

NOT FOR REVIEW

Early childhood assessment: observation, teacher 'knowledge' and the production of attainment data in early years settings

Alice Bradbury

Institute of Education, University of London, United Kingdom

20 Bedford Way

London WC1H 0AL

United Kingdom

a.bradbury@ioe.ac.uk

(alicebradbury@outlook.com, Sep 2013 – Apr 2014)

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Since 2003 children in England have been formally assessed at the age of five after their first year in school, and their numerical scores reported to parents and analysed at school and national levels. The use of statutory assessment for this age group is unique in the United Kingdom, where other regions use less formal methods of assessment, and is also unusual internationally. This article examines the peculiarity of this assessment system, the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFS Profile), and discusses its impact on classes of young children. The focus is on the production of numerical data through the accumulation of 'teacher knowledge' of pupils, which is constructed as a neutral, objective process. Using data from two ethnographic case studies of classrooms of four- and five-year-old children in London, it is argued that there are tensions between teachers' construction of the data they produce as neutral knowledge, their ambivalence in relation to the data reported, and the national publication of the proportions of children attaining each element of the assessment. The alternative methods of assessing this age group in other parts of the United Kingdom are used to consider the implications of the production of numerical assessment data in early childhood education.

Introduction

Since 2003 children in England have been formally assessed at the age of five after their first year in school, and their numerical scores reported to parents and analysed at school and national levels. This assessment, known as the Foundation Stage Profile during the period 2003-8 and then the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFS Profile) from 2008, comprised of 117 statements relating to all areas of the curriculum including Personal, social and emotional development, mathematics, literacy, creative and physical development, and 'knowledge and understanding of the world'. This statutory assessment was revised in 2012 but still retains this breadth of assessment and results in similar numerical data.

In the education systems of the other regions of the United Kingdom and in Northern Ireland, there are no statutory assessments of children in this age group. In common with many other early childhood settings worldwide, school based early years settings in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland report children's progress to parents, but they are not required to provide numerical scores and this information is not passed on to local or national authorities. Thus the use of statutory assessment in England is an unusual case, and therefore a site of interest in terms of the production of numerical data in education.

This paper begins with a discussion of early years assessment policy in the different regions of the UK, before I examine the peculiarity of the situation in England. To examine this issue in depth, I use data collected through ethnographic case studies of two Reception classrooms, undertaken during the period of the EYFS Profile between 2008-12 when the assessment was established in Reception classrooms. The data are used here to consider the role of numerical data in early years settings, and specifically the impact on pedagogy, teachers' views of the assessment, and the processes involved in the production of final attainment data. The aim is to relate the process of production of 'knowledge' about children, through assessment based on observation, to the numbers produced in relation to this knowledge.

Early Years Policy in England

The EYFS Profile in place between 2008 and 2012 (and almost identical to the Foundation Stage Profile in place 2003-2008) assessed children's progress in the six areas of learning of the EYFS: these are:

- Personal, social and emotional development (PSED)
- Communication, language and literacy (CLL)
- Problem solving, reasoning and numeracy (PSRN)

- Knowledge and understanding of the world (KUW)
- Physical development (PD)
- Creative development (CD) (QCA, 2008)

The Profile was made up of a total of 117 statements in relation to these areas, in thirteen scales spread unevenly across the six areas: there were three PSED scales (Dispositions and Attitudes; Social Development; and Emotional Development), four CLL scales (Language for Communicating and Thinking; Linking Sounds and Letters; Reading; and Writing), three PRSN scales (Numbers as Labels and for Counting; Calculating; and Shape, Space and Measures), and one scale each for KUW, CD and PD. Each scale was made up of nine points of increasing difficulty, though children did not need to achieve them in that order. In total, the Profile included 117 points, each of which teachers had to make a judgement on, either awarding the point or not. These judgements were based on observation of children in the classroom; the EYFS Profile Handbook explained:

Observation of children participating in everyday activities is the most reliable way to build up an accurate picture of what children know, understand, feel, are interested in and can do. (QCA 2008)

These observations were collected throughout the school year for each child, in the form of written notes, longer observations, photographs and samples of children's work, usually collated into a folder for each child. Although this was an on-going process and teachers were encouraged to assess children against the points each term, the final results were not submitted to the local authority until the summer term. At this point, it was a statutory requirement that teachers produce this data and deliver it to the local authority.

These data were then collated at an England-wide level, and published in various forms by the Department for Education (DCSF 2009; DCSF 2010; DfE 2010a; DfE 2012b; DfE, 2012d). These published data relied on a measure called a 'good level of development'

which included getting at least 78 points overall and at least six points in each of the seven CLLD and PSED scales (DCSF 2008). Proportions of children reaching this benchmark were published, which form the basis for discussions relating to the disparities in attainment by gender, Free School Meal status and ethnic group (Gillborn 2006b; Bradbury 2011; 2013b). More detailed data relating to each individual Profile point and proportions of children reaching a 'good level of development', organised by these pupil characteristics and by area were also published. Table 1 is an example of the reproduction of these data for the proportion of all children reaching each Profile point, provided to illustrate the level of detail involved.

[Table 1 about here]

Early Years Assessment in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Across the UK and Northern Ireland, the power to set and organise curricula and assessments is devolved to regional governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, while the UK government in London decides on policy in England. This means that different systems of early years assessment currently operate in different regions (though the English system is far larger in scale as the majority of the population reside there). The situation in England is therefore not just unusual internationally, but also unique in the context of the education systems in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. In this section I set out the systems of early years assessment used in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland by way of illustration of the possible alternatives to formal statutory assessment for this age group as currently administered in these near neighbours.

