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1st submitted 5th August 2018

Taking the ‘early yearsy’ route: resistance and professionalism in the enactment of assessment policy in early childhood in England

This paper explores how early years teachers respond to policy, using the case of Baseline Assessment, a new statutory assessment introduced to Reception classes (age 4-5) in England in 2015. Using interview and survey data collected during the period when the policy was introduced, the paper examines how teachers engaged in different forms of resistance to this unpopular policy reform. It is argued that as early years professionals Reception teachers draw on and draw strength from specifically early childhood-based knowledge and understandings, such as the emphasis on the whole child and an ethics of care, which provide them with justifications for resisting policy. This resistance is thus part of their identity as early years professionals, and allows for a particular positionality within the school. However, it is also argued that sometimes taking the apparently resistant ‘early yearsy’ route can actually facilitate policy; this is discussed as *compliant resistance*.

Keywords: policy, assessment, baseline, early years, teacher professionalism, resistance

Introduction

This paper considers the question of how teachers respond to new policy, and what shapes these responses, using the case of early years teachers. Drawing on data collected during the period when a new assessment policy was being rolled out across England, it considers how teachers of Reception classes (children aged 4-5) resist and comply with a new directive which had already received a hostile reception from the press and educational organisations (BWB 2015; Ward 2015b; Weale 2019).

To provide some context, the period of Coalition and Conservative governments in the UK (2010-15 and 2015-) saw a number of reforms which affected teachers' working lives and practices (Keddie 2017), including the further intensification of statutory testing, a new curriculum and the introduction of performance related pay – such that I have referred to the period as a 'policy storm' (Bradbury 2018). These reforms built on a longer-term trend of neoliberal reform in schools in England intensifying teachers' work, which has led to suggestions it is an 'impossible profession' (Bibby 2011). In this period policy initiatives brought the teaching profession into conflict with government repeatedly, particularly during the era of Michael Gove as Secretary of State for Education (2010-14); he was finally moved from this post when his relationship with teachers was deemed too 'toxic' to continue (BBC News 2014).

The new Baseline Assessment was introduced into this already strained atmosphere between teachers and government in 2015. The assessment, introduced into Reception (the first year of primary education) came in addition to an existing assessment (the EYFS Profile) which had already been reformed in 2012. However, unlike the existing EYFS Profile, the new Baseline Assessment was not intended to provide information for teachers or parents, but to provide a starting point for a measure of schools' effectiveness by calculating the 'value added' to pupils over the next seven years (Standards and Testing Agency and DfE 2015). Thus it was controversial with early years teachers and the subject of public campaigns and press comment (BWB 2015; Heavey 2016; Jarvis 2017; Ward 2015a; Ward 2015b). The policy was abandoned in 2016 before it became statutory, although in 2017 the government announced plans to reintroduce a revised version of the assessment in 2020 following a consultation and a piloting phase (DfE 2017).

Through an analysis of teachers' responses in interviews and an online survey (n=1131) I explore here how Reception teachers resisted the aims and impacts of Baseline,

often rejecting the principles behind it and those who proposed it on the basis of early years principles of care and play-based learning. I consider how the professional status of early years teachers draws on the specifics of early childhood education knowledge, and resistance to statutory assessment draws on this specific subjectivity. However, I then go on to argue that although early years teachers draw strength from the specifics of their particular early years knowledge to challenge policy, in some cases this apparent resistance may actually facilitate policy. In the case of Baseline, taking the ‘early yearsy’ route of an observation-based assessment allowed for the wider acceptance of the policy, paving the way for more test-based forms in later years (see also Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury 2017). I conceptualise this as *compliant resistance*, where resistance has the longer-term effect of compliance and does not significantly challenge the fundamentals of policy. I begin with a discussion of Baseline Assessment policy.

