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Published in:

PROCEEDINGS OF THE TENTH CONGRESS OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIETY FOR
RESEARCH IN MATHEMATICS EDUCATION (CERME10)

Publication date:

2017

Link:

[Link to publication in PEARL](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Pratt, N., & Alderton, J. (2017). It's different, it's difficult, it's unknown': Letting go of levels. *PROCEEDINGS OF THE TENTH CONGRESS OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIETY FOR RESEARCH IN MATHEMATICS EDUCATION (CERME10)*, 0(0), 3580-3587.

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‘It’s different, it’s difficult, it’s unknown’: letting go of levels

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This paper explores primary teachers’ accounts of their responses to major changes in the curriculum and assessment system in England, which has recently re-designated expected standards of achievement and progress. Analysis is informed by Foucauldian poststructural understandings of power/knowledge and truth to examine how they reorganise their practices as mathematics teachers within a policy context which continues to compel schools to focus on performance. By means of a small-scale empirical study, we identify the tensions created when the ‘rules of the game’ change and how technological assessment tools require and enable teachers to reproduce levels and labels to categorise pupils. Our aim in undertaking this analysis is not to compare teachers’ assessment practices to an ideal, beyond policy, but to illustrate how government-driven changes to assessment are insufficient to change underlying discourses of performativity which ultimately shape practice.

Keywords: Elementary school mathematics, assessment, Foucault, governmentality.

Introduction

The examination [assessment] combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgement. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them. (Foucault, 1977, p. 184)

The quote from Foucault begins to set out both our substantive interest and the theoretical stance, namely, an interest in mathematics assessment from a sociological perspective. Our focus is on assessment not simply as a technical activity to improve pupil outcomes, but as a mechanism through which teachers manage their professional selves; the way in which mathematics assessment is used as part of their ongoing professional identification and as the basis, and evidence, of their success. Our starting point is the claim that in English primary (5-11) schools, assessment, and the curriculum alongside which it takes place, plays a major – perhaps *the* major – role in influencing teachers’ actions. There are many reasons why this is the case but, as Pratt (2016a) argues, in essence they revolve around the marketized and high-stakes, accountable nature of the English system and the ‘performativity’ (Ball, 2003) this manifests in teachers’ work.

The changing context of English mathematics education

It is difficult in a short paper to describe fully the complex landscape of an education system and how it is changing and we refer the reader to Pratt (2016a) and Keddie (2016) for more detailed discussions of English primary schools. However, in summary the system is based in a neo-liberal, neo-conservative framework which affords an increasingly marketized, competitive and accountable approach to school improvement. This has led to a strong discourse of ‘progress’, since it is the change in pupils’ levels of attainment across each year which has been the key measure against which

schools, and individual teachers, have been judged. In turn this leads to a strong discourse of control, a belief that pupils' progress is predictable and controllable across time; and therefore of teachers' responsibility for learning outcomes obtained through their teaching (Pratt, 2016b). However, over the last 18 months, both the curriculum for mathematics and the assessment system have been reformed. The new primary national curriculum (NC) (DfE, 2013) stipulated increased expectations in mathematics with more challenging national tests. Perhaps most importantly for teachers, previous NC 'attainment levels' have been superseded by an 'expected standard' set for 2016, at a higher level than in 2015 (DfE, 2016). The rationale for this change is described in the final report of the government's Commission on Assessment Without Levels (McIntosh, 2015, p. 5), as follows:

Despite being intended only for use in statutory national assessments, too frequently levels also came to be used for in-school assessment between key stages in order to monitor whether pupils were on track to achieve expected levels at the end of key stages. This distorted the purpose of in-school assessment, particularly day-to-day formative assessment. The Commission believes that this has had a profoundly negative impact on teaching.

Too often levels became viewed as thresholds and teaching became focused on getting pupils across the next threshold ... Depth and breadth of understanding were sometimes sacrificed in favour of pace.

