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# **Playing the levelling field: teachers' management of assessment in English primary schools**

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## **Playing the levelling field: teachers' management of assessment in English primary schools**

This article focuses on how assessment practices are used by teachers to develop and maintain their own professional standing – how assessment works for them as professionals and the work they must do with it to be successful. Reporting on an empirical study involving interviews with 12 primary Key Stage 2 (7-11yrs) teachers and using an analysis based on Bourdieu's (1986) capitals and a framework from Bacchi (2000, 2009) the paper examines how teachers construct assessment data in particular, often carefully managed, ways. This, in turn, subjectifies both pupils and the teachers themselves in ways which create tensions in practice. The paper argues that high-stakes accountability through assessment is unlikely to be helpful in two ways: firstly, it does not actually do what teachers claim in accurately measuring pupils' progress; secondly that it is likely to lead to pedagogy that has negative effects on them as learners.

Assessment; policy and practice; primary education; Bourdieu; Bacchi; marketisation.

In this paper I make a contribution to our understanding of the ways in which assessment policy plays out at the level of classrooms by reporting on an empirical study which explores assessment from the point of view of English<sup>1</sup> primary school teachers' working practices. More specifically it analyses in detail the ways in which teachers manage the expectations that arise from increasingly demanding and more closely policed assessment systems, exploring the effect on teachers themselves as professionals. Previous work has, of course, critiqued the way in which assessment data is used at the macro and systemic level (Gorard, 2006, 2010) but has tended to focus more on the effect of assessment practices on pupil outcomes at the classroom level (e.g. Black, Harrison, Hodgen, Marshall, & Serret, 2011; Hogden & Wiliam, 2006), including consideration of the validity and reliability of such assessment (Cooper & Dunne, 2000) and the effects of different cultural practices (Black & Wiliam, 2005; Noyes, 2012). A second focus has been the way in which pupils' assessment outcomes are constructed through teachers' practices (e.g. Bradbury, 2012), especially through the notion of 'ability'. Marks (2014, p. 39), for example, notes that 'the dominant

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<sup>1</sup> Though at times the UK is referred to, this paper refers specifically to the school system in England, education in Wales, Scotland and North Ireland being devolved to local government.

view of ability in schools ... is as a fixed determinant of pupils' future attainment, relatively impervious to change'. Such constructions have been shown to have important consequences for pupils' school careers because of the way in which outcomes are used to 'distribute, and justify the distribution of, educational goods' (ibid.), leading to differential treatment of pupils, by schools and by individual teachers, which is potentially inequitable (see, for example, Boaler, 2005; Boaler, Wiliam, & Brown, 2000; Noyes, 2012; Solomon, 2007; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004). Here however the emphasis is different in two respects. Firstly, instead of pupils it considers the way in which assessment is used by teachers in managing their own professional work; how teachers' assessment practices have an effect on *themselves* as professional actors. Secondly, it aims to bridge the gap between policy and practice, showing how changes at the systemic level play out at the classroom level. The work is set in the context of English primary schooling. Since the 1988 Education Reform Act and the establishment of a National Curriculum with its associated programme of national testing, English schools have become increasingly subject to systems of accountability in a neoliberal and neo-conservative market environment (Apple, 2004, 2005; Furlong, 2012). For example, in a 2014 speech Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that

*Education is the best inoculation against unemployment. It's what gives our children the skills they need to compete, get a job and secure their future and it's what gives our country the platform from which to innovate, create new products and take on the world. (Cameron, 2014)*

Such language is indicative of the way in which education in English schools has been reconfigured, as a market commodity to be acquired by the young – or administered to them perhaps – in order to 'protect' against unemployment in adulthood. It has been argued (Apple, 2004, 2005; Pratt, 2016; Stevenson & Wood, 2014) that this acquisition affords control of teachers' work too, turning them into co-producers of this capital that pupils must acquire for their success. Moreover, teachers themselves have their 'performance' measured and, following the model of industrial growth and productivity, must increase their 'output' year on year. Such output is currently measured in very limited ways; through the grades achieved by pupils in assessment, either external standardised tests or internal assessment carried out by teachers themselves which may or may not be moderated by colleagues. This situation has not arisen overnight. Primary schooling has always involved some form of assessment of learning and, since the late 90s, assessment *for* learning has been promoted to enhance pupils' academic achievements (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hogden & Wiliam, 2006). However Torrance (2007) has argued (in the context of post-16 education) that making

assessment increasingly high stakes has led to a particular version of assessment *as* learning, in which it has come to dominate teaching and learning to such an extent that pedagogy is shaped to serve it, rather than vice versa. This transition is visible in the words of Adam, one of the teachers in this study (see below), who claims that:

