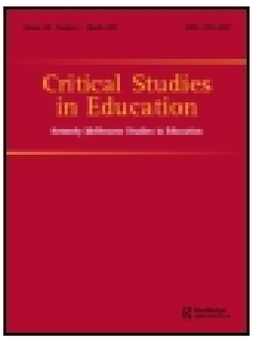

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ARTICLE

Fixing contradictions of education commercialisation: Pearson plc and the construction of its efficacy brand

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the fundamental contradictions related to the commercialisation of education and how Pearson plc – 'the world's leading multinational education company' – is trying to overcome these challenges through discourse and semiotics. Pearson's *Efficacy Framework* is a semiotic-calculative device created to measure the impact of educational products and services sold by the company. This paper examines the ways in which the efficacy programme and tools developed by Pearson represent a type of 'social fix' intended to resolve contradictions linked to education commercialisation by demonstrating the 'measurable impact' and 'outcomes' resulting from its educational products and services and communicating that to customers, shareholders, policymakers, state managers and partners. Efficacy will be analysed as it relates to a hegemonic 'knowledge brand' in the making in education that is being actively promoted and appropriated by Pearson. Pearson, therefore, aims to construct a corporate brand and reputation around *efficacy* based on legible measures of performance, which this paper argues is in response to risks and contradictions associated with the commercialisation of education.

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Introduction

Education has increasingly been rendered as a commodity that is produced, consumed and exchanged through market mechanisms. In turn, a global education industry has emerged, constituted by systems of rules, policies, processes and social forces that interact dialectically to influence education commercialisation (Ball, 2012; Robertson & Dale, 2015; Verger, Lubienski, & Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). For instance, economic globalisation has increased the demand and cross-border supply of educational services and products; international trends in education policy and governance reforms have advanced the logic of decentralisation, standardisation, austerity and evidence-based policy paradigms that involve increased private-sector participation and market-oriented restructuring; the growth of information technologies (IT) in relationship to

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learning has also created new market opportunities, and hence; the commodification and financialisation of education has undergone considerable expansion and intensification across all levels from pre-primary schooling to higher education and lifelong learning (Verger et al., 2016). In 2014, Bank of America-Merrill Lynch estimated that the global education industry was worth US$4.5–5 trillion and expected to grow to US $6–8 trillion by 2017 (Hartnett, Leung, & Marcus, 2014, p. 6).

This paper explores some of the contradictions of education commercialisation and ways in which global edu-businesses try to overcome such contradictions through discourse and semiotics in order to secure capital accumulation.

Pearson plc, the self-adorned 'world's leading learning company' is a paradigmatic case to study the growth of the global education industry and edu-businesses that seek to profit from it. Pearson is an influential, yet largely unaccountable, actor, partner, contractor and enabler of shifting political logics and processes connected to neoliberal globalisation that is transforming education into a sector guided by market principles, financial logics and capital accumulation strategies. And while Pearson is the focus of this paper, this analysis is concerned with a much broader phenomenon that relates to how edu-businesses attempt to legitimate and secure their profit-making activities in education.

Pearson's commercial activities in education span pre-primary to post-secondary levels and language to lifelong learning sectors in more than 70 countries around the globe. It has an extensive business portfolio in education with products and services related to assessment, publishing, curricula, data management/processing, administration and learning and technology as well as the Pearson Affordable Learning Fund that provides 'low-cost' private schooling in the global-South and the operation of private colleges in the global-North such as Pearson College London. In 2015, Pearson's sales dropped by 5% but remained substantial at £4.5 billion.

John Fallon, the Chief Executive Officer of Pearson, states: 'We think education will turn out to be the great growth industry of the 21st century' (Pearson plc, 2012, p. 8). This belief stems from socio-economic trends taking place on a global scale:

> As rapid advances in technology continue to disrupt the world of work, the economic value of education and skills will continue
> to increase. Governments spend trillions of dollars per year on education and training; and, each year, the still rapidly growing middle class invests more of its own increasing wealth in the education of themselves and their children. And yet, the world fails to meet the learning needs of far too many of our fellow citizens (Pearson plc, 2013, p. 9).

For more than a decade, Pearson has gone about restructuring the company into a globally integrated education conglomerate in order to capitalise on 'the
sustained and growing global demand for greater affordability, access, and achievement in education' (Pearson plc, 2014, p. 17). As the company claims:

> …the bigger Pearson's social impact – in improving access to good quality education and ensuring that translates into meaningful learning outcomes for far more people – the more we can create a faster growing and more profitable company, and do so in a sustainable manner (Pearson plc, 2015, p. 6).

Therefore, the company's 'commercial goals and social purpose are mutually reinforcing' (Pearson plc, 2012, p. 34). For Pearson then, demonstrating 'social impact' is 'a

form of justification of the company's commercial activities, or a form of legitimation for profit' (Junemann & Ball, 2015, p. 6).

In turn, Pearson aims to generate data that makes legible and visible the 'outcomes' and/or 'performance' of its educational commodities. It is part of a corporate strategy whereby Pearson intends to rebrand and reinvent itself as the 'efficacy company' in education that can deliver social impact in the form of effective and efficient outcomes for learners. As Marjorie Scardino, the former CEO of Pearson (1996–2012), announced in 2012: 'We're setting out to become the efficacy company…we need to define ourselves by how effective we are, by the impact we make'. John Fallon, the current CEO of Pearson, has maintained that: 'We want to be able to demonstrate that everything we do as a company delivers an improved learning outcome'. Hence, the goal of Pearson is to construct a corporate brand and reputation around efficacy that builds trust with customers and legitimates its for-profit activities in education.