Scotland

In Scotland, the *Early Years Framework* caters for children from birth to age eight, while the

statutory curriculum – the *Curriculum for Excellence* – sets out the requirements for children in at the ‘early level’. There is more flexibility in Scotland over when children start school than in England, depending on when in the academic year they are born, but in general children start school (in Primary 1) aged between 4 and a half and 5 and a half years old. The early level of assessment in the Curriculum for Excellence caters for children in their pre-school years and in Primary 1. There is no nationally-reported statutory form of assessment for children at this early level, but practitioners in pre-schools are expected to provide a profile at the point when children transfer into Primary education. There is some flexibility over the form of this information; the guidance states:

Transfer information could be recorded in an agreed ‘learning vehicle’ such as a ‘learning story’, ‘e-profile’ or ‘personal profile’ between parents, practitioners and children. This record could be continued for the first term (or longer) in Primary 1, to improve continuity. Transfer information/individual profiles should provide a holistic picture of the child and could include progression in relation to the four capacities and a focus on literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. Information may include some ‘stepping stones’, ‘next steps’ or ‘suggested next steps’. Reference may be made to preferred learning styles, behaviour and social patterns. (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2010:9)

Following this profile information, the next required assessment is at the end of primary education at the point of transition into secondary school. The Curriculum for Excellence emphasises the importance of on-going assessment through the education system (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2010), but places far less importance on the production of national curriculum levels and on formal standardised assessment than in England. The approach towards assessment is that ‘Assessment involves gathering, reflecting on and evaluating evidence of learning to enable staff to check on learners’ progress. (Scottish Government 2011:26). There is also a warning that assessment practices need to be ‘proportionate’:

It is also important that assessment is *proportionate* and that arrangements do not place excessive burdens on learners and teachers which divert their time and effort from learning and teaching. Further, the costs for the education community of high-quality assessment must be achievable within reasonable constraints of time, effort and resources. (Scottish Government 2011:27, emphasis in original)

Again, this is in contrast to the system in England in that the focus is on assessment as balanced in terms of manageability with the usefulness of the information gathered. Recent developments have included the reaffirmation of the importance of play within the early years curriculum with a published 'Play Strategy for Scotland' (Scottish Government 2013), suggesting policy is moving in an opposite direction to England where the prioritisation of play is seen as an endangered element of the EYFS (Roberts-Holmes 2013).

Wales

In Wales, since it was phased in in 2008-2010, the Foundation Phase has catered for children aged three to seven years, and includes a more formally organised curriculum than in Scotland with some similarities to the system in England. There are seven Areas of Learning, and for each 'the educational programme sets out what children should be taught and the outcomes set out expected standards of children's performance' (Welsh Government 2012a). The Areas of Learning are: Personal and Social Development, Well-being and Cultural Diversity; Language, Literacy and Communication Skills (in English or Welsh); Mathematical Development; Welsh Language Development; Knowledge and Understanding of the World; Physical Development; and Creative Development (Welsh Government 2012b). Formal assessment of these Areas takes place at the end of the Foundation Phase, at age seven (the same age that children in England take Key Stage 1 'Sats' tests). At this point, teachers report to parents on the first three Areas of Learning, giving each child a Foundation Phase Outcome Level ranging from 1-6, or they can decide the child is 'Above Outcome 6'

or ‘Working towards Outcome 1’. Thus this assessment, taken two years after the EYFS Profile, provides a more limited assessment of children than in England. However, as in England, there is some use of this data to make comparisons: parents also receive information on the overall results of children in the same year group in the school, and the most recent comparison report provided by the Welsh Government (Welsh Government 2012b).

Nonetheless, this current system remains a different approach to the assessment of young children than that exemplified by the EYFS Profile. However a recent report from the Welsh Government stated that ‘a more coherent system of assessing, tracking and monitoring the development and progress of children in the early years’ was planned, with a new assessment tool to track progress throughout the Foundation Phase to be piloted and then introduced in 2014-15 (Welsh Government 2013). This suggests a similar development-based framework will be introduced in Wales, but the main assessment will continue to be at age seven, rather than at age five.

Northern Ireland

Finally, in Northern Ireland, the ‘Foundation Stage’ provides the curriculum for children in Years 1 and 2 (age 4-5 and 5-6, equivalent to Reception and Year 1 in England) (Northern Ireland Curriculum 2006). The curriculum includes seven Areas of Learning, as in Wales, though these differ in the inclusion of Religious Education rather than additional language teaching. They are: Religious Education; Language and Literacy; Mathematics and Numeracy; The Arts; The World Around Us; Personal Development and Mutual Understanding; and Physical Development and Movement. Assessment, as in other systems, is based on ongoing observation but there is a Pupil Profile within the Foundation Stage which aims to ‘provide a record of the child’s learning and attainment together with any learning issues [...] [The profile] will help form the basis for planning future learning

(Northern Ireland Curriculum 2006:15). From 2010 the form of this statutory reporting has been the annual report, which has a set format consisting of written descriptions in relation to the areas of learning (Northern Ireland Curriculum 2013b). Schools can use scores to report to parents also if they wish but are not required to do so (Northern Ireland Curriculum 2013a).

The English policy context

As in many other early childhood education systems worldwide, most notably the *Te Whariki* curriculum in New Zealand (Carr, May et al. 1998; Carr 2013), assessment in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland prioritises adequately summarising a child's progress across a range of areas over the need to assess teachers' and schools' performance. Thus in comparison to England, in these systems there is less imperative to record children's progress numerically, as comparisons with other schools and other children are less important, and there is no systems of monitoring school performance over time through assessment. As we see in the data discussed below, this difference in emphasis has implications for the impact of the assessments on classroom practices. It is also noteworthy that in England children are assessed at an age when many children elsewhere will not be in compulsory education: the majority of other education systems involve later compulsory ages to start formal schooling (on this debate see Alexander 2009; DfE 2010b).

But how can we account for the different priorities evidenced in early years assessment in England? When it was introduced, the Foundation Stage Profile became the first nationally consistent assessment of children at age five in England, replacing local systems of informal 'baseline' testing on entry to school (Kirkup, Sainsbury et al. 2003). The need for consistency was linked to the formalisation of this 'key stage', and the setting out of developmental milestones and expectations for practice for children, including those from

birth after 2008. The formalisation of the curriculum and expectations for young children is also rare internationally, and the attitudes of early childhood professionals to this have been mixed (Kirkup, Sainsbury et al. 2003; Aubrey 2004; Sylva and Pugh 2005; Bradbury 2012). Some teachers have welcomed the higher status of statutory testing and the focus on play has been welcomed by early years practitioners; the designation of a key stage has been seen as an 'asset to status' (Hargreaves and Hopper, 2006). However, there has also been criticisms of increased formalisation and the bureaucracy involved in assessments; revisions to the EYFS since 2012 have attempted to deal with some of these problems, but have also been accused of the 'schoolification' of early years (Bradbury 2013a; Roberts-Holmes 2013).