*Basically your career is all down to your assessment, your data, your teaching and obviously assessment is a really big part of that. You know, that is a third of what you are being assessed on as a good teacher or an outstanding teacher; how you get 30 children, 100% of those children to be exactly where they should be 100% of the time, and things like that.*

High-stakes assessment systems like this are a key component in the reshaping of education in market terms. Such marketisation is based on the operationalisation of three premises which Apple (2005) argues are necessary for the creation of markets in public services and which underpin the ideas in this paper. Firstly, by focusing very strongly on numerical data generated by teacher assessment and testing, assessment itself has been reconfigured as a commodity. Pupils' achievements, objectified in numbers, provide goods which hold value for individual teachers who need them for their own professional success. Secondly, the working environment for teachers is being made more and more competitive. Teachers are set targets for pupil outcomes on which their status, their pay, and potentially their jobs, depend. This has made pupils' assessment outcomes ever more important for them as individuals and thus assessment is increasingly being constructed as a private good for the teacher, rather than a public good (Pratt, 2016). Thirdly, by making the stakes so high, teachers have little choice but to invest themselves in this game and thus become complicit in the marketisation, competing for the highest grades they can extract from their pupils – who, as Keddie (2016) has shown, also increasingly invest themselves in the performance and language of neoliberalism.

Taking this as its basis, the study reported here examines in detail the mechanism through which it takes place, showing *how* teachers manage this marketisation through their assessment, generating data in ways which allow them to construct an account of pupils and classes to meet the needs of their performance management and accountability systems. Given this approach it is important to state at the outset that the idea is not to judge it – though I do discuss some of the potential implications. Moreover, the intention is certainly not to imply that individual teachers are at fault and the theoretical position below explains why this is the case. Rather, the point is to identify and make explicit the mechanism by which the construction of assessment takes place in order to develop a position from which to

consider change, if appropriate, and to inform policy and decision making in schooling as a whole.

### **Theoretical framework**

Because this paper focuses on the relationship between practice at the classroom level and policy at the systemic level it frames the analysis in two theoretical approaches. In terms of practice it uses Bourdieu's notion of different forms of *capital* within a *field* (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986, 1998); in this case the field of primary schooling. In terms of policy it adopts a view of 'policy as discourse', the key elements of which are described and critiqued by Bacchi (2000, 2009) and Ball (1993). Each is taken in turn.

Bourdieu theorises practice, metaphorically, as the playing of a game for various stakes within a field – broadly speaking, the arena within which the game is played out. More fundamentally this paper draws on his view of human activity within this field as *reasoned*; namely 'that social agents don't just do anything, that they are not foolish, that they do not act without reason' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 75). However,

*this does not mean that one must assume that they are rational, that they are right to act as they do, or even, to put it more simply, that they have reasons to act and that reasons are what direct, guide, or orientate their actions (ibid.).*

What it does mean is that teachers act for reasons that are real to them in as far as they perceive consequences of their actions. Even if they are not aware of them, these reasons provide impetus for their practice. Indeed, one of Bourdieu's key insights is the mutually constituting nature of *field* and *habitus*, such that

*If your mind is structured according to the structures of the world in which you play, everything will seem obvious and the question of knowing if the game is "worth the candle" will not even be asked. In other words, social games are games that are forgotten qua games. (ibid. p.77)*

His notion of *illusio* then describes 'the enchanted relationship to a game that is the product of a relation of *ontological complicity* between mental structures and the objective structure of social space' (ibid., my emphasis). In such cases 'everything seems obvious and goes without saying' (p. 81) – hence my determination above not to blame teachers for practices that are 'reasonable' in Bourdieu's sense.

Thus the analysis here is examining assessment not in terms of how teachers conduct it but in terms of the reasons for doing so. Bourdieu's claim (e.g. 1998) is that, in a dual sense, actors do not act 'gratuitously'. Firstly, their actions are not free from reason; but secondly, they are

not given for free, having instead a motive driven by what one might gain within a set of practices whose meaning is not neutral within the field. There is an *economy of meaning* (see Wenger, 1998, p. 198ff), which explains Bourdieu's use of the idea of capitals since all acts can be seen as motivated by *interest* associated with the accumulation of something advantageous within that environment. As he notes, such acts need not be conscious, planned *a priori*, nor deliberate. 'One can be interested in a game (in the sense of not indifferent), while at the same time being disinterested' (ibid. p.77).