This paper aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on the global education industry by focusing on particular discourse, ideas, meanings, brands, desires and symbols used by education corporations like Pearson to advance capitalist restructuring in education. Scholarly attention that deconstructs the discourse and semiotics mobilised by transnational corporate actors for the purpose of commodifying more and more of the education sector is necessary for understanding the expansion and intensification of the global education industry and opening it up to critique. Therefore, this paper examines the discursive and semiotic techniques of Pearson that aim to construct a corporate brand and reputation around 'efficacy' in order to overcome contradictions related to education commercialisation.

This paper adopts a 'cultural political economy' approach (Best & Paterson, 2010; Jessop, 2004; Jessop & Sum, 2006; Robertson & Dale, 2015; Sum, 2010; Sum & Jessop, 2013) to examine the cultural (or discursive) aspects of capitalist restructuring associated with the political economy of education. In the first section, I outline four fundamental contradictions related to education as a commodity. In the next section, I examine how Pearson is trying to 'fix' such contradictions through its *Efficacy Framework*: a semiotic-calculative device created to measure the performance of educational products and services sold by the company. Methodologically, the semiotic and discursive techniques and practices for collecting, measuring and disseminating data contrived from Pearson's *Efficacy Framework* will be analysed using an approach based on critical semiotic analysis and critical political economy (Jessop, 2004, 2010). It will be argued that Pearson's *Efficacy Framework* is meant to fix contradictions linked to education commercialisation by ensuring consumers, clients, shareholders, policymakers, state managers and partners the efficacy of its products and services. By constructing a corporate brand and reputation around efficacy based on legible, measurable and auditable techniques, Pearson aims to secure capital accumulation in the global education industry despite risks and contradictions that exist. The notion of efficacy will also be discussed as it relates to a hegemonic 'knowledge brand' in the making in education which is being actively promoted and appropriated by Pearson. In the conclusion, a brief overview of insights gleaned from this paper will be discussed.

Education as a commodity: contradictions and crises-tendencies

The liberal propensity to treat education as an economic commodity involves contradictions and crisis-tendencies in *at least* four fundamental ways. Yet, it is important to note that not all forms of education as a commodity are contradictory. Typically, tutoring and some types of professional/corporate learning have been delivered as commodities that are bought and sold privately. Hence, the following discussion is concerned with broader conceptions of education including those forms generally regarded as a 'common good' and/or constitutionalised as a 'human right' such as primary, secondary and tertiary education. Here, contradictions are referred to as the 'various ruptures and inconsistencies both among and within the established social arrangements' (Seo & Creed, 2002, p. 225).

First, education in its commodity form is a contradiction given that learning and the transmission of knowledge that takes place can be secured otherwise than through market exchange. For example, reciprocity and/or redistribution via state or communal patronage can provide educational services without user fees. Many countries around the globe provide free, high-quality public education to their citizens. Yet, this is the exception not the norm. It is a matter of political will and priorities.

Education is essential to human activity, survival and growth, intrinsically linked to life itself. Indeed, the 'ability to acquire knowledge and culture, is one of the fundamental purposes of civilization' (Piketty, 2014, p. 308). Yet, under conditions of political and economic liberalism it has been rendered as something that is increasingly bought and sold – representing a 'fictitious commodity' (Polanyi, 2001). Like knowledge, education 'acquires a commodity form insofar as it is *made artificially scarce*' (Jessop, 2007, p. 120; emphasis added). Education is 'made artificially scare' as a result of political choices, interactions, tactics, financial outflows and structures of power and influence through which the supply and provision of quality education is 'rationed' (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). As state provision and supply of education is systematically reduced in relation to demand, the participation of private (foreign) actors has increased in the sector along with cross-border supplies of education (Verger et al., 2016). In spaces of state retrenchment, new commercial opportunities have emerged for corporate actors to help fill the 'governance gap' in the form of outsourcing arrangements, public–private partnerships and the direct provision of for-profit education (Bhanji, 2008). In the global North, market opportunities have mostly come in the form of curriculum and assessment services, traded as commodities, as governments 'open up' the sector to requests for tender that are assumed to be the most cost-effective and efficient mode of delivery. Charter school programmes and higher education institutes privately owned and operated as businesses also occupy education markets in the global North. In the global South, for-profit actors increasingly sell schooling as commodities where the political and economic determination to deliver quality education for all is lacking (Macpherson, Robertson, & Walford, 2014). Education commercialisation, therefore, is a social and political construction, and contradiction, given that learning can take place in non-commodity forms including reciprocity and/or redistribution via state or communal patronage.

The second contradiction linked to education commercialisation concerns the 'use-value' and 'exchange-value' aspects of educational commodities. 'Exchange-value refers

to a commodity's market-mediated monetary value for the seller; use-value refers to its material and/or symbolic usefulness to the purchaser. Without exchange-value, commodities would not be produced for sale; without use-value, they would not be purchased' (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 243). A contradiction exists insofar as educational commodities are sold at prices that are not congruent with their symbolic and/or economic utility. As David Harvey points out:

> All the commodities we buy in a capitalist society have a use value and an exchange value. The difference between the two forms of value is significant. To the degree they are often at odds with each other they constitute a contradiction, which can, on occasion, give rise to a crisis (2014, p. 15).