Context: Baseline Assessment

In their study of policy enactment in schools, Ball *et al* outline a binary between *imperative* or *disciplinary*, and *exhortative* policies (2011). Through the former, teachers are ‘put under pressure to submit to the disciplines of necessity’ (p. 612); while in relation to the latter, teachers are ‘required to bring judgement, originality and “passion”’ (p. 615). One of the notable aspects of the policy of Baseline Assessment as a case is that it does not fit easily within this binary: schools were not required to conduct the assessment in 2015, but were told it would be compulsory in 2016 and thus wanted to have a ‘trial run’. Thus, although it was voluntary, teachers felt under pressure to conduct the assessment within a six-week time frame. Meanwhile, schools were offered a choice of provider from an approved list, and many headteachers delegated responsibility for this choice to the Reception teachers themselves. Judgement was required, but there was also a disciplinary function, in that many

teachers felt under pressure to produce appropriate results, which often meant results which were low to maximise the ‘value added’ by the schools (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017). This ambiguous mixture of exhortation and expectations of good judgement was important, as demonstrated in later sections, in determining teachers’ responses to the policy.

The assessments themselves varied by provider, but all resulted in numerical scores which could be measured against Key Stage 2 SATs scores seven years later, to provide a progress measure. The most popular provider was Early Excellence (Ward 2015c), with over 12,000 primaries selecting this assessment. Early Excellence promoted themselves to early years educators as similar to the existing assessment in the reliance on teacher observations, including the characteristics of effective learning, whilst dissociating themselves with ‘testing children’. They described themselves as the only ‘non-invasive’ Baseline Assessment (Camden 2015). The other two providers’ assessments involved tablet-based tests (NfER and CEM), in contrast. It was the problem of comparability between these three assessments that was cited as the reason for the abandonment of Baseline in 2016 (STA 2016). However, plans were announced to reintroduce the assessment in 2020 following piloting, but with one single provider using a tablet-based assessment. Only one organisation submitted a bid in response to the £10million tender for the new Baseline (NfER), with Early Excellence describing the new requirements as ‘unworkable’ (Ward 2018), and the assessment continues to be controversial, with an expert panel describing the plans as ‘flawed, unjustified and wholly unfit for purpose’ (BERA 2018) and continued campaigns against its return (Weale, 2019). I return to a discussion of the new iteration of Baseline in the discussion section.

Conceptualising resistance and professionalism in the enactment of neoliberal policy

My discussion here of teachers’ responses to a new policy – one which made a dramatic impact on their working lives having arrived quite suddenly on the agenda – is shaped by the

wider literature on teachers' resistance and its relationship to feelings of professionalism. Although the phrase is useful as a shorthand, I am wary of romanticising the idea of 'resistance', and instead wish to discuss how various forms of questioning, criticism, and 'begrudging acceptance' (as found by Selwyn *et al.* 2015) are simply part of 'what teachers do', indeed part of their professional identity. Recent studies of secondary teachers have discussed forms of resistance and refusal as 'discontents, murmurings, indifference as disengagements' (Braun *et al.* 2012, p. 149-50) which describes the wider range of responses which might be characterised as 'resistant' to policy. However, Maguire *et al* recount how many respondents to this policy enactment research desired a 'Foucaultian "great refusal"', and were 'disappointed when we were not able to produce this' (Maguire *et al.* 2018, p. 1); this suggests there is an idealisation of the resistant teacher engaged in rebellious acts.

More common in the literature on teachers are the every-day mundane forms of resistance, what has been called a 'thin' form, in contrast to a 'thick', overt challenge to structures (Maguire *et al.* 2018). Although far more broad, this focus on the minor forms of resistance allows us to consider, as Maguire *et al* argue, how power operates in fluid and contingent ways. As written about extensively elsewhere (Ball 2003; Ball *et al.* 2011; Bradbury 2017), teachers in England are subject to a regime of neoliberal accountability dominated by data and the visibility of their performance; 'the teacher subject is constructed in a network of social practices which are infused with power relations' (Ball *et al.* 2011, p. 611). To examine how they question policy is to examine the challenges and disruptions to these power relations, and thus avoid the homogenisation of teachers as entirely bound by the neoliberal regime. A focus on the small acts of subversion, including simply telling an interviewer that they think the policy is nonsense, brings to the fore how individuals may be disciplined by the system, but still have agency; it challenges 'an obviousness which imposes itself on all' (Foucault, 1991 cited in Stephen Ball 2013, p. 33).

