

Creating an Ofsted story: the role of early years assessment data in schools' narratives of progress

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Keywords: word; another word; lower case except names

- Intro on importance of ofsted, relationship to data production, signif of EY; new baseline test make key area of policy
- Literature and theory – include Selwyn, Ozga etc. on increased role of data in governmance; also Gorard on progress measures; also performativity literature – Ball, Perryman;
- Research study – details
- Main findings 1 – on progress – need for demonstration of progress with 2yr olds; EY as baseline for value added
- Main findings 2 – on Ofsted story – role of EY in creating start of narrative, need for consistent narrative; EY data serves only as justification for future data in KS2
- Discussion – wider picture of datafication; surveillance as constant pressure between ofsted visits
- Conclusions – shifting cultures; increased importance of EY; dangers of value added methologies; new baseline as epitome of a trend which is already working in complex ways

Introduction

During the era of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in the United Kingdom (2010-2015), measures of progress became increasingly important in judgements of schools' effectiveness. The revised framework for school inspections carried out by Ofsted included reference to 'sustained and substantial progress' as a key indicator of a school's effectiveness. Towards the end of this government, new methods of monitoring primary schools were introduced which involved tracking children from when they enter the school in Reception (age 4-5) to their statutory assessments (Sats) at the end of their final year (age 10/11) (ref); this long-term strategy of measuring

progress from ‘baseline’ to Sats will bring new pressures on schools (it has yet to be implemented at the time of writing). This paper seeks to explore, in response to both this recent development and longer-term trends of monitoring and accountability, the importance of schools’ *narratives of progress* as constructed through the production of attainment data and the presentation of this data to Ofsted inspectors. In particular, we consider the increased significance of assessments of the youngest primary children within this framework of accountability, given previous research on the ways in which teacher assessments in Reception can be manipulated (ref AB bk). Using data from a qualitative research project in early years settings, we argue that the need to create an ‘Ofsted story’, as one of our participants termed it, starting with Reception assessments, is increasingly a priority for schools. This need for a narrative is set within a wider reification of ‘progress’ as a measure of effectiveness, which is evident in our data collected in both primary schools and other state-funded early years settings, such as Nursery Schools and Children’s Centres. **One of the outcomes of these pressures is the need to manage data in ways which are dependent on the timing of the assessment and the avoidance of risk.** We conclude by reflecting on the potential impact of the new baseline assessment with this context.

Shifting measures of schools’ standards

This exploration of the shifting priorities produced by accountability measures builds on a wealth of research in this field which has identified the complexities and temporary nature of pressures on schools (refs?). As measures and methods of judging schools shift with different governments, teachers have responded; Perryman’s research on Ofsted inspections in the 2000s provides evidence of how teachers reacted to the inspection regime at the time, for example, but the pressures of the current system of ‘no notice’ inspections are different. Changing measures of school performance in

league tables, such as the introduction of the EBacc measure under the coalition government and the disqualification of some courses from measures of A-C passes, have altered which subjects schools provide (ref), as the Coalition government intended. The uncertainty and precariousness what is being measured and how is part of the ‘terrors of performativity’ (Ball ref), as played out in teachers’ every-day lives.

At first sight, measures of judging attainment in primary schools in recent years have remained relatively stable in comparison with secondary education: the proportions of children attaining a Level 4 in the Sats tests in English and Maths at age 11 remain the main measure, and are used in league tables. However, changes such as the removal of science Sats tests and the altering of the content of the English and Maths tests (such as introducing a spelling and grammar test, and removing the calculator paper) have altered how teachers are encouraged to prepare children. An additional measure has also been introduced into primary in the form of the Phonics Screening Check at age six, and there have been reforms in the form and range of data including in published league tables (ref). Moreover, there have also been changes to the assessment in early years (a term used to refer to Reception classrooms in primary schools, as well as settings for younger children in the private and voluntary sector). The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFS Profile), introduced in 2003 by the Labour government, was revised in 2012 under the Coalition government as part of their aim to reduce bureaucracy, though there is debate over whether it achieved this aim (ref). This assessment, which covers all areas of the curriculum and is based entirely on teachers’ judgements, produces data on the proportion of children reaching a ‘good level of development’ (GLD) at the end of the first year of school in Reception. This data, we argue in this paper, has become increasingly important in the production

of schools' 'Ofsted stories', as it provides a starting point for children's progress through the primary school and thus forms a key part of how inspectors assess schools.

In order to be judged 'outstanding', schools must demonstrate that 'Pupils make substantial and sustained progress throughout year groups across many subjects' (refⁱ p71). This reification of progress as a measure of schools' effectiveness was confirmed by the announcement in 2014 that primary schools would be judged primarily on progress measures as opposed to raw attainment figures (**insert detail and refs**).