Guidance specifies that the majority of pupils should move through the programmes of study of the NC at broadly the same pace (DfE, 2013), crucially replacing previous advice to accelerate high attaining children through new content. At the classroom level, 'progress' *through* the curriculum has been replaced by 'progress' *within* it; and a new language of 'mastery' has sprung up to describe this, which "denotes a focus on achieving a deeper understanding of fewer topics, through problem-solving, questioning and encouraging deep mathematical thinking" (McIntosh, 2015, p. 17). Progress measures of pupils and schools across key stages are also calculated differently. Monitoring progress by levels and sub-levels has been replaced by a value-added measure. Pupils' results at the end of key stage 1 and key stage 2 (at ages 7 and 11) are compared to the achievements of other pupils with similar attainment nationally, and a new 'floor' standard requires that at least 65% of pupils meet the expected level in mathematics (and English), or that a school achieves sufficient progress scores (DfE, 2016). Schools not achieving the floor standard will be scrutinised through additional inspection and may have their freedom curtailed. Indeed, the Commission notes that "with freedom, however, comes responsibility" (McIntosh, 2015, p. 10) and "recognises that the transition to assessment without Attainment Targets and levels will be challenging, and that schools will have to develop and manage their assessment systems during a period of change" (p.16). However, it justifies this on the basis of "a much greater focus on high quality formative assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning"; the raising of "standards" in line with neoliberal policy. As we have previously pointed out, in a performativity culture such as this one, assessment has become a means by which teachers gain and maintain professional capital (after Bourdieu, see Pratt, 2016a).

Theoretical Framework

To understand the effect of changes to the ‘rules of the game’ of assessment, we draw on Foucault, particularly his notion of governmentality (Foucault, 1977) that surrounds English education (Ball, 2013; Llewellyn, 2016); the notion that dominant discourses become normalized to such an extent that (teacher) subjects consent to particular action and hence come to govern themselves. (Note, discourse here refers to “a group of rules proper to discursive practices ... [which] define the ordering of objects” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49) and is more than just language.) Our aim is to make visible the ways in which assessment discourses normalize certain practices and relations between teachers, school systems and pupils, rendering them common-sense, irrevocable and change-resistant – but not to judge these against some ideal version of practice. In theorising these forms of governmentality in and through assessment, two related ideas are in play: power/knowledge and truth. Power, according to Foucault, is enacted, not held by individuals, and

is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who 'do not have it'; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them. (Foucault, 1977, p. 27)

We emphasise that this can be a good or bad thing; power can liberate and is not oppressive per se, but either way, ‘power produces knowledge’ (ibid). ‘Experts’ in a field (teachers in their classroom settings, but also senior managers in the school as a whole, policy makers and children as ‘expert pupils’) produce knowledge through their language and activity which positions and exerts pressure in terms of the way it influences what can and cannot be said and done. In this sense, it forms a ‘game of truth’. For Foucault, truth is not something to be found outside of relations. Rather it is something produced through such relations so that “each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). Thus, the question is not what the truth ‘is’, but how things come to be taken as true; how this is used in order to make manifest and exert power relations. This is

the truth which does not belong to the order of what is, but to the order of what happens ... a truth which is not found but aroused and hunted down: production rather than apophantic. This kind of truth does not call for method, but for strategy. (Foucault et al, 2008, p. 237)

It is through this theoretical lens that we return to mathematics assessment, and the following questions: how do teachers respond to the changes that a new curriculum and assessment system impose; and in doing so, how do they re-organise the economy, and politics, of truth in assessment practices in order to (re)empower themselves as experts?