The concept of professionalism is also key here to understanding how teachers respond to policy. There is extensive literature on the teacher as a professional under neoliberalism in England and elsewhere (Stephen Ball 2003; Hall and McGinity 2015; Holloway and Brass 2018; Keddie 2017; 2018; Moore and Clarke 2016; Wilkins 2011), including that focused on the relation to assessment policy and data in particular (Bradbury 2013; Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017; Lewis and Holloway 2018; Thompson and Cook 2014). Much of this research details a transition from a teacher identity associated with ‘autonomy, criticality and care’ (traditional professionalism) to one ‘associated with competition, compliance, and regulation’ (entrepreneurial professionalism) (Keddie 2018, p. 199), and the tensions between these two conceptions of teachers’ roles and priorities. This shift is associated with the introduction of neoliberal forms of accountability, particularly the use of high stakes tests (Bradbury 2012; Holloway and Brass 2018). Indeed, in one US based study, it is argued that accountability mechanisms were ‘the very modes by which they [teachers] knew themselves and their quality’ (Holloway and Brass 2018, p. 362).

However, while this binary division is useful in cataloguing the changing attitudes of teachers to their own professionalism, there remain great ambiguities in teachers’ responses to the neoliberal policy regime (Wilkins 2011). Wilkins’ study of secondary teachers in England found they were able to reconcile the tensions between the pressures of accountability and professional autonomy. This ‘post-performative’ teacher, neither compliant nor resistant, is content with accountability mechanisms which are seen as effective. Similarly, Keddie found a combination of traditional and entrepreneurial professionalism in a primary school in England (2018), though she notes the framing of professionalism by the agenda of the overseeing Academy chain. For Braun and Maguire, the contradictions inherent in enacting policy in primary schools create a form of ‘doing without believing’ (Braun and Maguire, 2018). Thus, as I argue throughout this paper, the current

context is one where teachers' notions of professionalism are marked by complexity and contingency.

This complexity is particularly apparent in the specific discursive space of early years in primary schools (Osgood 2006a), where Reception and Nursery teachers operate alongside the wider school teaching body. The lower status of early years teachers in primary schools is a source of tension within schools, though the introduction of statutory assessment in Reception from 2003 brought these teachers into the accountability regime (Bradbury 2012) and was seen by some as an 'asset to status' (Hargreaves and Hopper 2006). However, the pressures of performativity are a source of great anxiety as requirements intensify (Kilderry 2015), and teachers' inability to fulfil the demands of statutory assessment, particularly the extensive evidence required, can lead to feelings of incompetence (Bradbury 2012). Moreover, this pressure can lead to 'cynical compliance', which describes 'tokenistic, half-hearted and tactical adherence of some teachers to the requirements [...] undertaken in a situation where teachers feel they have very little power to resist' (Bradbury 2012, p. 183). This engagement with statutory assessment and data is positioned in opposition to more traditional ideas of professionalism in early years, associated with emotion, relationships and play (Fleer 2013; Moyles 2001; Osgood 2006a; b). Indeed, the shift under neoliberalism has been described as 'de-professionalising' and then 're-professionalising' early years teachers (Osgood 2006b). In this paper I consider early years teachers as professionals further, through a discussion of their responses to a new assessment policy. I focus on the significance of these 'disqualified knowledges' (Foucault, 1980) of early years in forms of resistance, and how this relates to feelings of professionalism.