The analysis is thus focused on the way in which habitus (of teachers) and field (of assessment in primary schools) co-construct each other. It is a critical analysis in the sense that it considers this from a political point of view, in particular seeking to understand how policy at different levels relates to practice at the classroom/school level. Indeed, the justification for the work is that through understanding these relationships more fully one can identify possible inequities; or at least situations in which the educational relationship between teacher and pupil might warrant further consideration.

Given this, the analysis also therefore draws on the idea of 'policy as discourse' (Bacchi, 2000, 2009; Ball, 1993) a process of social deconstruction in which the focus is on the way in which social text is produced. As Bacchi (2000, p. 48) explains,

*The premise behind a policy-as-discourse approach is that it is inappropriate to see governments as responding to 'problems' that exist 'out there' in the community. Rather problems are 'created' or 'given shape' in the very policy proposals that are offered as 'responses'.*

From this perspective, policy is not just the 'actual' text of documentation (Ball & Bowe, 1992) but is seen as 'a set of shifting, diverse, and contradictory responses to a spectrum of political interests' (Edelman, 1988, p. 16 cited in Bacchi, 2000); and in this way policy therefore leads to Bourdieu's notions of *illusio* and misrecognition, through teachers' investment in the economy of meaning of assessment in the school. The analysis therefore critically examines the manner in which policy and practice of assessment, as they play out at the level of schools themselves, co-construct both the 'problem' of assessment and its 'solutions'; the *problematization* of assessment. Bacchi (2009, p. 40) suggests three useful dimensions in respect of such problematization: discursive effects; subjectification effects; and lived effects. Thus what follows examines the discursive effects of assessment including 'the ways in which the terms of discourse limit what can be talked about' (Bacchi, 2000, p. 49). Not only do discourses offer a way of enacting assessment, they also create silences, things that cannot be said and done, all of which play a part in constituting the teachers as

professionals (subjectification). The conclusion turns to the lived effects in order to root the work in practice.

## Methodology

Given the argument above, the empirical focus of the study was to examine the discourse of assessment as it is represented in the words of teachers in order to understand the way in which the various interests at stake are managed as forms of capital; and to examine the effect this might have on pupils. This was undertaken through individual interviews with 12 primary, Key Stage 2 (KS2: 7-11yrs) teachers from 4 different schools in the South West of England. Interviewees were chosen opportunistically. Having approached the school, it was left for individuals to volunteer to participate, but where possible people were selected to span pupil ages across KS2, stages of career, gender and professional role. Table 1 gives an overview of the participants, with names as pseudonyms.

Name	School	Age	Age of current pupils (years)	Years in teaching	Other
Adam	A	Early-20s	8/9	1	In second year of teaching having just completed his probationary year.
Alice	B	Late-30s	N/A	14	Senior leader
Fiona	C	Mid-20s	7/8	5	
Kim	A	Mid-30s	9/10	15	Coordinator for pupils with Special Educational Needs.
Mark	A	Late-40s	8/9	10	Previous career in the Civil Service.
Martin	C	Late-40s	10/11	16	
Rob	B	Mid-20s	7/8	3	
Sasha	D	Late-20s	9/10	6	
Tina	B	Mid-40s	N/A	21	Works as a specialist teaching maths to all year groups across the school.
Tony	D	Early-30s	7/8	10	
Sally	D	Early-50s	8/9	27	Maths coordinator in the school
Karen	C	Mid-30s	10/11	8	

Table 1. Participant details.

The interviews involved semi-structured, open-ended questions using Mason's (2002) approach of eliciting 'accounts of' what they did before asking them to 'account for' these



actions. Such an approach fits well with Bourdieu's notion of *reasoned activity*. Interviews are prime sites for the construction of reason as interviewees are asked to account, in the moment, for their actions. Socially, one is required to appear to act in a *reasonable* manner and hence Mason's approach makes it more likely that such reasoning is rooted in practice rather than imagination. Beginning with 'what happened' allows the interviewee to consider their action in the context of their professional life and to account for it. This is not to claim 'truth' in the accounts; rather the claim is that each person's actions are accounted for in a plausible and trustworthy manner.