This builds on a complex history of the use of progress measures in education in England. [**Explain CVA and abolition, Tory quotes on this, but continued use of VA. Gorard on progress measures**]

Theory

The research study [adapt for inclusion of LA advisor**]**

The data used here were collected through a qualitative research study involving teachers and school leaders in three sites: a primary school, a Children's Centre run by a local authority, and a combined Nursery School and Children's Centre, also LA-run. We also interviewed an Early Years advisor employed by a local authority to support teachers in their use of data, to provide an alternative viewpoint. The aim of this project was to explore how these settings collected attainment data on children in the Early Years Foundation Stage, both through statutory assessment (the EYFS Profile) and more informal local methods. We interviewed teachers across the three sites, undertook informal observations in the settings and collected documentation, including anonymised Excel spreadsheets illustrating the type of data they collected. The data

used here arise from the semi-structured interviews conducted with, in total, one head teacher, three deputy head teachers, two EYFS leaders and three early years teachers, plus the external EY advisor. The participants came from a range of local authorities.

The Children's Centre, which we call Centre A, is located in an inner London borough and serves a deprived community. Children's Centres are publically funded settings where a wide range of activities take place, including nursery classes, drop-in 'stay and play' sessions, midwifery services and postnatal care. Our focus was on the two groups of children who regularly attend the centre: the 'two-year-old group' and the nursery class for three to four-year-olds. The younger group of children attend Centre A for 15 hours a week under arrangements introduced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2013 to provide 15 hours of free care per week for disadvantaged children. The primary school, which we call School B, is located in a different area of London, but the pupil population has a similar demographic profile. Our third research site, Centre C, is an inner city combined Nursery School and Children's Centre in the southwest of England. Centre C is based on two different geographical sites, with the nursery school in the city's traditional dock and industrial area whilst the recently opened two year olds Children's Centre is located in a poor socio-economic, predominately Somali residential area. The LA adviser is employed by a different local authority, which we refer to as Authority D. Access was gained through contacts in an opportunistic sampling technique, based on the need to involve settings representative of English state provisionⁱⁱ in the early years. The research was conducted within the BERA Ethical Guidelines; all names and details have been changed to protect participants' anonymity.

[insert link sentence]

Creating a story for Ofsted

The pressures of Ofsted inspection as well documented (refs), and remain a key feature of teachers' working lives in England (ref?). Nonetheless, as Ofsted's inspection framework has undergone reform, the operation of inspections and the information required by inspectors has changed. In the current system, inspectors examine the school's 'attainment and progress' data in preparation for an inspection, and indeed use this data to decide if an inspection is necessary (refⁱⁱⁱ p10). This makes this information, which includes the proportion of children gaining a 'good level of development' (GLD) in the EYFS, Phonics Screening Tests scores, and Sats results, particularly high stakes for primary schools, both before and during an inspection. One teacher we interviewed commented 'Ofsted just wanted the data and they kept asking for more!'. Significantly, the criteria on which schools are judged in terms of achievement are based primarily on progress measures: to be outstanding, the schools must show that 'From each different starting point, the proportions of pupils making expected progress and the proportions exceeding expected progress in English and in mathematics are high compared with national figures (ref p71). Thus a key part of the inspection is based on the 'value added' by the school; for this, they require a narrative of progress:

We have to have a story for Ofsted and there has to be progress from when they came in to the end of Year 6. So Year 6 can come up with good results but if they came in really well then it's not good enough because there's not sufficient value added and you have failed them. (Teacher X, School B)

Within this framework, raw results (high scores in Year 6) are insufficient if the children were already assessed as high attaining in the early years. As previous research on early years assessments has found (ref bk), there is therefore pressure to deflate early years assessments in order to provide a lower baseline for measures of progress. The

school needs to produce a narrative of progress, from low attainment to high attainment as children progress through the school; this may be particularly the case if the school does not compare well with others on raw data. However, the workings of value added ensures that even schools with high attainment rates in general face pressure: as this teacher identifies, if a child is deemed high attaining in Reception then they must maintain this high attainment through the school:

The tracking begins from Nursery in the Prime Areas and right through to Year 6. If you are exceeding at the end of Reception you have to show that you are exceeding at the end of KS1 and if not then we are not doing our job.

This pressure obviously makes assessing children in Reception as having high scores an unattractive prospect; it is a risk which schools may wish to avoid.

The requirements of an 'Ofsted story' do not simply relate to the attainment data: there is also a need to conduct and document interventions such as withdrawal groups where the data show children are failing to make enough progress:

You have to track children all the time and I have to add everyone's data at the end of each term to the school tracker. Have they performed appropriately and if not, why not and what interventions are going to have to go in? Nobody's allowed to fall behind.