The unique and continued use of statutory assessment in the early years in England is based, I would argue, on the policy context relating to accountability measures and funding, which can be broadly characterised as neoliberal in nature. Systems of assessing children through national tests (known as 'Sats') at age seven and 11 are well established in England, and thus the EYFS Profile provided an extension of this practice into the early years. Furthermore, the use of numerical data in these assessments (children are designated as working at National Curriculum Levels in these tests), which is then reported to local authorities and published nationally, means that the production of albeit more complex data in Reception is in keeping with the general practices of the primary schools in which they are located. Teachers in Reception, who may also work in Key Stage 1 (age 5-7), are familiar with the pressures of the later 'Sats' tests and may see the EYFS as a logical extension of this practice; indeed, one teacher in the study examined below called the Profile 'the Sats of the Foundation Stage'.

The early years were also the site of huge increases in funding during the Labour government era till 2010: there was an 84 per cent increase in spending on education for the under fives in England between 1997 and 2009 (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2009, p. 24). This

resulted in a need for a measure of the effectiveness of this investment, which is provided by the EYFS Profile data. This transactional understanding of the purpose of the assessment was commonly expressed by the teachers in this study, as exemplified by this quote:

If you're funding stuff and you're giving all these schools money, you need to know, the government need to know that they're getting their money back from it, that they are, the people who you're giving money to are doing their work, so you need a figure, you need a percentage. (Jim, teacher at Gatehouse)

This need for numerical data due to increased funding is not inevitable, however, as we see in other systems in the UK and internationally; there has been a worldwide trend of increased focus and investment in early years education in the last decade, and yet few systems operate a formal assessment similar to the EYFS Profile for children at five years. Nonetheless, as I and others have argued, increases in funding have often come hand in hand with discourses of 'quality', 'standards' and 'accountability' – which still have had implications for both early childhood settings and the children who attend them (Bradbury, 2013b; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Farquhar and Fitzsimons, 2008; Hultqvist and Dahlberg, 2001; Yelland, 2010). As we see in the data from this research study, the English case serves as a cautionary tale for the impact of formal assessment through observation in early childhood settings.

The research study

The research data used here were collected through two ethnographic studies of Reception classrooms in schools in inner London. Data collection consisted of regular classroom observation each week through one academic year, interviews with teachers each term and the collection of documentation from the classroom including official assessments, observation notes, groupings and lesson plans. The two sites were selected as schools in areas of disadvantage with high proportions of children from minoritised communities and on free school meals. One school, which I call Gatehouse Primary, was a large community primary

school where the vast majority of children were from minoritised communities and living on a local authority estate. The other school, which I call St Mary's, was a Church of England voluntary-aided primary, with only one form entry. This school has a larger proportion of White British children, but the majority of children still came from minoritised groups. Both schools had above average numbers of children with English as an additional language and receiving free schools meals, and both had below average results in their statutory test results at Key Stage 2 (age 11). The data presented here arose from fieldnotes collected in the classroom and from interviews with the main Reception classroom teachers (Paul at St Mary's and Jim at Gatehouse) and the EYFS Leader at Gatehouse, Lynn (all pseudonyms).

The data from these two Reception classrooms were analysed using theoretical framework influenced by poststructural theory, particularly the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, and by Critical Race Theory, a body of work originating in the United States which is increasingly used to examine race inequalities in education in the United Kingdom (Gillborn 2006a). For the purposes of this paper, I use theoretical tools from Foucault's work on discourse and disciplinary power (Foucault 1980), and Ball's work on the 'terrors of performativity' in education (Ball 2003) to examine the impact of this assessment on Reception teachers and their classroom and assessment practices.

The operation of assessment in Reception classrooms in England

While I have written extensively on the findings of this research project elsewhere (Bradbury 2011; 2012; 2013a; 2013b), I return to these data here in the light of the foci of the 'Knowledge and Numbers' seminar programme. In particular, I examine the process by which teachers are required to distil an entire year's observations of a child relating to multiple areas of the curriculum and behaviour, into numerical data. Throughout, we see how the practices and discourses associated with the EYFS Profile are an example of the

complexity of the enactment of a policy in the classroom (Ball, Maguire et al. 2012), a process which is contingent on many factors and different in each school. I am not suggesting here that these practices or comments are common to all Reception classrooms, simply that they offer case studies of the workings of ideas about ‘knowledge’ and data production in a classroom setting. I begin with an examination of the findings relating to ‘teacher knowledge’ as a neutral and objective source for assessment. Given the similarities in findings between the two schools, the analysis combines data from them both.

Assessment and ‘knowledge’ as objective and neutral

Within the Reception teachers’ discussions of the assessment there emerged a number of contradictory constructions of the Profile, and the observations used to inform it, as variously accurate and scientific, based on specific early years expertise, and as a badly organised assessment which could only ever be ‘best fit’. The tensions between these views of the Profile had an impact, I argue, on the compilation of the final results at the end of the year. The idea of observation as a neutral process of collecting objective data was largely seen positively by these Reception teachers, in contrast to the idea of formally testing children, as in ‘Sats’ tests at seven and 11. The idea of ‘teacher knowledge’ worked powerfully to constitute the information gathered by teachers through observation and every day interaction with children as a specialised body of information. This idea originates to some extent in policy documentation, including a Department for Education and Skills document called ‘Creating the picture’ which explains how early years teachers should gain this ‘knowledge’ of their pupils (DES 2007). The Reception teachers had also been advised by the local authority to rely on ‘teacher knowledge’ for their assessments, as opposed to having to have written observation evidence for all the Profile points; Jim, the class teacher at Gatehouse commented:

“... we were basically told that assessment is now almost 50% teacher knowledge – you don’t have to have a note, you don’t have to have it written down, you just need to know.” (Jim, Gatehouse)

Thus the production of ‘teacher knowledge’ of children, informed by but separate from observation of children, was constructed as an important part of an early years teacher’s role, and therefore part of their skills and professionalism, rather than as subjective and discursively constrained.