In education, this type of contradiction and crisis-tendency can take many forms. For example, governments purchase mass-produced and standardised examinations from corporations such as Pearson that shape the design and meaning of education, yet the focus on data-based scores and results produced by commodities for testing can often be at odds with notions of 'quality' in learning. Educational consumers of higher education accumulate mass debt investing in credentials and degrees in order to enhance their human capital and economic outlook, yet may still end up un(der)-employed. And in low-income countries, the aspirational poor expends significant proportions of family income on for-profit schooling delivered by multinational corporations, yet rather than alleviating poverty, often entrenches it.

Contemporary capitalism is largely considered to be a knowledge-based economy in which 'knowledge has become the most important factor of production and the key to economic competitiveness' (Jessop, 2007, p. 115). Under such conditions, education has become dominated by an instrumentalist view in which education is valued insofar as it develops human capital and economic competitiveness, referring to the skills, information and knowledge acquired from education that enhance the productivity of the human being as an economic factor of production (Robeyns, 2006). Learning, as an investment in the production of human capital within knowledge-based economies, also remakes consumers of education into economic factors of production that become integrated into capitalist structures of subjugation (Simons, 2006). This brings us to the third contradiction.

Education commercialisation both expands and intensifies private control and influences over the learning and transmission of knowledge and socialisation that takes place within systems of education, which is even more salient in knowledge-based economies given that it also increases private (oftentimes corporate) control in the social relations of production. This dilemma can be linked to what has been called the 'fundamental contradiction of capitalism' (Jessop & Sum, 2006):

> This exists between the increasing socialization of productive forces and continuing private control in the social relations of production. Networked knowledge-based economies heighten this contradiction from both sides. On the one hand, the socialization of productive forces is accelerated in a knowledge-based economy by the increased importance of the 'general intellect' (or accumulated knowledge in the form of an intellectual commons) and the increased scope for 'economies of networks' that are generated in and through multi-actor, polycentric and multiscalar networks … In particular we can discern a growing tension between the logic of an information society (based on the collective appropriation of the use value generated by the general intellect and network economies)

> and the logic of an information economy (based on the private appropriation of the exchange values generated by the fictitious commodification of knowledge and the capacity to capture networks for private benefit) (p. 343).

The augmentation of private control and influence in systems of education resulting from commercialisation enable private actors to exercise increased authority over social relations of production since they structure that which disseminates and transfers the 'general intellect' deemed useful and employable in knowledge-based economies. In turn, at the same time as private economic actors increasingly influence, and profit from, the distribution of knowledge via market exchange, those who purchase it also become socialised as productive forces in knowledge-based capitalist economies – reflecting a fundamental contradiction.

An example of this 'fundamental contradiction of capitalism' is demonstrated by Pearson's edu-business activities in the Philippines. In 2013, Pearson partnered with Ayala Corporation to establish a for-profit chain of 'low-fee' private high schools in the Philippines known as Affordable Private Education Centers (APEC). In addition to selling schooling as a commodity, APEC delivers a 'reverse-engineered' curriculum oriented to meet the labour needs of industry (Riep, 2015). For instance, APEC aims to produce a repository of cheap and semi-skilled workers employable as call centre agents in the emerging business process outsourcing (BPO) sector in the Philippines. Not by coincidence, Ayala is a business leader in the BPO sector in the Philippines. In turn, this reflects the ways in which private authority exercised by corporations in education also influences the social relations of production.

The fourth contradiction, or rather crisis-tendency, linked to education commercialisation is a culmination of the preceding three contradictions already outlined: that is, the (re)distribution of education through market mechanisms has produced and exacerbated social inequality, inequity and segregation (Ball, 1993; Apple, 2001; Ball, 2003; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Lauder et al., 1999; Marginson, 1997). Marketised and commercialised education increases inequality by restricting and/or organising access according to levels of payment (or rather, privilege). And while Pearson claims 'market-based approaches can accelerate access to quality education' (http://www.pearson.com), this approach intends to commodify the exact inequality it implicates – which is as much a contradiction, as it is an impending social crisis.

Fixing contradictions through discourse and semiotics

Contradictions and crisis-tendencies linked to education commercialisation can be resolved (if only temporarily) through 'social fixes' ('where social is understood in terms of social practices with discursive and extra-discursive moments') (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 246). Social fixes reflect contested and compromised, repeated and varied processes including a range of social, political and economic forces and projects that 'secure a relatively durable pattern of structural coherence in the handling of the contradictions and dilemmas inherent in the capital relation' (Jessop & Sum, 2006, p. 321). Fixes can be studied in relation to their semantic, institutional and spatio-temporal dimensions: insofar as particular *institutions*, embedded in the contradictions of capital, make strategic use of structural and *discursive selectivities* that favour some

actors, alliances, interests, projects, visions and so on, which include *spatial* and *temporal boundaries* within which modes and phases of continued capital accumulation become normalised (Sum & Jessop, 2013). This paper focuses on the semiotic (or discursive) formations put in place by Pearson that aim to fix contradictions and crisis-tendencies related to education commercialisation.

Semantically, a social fix 'limits what can be seen, imagined, communicated and understood, and, through specific discursive fields (orders of discourse) they provide the categories that connect to particular fields of social relations' (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 247). Pearson has created an *Efficacy Framework* to categorise and delimit 'what can be seen, imagined, communicated and understood' about the company by measuring, calibrating and communicating the 'efficacy' of its educational commodities. Pearson claims 'an education product has efficacy if it has a measurable impact on improving people's lives through learning' (Barber & Rizvi, 2013, p. 12). By focusing on the 'measurable impact' that an educational commodity can have on the life of a consumer/learner, Pearson intends to reconfigure the parameters by which its edu-business activities are judged and perceived in order to shape the social perceptions of consumers and how they come to know, or what they know, about Pearson and its products. It is a semiotic social fix designed to maintain business growth and profitability in a context of risk and contradiction.