Methodology

The project involved extended semi-structured interviews with primary teachers in 9 different schools (12 teachers in total) in the first year after the removal of levels. Teachers and schools were chosen purposively to reflect a range of ages, experience, school types and locations, but in this paper we draw on just three of the participating teachers – Ann, Jill and Mike, all working in state schools – in order to keep the analysis manageable. Mike and Jill are in their late 20s and both are coordinators of mathematics in their schools and are both on a programme of training to develop

leadership in ‘mastery’ of mathematics. They work in a village and an urban school respectively; Jill has been teaching for 8 years and Mike for 7. Ann is in her late 30s, has been teaching for 19 years and in her current, town, school for 5 of these. She is a class teacher, but not a specialist in mathematics. Data from all the interviews were analysed thematically in relation to the substantive and theoretical framework – teachers’ assessment practices, as we understood them in relation to power/knowledge and truths. Whilst we can only present a small set of data we have selected this carefully, ensuring that teachers’ views, though sometimes individual, are never contradictory of the data set as a whole. Our aim is not to claim that the specifics are generalizable to every teacher beyond, or even within, the data set. Rather, the analysis is of the system of governmentality and the dominant discourses that constitute it. We think it offers a trustworthy and useful analysis in this sense, meaning that it is likely to be generalizable to other teachers in terms of the way in which their work becomes problematized, even if not in terms of how individuals are able to respond. All our work conformed to the ethical procedures of the British Educational Research Association and were approved by our employing institutions.

Analysis – Reproducing the truth

The DfE’s Commission on Assessment without Levels is very clear over the point of their removal.

Removing the ‘label’ of levels can help to improve pupils’ mind-sets about their own ability. Differentiating teaching according to pupils’ levels meant some pupils did not have access to more challenging aspects of the curriculum. (McIntosh, 2015, p. 15)

Interestingly, this critique itself illustrates Foucault’s central point about governmentality, namely that it is through labelling that subjects are categorised, normalized and objectified. They ‘become’ their label – and act accordingly in the common-sense, normal(ized), way that this affords. Whilst removing the language of levels is well-intentioned in order to remove such labels, we noted above that teachers’ work takes place in a culture of performativity with dominant discourses of control and responsibility. Central to governmentality, they require teachers to ‘know’ what their pupils can and cannot do so that they can take responsibility for ‘filling the gaps’ in their knowledge by “identifying specific ‘corrective’ activities to help them do this” (ibid. p.17). These, then, become questions of truth, of what pupils ‘actually’ and ‘really’ know. However, as Foucault notes, a truth statement is “contingent on the instruments required to discover it, the categories necessary to think it, and an adequate language for formulating it in proposition” (Foucault et al., 2008, p. 236). The language of levels may have gone, but the imperatives for control remain and so a new language is needed for teachers with which to think and speak it. Our interviews suggest that the language of ‘mastery’, codified through other national continuing professional development programmes, has offered teachers such an alternative, so that:

For every child you can click on an objective and say whether you are working towards it, achieved, secure, or greater depth. (Ann)

Basically we have developed a system throughout the year. So, we haven't bought a system in. We've simply developed our own system as a school where we've given the children a grade of either 1, 2, 3 or 4. (Mike)

When we were talking, as a school, what we were going to put for our levels, we said "what shall we call them?" We've got to have things and labelling them "emerging, developing, secure, exceeding". (Jill)

Ironically then, the notion of mastery which was meant to take teachers away from codifying and levelling has provided alternative "types of discourse which it [the system] accepts and makes function as true" (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). Classification continues, but with new levels. What is significant in terms of governmentality is that, despite the best intentions, this replacement is inevitable since it is founded in the performative discourse which underpins pedagogic activity. In English primary schools this performance is measured by 'progress'; in the past meaning the movement up levels and sub-levels of attainment. Although the removal of levels has meant that there might be a new official understanding of it – that "progress can involve developing deeper or wider understanding, not just moving on to work of greater difficulty" (McIntosh, 2015, p. 12) – it has not removed the imperative of being able to make it demonstrable as the way in which schools are judged. In other words, knowing 'where pupils are' is still central to "the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (Foucault, 1980, p. 131) and is not therefore optional.