The idea of ‘teacher knowledge’ was also informed by concepts from developmental discourse, dominant in early childhood education, which construct children as passing naturally and inevitably through various stages of skill development – a discourse which is resisted in critical early childhood literature (Cannella and Viruru 2004; Blaise 2005; MacNaughton 2005). This developmental discourse was in evidence in the teachers’ descriptions of how children needed to be ‘discovered’ over time and their true identities drawn out by skilful teachers. Here, Paul, the class teacher at St Mary’s, explains this process:

“At this stage I find it really interesting, trying to work out where they’re at and who they are, as individuals [...] when you’re not quite sure what’s going on in there, so to kind of open them up and get a picture of what’s going on.” (Paul, St Mary’s)

This romanticised vision of discovering pupils is intimately connected with discourses of ‘ability’ and development which construct ability as something which some children innately have, and some lack, coupled with the idea of on-going age-related development. Because some characteristics are seen as innate and fixed but not always reflected in terms of how children behave in the classroom, the teacher has to discover them and gradually come to gain a ‘true’ understanding of them; this is part of building ‘teacher knowledge’.

The teachers' enthusiasm for the use of 'teacher knowledge' was also linked to their practical concerns about producing large amounts of evidence for the EYFS Profile: this task took up large amounts of their and their teaching assistants' time, and was seen as unproductive and impractical. Moreover, the collection of hundreds of observations, photographs and children's work was seen as evidence of a lack of trust; in contrast, the idea of teacher knowledge was welcomed by Jim who said "it's like they finally trust you". Thus we can see these teachers' use of 'teacher knowledge' as part of a counter discourse in early years education, where ideas that lost legitimacy in a results-driven culture - 'disqualified knowledges' (Foucault 1980) regarding caring about children and the slow build-up of knowledge about children's development (Osgood 2006b) - are re-legitimised. This counter discourse rejects notions of teaching as preparing children for tests in favour of teacher assessment as a less damaging, more child-friendly assessment tool. Unusually, in early years in the late 2000s this counter discourse found itself temporarily (and only partially) in alignment with assessment policy.

When it came to making decisions on which of the 117 points to award each children at the end of the year, the teachers were keen to explain their use of 'knowledge' to decide on EYFS Profile results (though as discussed below, this was not consistent in each teacher's descriptions). At St Mary's, despite his detailed system of collecting observations, Paul explained that he did not use the folders to mark the Profiles. He said "We're not making our decisions based on what we have on our Profiles [folders]", instead arguing that it was based on discussions between him and his teaching assistant. Further evidence of this came during my observation of an EYFS Profile meeting in the summer term, when I saw an example of how Paul assessed the children's EYFS Profile scores:

Profile Meeting, June, in the staff room with Paul and Kelly (TA): Paul gives me a print out of the children's Profile results. He is unsure why Dinesh has an N for his Creative Development score (indicating a missing value in the chart). Paul sits at the laptop and

checks Dinesh's CD score. It seems he hasn't done it. He says "I'll do it now, I'll ask you questions" (to Kelly). Kelly jokingly but affectionately says "It won't be much". Paul says "I know". The folders are in a box next to Paul but he does not get Dinesh's out. He reads out the Profile points saying "No" and "Not really", after them. Kelly agrees, and says "It's like Parinda" and gives an example from the day before when Parinda couldn't take her own jumper off. Paul agrees that these children get everything done for them. He continues with points: "sings on his own, no chance", next one - "no way". Then he says as he goes through "bloody nightmare", "engages in repetitive play - he doesn't, he just doesn't". Paul gives him 0 and then realises he may have done it already - the 0 doesn't work for some reason and stays as an N. (Fieldnotes, St Mary's)

Paul's mistaken second attempt at assessing Dinesh's creative development (CD) shows how Profile points can be allocated through teacher 'knowledge', because this is seen as objective factual information, even though these judgements are based on a multitude of ideas about a particular child - their learner identity - which are far from neutral (as I discuss in detail elsewhere - see Bradbury 2013b). It was not clear if Paul compiled all the scores this way - it may be a special case as he was worried that the score was missing, or that Dinesh may be seen as particularly easy to assess - but nonetheless, it shows the power of the teacher knowledge discourse in legitimising this practice. Paul's comment about engaging in repetitive play (one of the Creative Development points), "he doesn't, he just doesn't" seems to present Paul as trying desperately to give Dinesh points, but being bound by what he 'knows' that Dinesh can do. This 'knowledge' is co-constructed with his TA Kelly, who would regularly contribute stories and observations from the classroom; in this case, another child's actions are used to back up Dinesh's lack of confidence. However, these opinions are still seen as factual, and used to give Dinesh a score of zero.

At Gatehouse, Jim's description of his use of teacher knowledge was more complex, and included greater emphasis on the collected evidence in the children's folders:

"I read their folder, and then I read their assessments, and then I went through each point, and highlighted on their tracking form whether I thought they could or couldn't." (Jim)

Jim appeared to recognise that the points are based on what he ‘thinks’ rather than fact, but he also engaged with the idea that he can accumulate enough ‘knowledge’ to produce accurate results:

AB: So you do: looking through the folder, looking through the assessments...

Jim: And what I know.

AB: And what you know of the child...

Jim: I kind of absorb myself in one child. In previous years I would absorb myself in a child, which sounds really odd ... tick the boxes and then I wrote the report after that. This year, I absorb myself in the kid, tick the box, move on. Absorb, but because it was fresh in my mind I was able to tick the boxes and then move on.