Pearson's Efficacy Framework

The *Efficacy Framework* developed by Pearson is designed to calculate the 'measurable, proven impact on learners' lives' (Pearson plc, 2014) resulting from the consumption of educational commodities sold by the company. It is a standardised review process that assigns a particular rating to Pearson's products and services, based on a four-point colour-coded scale, measured in relation to four criteria areas: outcomes, evidence, planning and implementation, and capacity to deliver. Evaluating and calculating product efficacy is done to ensure 'that all Pearson products and programmes address the factors that could affect the learning outcomes that they are ultimately able to produce, in a consistent way' (Pearson plc, 2013, p. 16). If it is determined that a product is demonstrating positive results in line with the *Efficacy Framework*, then the 'product is likely either already demonstrating efficacy, or at least on the path to efficacy' (Barber & Rizvi, 2013, p. 17). Pearson's *Efficacy Framework*, therefore, is a meaning-making apparatus designed to calculatedly attach the notion of 'efficacy' and its associated meanings to the products and operations of the company through visible and legible performance metrics.

Yet, what is crucially missing from Pearson's *Efficacy Framework* is a clear way to measure product efficacy that connects inputs to outputs. Although this auditing tool emphasises 'outcomes' there are no clear measures to account for the inputs that make the outcomes of learning possible. As is the case with Pearson and its *Efficacy Framework*:

> . . .when organizations do not have clear measures of productivity which relate their inputs to their outputs, the *audit* of efficiency and effectiveness is in fact a process of *defining* and

> operationalizing measures of performance for the audited entity. In short the efficiency and effectiveness of organizations is not so much verified as constructed around the audit process itself (Power, 1997, p. 51).

Hence, the *Efficacy Framework* is a process for naming and defining performance outcomes rather than verifying them. Pearson claims that:

> Fundamentally, efficacy is about defining what outcomes we need to achieve for our learners and building in the capabilities to measure and improve those outcomes. Starting with outcomes requires a shift in the way education companies build and market their products and services (Barber & Kumar, 2015, p. 10).

In turn, Pearson is attempting to grow its global edu-business by focusing on the auditability, deliverability, and hence, marketability of outcomes.

This renewed focus on outcomes is part of Pearson's organisational shift from a business that provides education inputs (e.g. selling textbooks) to one that provides education outputs (e.g. measurable and 'certifiable' learning outcomes) as pointed out by Hogan, Sellar, and Lingard (2016a). By focusing on the outcomes of its educational products and programmes, Pearson intends to modify the way in which the company and its edu-business activities are seen and judged by consumers.

Pearson claims its products and services deliver four types of outcomes related to efficacy: (1) *access*, which refers to the degree that learners can access a product (e.g. in terms of technology and socio-economic access); (2) *completion*, which refers to the tasks and courses completed by learners; (3) *achievement*, which refers to the standards of competencies, skills and qualifications achieved and (4) *progression*, which refers to the learners ability to progress onto further education, training or employment (Barber & Kumar, 2015, p. 21). Pearson also makes the distinction between learn*ing* and learn*er* outcomes in which the former are 'statements about what has been learned' and the latter refers to the 'way a human life is transformed by an educational experience' (Barber & Kumar, 2015, p. 20). By marketing learn*er* outcomes as the more expansive ways in which 'a human life is transformed by an educational experience', Pearson intends to show the ways in which the acquisition of products and services sold by the company results in a set of instrumental outcomes that improve the lives of consumers.

To date, Pearson has completed over 200 'efficacy reviews' and by 2018 the company plans to report publicly on the efficacy of its entire global product portfolio with the same rigor and consistency as its financial reporting.[1] As Pearson claims:

> This new and transparent approach to efficacy is central to our purpose and also makes good business sense. We hope that by demonstrating the evidence base that supports our products we will encourage a deeper engagement with learning outcomes across the education sector and at the same time clearly demonstrate the benefits of using those products (Pearson plc, 2013, p. 14).

So far Pearson has released more than a dozen 'efficacy reports'. One of which was a review of CTI Education Group – a private higher education institute that serves approximately 10,000 students across 12 campuses in South Africa.

Pearson has been the 100% owner of CTI since 2013. On the company's website it claims that 'Pearson's strong brand, educational resources and global reach will help leverage CTI's strengths and transform the higher education landscape in southern

Africa' (http://www.cti.ac.za/about-us/). At CTI, the focus is on 'arming students with real-life career skills and training them to succeed as employable graduates in a competitive 21st century economy' (CTI Education Group, 2016, p. 3). In turn, an 'intended outcome' advertised by CTI is employment or further education and training which students should achieve if they successfully complete tasks, modules, pass exams and attain the qualification they enrolled in to do at CTI. Sixty-eight per cent of CTI graduates find full-time, part-time or voluntary work or move onto further education or training, according to Pearson. However, Pearson also admits there are 'limitations to this data because responses are self-reported and the survey only had a 25 percent response rate' (http://www.pearson.com/efficacy-and-research/efficacy-reports.html). Therefore, correlations that lead to extrapolation are oftentimes oversimplified causing an impression of (in)efficacy that is misrepresented. The 'efficacy report' on CTI claims that:

> Pearson is continuing to investigate the efficacy of CTI and is establishing mechanisms to make efficacy research easier and more accurate to conduct. Students this year will receive a unique student identifier, allowing CTI to track student progression through the institute longitudinally. The unique student identifiers, paired with a redeveloped data infrastructure, will help Pearson conduct research around how successfully students engage with the course, achieve their qualifications, complete their module tasks, and progress after they've graduated (http://www.pearson.com/efficacy-and-research/efficacy-reports.html).

