

Doing without believing – enacting policy in the English primary school

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Abstract

This paper explores how six English primary school teachers enact assessment and attainment-focused policy and asks what this performative policy work does and whether it shapes or requires a new kind of primary teacher subjectivity. The paper draws on a small study of policy enactments in two primary schools in greater London in order to discuss two dimensions of policy enactment that emerged from our data: first, shifting assessment regimes in primary schools which create an enactment environment of second-guessing policy; and second, a shift in focus from the individual child to targeted groups that raises questions about more traditional primary school values. The paper concludes with a reflection on the effects of contradictory values and practices and how this policy context creates a form of ‘doing without believing’ in the English primary school.

Keywords: policy enactment, primary school, primary teachers, performativity, teacher subjectivity, affect

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Introduction

[The school's] strengths have always been around the fact that it focuses on values, things like respect for all people, respect for yourself, doing the best that you can, all of those sorts of things. However, it has shifted [] we have had to change our culture, we have had to become more focused on academic results and making sure that those are achieved, and that has shifted our priorities, it has meant that we sometimes have had to make decisions which I know would have been different...five years ago we would have done things differently. (Hazel, headteacher)

It is now commonplace to state that English teachers work in contexts of neoliberal education policies which emphasise accountability and measurable performance standards. Testing regimes increasingly shape the school day and school experiences of children and young people in England (Ball et al. 2012, Bradbury 2013) and across the world (Lingard et al. 2015). In the context of English primary schools, this emphasis on testing and the accompanying changes in policy and classroom activity in order to raise attainment can sometimes sit uneasily alongside a longstanding emphasis on developmentally appropriate and child-centred learning. The concern is that a preoccupation with children's academic attainment may sideline or impair their social and emotional development, particularly for the youngest children (Moss, 2013).

Primary schooling as a contested policy space

Primary schools in England have been subjected to a considerable number of policy reforms over the last thirty years (Brehony 2005, Alexander 2014) including more centralisation, a national curriculum and mandated national testing. Alexander describes educational

standards as ‘the catch-22 of centralisation’: ‘[t]he more policymakers micromanage, the more they risk blame when things go wrong, and the more they then strive to deflect the blame back’ (2014, p.358) onto schools and teachers. The scene is set for a besieged site of policy activity with the classroom as battleground where national tests are high stakes for governments and teachers alike.

In the case of primary schooling, the key question becomes what primary education is for: what is its purpose and whose needs should it serve? What are its core values or principles? These questions, posed by successive reviews into primary education (Rose 2009, Alexander 2010) and fiercely debated by UK politicians (e.g. Gove 2013, Greening 2016), take us into an arena of ideological and moral dilemmas. Even if policy purports to be about straightforwardly ‘practical’ aspects, such as how a child’s school day should look like and what can be done to close the educational achievement gap between rich and poor, these issues are underpinned by values, beliefs and ethical imperatives. These questions are not new ones, nor are they restricted to England. In a review of the aims and values of primary education in six different national settings (England, Scotland, Germany, New Zealand, Sweden and the Netherlands) Shuayb and O’Donnell (2008) found that for the past 40 years, primary education in the surveyed countries has been shaped by two main, contrasting influences. First, a child-centred approach that calls for ‘a flexible and autonomous system of primary education’ (Shuayb and O’Donnell 2008, p.2). And second, a view of education as primarily serving political and socio-economic aims and thus involving centralisation and an emphasis on standards. Writing about the first few years of the 21st century, Shuayb and O’Donnell observe the dominance of a contradictory ‘hybrid’ where ‘the aims, purposes and values of education ... [reflect] economic and social principles, at the same time as the philosophies of personalised teaching and learning’ (2008, p.4). We can see these somewhat