The research study

The research data discussed here arose from a project I led in the autumn of 2015 (with my colleague Guy Roberts-Holmes as co-researcher) exploring the introduction of Baseline

Assessment during the first, non-compulsory year of its implementation. It was commissioned and funded by two teaching trade unions, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers and the National Union of Teachers (now merged to form the National Education Union), but conducted independently. Methods consisted of 1) an England-wide survey of teachers and school leaders, and 2) interviews at five case study schools in different regions of England. The online survey asked for respondents' views on the new assessment, existing arrangements, the impact on the classroom, and the potential for measuring progress. It was aimed at teachers rather than other early years practitioners as the teacher was main person responsible for conducting the assessment. The total number of survey respondents was 1131. The vast majority (992) were Reception teachers (564) or early years coordinators (428); I refer here to these teachers collectively as early years teachersⁱ. Over three quarters of the respondents were using the Early Excellence Baseline, reflecting national trends, with 10% using CEM and 11% using NFERⁱⁱ. Written comments from the survey are denoted by a W and presented here as written.

The five case study schools were located in different areas of England and served a variety of different local populations. They are denoted by the pseudonyms Alder, Beech, Cedar, Damson and Elm Schools, and more precise details about their location are withheld to ensure anonymity. At each school, we interviewed Reception teachers, EYFS coordinators, headteachers and other school leaders, and parents, although the data here relate to the teachers and school leaders only.

The research was conducted within the ethical guidelines provided by the British Education Research Association and the University College London. Care has been taken to ensure anonymity of all respondents and the security of the data collected.

Initially, interview data were processed and coded in NVivo using themes driven by the research questions; these were analysed by the research team collectively alongside the

quantitative data. The findings here arise from a re-analysis of the data coded as resistance and questioning, conducted by the author.

My co-researcher and I have discussed the findings of this project, and the example of Baseline as a form of datafication, extensively elsewhere (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017). Here I focus specifically on what we can learn from this project about the response of a particular group of teachers in early years and some school leaders to a new policy, in order to add to the body of scholarship on resistance and professional identities.

Findings

Resistance and professional pride

A first form of resistance I note here is the simple matter of objection – to the policy itself, how it is introduced, and to specific parts of the assessment. It is important to note that this was a deeply unpopular policy before it was even implemented: in the survey, when asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement that Baseline is ‘a fair and accurate way to assess children’, only 7.7% of the survey participants responded positively. Survey respondents provided detailed descriptions of the problems of the assessment which were often passionate and emotive; for example:

Appalling form of unnecessary assessment. Goes against the principles of ethical and purposeful assessment in the EYFS. Serves no other purpose than to give the government another tool with which to bash teachers. Why change the system of EYFSP when it was perfectly adequate? I can see how this is already damaging to teachers and children and this kind of poorly considered policy makes me want to leave the profession. (W)

Many teacher respondents were frustrated with the introduction of a new policy at a time when there had already been a great deal of reform in primary schools; thus Baseline appeared ‘as another tool to bash teachers’ in the midst of a ‘policy storm’ (Bradbury 2018). It was seen as an additional burden by 75% of respondents to the survey, particularly as some

forms had to be conducted one-to-one with each child, and others involved extensive observation:

Very boring and labourious (sic) for trained professional teachers to sit through 30 times and then analyse. Teachers would benefit more from interacting with and getting to know the children in those early settling stages rather than be sat outside of the classroom, down a school corridor for a week! (W)

Now the baseline is done, I feel like I am 6 weeks behind in assessing the children on the curriculum we will actually be using all year. It has slowed down my professional judgement. (W)

We deserve to be trusted as professionals to do what is best for our children's development ensuring their wellbeing is high and their love for learning is nurtured. (W)

As these quotes indicate, the length of time taken and work involved was seen as a challenge to professionalism and evidence of a lack of trust in them as teachers; this is the 'de-professionalising' discourse noted by Osgood (2006b). Some respondents went further:

I am concerned that this will feed into a league table. I feel no longer trusted as a professional. (W)

Children are not sausages all made the same, let them be children and trust professionals to do their job! (W)

As discussed in previous research, these challenges to policy drew on the idea of the early years professional as trained in child development and skilled at developing relationships and continuous assessment of children as individuals (Bradbury 2012). This is contrasted to the mechanistic idea of children as sausages, uniformly produced without the need for skilled workers.