Putting in place efficacy mechanisms that show the impact of CTI, therefore, is a semiotic/discursive strategy meant to secure business operations.

Pearson has also released an efficacy report for its product aimswebPlus, which is a data-intensive assessment and reporting tool that helps educators track student progress in subjects such as reading and mathematics at each grade level from kindergarten to Grade 8. The United States and Canada are its key markets, and it currently reaches 3.8 million learners. Pearson has conducted evaluations that suggest testing results derived from aimsweb correlate with results scored by students on state tests in reading in math, 'which is one way to demonstrate the product's validity' (http://efficacy.pearson.com/product-progress/aimswebplus.html):

> In a study of roughly 1,000 students at each grade level from grades 3 to 8, Pearson found correlations ranging from 0.60 to 0.72 between scores on aimsweb reading assessments and scores on state reading tests in North Carolina and Illinois. Another study of about 700 students at each grade level from grades 3 to 8 found correlations ranging from 0.57 to 0.78 between scores on aimsweb math assessments and state math tests in North Carolina and Illinois. Pearson has also demonstrated that students who do poorly on their aimsweb assessments are unlikely to do well on their state math and reading tests – up to 85 percent of grades 3–8 students who failed their state math tests and up to 80 percent of students who failed their state reading tests were correctly flagged by aimsweb as at-risk. This sort of predictive accuracy allows teachers to develop and implement the proper educational interventions for those students who are at-risk of failing state exams.

By their very nature, tests produce calculable results and scores. Pearson's efficacy review of aimsweb, therefore, is a type of double audit. Since it aims to assess the validity of a product, yet, the product under review is itself a test that evaluates the ability of a student. It is a test of tests. However, what is lost in this fixation over results

is the inputs (curricula, teachers, pedagogy, etc.) that make the outcomes of education possible.

Vital to the *Efficacy Framework* and review process is the collection of 'efficacy evidence' that enables Pearson to 'generate valid and reliable claims about the products' impact on learner outcomes' (http://www.pearson.com/efficacy-and-research.html). Evidence of efficacy can be 'as simple as user surveys and as complex as randomized-controlled trials or longitudinal research' (Barber & Kumar, 2015, p. 24). It differs for each product based on the targets of learning outcomes and where a product is within its lifecycle. For example, Pearson states that if it were:

> . . .to study whether our universities in South Africa are adequately preparing graduates for careers, we might plan to do a longitudinal analysis to measure career outcomes over time. On the other hand, to study whether those graduates felt satisfied with their education, we may conduct a simple online survey before they graduate (Barber & Kumar, 2015, p. 24).

Standards of evidence collected by Pearson vary in complexity: from surveys that determine levels of customer satisfaction, to pre- and post-tests that indicate a correlation between products and the attainment of certain outcomes, to controlled studies that isolate the impact of products and thereby provide evidence of practical and/or statistical significance.

Pearson's efficacy evidence is meant to resolve the uncertain relationship that exists between the exchange-value and use-value of educational commodities by demonstrating the 'measurable impact' its products and services have 'on improving people's lives through learning' (Barber & Rizvi, 2013, p. 12). Yet, these calculations are highly reductionist and can misleadingly attribute certain outcomes to products or services rather than intake variables. Isolating and measuring the correlational effect that a particular educational commodity has on the life outcomes of a learner is abundantly complex given the confluence of background variables that effect learning and its ability to 'improve' the life of a learner. Pearson intends to perform longitudinal and systematic analysis over long periods of time to collect explanatory evidence that shows the 'measurable impact' its products and services have on learner outcomes. However, in the interim, the company plans to continue to 'depend on test and exam results, graduation rates and other measures as proxies' (Barber & Rizvi, 2013, p. 13). Yet, a potential conflict may arise from using standardised exam results to measure the efficacy of Pearson's products, which is particularly problematic in the United States where Pearson is the largest provider of education assessments. Pearson has multi-year contracts with the federal government and more than 25 states to administer and score examinations. By linking efficacy evidence to standardised tests, also prepared and scored by Pearson, this system can be manipulated so that Pearson products are framed and seen as the correlative factor that produces certain desired results. Indeed, the *Efficacy Framework* is designed to define and operationalise measures of performance for products and services sold by Pearson.

Efficacy as a hegemonic 'knowledge brand' in the making in education

Pearson claims it 'adopted the term "efficacy" from the pharmaceutical industry, where demonstrating the efficacy of medical interventions through systematic trials is

essential' (Barber & Rizvi, 2013, p. 12). In the education industry, the recontextualisation of efficacy involves demonstrating the ways in which education interventions (i.e. products, services, programmes) deliver efficient and effective outcomes. For over a century, education administrators have been concerned with the operational efficiencies of industrialised systems of education. However, since the 1990s neoliberal rationality and practices of government have intensified demands for national systems and various programmes of education to produce *cost-effective results*. A hegemonic discourse related to efficiency, (cost-)effectiveness, usefulness, productivity and performance (i.e. efficacy) – constructed by the dialectical interaction of ideas, institutions and material power – now governs education, globally. For Pearson, advertising effective and efficient outcomes to customers is a cleverly devised strategy to align the company's commercial activities with a 'neoliberal imaginary' (conceived as the semiotic aspects that give meaning and shape to politics and economics) which has become hegemonic in education policy, practice and discourse.