conflicting principles reflected in a number of key post-2000 policies in England. The 2004 Five year Strategy for Children and Learners (HM Government 2004a), for example, stated that the first aim of primary schooling was for every child to be making ‘the best possible progress in reading, writing and maths, with high-quality teachers and support staff in the classroom giving children more tailored learning’ (p.8), while the much publicised Every Child Matters policy published in the same year (HM Government 2004b) highlighted the following five outcomes: health, safety, enjoyment and achievement, making a positive contribution, and achieving economic well-being. What is evident is that over the past two decades, English primary schools and primary teachers have had to negotiate contradictory policy messages, working to interpret and translate policies that stress wellbeing while also enacting burgeoning sets of tests and assessment tasks. However, we know very little about how they are actually doing this, which is where our study of policy enactments in the primary school is trying to shed some light. Primary teaching appears caught up in conflicting discourses: a professional one centred on theories of child development and calls for the need for creativity in the early and primary years (Alexander 2014), and the current education policy climate in England which prioritises standards and a ‘back to basics’ focus where literacy and numeracy trump arts, humanities and spoken language approaches (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury 2016) – the schoolification of childhood (Clausen 2015).

In this paper and in other research, tensions are evident between these two perspectives specifically (but not only) in the arena of assessment and accountability. These tensions surfaced, for example, around policy moves towards more testing at an early stage in a child’s time in school, as Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2016) found in their evaluation of the Reception Baseline Assessment which was trialled in September 2015 in reception classes in England with 4-5 year-olds. The assessment was meant to provide a ‘baseline’

measurement against which to gauge a child's progress through their primary years. The respondents in Bradbury and Robert-Holmes's (2016) study cast serious doubts about the accuracy and usefulness of the Baseline test results and the programme was suspended. However, '[a]ssessment is a key part of the education system and remains crucial to ensuring that every child fulfils their potential' (DfE 2016). Thus primary assessment policy is very much on the English government's policy agenda, including potentially high stakes assessment for the youngest children. This policy focus on Early Years feeds into the pressures to raise attainment in existing primary-phase assessments, such as phonics screening in Year 1 and the Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) in Years 2 and 6, and the Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation (SPaG) tests that were criticised by teachers and government advisers alike (Wiggins 2016). In English primary settings, these assessment policies are enacted within the context of the education and care of young children which has traditionally emphasised developmentally appropriate pedagogies (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury 2016), including the importance of play and creative expression and where a focus on student well-being and pastoral care has been considered as an integral part of primary teachers' professional identity. Here we do not wish to set up a dichotomy between assessment policies versus child-centredness. Most teachers would see the need for some form of assessment and accountability; the issue is to do with the dominance of quantification and measurement.

The study methodology and the policy enactment framework

In this study we explore the enactments, translations and interpretations by policy actors on the ground in relation to the current preoccupation with measuring children's achievements in the primary setting. Our approach to policy research acknowledges the fact that 'policies do not normally tell you what to do, they create circumstances in which the range of options

available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or outcomes are set' (Ball 1994, p.19). Putting policies into practice is a sophisticated, complex and sometimes messy process. It involves negotiations and coalition-building in which old and new professional and governmental discourses mesh with personal beliefs and capabilities (Maguire et al. 2015). Moreover, policy enactments are also always context specific and situational (Braun et al. 2011). 'Whilst from the 'outside' a school may look like it is straightforwardly adopting a number of policies, schools have different capacities for 'coping' with policy and assembling school-based policy responses. Schools produce, to some extent, their own 'take' on policy, drawing on their culture or ethos, as well as on situated necessities' (Braun et al.2011, p.586). Doing high-stakes policy work can also be an emotional affair with significant psychological costs for teachers (Bibby, 2011). Overall, our analytical and conceptual approach towards policy enactment work in schools foregrounds teachers and other education workers as key actors, rather than merely subjects, in the policy process.