Each interview lasted between 50 minutes and an hour and half, generating around 15 hours of recordings. The analysis was carried out following Charmaz (2006) through repeated reading and listening leading to the construction of themes. Though interviews were transcribed and used within nVivo, the unit of analysis was generally at the paragraph level with meaning interpreted from what was said in the context of the interview as a whole. Some teachers also shared materials used in their assessment work such as data records and pupils' books which were often helpful in articulating their responses.

In order to try to represent my own interpretation of the participants in a trustworthy manner quotes are used where possible in what follows and care has been taken to ensure that they are both representative of the general sense of most teachers' positions and are not contradicted by, or contradictory to, other positions apparent in the transcripts. Nonetheless they do not, of course, represent the views of all participants and are part of my own construction of the account given in the paper as a whole.

The project was guided by an ethics protocol in line with the British Educational Research Association guidelines and approved by the author's university ethics committee. Far from being an addendum ethics were important in the study because, as noted above, the central point of the paper is to explore tensions in people's work. Such professional tensions are fundamentally social, in that they exist in the relationships between colleagues and are inherent in the systems within which they work; hence the interviews were far from benign. Particular care was therefore taken with issues of confidentiality and anonymity, reminding participants of their right to withdraw comments before, after and during the interviews and ensuring that nothing would be shared with managers other than a broad outline of the findings of the whole project – a promise that was quite hard to keep in practice because of the natural wish of headteachers to want to know what their staff are thinking and doing.

## **Outcomes – the nature of the assessment field**

In what follows I analyse the interviews by following Bacchi's (2000) three dimensions of problematisation outlined above, firstly focusing on discursive and subjectification effects in order to understand how assessment is problematized in teachers' work. This results in illuminating three aspects of practice: how assessment data gets constructed; how it positions teachers in relation to their work; and some of the mechanisms by which they achieve positions which are advantageous to themselves, with associated implications for pupils.

### ***1. The construction of assessment data***

As the various historical understandings of assessment outlined in the introduction have unfolded, an ontological tension has been created for teachers. On the one hand data is understood to be an objective representation of some 'actual' state of the child – ontologically, a realist perspective is adopted towards it with data brought into being through observation or measurement of this state, independent of the assessor. On the other hand it is a social construction within a shifting social context – ontologically, brought into being through human means and for specific ends. Such tensions are regularly apparent in the teachers' discussion of their assessment practices:

*Adam: Obviously there are set criteria ...*

*NP: But they need interpreting do they?...*

*Adam: Yeah, and obviously, interpretation again is a very personal thing. How I interpret something is going to be completely different to how the headteacher interprets it, or ... It's better to be bang on, but I sometimes do err on the side of caution.*

Note how Adam sees interpretation as inherent, yet also speaks of something objective (perhaps idealised) that one can be 'bang on'. Similarly, Kay, a Special Needs Coordinator (SENCo), illustrates the interest that teachers have in this objective, realist view of data:

*Actually the accuracy of levels, for me as SENCo, and maybe I'm a bit anal about things like this [laughs]. I quite like knowing that's **exactly** where they are and I'm confident that they are there. (Emphasis in her voice marked in bold.)*

This position allows teachers to feel confident in their own practice so that although, when pressed, they might accept that assessment judgements are interpretive they appear happy to accommodate a position of realism where it suits their interests to do so. Rob is aware of this tension and accounts for it by claiming that it is:

*a mix of the two really so what I do is, I obviously give all the children the test and then it's a case of rationalising the score they've got with your own opinion of the work they produce on a daily basis.*

In this way judgements can become *simultaneously* objective/definitive and subjective/arbitrary, as suits the situation. The ‘problem’ of accounting for teaching is ‘solved’ by data; which in turn creates a ‘problem’ of interpretation which can be ‘solved’ by ‘rationalising the score’. And of course this is rational for the teacher in two senses: firstly, in Bourdieu’s terms, though possibly irrational to an outside observer, Rob is acting in a reasoned way in terms of acquiring the cultural capital which symbolises expert teaching practice; and secondly, the word rationalising helps to form part of the professional discourse of (rational) behaviour that befits a profession. One could not act irrationally and expect to gain cultural capital. Thus, the ontological tension between assessment data as subjective construction and objective measurement is dissolved through a discourse which has the hallmark of rationality in its language.

