

Talking about the test. Boundary work in primary school teachers' interactions around national testing of student performance

ABSTRACT

There is currently a strong belief in accountability as a policy of action and standardized testing has been implemented in several countries. This article examines tensions that occur in meetings when primary school teachers in Norway discuss national testing, and how these are handled. In particular, tensions revolve around what is seen as internal (teachers' everyday work) and external (policies and practices outside the main frame of teaching). Even though national testing is mainly seen as external to teachers' work, teachers involve in boundary work and reshape professional discourse in order to create relevance and maintain legitimacy following new expectations.

Keywords: accountability; boundary work; discourse analysis; national testing

1. Introduction

This article investigates tensions that occur in meetings when primary school teachers in Norway discuss national testing of student performance. Student performance has received more attention internationally in the last two decades following landmark legislation in the UK and the USA and an increase in international assessment studies (Gewirtz, 2002; Martens, Rusconi, & Leuze, 2007). Policy initiatives aiming to increase student learning are closely associated with an increased emphasis on accountability and a quest for external control mechanisms to enhance and ensure "quality" in education (Ingersoll, 2003; Thomas, 2005; Evetts, 2008; Ozga, 2009). Within this context, standardized, centrally administered tests have

been introduced far beyond the United States (Fuller, 2008), with national testing having become an increasingly important – yet debated – practice in Europe (Eurydice, 2009).

However, most studies of how teachers perceive external, standardized testing have been conducted in the USA and the UK, where accountability policies have been effective for longer. Hence, there is a need for empirical studies that explore testing within various contexts to enhance knowledge about the implications for teaching and teachers' sense of professionalism. Given the current strong belief in accountability and the outcomes of increased standardized testing, it is important to examine the negotiations around testing that take place locally. Previous research relies on ex-situ accounts in particular and there is a need to focus on the micro-processes of interaction to enhance knowledge about institutional processes. When attending to language use, a discourse-inspired analysis is a fruitful resource to address questions of how national and local contexts are linked (Rogers et al., 2005), and the ways in which (competing) discourses come into play and are negotiated locally.

1.1 Changes in teacher professionalism

Concurrent with these policy changes, research on the implications of accountability policies for teachers' work argue that there is a change toward a more performative, technocratic, and constrained discourse on teacher professionalism (e.g., Jeffrey, 2002; Day, 2002; Stronach et al., 2002; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). For example, Sachs (2001) outlines how so-called managerialist professionalism implies more individualistic, competitive, and externally defined notions of teaching. On the other hand, democratic professionalism includes faith in collective capacity, use of critical reflection, concern for "the common good", and a democratic way of life. Day, Elliot, and Kington (2005) are concerned with teachers' work in relation to commitment, caring, and occupational competence, and how more traditional notions of professionalism are challenged under accountability. Several studies find that the

teacher's role as caring and student-centered is downplayed and challenged (Jeffrey, 2002; Lasky, 2005; O'Connor, 2008). A review study finds that some studies argue that this is a growing dilemma for teachers, while others describe how altruistic concern for student welfare remains dominant throughout teachers' careers (author, 2013a). Teachers often portray themselves as being protectors of students and being in opposition to policy (Rex & Nelson, 2004; Troman, 2008). Various studies also report on changing classroom practices and narrowing of curriculum due to standardized testing (Valli & Buese, 2007; Barrett, 2009).

However, research on changes in teacher professionalism often portray and conceptualize these changes in a linear and dichotomous way, and there are reasons to argue that different views on professionalism and accountability rather co-exist in the field and represent different discourses that teachers have to negotiate between (Locke et al., 2005; Carlgren & Klette, 2008; author, 2012; Conway & Murphy, 2013). This discussion can also be informed by the work of Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004), who emphasize the ongoing integration of what is individually and collectively seen as relevant to teaching. They call for increased attention toward what counts as "professional" in professional identity, suggesting how this is a contested concept. For example, Cohen (2008) focuses on how teachers use specific discourse strategies in establishing identity during changes in policy discourses on teachers' roles and responsibilities, often engaging in discourses counter to public discourses.