The policy enactment environment of primary schools is notably different from the secondary school context where our previous research was set (Ball, Maguire & Braun 2012). In primary schools, links with parents and the local community tend to be stronger and more immediate. As discussed above, primary pedagogy emphasises child-focused and developmentally appropriate approaches to education and learning. Even if these principles are sometimes hidden in everyday practice, they inform and shape the ethos and work of the primary school (Siraj, et al. 2014). Primary teachers' space for enacting policy is demarcated differently to that of secondary teachers. Spending most of their working days with 'their' class, their connection to 'their children' might be particularly strong (Teague 2015). These aspects, together with the composition of the workforce as overwhelmingly female, can cast

primary teachers in a ‘maternal’ caring role and they may struggle to assert professional autonomy (Troman 2008). Regarding the role of the primary headteacher, their work is different in a number of ways from their secondary counterparts (Pratt-Adams and Maguire 2009, Keddie 2017). Primary schools are smaller and headteachers are more visible within everyday school life and closer to the classroom; there is a more truncated management structure and relations with staff and children may be more personal. All these cultural and practical factors may be called up in the responses to, and interpretations of, policies and they position primary schools, primary teachers and primary headteachers in unique ways with regards to policy enactment.

We want to be careful not to create an image of primary teaching as conforming to a binary of either dedicated child-centred teachers or hard-edged performative-invested practitioners. As has been argued by researchers such as Day et al. (2007) and Wilkins (2011), policy shifts towards attainment measurement and competition have been in play for some time and teachers have become accustomed to the demands of the testing regimes and are able to accommodate them into their pedagogy. Indeed, Wilkins (2011) writes of what he calls the ‘post-performative’ teacher who can effect a synthesis between accountability and their commitment towards teaching in the primary school. His study of eighteen beginning teachers in their first year post training pointed out these new teachers had been schooled in a time of extensive reforms. The national curriculum and testing had been part of their own school student experiences and later their initial teacher training.

In this paper, we examine interview data from a study in two English community primary schools conducted in the summer of 2015. One of the schools was in inner London, the other in a suburban location within Greater London. By selecting schools in contrasting locations

we ensured different types of catchment areas, as our previous study in secondary schools showed that the needs of diverse intakes and communities played a part in how policies were enacted (Braun et al. 2011). However, the differences that we observed seemed more related to the leadership/headship style in each school rather than any more contextualised factors. In choosing the two schools, we were aiming for schools with an attainment record around local and national averages that were broadly considered as ‘good’ schools by the English school inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education¹. High attaining schools have more autonomy and may be under less policy pressure; schools that are doing less well are more susceptible to external scrutiny. The two schools in this study were well established neighbourhood schools with long standing headteachers and socially and ethnically diverse student intakes that reflected their respective inner city and suburban locations. We carried out in-depth, semi-structured interviews with three specific types of policy actors in each of the schools (six interviews altogether): the headteacher, a Year 6 teacher and an Early Years co-ordinator/lead teacher as these post holders would take the lead in accountability work. It could be argued that we concentrated on more experienced colleagues who may have been more resistant to change compared with their younger colleagues (Wilkins 2011). However, we wanted to talk with teachers who had experience with policy changes and who were responsible for enacting assessment and measurement-related policies. Thus we were particularly interested in these three roles as critical cases (Cohen et al. 2011) with regards to influencing policy enactment in primary school. In the interviews, we explored the kinds of policy activities and policy pressures that were impacting on primary schools and how these were shaping the life of teachers and students. In short, we were aiming to develop a grounded picture of what policy ‘does’ in schools. There are limits to this small study; first it

¹ Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, inspects all state-maintained schools in England at regular intervals and grades them on a four-point scale: outstanding, good, requires improvement and inadequate.

might have been instructive to interview some more recently qualified teachers to explore their perspectives on assessing young children and performance pressures. This may have generated some data that disconfirmed our main findings. There are well known shortcomings with relying on self-reporting in interview studies, for as Hammersley and Gomm (2008) argue, people do not necessarily do what they say or say what they do. Certainly, our data set would have been enriched by some observational work of assessment-focused pedagogy in the two schools. However, our emphasis on teacher subjectivity was particularly interested in teachers' self-understandings.