It is important to note that the preceding argument does not imply that all teachers simply ignored this tension – nor that any one teacher did so all the time. In fact, the interviews were interesting for the way in which teachers appeared to switch between these views; possibly, in part, because the act of being interviewed made them more aware of tensions than they might otherwise have been. Nonetheless Kay, for example, having noted above that she liked to know ‘exactly where they are’ (a phrase used by several of the teachers), also told an account of a child who ‘could destroy a level 6 [test] book, but when she came to do something with a protractor she wasn’t too sure how to use it’. As a result, Kay found herself having to record that ‘she hasn’t completely mastered the level 5 curriculum because she has to use a protractor and could not’. In this way Kay is clearly recognising the constructed nature of assessment, but appears happy to put this idea to one side when it is in her interest to be convinced that pupils are being assessed ‘exactly’.

The point here is not simply to illustrate this tension between two opposing views of assessment but to ask how it comes to bear on the way in which teachers construct themselves as professionals and how they manage their success in these terms. And of course it also begs the question of what effect this might have on pupils.

## ***2. Assessment: subjectifying teachers as professionals***

In previous work (Pratt, 2016) I have argued that contemporary schooling positions teachers within a doxa of meritocracy in which one’s professional (perhaps even personal) worth is gauged according to a restricted number of measures. Increasingly, these refer to assessment outcomes. To allow this meritocracy to work other discursive effects are involved as part of the problematisation of assessment, comprising at least four dimensions.

Firstly, comes (1) a *discourse of control*; a belief that progress is predictable and controllable across time. This belief is underpinned by, and conversely underpins, the idea that their teaching matters and that it directly correlates to learning. Thus, learning is generated by and defined through teaching such that as long as the latter is managed carefully the former can be managed and controlled too. Something of this is present in Tina's description of the way in which adults shape the track along which pupils are meant to progress:

*So I think we look at the ones that aren't on track ... so they don't slip under the radar or become one of those slow movers really or become one of those children who aren't making that nice steady incline. ... So we look at the children who seem to be off [target] in September and we might form intervention groups with them or point them in the direction of our TA [Teaching Assistant] and see what we need to do to get them where they need to be for the end of the Christmas term.*

Secondly, (2) teachers' *illusio* is shaped by a *discourse of participation*; willing (or inescapable) participation in official expectations of such progress. For the teachers in this study either they seemed unaware of any alternative way that things might be – Bourdieu's ontological complicity – or they recognised it but felt resigned to or comfortable with it. For example, Adam thinks that 'the positives are you've ... got to make sure you are always doing something, always trying to make sure that you are bringing those children up' and seems quite happy being in this position. In this he exhibits the third dimension (3), a *discourse of responsibility*; in which teachers accept individual responsibility for learning outcomes through their teaching. Indeed, the discursive effect here is one of *responsibilisation*, a form of subjectification which Shamir (2008, p. 7) describes as

*a technique of governance, [which is] fundamentally premised on the construction of moral agency as the necessary ontological condition for ensuring an entrepreneurial disposition in the case of individuals and socio-moral authority in the case of institutions.*

All this is evident in Sasha's response when talking about Standardised Attainment Test (SAT) outcomes with her Year 6 (10-11 yrs) children.

*Int: Do you feel responsible for them?*

*S: Yes, really responsible, completely. [Sasha describes the process of submitting and appraising SATs scores]. ... and some children you will be like, oh they were so close and then you feel a sense of disappointment for them and then you question whether or not you could have done more.*

This discourse of responsibilisation is rooted in (1) and (2) above: if progress is controllable through teaching, and if I have no choice but to participate in this process of control, then I must become responsible for it through my teaching. Finally, (4) this affords a *discourse of*

*meritocracy*. It is only through investment in such *illusio*, putting one's faith in all the above, that meritocracy becomes reasonable (in Bourdieu's sense), allowing teachers' status to be gauged legitimately through pupil assessment.

From this position, teachers become part of a meritocratic, hence competitive, system in which their own 'performance' is judged legitimately (from the perspective of the *doxa*) by pupils' progress acting as a proxy measure of their own teaching. Acceptance of this can be willing, as in Adam's case above, or unwilling but knowing, as with Mark who suggests that 'maybe I *should* play the game'. In other cases, it seems to illustrate a form of Bourdieu's misrecognition too, with teachers unaware of the way in which the *doxa* operates and accepting of it being the way life is.