The majority of studies investigating teachers' perceptions of and practices around standardized testing, however, are based on interviews and narrative approaches. In particular, there are few micro-analyses of interaction, which can contribute to greater knowledge about the tensions that are created and how policy is (re)shaped locally. Little (2012) argues that *ex situ* accounts of practice should be combined with micro-process research to enhance knowledge about how local practices both instantiate and construct school processes. There is

also a need for studies that investigate how discursive practices operate in relation to the school and broader political context (Ball et al., 2012).

1.2 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this paper is to present the outcome of an investigation into the tensions that occur in meetings when teachers discuss national testing. It addresses how primary school teachers handle these challenges by negotiating and reshaping professional discourse. National tests are of particular interest, as they are examples of accountability policies that are mandated and statutory (Maguire et al., 2010); they are “material” and “concrete”. Investigating micro-interaction around national testing creates possibilities for gaining more knowledge about how policies are enacted in everyday work (Nichols & Griffith, 2009).

To investigate local perceptions of accountability policies, I conducted a qualitative study in a Norwegian municipality. Based on fieldwork across one school year, and, more specifically, transcribed episodes from teacher staff meetings, the following research questions were pursued: What characterizes language-in-use in interaction where national tests are discussed and what tensions are created? In what ways, and why, do teachers negotiate and shape responses to new practices? First, I present the Norwegian context, as well as the local context of the study, before outlining the theoretical perspectives on researching localized discourses and the methodological framework. Thereafter, findings are presented by focusing on the main tensions that are identified, followed by a discussion.

2 Background

In Norway, national tests were first introduced in 2004, as a part of the national quality assessment system (NKVS). The tests were placed in conjunction with the implementation of a new competence-based curriculum in 2006 alongside increased decentralized governance (Hopmann, 2007; Skedsmo, 2009). However, concerns were raised about the quality of the

tests and the publication of the results. When a new government came into power in 2005, it instituted a moratorium in response to compelling criticism from researchers to limit the publication of league tables based on school results on the tests and other data. The tests were reintroduced in 2007. In key policy documents, the objective of national testing is to evaluate performance on individual and system levels (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2008). National tests are held in grades 5¹, 8, and 9 (students take the same test in grades 8 and 9 to measure progress) in reading literacy, numeracy, and English. All tests reflect competence aims in the national curriculum after grades 4 and 7, aiming to measure basic skills across subjects.

During the implementation of accountability measures, teachers and schools have generally been viewed as competent at managing their own development. Hopmann (2007) has described the accountability system in Norway as a “no school left behind” approach, where policymakers introduced new mechanisms for control, yet with no real stakes involved. Norway has a strong tradition of comprehensive schooling (“enhetsskole”), social inclusion, and egalitarian ideas (Telhaug et al., 2006; Aasen et al., 2013), and teachers have historically enjoyed a relatively high degree of status and autonomy in society (Slagstad, 1998). In the last decade, however, the policy discourse has increasingly emphasized teacher accountability, whereas the professional discourse represented by the teacher union articulates a particularly strong antagonism toward teacher accountability and the use of external control mechanisms (author, 2012). Therefore, it is interesting to investigate how the introduction of accountability measures such as national tests play out in this landscape.

Very few studies have explored perceptions of national testing. However, existing research reports have suggested that there is a greater emphasis on summative aspects over formative aspects, that teaching practices might become more directed toward national tests, and that the

¹ Grade 5 students are 9 or 10 years old. No marks are given before grade 8.

tests create some discomforts for teachers although they generally accept them (Allerup et al., 2009; OECD, 2011; Seland et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the studies do not go beyond these findings by exploring the reasons why summative aspects are foregrounded and teachers express discomforts about the tests yet do not resist them. This study attempts to contribute to an increased understanding of how and why these findings emerge across studies by investigating tensions that are created in meetings when teachers discuss national testing.