Jim’s process of ‘absorbing’ himself in each child is constructed as the professional and accurate approach to assessment; this is also legitimised by local authority advice and policy documents. However, this detailed approach was dependent on the child: Jim also commented that “Sometimes you don’t need to look at the folder – you know or you don’t know if the child has achieved that, just from your own brain”. Thus although the teachers collected a great deal of information, at the point of deciding the final results, they appeared to rely on their accumulated ‘knowledge’.

Furthermore, even where teachers used the folders of evidence, it was often the case that what information was collected and how it was interpreted was affected by the teacher’s previous ‘knowledge’ of the child. In this fieldnote from St Mary’s where Paul and his teaching assistant, Kelly, were discussing an observation, we see how they interpret it in relation to what they already ‘know’:

Paul and Kelly are looking at a long observation for Liam. They are trying to make sense of what it says about him filling a teapot with sand; they are remembering the incident as well as looking at what is written down. They have already found some points relating to literacy and personal and social development. Then Paul says “He works well with other children – he always does”; then he says about the teapot “He was good at filling it up wasn’t he? His fine motor skills are good [notes down]”. Kelly tries to remember, and

says Liam was looking around. Paul says “Making choices then. He is good anyway – our knowledge beyond this is that he good at choosing.” They note it down. (Fieldnotes, St Mary’s)

Here Paul and Kelly use their ‘knowledge’ to determine what the observation about Liam represents in terms of EYFS Profile points. While they use their knowledge to inform their interpretation, simultaneously the observation becomes further evidence for this knowledge.

A final indication of the power of ‘teacher knowledge’ came during the process of finalising the Profile results in the summer term. Both main class teachers with responsibility for scoring the children had systems which involved checking they had awarded points appropriately. At Gatehouse, Jim scored all the individual children and then put them in order of the total points score, to check for what he called ‘glaring inaccuracies’. At St Mary’s, Paul used a programme to collate results which highlighted the scores which were unusually high (point 9) or low (points 1,2 and 3 only) in different colours; this system, he explained, allowed these children to ‘jump out at you’, and formed part of his system of reviewing the results. In both these explanations, the teachers suggested that they had a thorough understanding of each child and their place within the group, and that they needed to check that this was adequately represented by the overall scores and patterns of scores.

In summary, in these classrooms a discourse of ‘teacher knowledge’ was used to describe how ideas about children could be collected through a neutral objective process and used to make accurate judgements. As well as policy recommendations, this discourse is based on wider ideas of developmental progress against set milestones, which inform the process of assessment for young children. These are assessments of children against established norms, a familiar concept in a world in which, as Foucault argues, the ‘judges of normality’ are omnipresent:

The judges of normality are everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the social worker-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements (Foucault 1991:304)

The wider acceptance of the ‘teacher-judge’ of normality, I would argue, allows these ‘teacher-judges’ to place great emphasis on their ‘knowledge’ as factual and unquestionable. That their professional identity was based on the accumulation of this ‘knowledge’ was also important (Bradbury, 2012). This was shown in Jim’s comments about a pupil who came to the class just before the Profile was completed: he took pride in only giving her ticks for things he definitely knew through observation that she could do, saying: “I don’t know her so I could only tick what I knew of her, hence her scores are incredibly low”. It would be irresponsible, in Jim’s view, to score a child that he didn’t ‘know’. That said, the next section outlines the more complex ambivalence felt by these teachers towards the EYFS Profile.

Ambivalence about the EYFS Profile

Alongside their explanations of how ‘teacher knowledge’ could be used for accurate assessment, the teachers also attempted, on occasion, to resist the practices and priorities associated with the EYFS Profile. This resistance took the form of criticisms of the form and content of the assessment and doubts about the accuracy of the final results. Again, these contradictory arguments had implications for the production of the final set of results.

The teachers were frequently critical of the EYFS Profile as an assessment, with their main criticism being that it was a blunt tool for the reproduction of their ‘knowledge’ into numerical data. They complained that the points were too vague or too long; they were described as “too wordy”, “wishy washy” and “airy fairy”, and therefore difficult to assess with any degree of accuracy. Within this, many of the teachers’ comments suggested that

they valued a neutral, accurate assessment system, which reveals the extent to which they are constrained by current discourses which value the kind of objective assessment which testing exemplifies. Comments included:

Lynn (EYFS Coordinator at Gatehouse) says the of EYFS Profile “its crap”, “it’s vague” and “it doesn’t show progress”. (Fieldnotes, Gatehouse)

“You’re quantifying something that’s not quantifiable. Some of it is quantifiable but for the majority of it, it’s not.” (Jim, Gatehouse)

“If they want people to use the system, it should be easy. [...] When you’re a brand new practitioner you don’t know what it means. [...] For example, this one here says “links sounds to letters, naming and sounding the letters of the alphabet”. Now naming and sounding the letters of the alphabet, OK, does that mean some letters, does that mean all letters? Does it mean which letters, does it mean what? What does it tell me? Nothing. So actually it’s vague and it’s very very typical of these statements – they’re vague and they’re useless.” (Paul, St Mary’s)

As we see here, the teachers’ complaints about the EYFS Profile were based on their difficulty in making decisions about awarding children a point or not; these criticisms did not reject the principle of objective assessment through observation, however, only the tool that is provided for recording purposes. Complaints about how the ‘vague’ EYFS Profile suggested a desire for accuracy, as was also shown by several comments which compared the EYFS Profile points for Maths with other scales, to emphasise the ease with which ‘measurable’ objectives could be assessed:

“It’s a yes/no, can/can’t and I think that’s very easy to do, and you, as a teacher, can assess the children very accurately, and I feel completely confident with all of the maths.” (Jim, Gatehouse)

“Some of them are very clear and are very black and white. [For example] that a child *is* able to recognise up to number nine. They either are or they aren’t, it’s not a fuzzy situation.” (Lynn, Gatehouse)