Regardless of teachers' awareness of their complicity, one effect of their *illusio* is that it ceases to become clear just who is being assessed – since teachers themselves are assessed through pupil assessment. For example, in describing performance management meetings with his senior leaders, Tony says that 'with management who are monitoring our progress and teaching, all the chat [with other teachers] is really about where pupils were and where they are going and potentially about how we are going to get them there'. In a very real sense for Tony the pupils have become a commodity, providing him with goods, in the form of their position on a prescribed path of progress, that he must use as capital to justify his work.

### ***3. 'Sending up' and 'levelling down' – teachers managing assessment***

The thrust of the argument above is that teachers are becoming increasingly reliant on their pupils to provide the capital needed for their professional success. In policy-as-discourse terms, the 'problem' of raising standards is 'solved' by creating a market in which teachers are made responsible for pupils' progress. Notwithstanding whether or not this solution does indeed solve its perceived problem, for teachers such solutions become personal-level problems associated with maintaining their professional standing; how, in Bourdieu's terms, they generate cultural capital that symbolises expertise and can be exchanged for positions of privilege in the professional community. This in turn raises the question of how they manage this accountability and the effects such management has on their relationships with pupils. Whilst their personal 'solutions' will be individual and contextualised, in the data generated through this project two practices stood out as significant and common in some way to all.

#### *i. 'Sending up' and 'dipping down'*

Because of its strong value as capital, the transfer of pupils' grades as they are 'sent up' from one teacher to the next is a potential pressure point in primary schools. As Adam observes 'if

you give someone an invented grade when they go up that has an impact on other people' because if the grade is too low one has more ground to make up and 'personally I don't want to go well actually that's whoever was before me's fault'. Transfer is therefore high stakes, not just for pupils who are likely to be grouped and differentiated on the basis of their grades, but for teachers too. Kay notes how despite all the effort put into assessing pupils at the end of the year by the previous teacher,

*lots of us did a couple of mini-assessments so that we had a really good picture of where they were at the start of the year so we could almost justify ... actually they have made progress because this is where I think they started*

These actions are non-gratuitous, appearing to provide 'reasoned' insurance against personal liability and laden with meritocratic value. The competitiveness inherent in them leads, in some cases, to frustration:

*Tony: Some teachers, this thing really bugs me, that some teachers don't trust other teachers and you see four points dip at the start of year and they consistently do it.*

*NP: You mean they ...*

*Tony: They ... the first week back, the children are not what they [previous teachers] say and they [new teachers] record a four point dip at the start [of the year] and I think a lot of assessment at the moment, and pressures, stresses are creating situations where that happens.*

Not only is it potentially rivalrous (Pratt, 2016; Slater & Tonkiss, 2001) but adjustment of grades is somewhat ironic given the care, and the sheer amount of time and effort, that teachers take to get their assessment 'bang on'. In some of the schools adjustment appeared as a deliberate and collegiate negotiation, Fiona noting that 'you might maybe put [pupils' grades] down as a little bit lower ... because you have got in mind that if they don't make that progress then that reflects poorly on the next teacher'. When asked if 'there is room to negotiate on grades' she says, with a somewhat apologetic laugh, 'yes, yeah. There probably shouldn't be, but there is'. In other schools it seemed more covert; everybody doing it but with changes remaining secret between certain groups of staff. Either way, pupils are affected by these changes and it is worth remembering that whilst the language of assessment may be abstract, its lived effects on pupils and teachers are very real in affording or constraining opportunities for success. Grades signify ability and ability is constructed by, and reconstructs, teachers' practices in ways which Marks (2014) has shown often strongly differentiate opportunities for the most and the least high achieving pupils; opportunities

which follow pupils through their whole school career and into adulthood (Boaler, 2005; Solomon, 2007; Wilkinson & Penney, 2013).

*ii. 'Levelling down' on departure*

Given that teachers appear routinely to adjust grades downwards at the start of the year, one might imagine that they also inflate them at the end of the year, gaining at both ends in terms of the crucial measure of their teaching expertise: pupil progress across the year. For the teachers here this was unilaterally *not* the case; indeed, quite the reverse. Emotive stories of the concern amongst teachers to be seen to be fair and professional, along with a sense that senior leaders were keen to ensure that the school as a whole had assessment data that fitted what was required of it by external agencies – largely the spectre of inspection – meant that teachers were very cautious of the end of year assessment. Tony is representative of the sample in claiming that ‘sending up is very stressful’ because ‘my stress at this moment is how my results, which are relatively good, are going to be perceived by the next teacher’. Whereas adjustments made at the start of the year tend to be negotiated between the new teacher and the assessment coordinator overseeing it, end of year assessment is different in kind. It tends to be both standardised by internal or external tests and public in that the results will be shared directly with the next teacher, building towards the published outcomes of the school as a whole at age 7 and 11 (which, along with entry, form the ages at which English school outcomes are publically accountable). The public nature of these scores makes them high stakes and without exception participants reported playing safe and bringing down levels.