These challenges to the policy indicate that there remain for early years teachers spaces for contention and resistance to policy, and that these can be based on their notions of

themselves as professionals with specific early years knowledge. Furthermore, I would argue that these teachers' resistances to Baseline are a key part of the establishment and maintenance of subjective positions as 'good' early years teachers, among their peers and the wider early years community. The model of the 'good' early years teacher in operation here is based on an understanding of child development and having appropriate skills in forming relationships with children and importantly, gathering 'knowledge' on a continuous basis; as one teacher commented, 'I have been teaching for 21 years and pride myself on how I get to know my children quickly and efficiently' (W)ⁱⁱⁱ. In this context, resistance to Baseline is essential to the maintenance of this professional identity; to accept it would be to challenge the 'ethos' of early years. As an aside, I emphasise again that I make no judgement here on whether early years teachers *should* have these skills and attributes, merely that they are part of the discursive constitution of the 'good' early years teacher.

Baseline was seen variously as an affront, disrespectful and inappropriate, because it asked teachers to behave in ways which directly contradicted these expectations of the good early years teacher:

Teachers work very hard to engage & build a rapport with reception children to allow them to have confidence to feel safe in their learning and to share their knowledge. 6 weeks isn't enough. Some children take months to settle and will then fly. [...] We pride ourselves in the knowledge of our children. Even though we chose the early excellence model of baseline we felt there was additional pressure because of the deadline and the need for a definite [sic] yes/no. As professionals we know there may be more about a child than yes/no. Nothing from the 'testing' told us anything we didn't already know or were learning (but had to rush the child to find out). What we keep wondering is why we have to give a rushed picture of each child. It seems such a step back. Why can't we keep and use the end of reception scores as a baseline (ideally the old scale, not the 'broad brush' 1,2,3 scoring). So much can happen in a child's life between EYFS and the end of KS2. Why not allow a bit longer to get the best picture possible. Let us get on with forming relationships & teaching. (W)

As we see in this response to the survey, the professional pride of early years teachers is linked to gathering detailed ‘knowledge’ of children; this is contradicted by a demand for fixed binary yes/no answers for Baseline. Teachers felt this need to label children in response to statements (in the case of those using Early Excellence) went against the practice of gradually building up knowledge of a child through observation over a long period of time – hence ‘6 weeks isn’t enough’. Among many other similar responses, one teacher noted that Baseline ‘forces teachers into yes/no responses when this is not an appropriate or fully accurate way to assess complicated young human beings’ (W). Many respondents also commented that their existing informal systems provided enough information, so that the new Baseline ‘hasn’t told me anything that I didn’t know already; the results that are now in are not telling me anything new’ (W). Here professional pride is bound up with long-established systems which are regarded as sufficient, so that the new Baseline simply becomes an unnecessary burden.

Furthermore, as noted above, Baseline distracted from the key job of building relationships and rapport with children, allowing children to ‘feel safe in their learning’.

As a teacher I would rather spend time supporting children settle in properly, talk to them, get to know them as individuals, use my experience to identify needs and interest, not just fill in more forms. (W)

Thus Baseline was seen as contradictory to the caring dimensions of early years teaching, where children’s ‘settling in’ is the priority in their first weeks of school. Many respondents mentioned the need for time to talk to children about their interests and the ‘distraction’ of needing to do baseline:

If I was sitting in the role play area talking to the children about what they are making and you know engaging with them in that way, I would have to say, ‘Oh I have got to go

and do some Baseline and assessment', it would make me feel guilty and it would just be this thing hanging over me (Teacher 3, Cedar).

Here we see how objections to Baseline were linked in quite clear ways to professional pride and notions of 'appropriateness' for Reception children. In some ways these are indicative of many teachers' reluctant responses to new policy, which is characterised as produced by 'non-experts'; this could be characterised as a questioning which is part of what Ball et al call the 'loving and hating of teaching' (Ball *et al.* 2011, p. 622). However what distinguishes early years teachers from other primary teachers is that these objections draw from specifically *early years-focused* practice and values. Indeed, objecting to more formal testing distances early years teachers from their peers in the rest of primary schools who have to conduct high stake tests in the form of SATs. And this is not simply a rejection of testing; Baseline is seen as an affront to the values and professional principles of early years pedagogy, out of kilter with their 'ways of being' as Reception teachers. In the example above, the key work of talking to children is replaced by the assessment. In this context, to fail to resist Baseline and its inappropriate practices is to fail to show commitment to the early years ethos. I do acknowledge however that there were some supportive comments from respondents and we cannot homogenise the entire early years workforce as compliant or resistant in the same ways.