Thus the narrative of progress must include details of how the school is intervening to ensure progress is universal – 'no one can fall behind'. The school is judged on both the identification of the children in need of 'intervention' and the success of these interventions in returning them to the norm of progress.

Thus the story for Ofsted must be complex and nuanced, and consider the complexities of different groups of pupils:

You have to know what the graphs mean and to have a narrative with each graph. So lots of time [is] spent getting the narrative together. (Deputy Head at Centre C)

You have to know every single child and every single group. Whether its boy or girl and Somalian and whether SEN and whether FSM, who's had an intervention, what are the home languages. I mean its everything on each child with all the variables. You have to know all the ins and outs of that data and it doesn't necessarily make your practice better. However, you can answer Ofsted and Ofsted like it! (School B)

This requirement is based on the Ofsted guidance which states 'Inspectors will evaluate evidence relating to the achievement of specific groups of pupils and individuals, including those eligible for support from the pupil premium' (p19). A school can be judged inadequate if 'There are wide gaps in the attainment and/or the learning and progress of different groups' (p72). Therefore an explanation is required which accounts for the progress of children in different groups, and again justifies any interventions.

The demands of performativity are such that the construction of an Ofsted story through data is in some schools sub-contracted out to private companies; in others a teacher becomes a 'data expert', ready to answer detailed questions on the data. At Centre C, the Deputy Head fulfilled this role: she commented 'I'm not classroom based anymore - I don't teach because I have to manage all this data'. As many inspections are now conducted with no notice given, the schools have to be prepared at all times for an inspection and the detailed scrutiny of their progress data, to be 'data-ready'. Ofsted's role as a monitoring and disciplinary force thus operates between inspections, ensuring that progress is a key focus for senior management. As one senior teacher at School B put it, 'The head's job rests on whether the data is good or bad'. The threat of inspection hangs over the school, determining how tasks are allocated and where additional support is provided. The focus on progress data also filters into local judgements, including those related to performance related pay: at Centre A, the Deputy Head noted

that decisions on her salary increments were determined by the data she produced on the progress of children on Free School Meals. We turn now to this wider move towards assessments of progress over raw attainment.

The reification of progress and the need for a baseline

This second section sets the need for an Ofsted story in a broader context, where there is a wider shift towards using progress measures to judge schools and the use of assessments in early years settings as a baseline. The recent move towards using baseline assessments to judge primary schools is the epitome of a trend, we argue, which is already present in primary schools and Children's centres; a trend towards the constant measurement of progress or value added between two points, in order to justify funding or good Ofsted judgements. This is informed by an input/output model of education as a linear process where everyone can be improved given the right environment and teaching; 'snapshots' at key points are necessary to measure the effectiveness of intervening events. As one teacher put it 'We have to prove we are making a difference. We need data to do that' (Deputy Head, Centre C).

As discussed, the first criteria for an Ofsted 'outstanding' judgements for schools is 'substantial and sustained progress' (ref); for early years provision, the equivalent statement requires that 'Children make consistently high rates of progress in relation to their starting points' (p75). At both Centre A, the Children's Centre, and at Centre C, the combined Nursery School and Children's Centre, young children were frequently assessed in order to show the required progress:

Our children are tracked from two to three [years old], three to four, and then you have to show that you have made value added by the time they reach the end of Reception. (Headteacher, Centre C)

...when Ofsted come and ask to see the tracking data, I can show this child, at their baseline, then their first, second and third term and this is where they are now.
(Deputy Head, Centre A)

This pressure was linked again to Ofsted inspection, but as we have discussed elsewhere (ref) it was also based on the need to show value for money to the local authority, who are responsible for apportioning the funding for provision for two-year-olds at Children's Centres. A fundamental part of these methods of monitoring progress is the establishment of norms, or 'expected rates of progress', which can be applied to data to identify who is in danger of 'falling behind'. As this deputy headteacher comments, these norms can be based on the other children in the group, or on general judgements of 'good progress':

We record how the children enter when they are two, so we have a baseline and then throughout the year we do three assessments with the children at set points and then compare them with each other to check that are making progress. We have a system which shows where the children should be with where they are so we can see if they are on track. (Deputy Head, Centre C)

The use of software to track and highlight certain children forms a key part of this management of progress data; it enables the easy identification of those children assessed to be making slower progress against their starting points.

