [for him to sit the test]' (Connor, S2 group discussion).

For other young people, there was a pressure to meet parental and familial expectations. Laila's (S3) parents wanted to provide her with an opportunity [to attend university] that they did not have when they were younger, whilst Heather's (S1) parents wanted her to attend

university in order to follow in their footsteps. This may suggest that the pressures for young people to succeed at school are not solely attributable to performativity, and hints towards a convergence of socio, cultural and political pressure sources within the wider system in which the young person is located (Rose and Rogers 2012). However, it is worth noting that Agger and Shelton (2007) argue that parental pressures on children to succeed in schooling are ever-increasing as part of a global neo-liberal agenda and push towards productivity equating to self-worth and measurable outcomes. Thus, creating the conditions from which a culture of performativity can flourish. In the Scottish context, Hamilton's and Brown's (2005) research, completed prior to the introduction of CfE in Scotland, explored the significance of exam assessment on Scottish students. They highlight, as found at Lochview, that young people are aware of the status and value placed on high-stakes assessment, and how this status, in turn, is entwined with young people's ideas of identity and societal self-worth. Indeed, Keddie's (2016) research, with primary school pupils in England, suggests that student identity is influenced by performative discourse – which are produced and reinforced by the education system.

## **Discussion**

Torrington and Weightman (1993) comment that understanding the culture of a school is crucial as otherwise the mismatch between action and culture can result in ineffective action. At Lochview, the school staff had come together to foster an environment whereby the local community was a central tenant, helping to create a 'natural social unit' (Dewey 1907) which celebrated and catered for the local community – often leading staff to act counter to the national curriculum and national policy objectives in order to foster a positive school culture. This was achieved by providing young people with multiple opportunities to achieve a positive educational outcome – in its widest sense, and not one solely focused on exam attainment.

Further, Lochview fostered an 'ecology of equity' (Ainscow et al. 2012), whereby the staff, in order to achieve equitable experiences and outcomes for young people, adopted a whole-system approach to schooling – including family, teachers, school, community, and local and national policy – in order to work together to make a difference to the school from the outside. At Lochview, the cultural-ecological approach (Lee 2012) allows us to explore the multi-layered context of the school environment, where the influences of performative policies and practices from global and national pressures can filter down to the day-to-day workings of staff. As such,

staff at Lochview were fighting structures to avoid becoming 'objects of policy, rather than subjects' (Lingard, Hayes and Mills 2003, 401). Further, the empirical data gathered from students helps to shed light on how performative measures can infiltrate the lifeworlds of young people – with performative, high-stakes assessment being seen as a necessary evil, but one in which comes laden with pressure and anxiety. However, again the cultural-ecological approach provided another layer to our understanding by highlighting the role of parental pressure on young people to succeed in exams. This suggests that the culture of performativity and accountability in the school system, and wider education system, may be perpetuated, and maintained, by the wider social system through the connection of each layer via social relationships and practices (Rose and Rogers 2012).

Referring back to the policy context in Scotland, which was outlined at the beginning of this paper, namely the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC), there are concerns that arise when viewed in light of the findings of this paper. Performative agendas in Scottish schooling – evident through school inspections, performance benchmarking and a need for constant improvement – exist alongside policies centralising children and young people, such as the national curriculum and the desire to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap. However, there is a concern that the values of the curriculum and aims of policies may become second-tier in cultures of accountability where summative, performative measures take precedence, and where the pressures of governance by data may be insurmountable for schools (Piattoeva 2015; Solomon and Lewin 2016). Indeed, it may be that the SAC, in promoting equity and social justice, may be legitimising, and further engraining, the accountability ideas of improvement and measurement in Scottish education. In order to fulfil the accountability agenda, and demonstrate impact and change, schools may be encouraged to resort to measurable, performative outcomes, such as exam attainment and positive school leaver destinations, rather than focusing on the creation of a school community and culture which can begin to challenge structural inequalities (Mowat 2018).

## **Conclusions**

This paper has explored, through case-study research, the ecology of a Scottish secondary school, Lochview High School, located in an area of socio-economic disadvantage and achieving better than expected outcomes for their students. At Lochview, the positive school culture,

running counter to performative national discourse, highlighted the role of the community, and the importance of a school acknowledging the needs and wants of the local community.

Further, the paper highlights how performativity and accountability are inextricably woven through the schooling system. The struggles faced by staff working in such a system are outlined while drawing upon the experiences of young people highlights how such measures can infiltrate the whole education system – and how other layers of the system, such as family, can perpetuate, and maintain, a culture of performativity. This is a key benefit of adopting a cultural-ecological approach (Lee 2012) in order to explore data as the framework allows for the multiplicity of systems to become apparent. Thus, highlighting the complexity of contexts, but also how settings, such as schools, are shaped by the world around them. Schools are not simply the single entity of a school, but they are filled with a multitude of actors, and face unique contexts, which influence, structure and contribute to the qualities of the school. Embracing this holistic understanding may help policy makers (at local and national levels) to move beyond an obsession with statistics, testing, attainment and measures of accountability, towards the promotion of greater contextual knowledge regarding the unique contexts of schools and the individual nature of young people's pathways.

As this paper focuses on one Scottish secondary school there are issues of national representativeness. Further, this school was selected based on their location in an area of socio-economic disadvantage which constitutes one characteristic of a school. Nevertheless, this case study highlights how the focus on measures of performativity can be an everyday struggle for the school community and suggests flaws in national policy making where policies do not always align with wider purposes of education in a democratic society where the child, the learner, is at the centre of policies and education (Murphy et al. 2015). As a result, and of importance to this paper situated in the Scottish context, it remains to be seen whether the poverty-related attainment gap can be effectively closed when schools are expected to navigate contradictory, performativity based agendas in their day-to-day working.

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<sup>i</sup> Secondary schooling covers the ages 11 to 18 (from S1-S6), with young people having the option to leave school from age 16 onwards (S4/5).

<sup>ii</sup> A benchmarking tool introduced to replace the performance statistics, Standard Tables and Charts.

<sup>iii</sup> A qualification-based grade of chartered teacher was established to reward experienced and high quality teachers who wished to pursue a challenging career, but still teach.

<sup>iv</sup> Education in Scotland is provided by the state and independent sector. The vast majority of schools are state schools which are owned and operated by local authorities.

<sup>v</sup> Some schools in Scotland are associated with a religious denomination.

<sup>vi</sup> These are subject-based qualifications that young people study for in the Senior Phase (S4-6) of secondary school (ages 15 to 18). These qualifications are assessed through exam or coursework, or both – most of which is marked by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). For more information:

[https://www.sqa.org.uk/files\\_ccc/Guide\\_to\\_Scottish\\_Qualifications.pdf](https://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/Guide_to_Scottish_Qualifications.pdf)

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