New public management (NPM) is the dominant mode of governance aligned with neoliberal rationality. It 'consists of a cluster of ideas borrowed from the conceptual framework of private sector administrative practice' (Power, 1997, p. 43) that involves the inculcation of market values and principles for governing public services (Lynch, 2015). A politics of cost-control, outsourcing, contractualisation and the creation of market and quasi-market mechanisms represent the organising principles and methods of service delivery according to NPM (Power, 1997). This involves 'the reconstitution of the state from that of service delivery provider to a combination of regulation, performance monitoring, contracting and the facilitation of new providers of public services' (Ball, 2012, p. 36). Yet, this 'hollowing out of the state' brought on by NPM also 'generates a demand for audit and other forms of evaluation and inspection to fill the hole' which is said to enhance 'accountability to customers for the quality of service via the creation of performance indicators' (Power, 1997, p. 43). In turn, the spread of NPM is believed to be:

> . . .the success of political discourses which have demanded improved accountability of public services. . .in terms of performance. It has been argued that taxpayers have rights to know that their money is being spent economically, efficiently, and effectively – the three E's – and that citizens as consumers of public services are entitled to monitor and demand certain minimum standards of performance (Power, 1997, p. 44).

With greater demands for improved accountability in public services, Pearson is appropriating a discourse of efficacy to stabilise concerns and anxieties related to neoliberal restructuring and education commercialisation.

As citizens are remade into consumers of 'public' services while governments increasingly outsource their responsibilities to new private providers, 'value for money' (VFM) evaluations have become increasingly important. VFM refers to assessments that determine whether or not a buyer, given their available resources, has obtained maximum value for the products they purchase. Pearson explains: 'As governments – and individuals – invest more in education, they are demanding better value for money. They expect better teaching, better outcomes and more accurate ways of measuring progress' (Pearson plc, n.d., p. 3). VFM is listed on Pearson's *Efficacy Framework* as a key outcome by which its products and services are evaluated. VFM

auditing is concerned with defining and judging *accountability* in terms of efficiency and effectiveness: '*efficiency* as accountability for ensuring that maximum output is obtained from the resources employed or that minimum resources are used to achieve a given level of output/service' and '*effectiveness* as accountability for ensuring that outcomes conform to intentions, as defined in programmes' (Power, 1997, p. 50). In education, accountability is monitored through the 'increasingly intrusive surveillance of staff in the name of efficiency and performance management' (Connell, 2013, p.102) which includes mass-produced and standardised examinations that test both student and teacher effectiveness in relation to desired programmatic outcomes. Auditing performance in education for accountability purposes based on efficiency and effectiveness also restructures programmes and systems of education to conform with calculable outcomes and performance indicators. As Lynch (2015) points out 'because auditing is about inspection, control and regulation (Lingard, 2011; Power, 1994; Shore & Wright, 1999), its introduction into the education lexicon signifies the development of a whole new system of disciplinary regulation through measurable accountability, quality assurance and performance' (p. 194). Hence, the discursive and disciplinary power of efficacy resides in its ability to render systems of education as something auditable, and hence, measurable via performance monitoring. In turn, this forms the basis of a new mode of accountability between education consumers and private providers like Pearson based on VFM propositions.

A 'discursive formation' (Foucault, 1970) related to patterns and concerns for efficacy in education is becoming increasingly dominant; augmented by extra-discursive formations connected to institutions, neoliberal politics and economic restructuring. A globalised testing regime represents this discursive pattern towards efficacy in education based on measurable performance. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) and Indicators of National Education Systems (INES), all of which are administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), represent some of the most prominent examples of the globalised testing establishment. In 2014 Pearson won a competitive tender by the OECD to develop the frameworks for PISA 2018 to define which educational outcomes will be measured and how. In addition to international testing regimes like those administered by the OECD and Pearson, there are multitudinous examples of governmental and non-governmental actors that reverberate neoliberal discourses related to efficacy as the art of how best to govern education (see Table 1).

Circulating transnationally within policy networks the discourse of efficiency and effectiveness has become hegemonic: normalised, institutionalised, packaged, marketed, branded and consumed in various policy settings and sold by consultancy firms and private enterprise. Diverse and complimentary institutions interlinked by a familiar economic imaginary conduct their operations in line with this dominant managerialist knowledge. As a result, networks and hegemonic blocs have formed that administer and prescribe, at various levels, a market-disciplinary project in education based on performance and efficiency. The re-contextualisation of performative discourses are (re) appropriated and relocated in ways that both fit and reaffirm existing social relations (Bernstein, 1996). The development of pre-packaged and ready-made models (such as measures of performance, outcomes, standards, curriculum, modules, manuals and methods of delivery) associated with 'intellectual expertise' and leadership (including

Table 1. Examples of different institutions and discourses related to efficacy in education across different scales.

Scales	Institutions	Efficacy discourse, documents and/or instruments	Description
International	UNESCO	*General Educational Quality Analysis/Diagnosis Framework (GEQAF)*	Analytical tool for member states to diagnose and analyse cost-efficiencies/inefficiencies of education systems
	World Economic Forum	*New Vision for Education – Unlocking the Potential of Technology 2015*	Advocates that educational technology can be aligned with learning objectives to efficiently deliver instruction and learning
Regional	Inter-American Development Bank	*Education: Sector Policies 2015*	Efficiency of investments in education by the bank is a main of objective in order to achieve cost-effective results
	World Bank, Africa Region	*Index of efficiency*	Measures the amount of public resources 'wasted' on children who drop out before finishing primary education or on repetition years
National	UK Government, Department for Education	*Review of efficiency in the schools system 2013*	Policy paper that reviews the relationship between how schools allocate their budget and the results they achieve
	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundations, United States	*Intensive Partnerships for Effective Teaching*	An initiative in the United States that measures teacher efficacy to produce learning outcomes and to improve overall teaching effectiveness
Local	Ontario Ministry of Education	*School Effectiveness Framework: A support for school improvement and student success*	A guide for school boards to improve school effectiveness and student outcomes
	Chelsea Public Schools, Massachusetts	*District Improvement Plan 2011–2016*	A district goal is to evaluate the cost-effectiveness and efficacy of policies and procedures that are standards-based and driven by student achievement data