In our data analysis, we worked on identifying and developing themes, cross-referencing with our earlier theorisations of policy enactment in secondary schools (Ball, Maguire & Braun 2012) and building a repertoire of middle-range concepts that reflected practices in primary schools that take account of the complexity of policy enactments. Examining the interview transcripts through a lens that positions teachers as policy actors, as well as policy subjects, allowed us to focus on the limits and possibilities of the interpretation and translation of policy. We have written about the technologies that 'drive the machinery of (policy) delivery, as enactments of policy' (Ball et al. 2012, p.81) and in this paper we want to concentrate on a primary enactment technology that emerged from the data analysis; that is, the way in which schools were anticipating and second-guessing likely policy shifts and aligning their practices in advance to meet these predicted changes. The second enactment technology that we describe here is a shift in focus away from individual children to specific cohorts' attainment, both impacting on practitioners' understanding of primary school values and of their own subjectivity. Our point is that enactments are 'creative and sophisticated but they are set within a logic of conformity and the imperatives of performance and competition' (Ball et al. 2012, p.97)

Second-guessing policy: chasing shifting assessment regimes

An ever-present theme in the interviews was a sense of constantly shifting goalposts when it comes to assessment. What measures and what acceptable levels were to be employed and aimed for became a perpetual point of discussion, preparation and concern among staff. One measure, which at the time of our interviews caused particular consternation, was a focus on students making ‘more than expected progress’ – an achievement goal that by its very nature conveyed a sense of failure to teachers, even though their students were doing well and made progress. What was perhaps meant to be an aspirational target, was experienced as an unfair and punishing measure:

So a big thing for schools was about how much progress children made. We were in the position, for years and years, our children generally attained...their attainment was quite good. [] However the progress was not always great because actually they did very well at the end of Key Stage 1² and they were okay at the end of Key Stage 2³. [] So we have really worked on trying to get children to make expected progress. And two years ago we celebrated because we had finally got children to above the national – [...] everybody is now making expected progress. [] And now I noticed, when the local authority came in, not the least bit interested anymore in children making expected [progress], but you’re failing because [] basically, you haven’t got enough children making *more than expected* [progress]. (Hazel, headteacher)

[T]he last couple of years have really changed. It used to be enough to be a Level 4 at the end of Key Stage 2, then it became you had to be a Level 5, now I’ve been struggling to

² Age 7

³ Age 11

try and see if any of them are Level 6. And progress is not enough, *expected progress is not enough*. (Deborah, Year 6 teacher)

One point to note in the second extract is that the children are described in terms of their levels – a very particular version of reconstituting the child. Primary schools and thus primary teachers and the children are subject to a growing number of key assessment moments: in reception the Early Years Assessment Framework and possibly a version of the baseline test mentioned earlier, the phonics screening test in Year 1, and end of Key Stage tests (SATs) in Year 2 and Year 6, alongside continuous teacher assessment – a panoply of metrics, measurement and quantification (Falabella, 2014). What is hoped for is a comprehensive picture of how each child is doing and developing. Although one downside with this continual recording can be the locking of young children into particular learner identities where early assessment shapes teacher expectations which follow students through their school careers (Bradbury 2013) and thus perpetuate and re-inscribe inequalities (Teague 2015). Whether they are intended to or not, there is no doubt that testing in primary schools is high stakes for the children and their carers/parents, as well as for teachers and schools (Keddie 2017). The ensuing pressure results in constant, heightened policy activity in classrooms and staffrooms, regardless of government assurances that they wish for a period of policy stability (Greening 2016). This activity reaches its nadir in Year 6, the last year of primary schooling, when end of year SATs tests judge schools (and students) as achieving or lacking:

Certainly being in Year 6, without a shadow of doubt, it's all about attainment and results. And we're reminded about that every single day. It's...it's just in our daily conversation amongst all the teachers, with the heads: we're constantly talking about targets, [] it's not good enough that we reach floor targets we actually have to exceed them. [] The deputy

head has dedicated a day a week to the Level 6s in Year 6, to try and get as many of them as possible. And she does lunchtime booster clubs and after-school booster clubs as well. Because, again, this is what Ofsted are looking for so they'll want to know where your level 6s are and what you're doing. [] So it's a lot of pressure, a lot of pressure on the school, and on the kids. (Julia, Year 6 teacher)

Pressure and uncertainty create a powerful mix of ontological insecurity among these primary school teachers and headteachers. Some time ago, Ball observed that the accountability mechanisms of a neoliberal system of public sector governance required 'individual practitioners to organize themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations' and 'to set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation' (2003, p.215). As Bevan and Hood commented, the 2000s saw 'a system of governance of public services that combined targets with an element of terror' (2006, p.517).