2.1 Context of the study

The empirical setting for this study is a municipality in southeastern Norway. Woodland municipality can be described as typical in terms of the number of inhabitants and their socio-economic background, being a predominantly rural area with three urban areas. The municipality has received awards for its work in school development, although these were gained before the increased focus on student outcomes and accountability. Most of the principals and school administrators have completed parts of a master's degree in school leadership, implying a greater concern with leadership practices. It is of interest to see how national testing is given meaning in a context where the municipality is known to be development-oriented, yet where teachers and principals have enjoyed a relative high degree of autonomy in deciding upon instructional practices and school development projects.

3 Theoretical perspectives

Perspectives on studying how policies are perceived and enacted upon locally provide a starting point for investigating how teachers negotiate practices around national testing. In examining meaning-making among teachers, discourse analysis has inspired the analysis.

3.1 Competing discourses

Education policy is often investigated by analyzing authorized policy and with an emphasis on whether policies are working or not or what their intended and unintended effects are

(Levinson et al., 2009). They are more rarely investigated in terms of how people activate them locally when going about their ordinary work (Nichols & Griffith, 2009; Ball et al., 2012). An alternative way of studying policy is to focus on policy as ongoing social practice and what policies “do” by investigating how local actors give meaning to, approve, resist, or reshape policy in various ways. Localized discourses or “embedded” policy (Ozga & Jones, 2006) develop as policy agendas come up against local practices, which will remain significant and interpret or translate (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008) policy in certain ways.

However, this idea of translation of policy also needs to be critically investigated: what is brought into play and how is this responded to? In local practices, teachers are the main actors, drawing on professional discourses and normative belief systems (Evetts, 2003; van Dijk, 2006). Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) are concerned with what they coin “policy enactment”, that is, how policies are “translated” by diverse actors in the school environment. Policy is seen as processes that are subjected to interpretation and negotiation as it is enacted locally in schools and classrooms (Ball, 1994). In this perspective, policies are not just texts and “things” (such as legislations and tests), but also discursive processes (Braun et al., 2010).

Broadly speaking, local discursive practices are situated in an area of tension between political discourse and professional discourse. These might present competing discourses of which teachers have to negotiate between and where issues of autonomy are particularly contested (Ozga & Lawn, 1981; Gewirtz et al., 2008; author, 2012). Typical for local discourses is, however, how authority, regulation, and ways of creating legitimacy to the public (Linde, 1997) co-exist with a professional discourse emphasizing accredited skills, knowledge, and activities that professionals carry out to accomplish their responsibilities (Sarangi & Roberts, 1999). Even though tensions between these discourses can create discomforts, they need to be negotiated to create organizational legitimacy (Spillane, 2004;

Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). In handling these tensions, creating relevance and legitimacy becomes important, both towards the public and teachers' value systems (van Dijk, 2006).

Therefore, it is worthwhile to more closely investigate how teachers negotiate tensions in discursive practices around national testing. This is because it is viable that even though national testing is a mandated practice, teachers' representations need to fit a specific tradition of legitimation and practical outcomes (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Mäkitalo, 2003). Producing relevant, legitimate accounts can become especially important when professionalism is reconstructed in national policy (author, 2013b), and creating legitimacy for epistemology is related to creating boundaries around one's work. The discursive processes that groups of teachers involve in can therefore be discussed in light of boundary work (Liljegren, 2012). Discursive boundary work takes place as teachers create, maintain, tear down, and transform boundaries, for example by separating "us" and "them", and evaluate certain practices. This is typically done to create legitimacy, negotiate jurisdictional boundaries, and define levels of discretion and autonomy (Liljegren, 2012). An investigation of teachers' interaction provides possibilities to investigate how boundaries are drawn and redrawn in micro-processes.