We see here how the teachers appear to welcome the parts of the EYFS Profile system which allow them to produce an ‘accurate’ assessment based on their ‘teacher knowledge’. This apparent belief in the possibility of neutral objective assessment was also indicated by the notes included in the adults’ observation clipboards at Gatehouse, which included instructions that all observations should include ‘factual, objective description’ and ‘All observations should be POSITIVE and FACTUAL and CLEAR and MEANINGFUL!’ (Fieldnotes, Gatehouse). The double mention of the need for “factual” observation indicates the strength of the discourse of objective assessment; this is considered to be an achievable aim. We see here how the EYFS Profile is simultaneously a factual and neutral assessment method, *and* a “wishy washy”, inaccurate system. Within this contradiction, however, there was no questioning of the teachers’ knowledge of the children as the basis for assessment. Instead, the fault for confusion lay entirely with the vagueness of the EYFS Profile points. Jim explained:

“It’s really hard because they’re asking for a number. I always think if you’re going to ask a question, you’re going to get, like if you ask an open-ended question you’re going to get an open-ended answer, but if you ask a closed question you get a closed answer but they are asking an open-ended question, with a closed answer, it’s kind of, the two don’t really go together.” (Jim, Gatehouse)

Jim appears to see the problem as the EYFS Profile asking the wrong questions; it does not allow for the complexity of the situation or the extent of his knowledge about the child. Thus the EYFS Profile is an inadequate instrument: it has “too much in it that’s not relevant, and misses out important stuff” (Jim).

The teachers’ perceptions of the EYFS Profile were also affected by the practical requirements, especially the need to collect so many observations and translate them into EYFS Profile points. This process was seen as an impossible task and a waste of time:

“There’s 117 profile points, you know, and you’re supposed to have evidence, three pieces of evidence, for each. There is no way that you can do that. [...] If you look at the profile book, it’s just like, nonsense. You know there’s no way you’re going to see Johnny doing this or that because you’ve got thirty Johnnys, you can’t find that on a daily basis.” (Paul, St Mary’s)

Paul’s resentment of the impossibility of this requirement was compounded by the irrelevance of the evidence collected, given the reification of ‘teacher knowledge’ as factual.

At the final stage of completing the EYFS Profile results for submission to the local authority, at times the time-consuming nature of the assessment and its vagueness had implications for the reliability of children’s scores (in contrast to other comments which suggested accuracy based on knowledge). Despite his ‘absorption’ process, Jim admitted that the last few Profiles were completed in a ‘crazy, last minute, absolutely knackered, can’t be bothered anymore, rush’. At St Mary’s Paul commented ‘it’s just crap. I try to really genuinely form a system and it’s always “Do your best, do your best” because everybody knows it can’t be done’. Thus the inadequacies of the EYFS Profile as an assessment were seen as resulting in an inaccurate assessment.

At times there were also doubts about the effectiveness of the use of ‘teacher knowledge’ in assessments; when asked if he felt confident in having all the required information ‘in his head’ Jim replied:

‘No, not at all. I don’t feel confident about that, and I never have done. And I’ve always thought that when I was filling out their Foundation Stage Profiles at the end, that it’s always just a best fit, it always has been. It’s just there’s no way you can quantify everything that they’ve said and done throughout the whole year and give them a tick for it. It’s impossible. (Jim, Gatehouse)

Similarly at St Mary’s, Paul, who regarded the EYFS Profile as “impossible”, gave an account of the process which suggested he was simply ‘doing his best’ with a flawed system. This dismissive discourse worked alongside other constructions of the EYFS Profile as a fair

realisation of ‘teacher knowledge’; even though they contradicted each other, these two stances were deployed at different times in order to position the teachers as both professionals and as resisting the system. They were constrained by discourses of what makes a good early years teacher, particularly that they should have good ‘developmental knowledge’ of each child. Both of these views of the Profile as accurate and inaccurate fail to recognise the power of the results when reproduced as numerical data, for instance in providing a baseline for the children as they move up the school. The focus is never on the subjective nature of the teachers’ decisions and their impact, even when the results are dismissed as a “best fit”.

The teachers constructed ‘teacher knowledge’ both as an accurate, objective method of collecting information on a child to be translated into the numerical scores, and as information which is insufficiently represented by the assessment results. As I discuss in the following section, this led to practices of ‘cynical compliance’ with the statutory elements of the assessment, which still left the idea of ‘teacher knowledge’ intact.

Cynical compliance and the law of contradiction

In analysing the teachers’ views on the EYFS Profile and the practices associated with it, it is useful to return to Ball’s discussion of the ‘terrors of performativity’ (Ball 2003) and the literature on discourses of early years professionalism (Bradbury, 2012; Cannella 1997; Osgood 2006a; Simpson 2010). A particularly relevant concept from Ball’s discussion is the idea of ‘cynical compliance’, which he discusses in relation to inspections, but equally applies in this case to the demands of assessment:

What is produced is a spectacle, game-playing, or cynical compliance, or what one might see as ‘enacted fantasy’ (Butler 1990), which is there simply to be seen and judged (Ball 2003:223)

These ideas were echoed in comments from the Reception teachers such as ‘It’s just to

produce a number' (Jim) and '[with] the profiles you can make up any number and they're not going to bloody know' (Paul, in relation to other teachers). Despite the teachers' commitment to 'teacher knowledge', in these classrooms, the production of the EYFS Profile scores had become a process of producing numbers 'simply to be seen and judged'. This cynicism was evident in comments such as these:

"You've got 22 folders down there with nothing in and it's like Christ, let's fill it. You need stuff in there – we need to show that we're doing work". (Jim, Gatehouse)

Meeting with Paul and Kelly: they discuss a sheet to keep track of observations done. Paul says "It's another pain in the arse bit of paperwork, but we need to find out where the big blanks are [...] we've got to do it or we'll end up with a big fat zero by the end of the year." (Fieldnotes, St Mary's)

The result was their engagement in practices which were in keeping with the rules of the EYFS Profile requirements, but also showed their ambivalence towards it. This included, in the Reception class at St Mary's, only filing away observations for six 'focus' children on the basis that the local authority moderation process would only involve six children, which Paul could choose. This was justified, in part, by Paul's 'teacher knowledge'; he argued that this was fine because 'We know where the other children are at, 'cause we're observing them all the time' (Fieldnotes, St Mary's). This 'cynical compliance' continued when he found out that he was not going to be moderated at all: he said "We're not being moderated so we don't need to worry about sticking everything in" (Fieldnotes). For Paul, the only purpose of sticking in the observations was to pacify the LA advisors and therefore appear to be behaving professionally, not to gather evidence for use in the final EYFS Profile scores, because he had adequate 'teacher knowledge' to score the children anyway. Here we see the power of ideas about professionalism in early years working, as Cannella (1997) has argued, as methods of control. However, we also see the importance of agency, the ability to 'resist

the regulatory gaze' (Osgood 2006a). I return to these contradictions in my discussion below of 'fabrications'.