In a form of pre-emptive enactment, teachers in our two schools were attempting to second-guess policy and while operating with often very unclear information, were attempting to produce figures and statistics that would insure them against being judged as 'inadequate' or 'requiring improvement' by Ofsted. Second-guessing and attempting to pre-empt policy changes were also a form of defending against fears of failing. Here by defending, we highlight the ways in which human beings protect themselves from anxieties. Teachers enact measures to limit stress and manage anxiety (Youell 2006). In consequence, the hope to escape the regulatory gaze by performing at, or indeed above, expectations creates an atmosphere of incessant activity and calculation which at times crosses over into a gaming approach (Bevan and Hood 2006). 'Covering ourselves', as Sasha explains below, is a guiding principle and in the example she gives, it creates assessment work for herself and her Early Years colleagues that is not a statutory requirement, but 'you can never be sure':

You do work through this kind of tick thing and if they've got 'no's to these two statements in literacy then you don't move on to the next. And it tells you whether they're age-expected, below age-expected, or above. And it's only statutory next year for reception but we've opted to do it for nursery as well because even though Ofsted are saying that they're not going to look at baselines and about your early years practice, we're not convinced, really, because you can never be sure. [] So [the children] do it again in reception and then we've, I suppose, covered ourselves to say, "Well, this is where they were in nursery and this is where they are in reception." (Sasha, Early Years leader)

Angie, another Early Years teacher, describes how some of these judgements and activities are questionable:

I think it's ridiculous to be looking at children in their first few weeks of school when they're not settled. [] I think they want us to mark them low, I think they want low scores so that everything will look [later on] like all of a sudden we're doing so much better. [] I'm against the idea of testing children; and they say it's teacher assessment, you know, but you cannot possibly see 60 children just happen to count or count objects (Angie, Early Years leader)

There is disapproval to these multifarious testing regimes in both our data and elsewhere (e.g. Hutchings 2015, Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes 2016), as well as on media sites such as the Guardian newspaper's Secret Teacher blog (<https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/series/the-secret-teacher>). Yet, active opposition at school-level remains muted. A degree of pragmatic compliance has been observed by researchers such as Keddie, who argues that within 'the current sociality of performativity' educators 'are engaging in varying

degrees of compliance' (2018, p.210), and Wilkins (2011), whose 'post-performative' newly qualified professionals, are comfortable with performative demands, if they appear to work.

In contrast, while the teachers in our study were arguably also compliant, there was simultaneously a sense of deep unease. Engaging in practices one does not believe in or is actively opposed to is something the interviewees felt they were doing a lot, and there was a feeling of inevitability and even some resignation. There was evidence of what Gilbert (2015) in Gramscian terms names 'disaffected consent', a values-based rejection of aspects of reform alongside acquiescence. Underlying these accounts was a sense of professional purpose wedded to primary teaching as a value-led profession (Siraj et al. 2014). It is when it comes to children and their well-being, that the most outspoken and desperate opposition to practices was voiced. So while there might be a degree of compliance, this is not an uncritical or unaware assent – rather what we were seeing was a form of 'doing without believing'.

Upsetting primary school values: shifting focus from the individual child to targeted groups

Julia, a Year 6 teacher, had taken a three year break from teaching before returning to the same school. In the interview extract below, she noticed a major shift in the ways students were being discussed. Instead of a focus on individual children's contexts and experiences, she observed a move to software-assisted presentations where the 'unit of analysis' was often the group, rather than the child:

Three times a year you have these pupil review meetings where you're meeting to talk about the children in your year group. [] And in the past, we would have these pupil review meetings, which would last all morning and we would go through [] every single child individually. [] So there would be lots of chat about their home life, it

was much more of a kind of pastoral thing. [] But what I've noticed coming back this year is that all of that has gone and it's not about going through the individual children, teachers now have to come with great folders with charts and graphs [] for every different type of group of, you know, different groups within the...within the year group, so boys and girls and [ethnicity, level 4 borderline, etc.] (Julia, Year 6 teacher)