Source: Personal compilation based on website information and online policy documents from different institutions, accessed on 5–7 January 2016.

government officials, academics, consultants, firms, technocrats, etc.) form an assemblage of knowledge and experts that have given rise to a hegemonic 'knowledge brand' of efficacy in education. Sum and Jessop (2013) define a 'knowledge brand' as:

> …a resonant hegemonic meaning-making device advanced in various ways by 'world-class' gurus–academics–consultants who claim unique knowledge of a relevant strategic or policy field and pragmatically translate this into (trans-)national policy symbols, recipes and toolkits that address policy problems and dilemmas and also appeal to pride, threats and anxieties about socio-economic restructuring and changes. In this regard, a knowledge brand is a trans-national manifestation and condensation of institutional, organizational and discursive power in the knowledge–consultancy–policy circuit. After all, not all forms of knowledge are equal; some are more prominent and 'brandized' than others. Thus knowledge is at the same time diffused and condensed along specific nodal points, the location of which is extra-discursively as well as discursively conditioned (p. 305)

Efficacy, therefore, is a hegemonic 'knowledge brand' in the making in education, by which programmes and systems of education are discursively and extra-discursively governed in order to yield cost-effective 'results' and productivity.

Imagined reputation

Pearson's efficacy programme and tools are meant to construct a corporate image and reputation around the 'knowledge brand' of efficacy and its associated meanings related to performance, effectiveness and usefulness. As the company claims: 'We know what's really important – commercially, strategically, ethically – is that every product we make and sell can be measured and judged by the outcomes it helps to achieve' (Pearson plc, 2014, para. 1). 'Measurable impact' and 'outcomes' calculated by Pearson's *Efficacy Framework* represent the data from which the company intends to establish a 'cognitive frame' (Beckert, 2010) for consumers to understand, evaluate and judge the edu-business practices and products of Pearson. It is a semiotic social fix that 'limits what can be seen, imagined, communicated and understood' (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 247) about Pearson and its products – which is largely in response to the crisis of reputation that has afflicted the company's brand and image in recent years.

As Pearson claims: 'our business depends on a strong brand, and any failure to maintain, protect and enhance our brand would hurt our ability to retain or expand our business' (Pearson plc, 2013, p. 43). Yet, a number of indicators show fractures in the Pearson brand: the company's stock declined by 40% in 2015; the company lost multimillion dollar contracts to deliver tests in New York and Texas; protests against its standardised examinations and data management products and practices have increased throughout the United States including boycotts, demonstrations and student walkouts and refusal to write Pearson-made tests; an ongoing FBI investigation into collusion between Pearson, Apple and the Los Angeles Unified School District regarding a US$1.3 billion project to equip all K-12 students with a personal iPad has gone public; teacher union activism, particularly by the global federation of teacher unions, Education International, along with civil society organisations around the globe have made Pearson the object of resistance; a webpage has emerged in which disgruntled consumers of Pearson can voice their complaints (http://pearson-education.pissedconsumer.com), and a growing body of articles and blogs condemning Pearson such as *Forbes* article 'Everybody hates Pearson' all indicate that the social perception of the company is problematic. In turn, Pearson's efficacy programme is designed to shape (or reshape) how consumers perceive, rationalise, value and think about its products in order to manage contradictions and crisis-tendencies related to its edu-business activities.

Constructing a corporate brand and reputation around efficacy relies on demonstrable outcomes. Pearson's global programme of efficacy, therefore, is meant to make visible and legible the impact of its products. As part of this project, Pearson has announced an 'ambitious vision' known as the 'Efficacy Growth & Impact Goals' by which the company 'commits to impacting the lives of 200 million learners by 2025 in critical ways' that includes providing access to primary, secondary and post-secondary education, enhancing literacy and numeracy, and improving student employability (http://www.pearson.com/about-us/growth-and-impact.html). Quantifiable metrics that show proof of impact are produced by standardised test results, graduation rates, customer surveys and other proxies that are meant to give the impression of efficacy. As Michael Power points out, the reputation of different organisations can be socially constructed through auditing practices and techniques that conjure up perceptions of

effectiveness, productivity, value, etc. (Power, 1997, 2007). By generating evidence-based calculations that 'prove' the efficacy of its products, Pearson intends 'to construct and manage social perceptions' (Power, 2007, p. 129) and forge a corporate reputation around the calculability and auditability of efficacy. In doing so, the company claims measurable impact goals 'will serve as a driver of Pearson's future growth and profitability' (http://www.pearson.com/about-us/growth-and-impact.html).