A second useful principle from Ball's work on the 'terrors of performativity' is Lyotard's 'law of contradiction' (Lyotard, 1983 in Ball 2003): Ball explains this as:

This contradiction arises between intensification – as an increase in the volume of first order activities (direct engagement with students, research, curriculum development) required by the demands of performativity – and the 'costs' in terms of time and energy of second order activities that is the work of performance monitoring and management. (Ball 2003:221)

At both schools, the collection of evidence in individual EYFS Profile folders was seen as hugely time-consuming, but necessary for accountability purposes. At St Mary's, where there were fewer adults to help file observations, this collection of evidence was seen by Paul as a particular problem. Providing activities meant producing observations, which then had to be filed, thus reducing the amount of time spent planning and preparing for new activities. This contradiction led to the tactical selection of what observations to file, discussed above.

The EYFS Profile was a constant presence in these classrooms, in the form of observations being written, photographs being taken, and tick sheets for activities. It also affected planning: when Jim talked about colours not being a EYFS Profile point, he said "How can we teach it if it's not a target?" (Fieldnotes). Hundreds of observations were written and stuck into folders over the course of the year and all of the adults in both classrooms were involved in the process. Furthermore, the importance of observations had a real effect on how the teachers understood their roles. For some, the 'enacted fantasy' (Butler 1990) had become real and the collection of observations has become the essence of the teacher's role: when I asked if the support teacher at Gatehouse, Susan, was still collecting observations after the final results had been submitted to the LA, she said "if I didn't do it I

wouldn't feel like I was doing my job" (Fieldnotes). For Susan, "doing her job" *is* collecting observations, not teaching.

The impact of the EYFS Profile on classroom practices can be understood as two processes running in parallel: first, a process of producing evidence which exists only to be checked, and secondly, a process of gathering 'knowledge' which will eventually be used to score the children. Both of these processes are necessary for the teacher to appear and feel professional, but they do not necessarily need to interact, until the final point when the LA moderator relates the folder to the EYFS Profile scores. It is only at this point (and for only six children in the class), that these two parallel processes need to converge. These processes do, of course, feed into each other through the year (or at least the 'knowledge' collecting process feeds into the folder production by determining what is included) but they are not regarded as one and the same; they are two different processes, running along in parallel in order to be checked at key points. This is the performance required, and the teachers have little choice but to comply.

Fabricating results

This final section focuses specifically on the production of the actual numerical data which is reported to government as the culmination of the long process of collecting evidence through observation. Here the case study of what was observed at Gatehouse during the production of results is used to illustrate Ball's idea of a fabrication:

Fabrications conceal as much as they reveal. They are ways of measuring oneself within particular registers of meaning, within a particular economy of meaning in which only certain possibilities of being have value. However, such fabrications are deeply paradoxical [...] Fabrications are both resistance *and* capitulation. They are a betrayal even, a giving up of claims to authenticity and commitment, an investment in plasticity. (Ball 2003:225 emphasis in original)

At Gatehouse, the production of final results was affected by pressure from the local authority advisers and school management, which lead to results being changed to fit with these demands (Bradbury, 2011; 2013b). As such, what was produced was a ‘fabrication’, where the only ‘possibilities of being [that] have value’ were those based upon assumptions about the pupils in the school as a ‘difficult intake’. As I have examined in detail elsewhere (Bradbury, 2011; 2013b), the teachers at Gatehouse viewed the children in their school as unusually challenging to teach, and this was linked to their socio-economic and minoritised status. This was reinforced by the school’s inner city location in an area which had previously been designated as educationally ‘underachieving’ and deserving of additional funding. When the class teacher produced the final results based on his observation, he was told by the local authority advisers who monitor assessments that his results were ‘too high’ for this type of school, and he was advised to change results. Furthermore, a system of assessing the ‘value added’ by each school by mapping on children’s results from one assessment to the next, though not officially in place with early years results, provided further justification for reducing children’s scores: providing a lower baseline meant that the children’s results in subsequent statutory assessments would show more ‘value added’.

As a result of these dual pressures, the scores from Gatehouse were changed, with the removal of some points from the ‘low ability’ children (Bradbury, 2011; 2013b). This process was facilitated, I argue, by the ambivalence felt towards the assessment, particularly the teachers’ construction of it as a blunt tool for the recording of their complex ‘teacher knowledge’ of children and as something they could never get ‘right’. The teachers’ frustration towards the EYFS Profile were exemplified by this comment from Lynn at Gatehouse:

“I mean, look, you’re human, obviously if someone keeps saying to you, “Oh that’s not right, no, that’s not right, that’s not right, I don’t want you to mark them into a curve, I don’t want you to fit them into a pigeon hole, I want you to mark them how you think

you mark them” and then you get told off for that, then you think - and you do get to the point where you think I’m just going to fill this out – what do you think I should write, so that you will stop bothering me please.” (Lynn, Gatehouse)

Here Lynn describes her frustration with the assessment and the temptation to ‘just [...] fill this out’ so that she can be left in peace, presumably to get on with the ‘real’ business of teaching. This contrast relates to the counter discourse of prioritising learning over assessment mentioned earlier, and also the law of contradiction, where she sees the assessment process as reducing her time to engage in actual teaching.