3.2 Situated meaning and discourse models

Embedded policy is investigated through an analysis of micro-level interaction where national testing is discussed. Attention to situated meanings and discourse models can provide insights into patterns of meaning-making and how relevance and legitimacy are negotiated. Discourse models can be described as partly unconscious theories that contribute to making sense of the world; storylines, images, explanatory frameworks (Gee, 2011). These 'models' represent socially distinctive identities that people take on in society, such as "teacher", and that influence ways of thinking, acting, and talking. Yet, as people typically work to establish relevance and agreement, ways of being and acting are gradually transformed (Gee, 2011). In

education, tensions around the sorts of knowledge that are privileged and who should control policies and procedures as they apply to schools and classrooms are prominent (Furlong et al., 2000). These debates also imply concerns about status, power and social control (Gee, 2011).

Situated meanings are created as responses to experiences (Gee, 2011). Therefore, of particular concern in the analysis is how language is used to make things – here the national tests – significant or not significant in certain ways. This analytical perspective is concerned with what is being communicated as normal, correct, and appropriate. It includes attention to the ways things ‘ought’ to be, how actors are treated as responsible or not, good and bad motives (or “storylines” that exist within the mind); practices that serve as explanations within a social group (Gee, 2011). How national tests are represented is an important starting point, from which I particularly focus on the creation of binaries and then the use of metaphors and how these work together with modality to investigate ways of diffusing tensions.

Binary oppositions represent a general polarization principle that applied to discursive practices affects meaning, and is also a way of enhancing or mitigating good or bad things in language (van Dijk, 2006). Such binaries are typically organized through positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, of which the creation of an “us-them” binary (MacLure, 2003) is a prominent example. Such binaries or polarizations are described by van Dijk (2006) as representing belief systems that are “coded” in talk and text. What is given positive and negative meaning for “us” and “them” can be further investigated through metaphors and modality, often used to emphasize or de-emphasize meaning (van Dijk, 2006).

Metaphors are ways of representing something in terms of something else. In their seminal work, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explore the ways individuals make meaning of their lives through regular use of metaphor as a mechanism of understanding experience. From a discourse perspective, use of metaphors is concerned with how actors perceive and structure

reality, and how ideas, attitudes, and values are revealed in a particularly visible way, thereby making metaphor analysis an appropriate research tool (Charteris-Black, 2004). Metaphors are often used when talking about something that is emotionally charged, and to avoid explicit emotion, also employed when it is difficult to express or capture an idea (Cameron, 2011).

Modality is used to express necessity and degrees of support or reservation (e.g., through modal verbs such as *can*, *will*, *must*, *should*) and for communicating “truth” and commitment (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999). Modality is thereby closely related to evaluation and the values to which people commit as they work to evaluate “the state of affairs”. Values are also viewed as having more dimensions than only acceptance or rejection, which more greatly can be analyzed through use of modality (Fairclough, 2003). Taken together, metaphors and modality enable a closer investigation of how actors attempt to handle tensions that occur around national testing, especially those that are more emotionally charged.

4 Data, framework, and analysis

I focus on two primary schools that were described as frontrunners in school development and educational assessment by the school administrators. It was particularly interesting to investigate primary schools as they have limited experience in standardized testing and assessments. Hillside Primary School is a grade 1–7 school with 150 students, 14 teachers, and a principal. Lakeview Primary School is a smaller grade 1–7 school with fewer than 100 students, eight teachers, and a principal. Both schools have weekly meetings with all teachers, usually facilitated by the principal. The steering context is quite similar across the schools, as the municipality is concerned with common visions, development projects, and close cooperation between the principals (such as monthly principal meetings). It is interesting to see how national testing is handled in a context where schools and teachers are known to be proactive, yet where they have enjoyed a relatively high degree of autonomy.