Hunting for truth with technology

Foucault (1980, p. 131) has pointed out that the political economy of truth is characterised by, amongst other things, the form of scientific discourse, economic and political demands and the ways in which it is diffused and consumed amongst different organisations. Each school in our study has made use of some form of tracking system, either commercial software or a spreadsheet of some sort, as a technology for capturing data and in different ways teachers are looking for these technologies to help them seek the truth about the progress of their pupils. In each case, there are two technologies at work. Firstly, a tracking system recreates labels:

you've got all the statements and you can say whether the children are working towards it, expected for it, or exceeding for it, or something. Then it breaks it down into them being, for each year group, they are beginning to access or beginning plus, working towards or working at plus, secure, secure plus. There are six basic, what would have been sub-levels. (Mike)

But, he notes, "it can't generate something that tells you your child probably is secure or probably is working at" and "it's not comparing your children to anyone else. It's not saying anything." Whilst teacher judgement is "fine and good" it does not seem to represent a sufficient truth for the accountability purposes to which it is to be put. Mike's school has therefore turned to commercially produced online tests. These give him "beautiful data" and whilst it also serves a formative purpose in identifying "gaps" it "provides a comfort blanket" because "it gives you a standardised score and it's based against however many thousand children from around the country".

Whilst Mike has turned to comparative statistics to produce knowledge of progress, Jill agrees that numbers and labels mean that "it somehow feels like it's clearer, but if it's not well-defined that's quite dangerous, really". Rather than seeking a truth in statistics though, Jill is committed to the idea of illuminating pupils' mathematical understanding and somehow mapping this onto the new labels so that they can say, "these children are where they should be and these children aren't ... so that the

gaps that they have got [can be] filled". Rather than comparisons to other pupils nationally, Jill's plan is to exemplify for colleagues a truth about what each label (developing, secure etc.) looks like in terms of the objectives from the curriculum that pupils can achieve. In this way she hopes that "it would be very clear where the children were and where their next steps were more clearly" and that "within the following year's teaching you can see that clear progression, and then that becomes a way for teachers to show progress". Jill's belief seems to be that professional judgement, evaluating pupils' understanding against exemplar materials, will, in time, allow teachers to learn what the new levels "feel like".

The rationale for the removal of levels and a focus on mastery was, in part, based on the assertion that "too often ... teaching became focused on getting pupils across the next threshold instead of ensuring they were secure in the knowledge and understanding defined in the programmes of study" (McIntosh, 2015, p. 5). We have illustrated how levels have been recreated by teachers to serve the function of performativity, yet this is not to say that the idea of refocusing on pupils' understanding of the curriculum was not welcomed and encouraged by this move. Mike notes that alongside the security of knowing how their pupils rank against others "we are thinking about 'OK they are working at expected levels or just below but what are their gaps and how am I going to fill their gaps?" Jill claims that "I think the move away from levels has been absolutely fantastic" because it allowed them to "take the time to sit back and actually think about the underlying maths". Ann also welcomes the focus on ensuring that "gaps are filled" and considers this as central to pupils' success. However, in her experience

it was just a lot that had to be covered and part of it was because there were gaps that I needed to go [over]. So for example my class didn't have a very good understanding of decimals, so rather than teaching thousandths and all of what was in the year 5 curriculum, I've had to go right back to the start and doing tenths. And that is your year 3 and year 4 objectives. (Ann)

This has led to her being reluctant to say that any child is secure and to her "feeling that almost, as a teacher, you've failed", with her confidence being affected as a result. The school uses a system called School Pupil Tracker Online (SPTO) which, unlike the other systems, is meant to calculate whether pupils are emerging, developing or secure, but Ann does not trust its output.

I just experimented with 'what if I made that [objective] mostly achieved?'. And by doing that I could see that it was literally one little click turns that level up. ... I didn't like the fact that just one click sent that judgement over, particularly when it didn't look like it was right.

She notes that even if the company that runs the software alters this in the coming year "it sounds like the standard is going to slightly change every single year, which just makes it completely confusing. How can you work towards something that you don't know what it is?" This lack of clarity over the truth of her pupils' learning is leading to some tension for Ann.