Despite the lengthy process of collecting observations and the teachers’ emphasis on ‘teacher knowledge’, the numerical data produced at the end of the year are, I would argue, merely fabrications, in Ball’s terms, which ‘conceal as much as they reveal’. What is particularly damaging about the production of a ‘fabrication’ is that it is ‘both resistance *and* capitulation’. By ‘just filling out’ the Profile in response to what the local authority demands, Lynn is resisting the idea that it is an accurate assessment of what the children can do, yet she is also capitulating to the requirements of the local authority, rather than producing something which reflects her knowledge. The teachers are both controlled by discourses of professionalism which exert disciplinary power over them, but also able to exercise some agency in their response (Osgood 2006). As I have argued elsewhere, the impact on their feelings of professionalism is therefore complex (Bradbury 2012). Importantly, this production of a ‘fabrication’ comes at the end of an academic year during which a huge amount of time has been spent producing evidence for this assessment: this shows how performative technologies require constant work and maintenance. The ‘enacted fantasy’ of accurate assessment does not happen in one moment, but must be built up and performed throughout the year, in the production of folders of evidence and through continual observation. The fictive accuracy of the EYFS Profile must be resignified through the regular collection of data and the allocation of points, up until the final scores. Even then, success (in

the form of producing acceptable results) is only ever fleeting – it will need to be reproduced, refabricated again next year, and the next, so that there can be no respite. Furthermore, the need for coherence between fabrications is determined by long-term analysis of results.

Recent developments in England

In England there have been two recent developments in relation to early years assessment, following the change of government in 2010, which affect the collection of numerical data in Reception. Most significantly, the EYFS as a whole was reviewed and revised, with new Profile arrangements put in place for the academic year 2012-13. The focus on these revisions was to ‘slim down’ the EYFS to make it ‘less bureaucratic’ (DfE 2011; DfE 2012a)¹. However, as I have argued elsewhere, the revised Profile is fundamentally unchanged in terms of the principles which guide it (Bradbury 2013b), and continues to involve very detailed assessment (Bradbury 2013a). It remains a system which produces numerical data for the purposes of accountability, and thus the practices associated with it in the classroom, examples of which are detailed here, are unlikely to be changed.

A second, more recent, development relates to a proposal to use early years assessment data to create a ‘baseline’ for primary schools to be judged upon. EYFS data are already used informally to measure the ‘value added’ within schools, and they form part of the ‘trajectory’ of attainment through Key Stages 1 and 2 which the school inspection service Ofsted focus upon, but in July 2013 the Department of Education began a consultation on how to measure primary schools’ effectiveness which included the possibility of a ‘baseline’ assessment, conducted in either Reception or Key Stage 1, for comparison with the same cohort when they reach the final year of primary school (DfE 2013). In this scenario, it is not clear if the EYFS Profile would continue or what form the baseline assessment would take, but the proposal is an alternative to the EYFS Profile as a method of judging early years

provision, and for reporting to parents or other teachers. Instead early years assessment becomes a tool for whole-school accountability and thus would serve a different purpose from either the current EYFS Profile or the systems of early years assessment in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

So, what does the English case reveal about both the impact of statutory assessments in the early years of education and their publication by the national department of education? Are there any lessons that can be learnt that are relevant to other education systems? First, I would argue that the use of a complex and detailed assessment covering all areas of the curriculum, conducted throughout the school year, has the potential to reduce the amount of time spent teaching, as opposed to assessing; the ‘law of contradiction’ discussed above applies here. There are also professional implications in terms of teachers’ feelings of being trusted in relation to how much evidence they need to collect, and in terms of the practices of cynical compliance they feel they need to engage in. Any assessment in this age group has to take into account the balance between the time-consuming nature of assessing through observation and the utility of the data created.

Secondly, I would argue that there are real dangers in using ‘teacher knowledge’, constructed as a neutral and objective tool, as the basis for assessment. This is particularly relevant for children who belong to groups of pupils who have traditionally had lower than average attainment, such as children from minoritised communities, from lower-income homes, and in many cases, boys (Bradbury, 2013b). The practice of relying on ‘teacher knowledge’ is common to many early childhood settings, as discussed above, but it has greater power when translated into numerical data, reported to government authorities. The process of accumulating numbers, which can be turned into averages, overall totals and

judged as meeting a benchmark or not, transforms complex observational data into an entirely different form of information which is used in very different ways. These numbers can be used to assess a school's performance, or to compare averages across two classes; they can be used to predict future attainment, or judge the 'value added' over time by a school. The presentation and use of numerical data as factual and objective, even though it is based on subjective 'teacher knowledge', is wrought with potential problems. I am not suggesting that formal testing be introduced into Reception classrooms, but that assessment needs to be built upon a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of 'teacher knowledge' of children and the problems inherent in translating these into numerical data. After all, the operation of less formal, non-statutory assessment systems in other areas of the UK and elsewhere suggests that increased funding in early years education does not necessitate more monitoring through assessment.

Thirdly, I would argue that any statutory assessment in early years – including those potentially to be introduced into Reception in England as 'baseline' assessments – has to take into account the extensive research on the impact on practices of high-stakes assessments. It has long been recognised in educational systems that increasing the pressure on teachers to produce expected results leads to a reduced curriculum through 'teaching to the test', practices which prioritise children below the expected benchmark (Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Stobart 2008), and, as illustrated above, practices of 'cynical compliance' with regulations. Indeed, emerging research from England suggests that the revised goals in the 2012 EYFS Profile and the introduction of a test on Phonics at age six have led to the organisation of Reception and Nursery age children into 'intervention' and 'target' groups if they are just below the expected levels (Roberts-Holmes 2013). The use of statutory assessment in early years, particularly where it forms the baseline for 'value added' measures

of progress or other methods of assessing schools' performance, inevitably creates a 'high stakes' situation which may not be optimal for children's learning.

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¹ Instead of reporting on 117 points across nine scales, teachers now have to report on 17 early learning goals across the curriculum. Each of these goals, however, consists on a number of statements; thus the numerous single statements of the original EYFS Profile have been replaced by fewer but longer statements in the revised Profile. Furthermore, the decision for each goal is not a binary yes/no, instead teachers have to decide if a child is 'exceeding', 'expected' or 'emerging' (often recorded as 3,2 or 1) in relation to the goal. These data are reported to local authorities as before, compared on a national scale and used to form part of schools' inspection judgements.