The fieldwork for this study includes approximately 25 hours of observation during teacher meetings at the two primary schools (approximately the same amount of time was spent at the two schools) over the course of the 2010–2011 school year. Participant observation was focused on meetings where assessment, testing, and achievement were the main topics. A one-day meeting with the municipality’s principals and assistant principals was also observed. After observing the meetings for some months, I interviewed grade-5 teachers (2) and principals (2), and conducted focus-group interviews with the majority of teachers (17) in the two schools (who worked together in teacher teams, stable units of 5–6 teachers on grade-level that collaborate at least one hour a week). The focus groups were conversational and approximated to naturally occurring data (Kitzinger, 1995). They concentrated on key issues around professionalism and teachers’ work, aiming to give participants opportunities for approving, resisting, or explaining viewpoints (Morgan, 1997). The questions were broad, such as views on main tasks, assessment, knowledge sources, etc. The individual interviews also entailed specific questions about national testing, such as “can you describe what you do before, during, and after the national tests”. I taped and transcribed the interviews verbatim. In the process of analysis, extracts were carefully translated into English (including translation of the metaphors, which was also checked by native speakers). All names are pseudonyms.

In the analysis, I focused on moment-to-moment interaction in meetings and interviews where national testing was discussed (four segments from the teacher meetings, six from focus group interviews and five from individual teacher interviews). The segments from the meetings were transcribed after identified. Together, these segments form the linguistic corpus of analysis, a finite collection of discourse (Charteris-Black, 2004). Yet the main emphasis is placed on meeting data as these provide the most intensive view (Little, 2002) of national testing and represented instances where tensions were most prominent.

The main selection criteria for closer analysis were instances in the corpus where tensions were particularly visible. The excerpts were selected following three justifications: First, I selected excerpts where the creation of tensions around national testing was prominent. An example on an identifier of tensions is the conjunction “but”, a form that sets up a contrast or an objection in meaning (Gee, 2011). Second, I focused on instances where binaries were particularly visible, especially through the use of the pronoun “we”. Third, I selected excerpts that presented instances of recurring representations in the corpus, yet that made relations between discursive practices and political context particularly visible (Helstad & Lund, 2012). That is, the tension that was prominent in the excerpt was also found in other parts of the corpus. Together, the selected excerpts represent what Fairclough (1995) describes as “moments of cruces”, or tension points; moments of difficulty indicated by language-in-use. This selection criterion allows for a more detailed analysis of situated meanings (Gee, 2011). This consideration also informed the length of the excerpts.

In the first step of the analysis, I focused on ways of representing national testing in relation to how national tests were represented in the corpus and the binaries that were constructed. Through this first reading, I selected the excerpts for deeper analysis (following the justifications as outlined above). The second step of analysis attended to the selected excerpts and more specifically focused on teachers’ use of metaphors and modality, whilst also looking at other discursive outlooks such as word choices and intertextuality. The third step of analysis was based on the previous steps of analysis and focused on teachers’ created boundaries around national testing and the reshaping of professional discourse. The steps of the analysis are outlined below:

[Insert Table 1 here]

I have discussed the analysis and possible interpretations with other researchers as a method for communicative validity (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I have presented a preliminary analysis for principals and teachers, using respondent validation to ascertain the relationship between the researchers' characterization and interpretation of the data and the participants' experiences (Carspecken, 1996). The analysis and following discussion offer analytical generalizations by providing transparency and theoretical interpretations, and in terms of how the findings can be used to guide other analyses in similar contexts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Halkier, 2011). Thereby, the study can also offer analytical understandings.

5 Analysis of discursive practices

Throughout the corpus, the way national tests are talked about largely supports what has been found in evaluation research of national testing: the summative aspect is foregrounded over the formative, teachers practice for the tests, and teachers generally accept the tests yet there are dissatisfactions related to them (Allerup et al., 2009; Seland et al., 2013). Nonetheless, there is limited knowledge about the ways in which these interpretations and social effects can be interpreted. Data from the teacher meetings, however, provided rich material for a closer investigation of the tensions around national testing and what is "at stake" for teachers. It also shed light on how and why these tensions are created.

In the corpus, an overall binary is created between the internal and the external, whereby national tests and related practices are mainly placed as external to the everyday work of teachers. In the following, I present findings from the analysis through selected excerpts (selected following the justifications outlined in section 4). The excerpts are presented in tables with lines separating the speakers. The starting point for analysis is the *tension* that is created around national testing. Thereafter, I proceed by a more fine-tuned analysis followed by attending to how relevance and legitimacy of national testing is dealt with.