So within what I do with the children I see progress but I don't always see it in what I've got on paper, on SPTO. The progress isn't always reflected there ... I thought I was a good maths teacher, maybe I'm not, because of what's coming out ... In some ways I'm almost fighting against it and saying 'you will not do this to my confidence' [laughs], yeah.

A new normalizing gaze

We noted above that one intention of removing levels was to avoid labelling pupils in ways that prevented access to the curriculum. As the quote that begins this paper makes clear, however, from Foucault's position any examination "combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgement" which "establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them" (Foucault, 1977, p. 184). Foucault's use of normalizing here is two-fold. On the one hand it points to the standardisation and categorisation of pupils; their allocation into categories, in this case 'emerging', 'secure' etc. which are then used to define normal, and hence abnormal, and to take remedial action. Mike refers to "the ones who haven't quite got there" and Jill to those who are "where they should be" and those that are not. On the other hand, it refers to the notion of making this categorisation 'normal' practice; common-sense, inarguable, defining what can and cannot be thought and said. Thus, although removing levels is meant to avoid differentiating pupils and restricting their access to the curriculum, the need to track progress makes such differentiation necessary. To speak of progress is to speak of changes in category as the only "type of discourse which [society] accepts and makes function as true" (Foucault, 1980, p. 131); "a truth provoked by rituals, captured by ruses, seized according to occasions" (Foucault et al., 2008, p. 237). Such rituals create a practical tension in the idea of normalisation. As Mike notes,

It's that challenge we're set of trying to keep together and moving forward together but having children still working at a greater depth but closing the gap for the ones that are lower.

For those already 'succeeding' as secure, mathematics involves a range of activities. Mike describes "10 children who we saw as working at greater depth and they worked in groups with teaching assistants and had some really different kind of problem solving". However, Jill points out that the governmentality around floor targets means that for "the children who are almost secure but not quite, there is a real push to get them [over the threshold]".

Yes, but I think the secure one [is key] at the moment. I think at the moment with the new system it's different, it's difficult, it's unknown. I think it's that 'where are we for secure?' (Jill).

Hence, whilst the change in the curriculum structure is meant to ensure that children move together through the content, the manner in which assessment inevitably "establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them" (Foucault, 1977, p. 184) means that the way in which they experience the subject is far from equal.

Discussion

Our analysis suggests that although superficially things might look different and teachers may feel that their practice has changed, this appears to be largely a reconstruction of the same dominant discourses in new language. Whilst the specific practices of governing might have been altered, the fundamental forms of governmentality have not and teachers are in the process of reconstituting much of what they had before. We recognise that the recent changes have opened up opportunities for discussion, collaboration and reflection within and between schools and made teachers pause and take stock of assessment in ways that feel positive to them. However, they have also reproduced pressures and tensions which can work to deflect attention away from questioning the responsibilities

of policy makers and the implications for the teaching and learning of mathematics in the new system. Whilst there is a significant impact on teachers' day-to-day teaching and assessment practices, and how these are evaluated, the performative role of the teacher remains largely the same. There does seem to be more consideration of pupils' development in mathematics; though this is produced in particular ways: an atomised curriculum and filling in gaps. There are signs too that far from alleviating the problem of access to the curriculum for all children, there is a new normalizing gaze; one that focuses teachers' efforts on an even slimmer tranche of pupils who might just be normalized – literally, to the middle of the normal distribution. Similarly, only those who are 'secure' in their 'knowledge' of the subject get access to a rich version of mathematical problem solving. These points raise questions about the way in which such tightly managed forms of assessment affect pupils' relationships with the subject and about the equity of pupils' access to the curriculum. The nature of these authoritative discourses of progress, control and responsibility that make up performativity, and the version of mathematics and assessment produced within them, appear difficult for the teachers in our study to identify. All schooling operates within policy and its incumbent discourses and can never be free of it, however the value of a Foucauldian analysis is in making such discourses visible to those responsible for making changes to the assessment system.

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