Consideration of this relationship between professionalism and resistance in early years frames and informs how we understand these teachers' responses; their resistance is sustained but also demanded by their particular professional identities. Early years teachers are, I would argue, quite a different case from the wider literature on teachers under the neoliberal gaze; they certainly do not fit with the content and balanced 'post-performative' identities described by Wilkins (2011).

Compliant forms of resistance

Following this discussion of objection to the new policy and the relationship to professionalism for early years teachers, this second section of analysis considers the complex relation of resistance with forms of compliance. As discussed, Baseline can be characterised with Ball *et al*'s binary schema as both an *imperative* or *disciplinary* policy, which puts pressure on the teacher to respond, and as *exhortative*, in that it did allow the teachers some choice of provider and thus agency. Here I consider how they exercised that agency through their choices of Baseline provider, in ways which were ultimately compliant but felt like resistance.

The teachers in this study were not passive policy subjects, though they did feel pressure to engage with the policy overall. The majority of schools engaged with Baseline in 2015 even though it was voluntary, in order to prepare themselves for the 2016 compulsory year. As discussed, there were three choice of provider, one of which was based on observation like the existing EYFS Profile assessment (Early Excellence, also known as EExBA). I focus here on the implications of providing this choice, and those teachers who selected the Early Excellence Baseline. In our case study schools the Reception teachers were able to choose the provider; for the survey respondents we do not know who made this decision, though some responses suggest it was the teacher themselves.

As reported widely in the education media, the majority of schools chose Early Excellence, and this was seen as a challenge to the policy (Ward 2015c). Early Excellence effectively positioned their Baseline as unique and steeped in early years practice, although it did fulfil the requirement that each child be numerically scored on literacy and mathematics. This positioning meant that simply choosing Early Excellence was seen by many teachers as a form of resistance to the policy, and as a challenge to government. It was described positively by teachers as quick and familiar, and aligned with 'good early years practice':

Early excellence baseline was easy and rooted in the pedagogy of early years ed. the baseline was a quick and easy based on observation assessments we carry out every year. (W)

The Early Excellence was pretty close to what we would normally do so it wasn't an empty enterprise. (W)

We have chosen the assessment which has the least impact on the children. The way early excellence has designed it is more inline with good EY practice than other assessments. I answered many of these questions in the way I did because it this assessment is OBSERVATION based. (W)

I feel incredibly sad for all those poor children that have been assessed using anything other than Early Excellence and for their teachers as the info will be useless in providing the best education for those children. (W)

We see here how the use of observation – as a less intrusive form of assessment – is positioned as the method most in keeping with an early years ethos and good practice, so that using Early Excellence is the appropriate choice for the good early years professional. There were doubts overall (for example that Baseline might be an ‘empty enterprise’), but the alignment of Early Excellence with existing informal baselines and in many responses with the EYFS Profile or data management systems, made it an easier and more attractive choice.

For me it wasn't really much of a decision because we wanted to go with the EExBA because it was the ethos that we already follow. It wasn't a particular change from practice that we already do. (Assistant Head, Cedar)

The strength of feeling on taking the ‘early yearsy route’ through Baseline, as one teacher described, was evident in discussions with headteachers on their involvement in choosing a provider. One headteacher described a meeting of ‘busy, busy heads’ and ‘early years coordinators who like to make decisions in groups’:

The wave was, you know, there was this wave of early years, Early Excellence, and you almost felt like if you were going with somebody else you know you were a traitor to good Early Years pedagogy. (Head, Alder)