5.1 Tension over the publication of results – “professional knowledge” at stake

The following excerpt is from a teacher meeting at Lakeview Primary School, where the teachers were presenting how they work with assessment in the different grades. The principal turned to the grade 5 teacher, Maja, after she had just received a phone call from a local journalist.

Excerpt 1

Transcript line	Speaker	Talk / text
(1)	Principal	Should we start with the call you just received? (<i>laughing</i>)
(2)	Maja	It was from the local newspaper. They've come to know about the national test results in reading and they would like to come here tomorrow to take a picture of the class (<i>laughter, "mmm", some strange looks</i>)
(3)	Marcus	Local bargaining (<i>laughing</i>)
(4)	Maja	The results from the English test will come tomorrow then, so that will be exciting.
(5)	Siri	But is it allowed to ... suddenly ...?
(6)	Maja	But it's been in <i>Aftenposten</i> [a national newspaper] ... So it's public, anyway. So I don't know.
(7)	Siri	I don't believe in these things ...
(8)	Maja	I didn't know that it would be made public. That we just got the results in from our own school. So therefore I don't know, I don't understand (...)
(9)	Principal	<i>Aftenposten</i> has published the results from all schools in Norway, so ...
(10)	Maja	Everything is there.
(11)	Principal	It's no secret anymore.
(12)	Siri	But we should decide whether we should say yes or no to get praise like that? Is it only good?
(13)	Principal	No, but we can say ... we must let them come.
(14)	Maja	He had just obtained information from the newspaper and would like to take a picture. The information he had, was the numbers.
(15)	Siri	But then we do exactly the opposite of what we highlighted last time, when we had the worst results. But now it's okay? This is a bit strange to me. (<i>laughter</i>)
(16)	Ragnhild	Totally agree.
(17)	Principal	No, but we'll just let them come. If we resist, you can guarantee that they will write something. We can't make this negative.
(18)	Siri	No. I just want us to be conscious of how we want it, that it is ... That we somehow are against it when it goes bad and for it when it goes well (...)
(19)	Siri	But we didn't do anything to hide the results last year either. We were open about the same results.
(20)	Lisa	What the last class achieved was perhaps not measurable. What they're particularly good at.
(21)	Marcus	Performance wise they did maybe just as good a performance.
(22)	Lisa	So then we should say something about what lies between the lines (...)
(23)	Siri	But then we've also got the chance to comment on it ... That this moves in waves.
(24)	Marcus	We're open about the results, but we can't comment on individual students and ...
(25)	Principal	No, but it's better that we talk to them and describe what we're not in control of.

The primary tension here is created around “us” and “them” and issues of professional knowledge. The principal leads this interaction, but several teachers engage in the discussion. He invites Maja, who is teaching grade 5 and has achieved the best reading results within the municipality, to tell the others what is going on (2). Marcus immediately makes an ironic comment (3) on local bargaining. Maja continues with a positive evaluation of the test results (4), before Siri (5) through an objection initiates a discussion around the publication of results. Maja then argues that it is out of her control that the results are already publically available, thereby removing responsibility from herself (6, 8), presumably as a counter-response to Siri’s devaluing of publishing the results (7). The principal supports Maja (9, 11) by using prescriptive language about how the results are no longer “a secret” (refers to the results being published on the website of the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training). A binary of “us” and “them” is created through the use of “we”, first introduced by Siri (12). She follows up by raising the ethically loaded question as to whether it is “good” to get this kind of publicity (15). She uses the pronoun “we” and prescriptive language “it is”, strongly positioning teachers as the ones who should decide. This representation is followed up in turns 15, 18, 19, and 23, where she also highlights how “we” as teachers have the knowledge to inform the public about this matter, and that it is important. Siri uses the metaphor of waves (23), suggesting how national test results represent cyclical movements rather than being linear developments. Ragnhild (16) supports Siri by using modality (“totally agree”). “Them”, on the other side, is the media, which also comes to represent the general public as readers of newspapers.