*Fiona: when you submit your data, each child has a certain amount of points progress they need to make, and sometimes if they've made more than that you might be under a little bit of pressure just to put down the expected, so that the following year, if they don't make expected ... because children's progress isn't linear and they have their ups and their downs so if they are on a massive up and you put that in then the following year the amount of work they are going to have to do to maintain it is probably not realistic.*

*Tina: yeah it is a dilemma. We do tend to bring them down and then sometimes if they're not brought down ... we had certain years where I've put them down in order not to stitch up the next teacher and then the next teacher has or hasn't and suddenly they get a really inflated score.*

These comments point clearly to the complex set of social and professional relationships that assessment creates for teachers. In them one can see the competing discourses of: professional collegiality, not ‘stitching up’ one’s colleagues; organisational requirements, which demand to know ‘why hasn't so and so made this much progress’ (Adam); and the

ongoing ontological tension between the official line of policy and the reality of children's 'ups and downs'. But underpinning all of this is a perhaps a more fundamental professional expectation rooted in the fear that colleagues will not respect you because,

*even though I think you [the pupil] were that [level], I'm going to put you at that so I don't look like I've graded too high. Because there is a tendency to perceive that a generous marker is bad ... Because I think there is a tendency to think that over-assessing a little bit is worse than under-assessing by a lot. (Sasha)*

## **Discussion**

In the analysis above I have focused largely on Bacchi's (2009) discursive and subjectification effects of assessment practices. Clearly, assessment judgements and adjustments are not neutral but made within a doxa which generates and sustains particular value positions. Teachers' decisions about where children are in relation to assessment levels is a complex amalgam of their desire to act in a manner which is fair to pupils, the need to grow their professional capital and the question of what is negotiable and what is not. In this section I turn to the lived effects; the material impact on practice, encapsulated in Adam's assertion that

*obviously I want my children to do well anyway, but then there is that extra thing of I want you to do well not just for yourselves and for me to enjoy the fact that you've done well, but actually, you know, I need you to do well so I can kind of live in my house.*

The aim of this work has not been to judge teachers. Indeed, what is very apparent in the data is the complex nexus of competing discourses in their work, each pulling in a different direction and having a material effect on them. A strong feature of the interviews was the repeated reference to negative feelings, variously described in ways such as 'everyone being stressed by assessment' (Tony), 'high pressure' which is 'stressful, definitely stressful' (Sasha), and 'having to account for it [constantly being] in the back of your mind' (Rob). In light of this it would be easy to suggest that teachers stood against such forms of accountability and felt negative about assessment as a whole but in practice the situation was much less clear. Whilst at a national level the problematisation of assessment operates through the ongoing 'solution' to the 'problem' of educational standards and accountability, at the school level teachers themselves are involved in assessment mechanisms which map this problematisation to the classroom. As has been illustrated above, this leads to them playing the system to construct an appropriate picture of success. For example, by



constructing learning as the problem of movement through a clearly (pre)described set of ends, Kay is able to suggest that

*doing the excel spreadsheet and the gap analysis and highlighting those areas, and understanding all that, I see as absolutely key for me to be able to address that with the children and move on and make good progress.*

For Kay therefore, even if it is sometimes stressful, the apparent surgical accuracy offered by assessment practices allows her to feel in control of pupils' learning and hence of her own professional conduct, though it is framed in terms of the benefit to pupils. Moreover, even though she asks 'do I need levels for everything? No I don't because I've got that picture there [in her ongoing formative assessment]' she goes on to note that:

*it's just the way it is and actually it seems to be working because we've made, as a school, really good progress over however many years. So for me, absolutely it works. And as a member of the school leadership team ... [laughs]*