This collective decision that Early Excellence was the only acceptable choice, and that anything else would be ‘traitorous’ indicates again the association between resisting a policy such as Baseline and remaining aligned with the early years ethos. However, in choosing Early Excellence, these teachers were of course engaging with the policy even when they were not required to, and ultimately complying with the policy. One headteacher hinted at this:

I imagine their intention is to make us feel we have got some control over it and some sort of ownership. And I guess if it goes the way of Early Excellence which is the one we feel is quite good then we will be quite happy. [...] But if they go with another one then we won’t be quite so happy. [...] I think people have appreciated the ability to choose one system and try what they think is the best way to match our own practice. (Head, Elm)

This ‘ownership’ has facilitated and allowed the policy to be enacted, despite a resistant workforce. This resistance then is ultimately compliant, such that it can be described as compliant resistance: it challenges the policy in ways which in the long-term only expedite the policy.

This compliant resistance exists in a context where there is a general ‘begrudging acceptance’ (Selwyn *et al.* 2015) of policy, and ‘feelings of powerlessness and fatalistic resignation’ (Osgood, 2006a, p. 7) determine how teachers respond to new reforms. But it is not the same as cynical compliance, where teachers enact policy in limited and disengaged ways; many teacher respondents were enthusiastic about using Early Excellence initially, and attempted to conduct the assessment thoroughly. It was only during the period of attempting to collect the data required that many noted the impact on their practice:

Early Excellence is the only provider I would consider as all others contradict with the EYFS ethos. It has added workload as we still have to conduct our own on entry assessments to gain an accurate starting point for planning and tracking from. (W)

All reception Teachers already do baseline - Early Excellence has been a good match with our philosophy, however it does not cover all Learning areas of the EYFS. (W)

Given that we had to choose a baseline assessment, I think the format provided by Early Excellence fitted well with the ethos of early years approach to learning and assessment. However it did not give an accurate enough 'on entry' assessment of the children to inform planning so further assessment (which is the usual practice in our setting) had to be completed thus increasing the workload for the classroom teachers. (W)

Using Early Excellence- as it was observation based it was very much like the baseline assessment we did already in previous years. However the questions were specific and did not cover all the aspects teachers would normally consider when doing their own baseline assessments. I feel the results are less reliable for some children for this reason. (W)

Thus although these teachers saw Early Excellence as an appropriate choice, they still had criticisms of its impact on the classroom and questions about the reliability of the results. The policy remains contested on the basis of early years knowledge, although it has been complied with.

Discussion: the impact of resistance

The forms of 'thin' resistance discussed here are examples of what Ball has called 'strategic skirmishes', moments of subversion which never mark the total refusal of power for those teachers who question the neoliberal regime (Ball 2016, p. 1131). Indeed much of the recent literature talks merely in terms of small-scale refusals and challenges, and of teachers who are wholly subsumed by the neoliberal model of the teacher, or dominated and restricted by its framing (Keddie 2018; Maguire *et al.* 2018). And yet the case in hand here of Baseline assessment, is an example of a policy which *was* retracted, following a widespread campaign

by professional organisations and the teacher trade unions, and academic research. Does this mean we need to rethink these resistances? The reason cited by government for the abandonment of the policy was the incompatibility of the different forms of assessment; thus the choice of an ‘early years’ observation-based assessment by the majority of schools did act as a form of sector-wide resistance, as the results from Early Excellence were not deemed comparable with the tablet-based tests (STA 2016). Inadvertently, those teachers who chose Early Excellence may have done more to damage the policy than those who refused to engage (Ward 2015b).

Yet, the long-term results of this policy skirmish suggest that the characterisation of these choices as *compliant resistance* rings true. Since the 2016 announcement that Baseline was abandoned, the issue has remained on the agenda. The headteachers’ union NAHT released a report in early 2017 which suggested that if Baseline were reintroduced, the statutory tests at age six (Key Stage 1 SATS) could be removed (NAHT 2017). Following this, later in 2017 a consultation was announced which sought views on changing the way progress was measured in primary schools; this consultation presented reintroducing Baseline as a fairer way to assess primary schools than the use of Key Stage 1 SATS. There was no option not to use a progress measure; simply two options of Key Stage 1 or Reception, and a choice of which was preferable. Baseline was clearly established as a logical possibility for the basis of progress measures; perhaps seen as the lesser of two evils, with the possibility of the removal of Key Stage 1 SATS working as an incentive to opt for Baseline. The government response to the consultation included the announcement that Baseline would be trialled in 2018 and piloted in 2019, for a national roll-out in 2020 (with the potential removal of Key Stage 1 SATS promised) (DfE 2017). Although there continue to be campaigns against Baseline and resistance among teachers, I would argue that the ground was laid by the 2015 version for some level of sector-wide acceptance of the reintroduction of Baseline.