Lisa (20, 22) and Marcus (21, 24) raise a concern about what is measured and not measured in the tests, and how this knowledge belongs to the profession, but not the public. The arguments against publishing test scores are negotiated in terms of transparency and not hiding the results (24). The principal articulates a drift toward truth and openness and comments by

making three short, authoritative statements using modality (13, 17, 25). He is worried that it is not going to be a positive story, however, the third time (25) he elaborates by adding “describe what we are not in control of”, interpreted as a way of accommodating the teachers. However, he mainly includes himself discursively with the teachers in the interaction.

Another example is from a focus group on negotiations over the same tension:

Excerpt 2

<i>Transcript line</i>	<i>Speaker</i>	<i>Talk / text</i>
(1)	Marcus	So, all students should take part. We need to show trustworthiness and integrity (...) It's not a secret. It's better to show what it is and take action accordingly. Don't sweep it under the carpet.
(2)	Siri	And we know exactly why there might not be good academic results, we know the reason. Those students have something else that maybe not so many other students have got. A tolerance that you have to look hard to find. There's no grade for that.
(3)	Marcus	No, we use the results in our way and then there's the newspaper for those who think that's fun. Compare in any which way.

The teachers articulate the need to demarcate the role of the media and highlight the broader aims of education, which the test results can say little about. However, there is a strong concern about the importance of being open about the results, or a drift toward the “truth”, evidence, and evaluation: “It is not a secret” and “Don't sweep it under the carpet.” The metaphor is used to highlight openness and transparency, hence, also the fear of being accused of the contrary. At the same time, “the truth” is discursively related to an ethical question of what is not being measured. The importance of teachers' knowledge is also discussed in this last excerpt: “we know the reason” (2). However, the results are included here as a part of teachers' knowledge base: “our way” (3). This directs attention to the tests not being delegitimized as such, but that controlling aspects activate forms of de-legitimation.

Based on the excerpts above, there are two aspects that should be especially highlighted in terms of reshaping professional discourse. First, Maja is clearly proud of her students and values aspects of the national tests (as she also communicates in the interview). Hence, she

emphasizes alternative views of the national tests as opposed to the other teachers. Second, teachers argue that the media plays a role, which contributes toward highlighting summative aspects by focusing on results and representing a narrower view of learning. Thereby, the teachers partly delegitimize aspects of the tests by highlighting knowledge that is important for interpreting the results, including taking responsibility for the broader aims of education.

5.2 Tension over practicing for the tests – the curriculum at stake

In a teacher meeting at Lakeview Primary School, a discussion about the development of assessment materials for formative purposes develops into a discussion about national tests. Related to the discussion above about how national testing challenges aspects of professional knowledge, excerpt 3 shows how national tests challenge the curriculum.

Excerpt 3

<i>Transcript line</i>	<i>Speaker</i>	<i>Talk / text</i>
(1)	<i>Marcus</i>	We have to look at previous national tests and the practice exercises for the national tests. That is what actually tells us what is expected. They decide what is important. It isn't even this [points to the competence aims in the curriculum]; it's the people who make the tests.
(2)	<i>Siri</i>	Hopefully they're following the same path.
(3)	<i>Lisa</i>	Is it the national tests that will govern us all, or is it something else? Our Bible has to be LK06 [the national curriculum].
(4)	<i>Siri</i>	Yes, but if we have confidence in the national tests, they will test students in what is important and what is expected after 5th grade.
(5)	<i>Lisa</i>	Yes, but I think it should be more natural to look at our little Bible than ...
(6)	<i>Siri</i>	Yeah, but then those who make the national tests must look at our little Bible too.
(7)	<i>Lisa</i>	But if there is no correlation there, then we can't steer the vessel toward the national tests. So that governs what we do.
(8)	<i>Norunn</i>	No, but we're only human, and ... my son-in-law is young and happy in school and everything. Now he's had his class for several years and they're in 7th grade now, and he says that in the beginning he said, no, the national tests will come, but he followed his plan. "But ask me today; now I find out what's in the national tests, we practice that at any price. If it's a good school and a good teacher, yes, then it will appear in your results."