Hence, whilst she suggests that assessment is burdensome and unnecessary in part, the ontological complicity of Kay's own habitus and the dominating doxa of assessment in school allow any inconsistencies to remain hidden. As Widin (2010) points out the dominance of certain people or groups is often hidden behind a 'disavowal of interest' which 'masks the interests, the embodied 'feel for the game' that agents have in their carrying out of the work' (p. 34). Whilst Kay claims that 'it works', in terms of the analysis here assessment might therefore better be seen as 'doing work' for Kay and her colleagues. The lived effect of assessment which allows her to be successful both in terms of her support for pupils and as a manager in the school originates in a discursive space between assessment as being absolute and controllable and simultaneously malleable and negotiable. This space contains discourses which are privileged in the regime of competence of professional practice allowing teachers to generate and accumulate capitals. But it also has silences which prompt questions about the nature of the work being carried out through assessment, including at least the following. Firstly, in as far as *assessment for learning* is a dominant discourse in schools (regardless of whether, from outside the discourse, one believes in it or not) there is a mismatch between what it aims to do (Swaffield, 2011) and what appears to go on. If, in the words of the participants in this study, knowing 'exactly where they are' and being 'bang on' with assessment is 'absolutely key' for making progress then it would surely be important that assessment outcomes were at least reported accurately and with a degree of validity and reliability. We have seen that this is not entirely the case. Rather, they also form part of a levelling game that is played out between teachers looking to acquire professional capital.

Secondly, it is apparent that to make assessment (do) ‘work’ pupils’ activity needs to be commodified into numerical data. The extent to which this happens for the pupils’ or the teachers’ benefit is increasingly unclear, potentially changing the relationship between them. Whilst this research did not attempt to access pupils’ perspectives it is set against a backdrop of reporting on the potentially negative effects of accountability on young people themselves (Keddie, 2016), much of which describes feelings of pressure being transferred from teachers to pupils (e.g. Hutchings, 2015). Tony captures the sense of this in describing how:

*everyone has the stress of that, I mean like government need to be looking like they are doing a good job governing. It gets onto head[teacher]s and they need to be monitoring that progress and they would say my school has made a lot of progress. Deputies look at their key stage and say my key stage has done really well this year [laughs]. And then teachers, my progress it is, it is ... you’re responsible for that data, so you have ownership over that data, but I suppose the stupid thing is ... is the children who are at the centre of it are the ones who are almost most removed from the talk of targets and data and ... Yes, it’s ridiculous isn’t it.*

Thirdly, as Tony’s concluding comments suggest, assessment mechanisms are unlikely to lead to the kinds of dialogic, constructivist teaching promoted by the assessment for learning agenda in which

*The dialogue between pupils and a teacher should be thoughtful, reflective, focused to evoke and explore understanding, and conducted so that all pupils have an opportunity to think and to express their ideas.* (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 8)

Finally, the data reported here suggest that because not all pupils are equally valuable as a commodity – for example if they cannot reach the required levels of attainment – assessment may provide a mechanism for differential treatment of pupils rather than an equitable approach to supporting their individual development. This is an especially important area for further research in order to establish more clearly how changing policy around assessment leads to different lived effects for pupils, especially those who are more vulnerable in the education system because their circumstances afford less protection from negative changes. In all these ways therefore, assessment appears to be a powerful element of teachers’ practice. Though set in a rhetoric of being for the benefit of pupils through addressing their individual needs, its ontological construction, the subsequent positioning of teachers and the resulting adjustment of outcomes mean that things are not so simple. Far from being used for levelling the playing field of schooling, assessment appears to be focused on ‘playing the levelling field’ in an attempt to ‘solve’ the ‘problem’ of assessment policy.

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Table 1. Participant details.

Name	School	Age	Age of current pupils (years)	Years in teaching	Other
Adam	A	Early-20s	8/9	1	In second year of teaching having just completed his probationary year.
Alice	B	Late-30s	N/A	14	Senior leader
Fiona	C	Mid-20s	7/8	5	
Kim	A	Mid-30s	9/10	15	Coordinator for pupils with Special Educational Needs.
Mark	A	Late-40s	8/9	10	Previous career in the Civil Service.
Martin	C	Late-40s	10/11	16	
Rob	B	Mid-20s	7/8	3	
Sasha	D	Late-20s	9/10	6	
Tina	B	Mid-40s	N/A	21	Works as a specialist teaching maths to all year groups across the school.
Tony	D	Early-30s	7/8	10	
Sally	D	Early-50s	8/9	27	Maths coordinator in the school
Karen	C	Mid-30s	10/11	8	