We produce individual graphs for each child at the beginning of each year and end of each year. We see if they have made a good level of progress. So spread sheets for each class. It shows their baseline assessment and then predicts where they should be at. So, the predicted is behind and the front line shows where they are actually at. (Deputy Head, Centre C)

We see in these comments how important the establishment of a baseline is within this

reification of progress: without it, nothing can be measured. Equally, with an inaccurate baseline, measures of progress are meaningless. In the case of early years education, this is a further complication to assessment, because some institutions form the starting point, while others measure the end point. For example, assessments of what children attain at the end of their time in a Children Centre at age four are used to judge that Centre's effectiveness, but may also be used to form a baseline for judgements when these children arrive in Reception.

We spend loads of hours getting the data into shape to send to primary school but the primary schools don't have to use that data from Nursery schools. So basically, reception teachers want their children to come in as low as possible, so that they get the value added at end of reception. We don't have any proof that they use our data sheets at all. (Deputy Head, Centre C)

Here we see how the competing demands of making the data work for the institution may conflict with the aims of the teachers.

More significantly, there is an overall effect of this reification of progress on early years both in schools and other settings: the increased focus on and surveillance of younger children as part of regimes of accountability.

More than ever before EY is valued as a particular stage and that's probably because of the data now being collected in the EY. The government just loves statistics and numerical data and then they realized that EY data can be collected and then all of a sudden we have Prime Areas to measure! (Deputy Head, School B)

This reference to the coalition government's reforms to the EYFS Profile – which included the introduction of 'prime areas' of Literacy, Maths and Personal and Emotional development – suggests the increased importance of the early years as a site for data production. This new found role for early years settings as additional 'centres of

calculation' (ref), is layered over long-standing debates over the status of early years professionals, the gendered nature of working with young children, and the balance between academic work and play with under-fives. We argue that the role of the early years in providing the earliest assessments conducted in primary education (the EYFS Profile) has increased its status, although there are of course costs to this status, which we do not have space to discuss here. This is particularly evident in recent policy on baseline assessments in Reception.

Baseline assessments in Reception

From 2015 the DfE (2014b) will introduce Baseline Assessments for four-year-olds in their first few weeks of schooling, for use in measuring the progress of children throughout their time in Primary school. The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFS Profile) will become optional from September 2016. The standardised Baseline Assessment will produce a single numerical data score for each child based upon numeracy and literacy skills that will be tracked through to Year 6: 'pupil progression' from Reception will become Ofsted's main focus. A range of options for the Baseline Assessment will be available to schools, provided by a range of commercial organisations and universities following a tendering process (ref). This reform is the epitome of the reification of progress we have examined here. In preparation for this, some local authorities have introduced (or re-introduced) baseline assessments in Reception, and begun to use this data in their work with primary schools:

Quote Nick

This policy reform further emphasises the now established practice of tracking and

predicting children's progress and attainment against set goals, but the high stake involved mean that there is great potential for 'game playing', or deliberate deflation of results, as previously found in relation to the EYFS Profile (ref AB):

There is a lot of game playing going on to try to achieve a lower baseline. In some Reception classes they put them at a very low 30 – 50 months. They try to pretend that they are like a 3 year old! A lot of the children have been in an early years setting for a number of years before Reception, so how can that child still be at that level? [...] We are quick at the game playing going on and that's where our challenge comes in as an LA. (EY Advisor, Authority D)

The issue of deflating results to provide a low baseline and therefore greater progress is a significant problem in any progress measurement where the organisation under pressure conducts the baseline themselves. In this area, the local authority's role involves monitoring and challenging this game playing; thus they become another layer of surveillance within a data-focused system. With the nation-wide introduction of Baseline Assessment, this issue and additional pressures are likely to be exacerbated.

The reaction to this policy announcement was...

- Outline new policy and press reaction

In particular, concerns have been raised over the simplification of a single score for both literacy and maths.

- Incl. discussion of dangers of simplification through single score – see tender documentation
- Explore what means for EYFS profile and potential disruption (if space).

Conclusions: the importance of data in governance and the importance of EY

- Governance through inspection based on data
- EY as site for data production and thus site pressures of accountability - 'game playing' and triage (ref to other work)
- Shifts in culture and roles, and potential trends in future

To do – include some quotes from documentation paper

- Add in refs
- Fill in missing sections
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Heading 1: use this style for level one headings

Paragraph: use this for the first paragraph in a section, or to continue after an extract.

New paragraph: use this style when you need to begin a new paragraph.

Display quotations of over 40 words, or as needed.

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Acknowledgements, avoiding identifying any of the authors prior to peer review

1. This is a note. The style name is Footnotes, but it can also be applied to endnotes.

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ⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook>

ⁱⁱ Although private nurseries are also subject to the same demands as state providers, this study is limited to state provision.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-framework-for-school-inspection>