The role and use of technology as a tool for translating and enacting policy is something we observed in relation to our secondary school study (Ball et al. 2012), however, there is a qualitative difference in the way this is experienced and presented by these primary teachers; a sense of selling out of professional values and child-centred practices that teachers consider as integral to their understanding of themselves as primary school practitioners. As Angie, one of the Early Years leaders, put it: *'I'm becoming that teacher, which I never wanted to be, who keeps looking at my percentages.'* So while there is participation in these practices, there is also the values-based rejection that Gilbert (2015) identifies as 'disaffected consent'. Even when there is a degree of enthusiasm for some of the opportunities technology affords, such as in the extract below by Sasha, there is some reluctance around how to apply this, at least in relation to very young children:

I think we try and sort of share the, you know, when we do our meetings, so just say if I've done an analysis of our data and I'll say, "Look," you know, "we've seen that the boys," you know, "in their writing, they're just not doing it so," you know, "can we look at trying to get those boys to come and sit down. So when you are doing an activity," – *not that we force children to come over* – "be aware to go and engage those boys." (Sasha, Early Years leader)

Reading this kind of account, one might ask whether teachers and Early Years practitioners really need a computer programme to point out to them that ‘the boys’ are not participating in writing activities. The incorporation of a technological mediator, such as the ever-present student tracker programmes in schools, aligns with a distrust of professional expertise and autonomy as part of the workings of neoliberal regimes in education. On the ground, the teachers we spoke to were aware of and knowledgeable about what was happening in their classrooms and schools and there was concern about some of the unintended effects of tracking and grouping. Angie below was concerned that issues of social and emotional development might be neglected and driven underground, if they no longer showed on children’s charts:

And I’m aware that as a teacher when you’re putting those assessments through and those children who are, you know, they’re good in certain areas but maybe not in all of those six areas⁴, which means...so I’ve got a child who’s very bright and he’s, you know, reading Year 3 books, he’s doing Year 3 maths [] His friendships are better than they were but they’re not really where they should be. So therefore for personal and social he doesn’t get his mark, therefore he’s not going to get his overall early learning GLD [Good level of development]. [] And you can see how some schools would perhaps give them the mark anyway and then that child then goes, you know, under the radar as a child that needs support because for the school to acknowledge it, then it’s not going to look good for them. (Angie, Early Years leader)

What a regime of accountability for the school and testing does to the child was a main talking point in our interviews, even though we did not have any questions in our semi-

⁴ The English government’s ‘areas of learning’ for the Early Years Foundation Stage are: communication and language; physical development; personal, social and emotional development; literacy; mathematics; understanding the world; expressive arts and design. <https://www.gov.uk/early-years-foundation-stage>

structured interview schedule that asked directly about the impact of policies on the children. Practices such as grouping students by ability, once rare in primary schools where mixed ability teaching has been considered the norm, are gaining ground and can now be observed even in preparation for the Year 1 phonics test (Bradbury & Robert-Holmes 2017). In our study, it was particularly the Year 6 teachers who identified this trend (*'the children are streamed for everything [] for maths, for reading, for writing and for grammar'* Julia, Year 6 teacher). Teachers then struggle with contradictory messages being conveyed to the children. Primary schooling aims to be inclusive and communal and the values that are meant to be promoted are ones of friendship and working hard to the best of one's ability. Confronted with children who know and worry about their place in the academic hierarchy, teachers can not help but be emotionally impacted, especially because they are often aware of other challenges and events that are happening in the students' lives, outside of school. It is worth quoting Julia, who works with Year 6 children who receive additional support for their SATs, at length:

So certainly the children I work with [] talk about themselves being thick or of a lower ability or 'I'm not good enough' or 'I'm going to be rubbish in my SATs'. And, you know, 'Julia, how important is this?' you know. And it is, it's actually really quite upsetting because a lot of these children have so many other issues too and the last thing they need to be told is that, well, you know, you're in the low ability group for maths and we're not quite sure you're going to get a Level 4 – not that we'd actually speak to them in that way. []

I've had a few moments of crisis about having to do, you know, what I've been asked to do because I probably don't really...well, I don't believe in it. I actually think it's quite damaging. And I've seen the effects it's had on children. And SATs week itself

was just...it was just relentless. And I just thought, you know, in the tests some of these children [] were going through maybe five or six different emotions in that forty-five minute paper, from complete despair to like tears and, you know, then happiness because they got a question right and then despair again and.... I just always will remember this poor little boy just shaking during his reading test. And I just thought that's...that that's not what we're here to do, you know, that's not right.