Thus, in the long-term, the engagement of teachers with one form of Baseline worked as part of a ‘policy ratchet’ (Ball 2008), making a previously unacceptable idea workable and worth engaging with, so that the next more formal version does not appear as quite such a shift in practice. Thus when the NAHT suggested a return to Baseline in early 2017 it was now a familiar concept, as most Reception teachers had engaged with it in 2015. Overall then, the resistant act of choosing Early Excellence and therefore engaging with the new policy when it was voluntary may have contributed to the long-term establishment of Baseline. I note, however, that there continue to be forms of resistance against the policy, as demonstrated by the BERA publication criticising the assessment (2018) and the continued campaign from the More than a Score group (MTAS, 2018; Weale 2019).

Conclusion

As mentioned, much of the literature on teacher professionalism under neoliberalism focuses on ‘restricted professional identities where affordances for professional practices lying outside of neoliberal subjectivities have been dramatically reduced’ (Hall and McGinity 2015, p. 2). This paper has demonstrated how the early years remains a space for alternative views of teaching and teachers, as early years-specific bodies of knowledge and practices bolster teachers’ willingness to question and challenge new policy. However, we must remember that these challenges have emotional and professional costs; we need to ‘deromanticise’ the idea of teachers’ resistance to policy as consider the emotional and professional impact on those engaging with counter discourses (Bradbury 2012).

Significantly, there remain ambiguities and concessions, as teachers accept the new assessment policy if it is done in an ‘early yearsy’ fashion, namely involving observation rather than formal testing. This choice is seen as challenging the policy, but does involve engaging with and completing the assessment; here this approach is described as *compliant resistance*. This should be distinguished clearly from forms of *cynical compliance*, where

teachers unwillingly engage in practices which they fundamentally disagree with (similar to Braun and Maguire's description of 'doing without believing', 2018). *Compliant resistance* involves, by contrast, believing in what you are doing as useful, as long as it is *in this form*. In a small way, this responds to the call for a 'more complex lexicon that traces the ambivalences and ambiguities that are involved in enacting and resisting educational policy in schools' (Maguire *et al.* 2018, p. 13).

This paper considers one case of how teachers responded when a new and controversial policy was implemented during a period of intense policy reform in primary schools, using data collected during the period when the policy was introduced to schools. The conclusions drawn relate to the specific positioning of early years teachers in response to policy and the connections between being resistant to statutory assessment and being a 'good' early years teacher. Thus it adds to the body of work which demonstrates that teachers' responses to policy are always contextual (Braun *et al.* 2011), while also raising questions about which teachers are more able to engage in forms of resistance, and the longer-term implications of this engagement with alternative ways of thinking for the practice of teaching.

Acknowledgements:

This research project was funded by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers and the National Union of Teachers (now combined as the National Education Union). I am grateful for their support and the contribution of my co-researcher Guy Roberts-Holmes.

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ⁱ I do this for ease of reading, aware that there are also teachers in Nursery classes in primary schools, and in other early years settings that would consider themselves to be ‘early years teachers’. The teachers I refer to here would all have qualified teacher status (QTS).

ⁱⁱ Interestingly, for some questions where the provider is an important factor, such as those about workload and impact on the classroom, the responses disaggregated by provider are broadly consistent.

ⁱⁱⁱ I have written previously about the problematic nature of this ‘knowledge’ in relation to social inequalities (see Author, 2013); I do not have space to discuss this in depth here.