For Pearson the aim is to develop a reputation in which its educational commodities are seen and 'shown to deliver meaningful, measurable outcomes' (Barber & Kumar, 2015, p. 4). Hence, Pearson is marketing a type of 'neo-social mode of accountability' connected to education commercialisation, bound by market rationality (Hogan et al., 2016a; Hogan, Sellar, & Lingard, 2016b; Vogelmann, 2012). The 'term "neo-social" refers to the economisation of social responsibilities produced by demands that market actors assume social responsibilities that complement, or enhance, their focus on profit and market capitalisation' (Hogan et al., 2016a, p. 244). This is part of Pearson's new corporate social responsibility strategy that emphasises accountability to consumers in the form of outcomes that demonstrate product efficacy, which has also been highlighted in the works of Hogan et al. (2016a, 2016b)). Indeed:

> Pearson have embraced performative accountability as a way to conjure a moral dimension to its operations, presenting itself as a corporation focused on a double bottom line of profitability for its shareholders and social responsibility for improving people's lives through learning (Hogan, Sellar, & Lingard, 2015, p. 6).

Pearson, for example, states:

> We believe in the concept of shared value: that long-term financial success is a direct result of delivering social outcomes. So for us, efficacy makes perfect business sense. If our products deliver what our customers and learners need, we will be commercially successful (Barber & Kumar, 2015, p. 15).

Hence, by mobilising the discourse and practices of efficacy and efficacy auditing, Pearson aims to construct a particular reputation – imagined or real – to overcome contradictions related to its edu-business activities.

As part of this restructuring and rebranding process around efficacy, Pearson recruited 'education expert' Sir Michael Barber in 2011. Appointed as Pearson's Chief Education Advisor, Barber is 'leading Pearson's worldwide programme of efficacy and research ensuring the impact of the programme on the learner outcomes of Pearson and its customers' (http://www.pearson.com/michael-barber/bio.html). Prior to Pearson, Barber was the Head of global education practice for McKinsey & Company. He also served the UK government (from 1997–2005) under Tony Blair's regime as both the Head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit and as Chief Adviser to the Secretary of State for Education on School Standards. Barber has also worked as a global consultant with governments in Australia, Punjab, the United States and Ontario. By recruiting Barber, Pearson also gains his connections, status, reputation and influence in high-profile policy networks. As Hogan et al. (2015) point out:

> . . .Barber, as 'a leading authority on education systems and education reform' (Pearson plc, 2011) with connections to a range of government and academic actors in education policy globally, is able to help constitute an assemblage in which Pearson might become seen as a morally authoritative agency in educational matters . . . For example, Barber, as a former bureaucrat, can help to communicate the relevance and currency of Pearson's activities to government officials, and this likely serves to promote the perceived legitimacy and authority of using Pearson for government contracts and services (p. 49).

For Pearson the goal is to develop the reputation of a moral authority in education. However, in November 2016, Pearson announced that Barber decided he will leave the company and his position as Chief Education Advisor in late 2017, instead to continue working with governments.

Conclusion

Education commercialisation involves fundamental contradictions and crisis-tendencies which Pearson is attempting to overcome through discourse and semiotic techniques. This paper explores the ways in which Pearson aims to make visible, legible and calculable the effectiveness and usefulness of its products through practices and apparatuses connected to its *Efficacy Framework*. Yet, it is not only Pearson that markets 'impact' and 'outcomes'. Other education companies like Laureate Education, Inc., the largest for-profit higher education company in the world, advertises 'strong student outcomes' and a 'proven quality and reputation' while Bridge International Academies, Ltd., the largest for-profit provider of low-cost schooling in the world, claims it has a social mission to school 10,000,000 children in low-income countries while demonstrating 'impact evaluation results'. Claims such as these are meant to legitimate commercial activities in the education sector. In response, critical students, educators, administrators and citizens must be conscious of, and act upon, instances when they are being sold illusory outcomes, symbols and results that lose sight of the self-determining, humanistic and emancipatory elements of education.

Current social arrangements related to the global education industry demonstrate that those who have the most to gain from education commercialisation are the global edu-businesses and edu-preneurs selling products, services, policies and programmes (Verger et al., 2016). Consequently, the goal of Pearson's *Efficacy Framework* is to show that purchasing and consuming its educational products is a 'win-win' for vendors and customers alike – a double bottom line based on profitability for shareholders and social outcomes for learners. However, not is all as it might seem. As this paper demonstrates, the *Efficacy Framework* is a 'meaning-making device' (Sum & Jessop, 2013, 305) that intends to delimit what can be seen, imagined, communicated and understood about Pearson and its products. This semiotic-calculative device is designed to shape the social perceptions of customers, policymakers, state managers and shareholders by defining and operationalising the measurable impact and outcomes that are said to result from Pearson's educational commodities – and thus, constructing an imagined reputation around performance and effectiveness. By focusing on the discourse and devices mobilised by 'the world's leading education company' that aims to uphold the capital relation in education despite contradictions and crisis-tendencies that exist, this paper contributes to our understanding of the global education industry

and the ways in which it might be (temporarily) stabilised or expanded. Ultimately, it is hoped that contradictions related to education commercialisation, rather than be normalised and institutionalised by the efforts of those who benefit from them, 'can be a fecund source of both personal and social change from which people emerge far better off then before' (Harvey, 2014, p. 3) by opening them to critique, to action and transformation.

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Note

1. Pearson claims its efficacy reports 'will be audited by an external firm, which will validate [its] approach, data, and conclusions' (Barber & Kumar, 2015, p. 5). The multinational auditing firm, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), has been chosen as the external partner to 'validate' Pearson's efficacy findings. However, PwC has its own history of corruption, fraud, tax evasions and negligent auditing practices. For example, as part of the *Luxembourg Leaks* it was made public in 2014 that PwC negotiated 548 tax avoidance schemes with 343 multinational corporations in Luxembourg. In another case, PwC was found to be unethically favoured by the World Bank in a bid to privatise the water distribution system in Delhi, India.

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