(Julia Year 6 teacher)

The emotional effects of high stakes testing on teachers, as well as children, is not something that is often discussed in the literature. As Bibby (2011, p.139) explains, 'the experience of the impossibility of policy ideals and the sheer hard work of living with them' can produce a set of 'psychic and social costs'. These costs can be overwhelmingly difficult for teachers to manage; their idealised identity as a teacher can be damaged and this 'failure' can cause grave stress and anxiety. Given that our interviews were meant to be about policy, the degree of emotionality and even despair that we encountered was striking:

I am the Year 6 teacher and because of the, I think, the type of school we are as well, and the type of person I am, I always want to kind of make sure everything is as good as I can get it. But I, over the seven years that I've done this, that feeling of responsibility has increased, really because the stakes have got higher, they've got higher and higher and higher every year. And, you know, I don't know, I don't know where it's going to end and I don't know if that's just me, just us, I really just don't know. [...]. Sometimes having to just cry in Hazel's [the headteacher] office or for [Hazel] to cry or for Darren [deputy head] to cry, or for any number of teachers to cry.

(Deborah Year 6 teacher)

Even in more positive accounts of policy enactment, a sense of self-conscious boldness can be detected which might consciously or unconsciously be trying to mask some of the difficulties and anxieties primary schools (and their teachers) experience in a reductionist performative policy climate where assessment and attainment has become the main policy focus (Keddie 2018). George, one of the headteachers we interviewed and for whom policy reforms presented challenges to be managed and enacted, rather than despaired over, produced what he may have thought of as an up-beat account of the school's atmosphere, albeit with a disturbing edge of unbounded teachers' commitments and excessive workloads (another form of defence to some extent):

You could become very sort of demoralised by the whole thing but we don't tend to be because we've got a very happy, positive, forward-looking staff and we just get on with it. And very hard working staff, indeed, very hard working. It's not unheard of for us to throw staff out at the end of the day because they still wish to stay in and get work done. (George, Headteacher)

George evokes what Bibby (2011) terms the 'social defences' of the school by telling the interviewer, himself and his staff that regardless of the work and policy pressures, the school and everyone within it is part of a 'happy' community. This type of social defence risks forcing participants to depress the difficulties or even impossibilities of the job; being less-than-positive would erode the engine that keeps everyone working so very hard. In the previous section, we made the point that busy policy enactment work, including the second-guessing of policy, acts as an individual defence against anxiety and a fear of failure (Youell, 2006). Social defences can also drive enactments. In George's version, the school's teachers just 'get on with it' and are 'forward-looking', but this account is difficult to reconcile with the upset that we also encountered in the interviews. Shared, possibly imagined or idealised,

primary school values can act as an invaluable social and emotional resource for teachers. However, this resource risks drying up when values are unsettled and stretched to such an extent that they become no longer recognisable, as we can see below in Julia's concluding remark in her interview:

I just don't think that I can be the teacher that this school really wants me to be at the moment. I mean, unless things change or.... I don't know, I just...I don't feel comfortable doing this type of teaching. It's not me, it's not who I am, it's not what I believe in, it's certainly not what I believe in. [] And that's not really the type of teaching I want to be doing. (Julia, Year 6 teacher)

Reconstituting primary schools and primary teachers' subjectivities

In this paper, we have discussed the sense of uncertainty and pressure that a small set of English primary teachers experience with regards to the assessment policy work that they are charged with enacting. An uncertainty that can result in a great deal of activity 'just in case' and a large amount of additional work in order to 'cover our backs'. We term this a technology of pre-enactment, or the second-guessing of policy. What was evident was that the necessity of compliance with performative policy demands could lead to an underlying sense of disorientation and estrangement from some core values in primary school teaching; that 'at the heart of the educational process lies the child' (Plowden Report, 1967, p.7). In contrast, as Hardy and Lewis (2017:14) argue, 'current approaches to testing seem to constitute schooling more as a site for the measurement and monitoring of standardised practices' and this concern was expressed by our respondents.

Our paper highlights some of the emotional costs expressed by teachers about enacting policies that they do not believe benefit all their children. We have argued that teachers'

work and primary children's experiences have become ever more exhausting and intensive as a result of the overriding concern with, and acceptance of, the schoolification of early childhood (Clausen 2015) and the preoccupation with the minutiae of measurement. Targets can act to control and confine teachers' work and re-vision what it means to be a 'good' primary teacher as producing the required results. The professional culture of primary teaching has traditionally been imbued with notions of altruism and reward linked to student care and children's 'success' in a broad sense. In a performative, neoliberal education context, caring for students has become redefined as ensuring that children achieve academically.

A reconstitution of primary schooling and thus primary teachers as 'good' only when academic targets are achieved, may provide certainty and direction for some teachers, but can create a troubling sense of professional insecurity for teachers who know that children's abilities and lives are more complex than target-tracking software suggests. Ball (2003) talked about a 'structural and individual schizophrenia of values and purposes' that created 'the potential for inauthenticity and meaninglessness' (2003, p.223). We have seen disaffected consent (Gilbert 2015) in our interviewees and we wonder about its sustainability. It is possible that by up-setting a set of child-focused primary school values, performative policy enactments run the danger of alienating some primary teachers to the extent that they may feel they no longer have a place in the profession.

Conclusions

It might be argued that what we have done in this paper is to apply some aspects of policy enactment work to the setting of the primary school, with a focus on assessment, and this is part of what we have done. In what we have reported, we have charted the impact of

performance pressures on those teachers charged with the delivery of these policy directives. However, rather than teasing out the full range of strategies, tactics and technologies of assessment that have been put in play to ‘deliver’ these policies, in the data that we have deployed, we have concentrated on how a small set of teachers have explained their work in terms of affect. Our concern has been with how some teachers struggle to do their best for their schools’ need to meet external targets and do their best for the children in their care – following policies that they do not always see as pedagogically appropriate. Policy enactment recognises that schools always have some space and scope for interpreting and translating policies in different ways. In part, some differences will be driven by contextual factors; more ‘successful’ schools in Ofsted terms who may be over-subscribed and enjoy larger budgets may have more scope to innovate or even ‘buffer’ some of the more negative pressures. However, our two schools were not of this kind. Hence, they were trying to stay ahead of the game and ‘second guess’ policy demands – a form of pre-enactment.

Schools are used to doing accountability work and have been subjected to pressures of performance for some considerable time. What was evident to us from what teachers said was the way in which performance demands had been ratcheted up – needing to make ‘more than expected progress’. The culture in English schools is such that forms of accountability are part of the professional repertoire of the teacher, the problem seems to lie with the degree of what is being demanded and the intensification of these demands, as well as some of the effects and outcomes that appear damaging to some children.

One finding that is worth highlighting is the way in which our two headteachers reported on their schools’ approaches. Hazel recognised that changes had taken place and that the school had changed its practices. She has had to ‘shift her priorities’ which is not to say that they

have changed entirely. George highlighted the happy, hard working staff in his school and did not mention any more complex feelings being held by his staff.

At the start of this paper we asked whether performative policy work shapes or requires a new kind of primary teacher subjectivity. From our small study with only a limited number of interviewees, we can of course not make any generalisations to this effect, but what is perhaps striking is that rather than there being a new or shared self-understanding of what it means to be a primary teacher, there is struggle and emotional up-set. The idea of a reconstituted professional subjectivity suggests a degree of certainty or consensus, instead what our interviewees expressed was considerable uncertainty about aspects of their daily work and more widely of what it means to be a primary teacher in the current policy landscape.

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