There is a binary in the text created between “we” as teachers and “them”, that is, those who make the tests. This construction follows from Marcus’ concern that the national tests are ranked higher than the competence aims in the national curriculum (1) and are present

throughout the excerpt. A tension is created between the national tests and the curriculum, and is further strengthened during the dialogue. For example, the objection “but” is used prominently when teachers take turns and try to make sense out of this relation. Furthermore, there is an interesting use of metaphors and modality in this excerpt, which suggestive of the heightened emotion that evolves as a result of national testing and the need to manage it.

Siri uses the metaphor of “following the same path” (2) and she emphasizes how these ideally should be compatible practices through the use of modality (“hopefully”). Thereafter, the dialogue between Lisa and Siri develops into a discussion about whether or not the national tests and the curriculum follow the same “path”. Here, Lisa introduces “the Bible” as a metaphor for the national curriculum (3). “Our Bible” is presented as being close to teacher practice, giving the teachers (“us”) guidelines to follow (4, 5), and the national tests are discussed in terms of whether “they” or “those” that make the national tests relate to the curriculum (4, 6). Modal verbs – such as *should*, *must*, and *will* – are used in this short sequence, examples of modality that emphasize Lisa’s and Siri’s attitudes toward the national tests and what they should or should not do. Another metaphor of the school as a “vessel” is evoked by Lisa (7), emphasizing how it would be wrong to steer practice toward what is being measured in the national tests. She also implies that this is impossible and unacceptable by using modality (“cannot”). The term “natural” associates determinism with something that is hard not to do, and she elaborates by giving a narrative example (an example on intertextuality as she brings in her son-in law’s voice), thus adding strength to her argument. Norunn, thereafter, attempts to rationalize teachers’ responses by articulating how “we are only human” (8), also being suggestive to that of a ‘natural’ development of how changing classroom practices toward the national tests is a probable development.

Another example of how the curriculum is challenged is from an interview with a grade 5 teacher. The school is described as “a freight train”. Images of the school as a vessel or a train

come to represent the everyday practices; they are “grounded”, but constantly moving, producing, and bringing someone from A to B (students). Stability and “being on track” are emphasized, yet also how new assessment practices such as national testing are welcomed:

Excerpt 4

<i>Transcript line</i>	<i>Speaker</i>	<i>Talk / text</i>
(1)	Susanne (Hillside)	Assessment and achievement of competence aims; that is like the next thing drifting. And suddenly, “poof”, and it comes down on us. And it's exciting, and it's important. But it must somehow come down to our everyday life. We're like a big freight train that is rolling and going onward; we don't stand still at any station, we keep on rolling.

The practice of national testing is represented as coming suddenly and from above; “suddenly, ‘poof’, and it comes down on us”. Susanne also articulates how she wants to be forward-looking, yet negotiating this position with more stable aspects. Yet imagery depicting national tests portrays something intruding into everyday practice.

Looking at how teachers negotiate and possibly reshape discourses, two aspects should be especially highlighted. First, input-control through the curriculum is much more valued than output-control through national testing. Even though the curriculum also represents authority, this is first and foremost constructed as “internal”, while the national tests are questioned and assessed in terms of whether or not to trust them (and the test makers). Second, the attempts to make sense out of national testing are also about making sense of being teachers when external pressure rises. One solution is presented as not letting national testing influence teaching too much. Another solution is presented as being more accepting of national testing as a more integral part of teaching. This implies that the tension between policy and teachers is still present, but it also suggests that national tests have increasingly been accepted.

5.3 Tension around evaluation – formative aspects at stake

To pursue this relation between positive and negative evaluations of the test, I turn to a teacher meeting at Hillside Primary School, where the topic for discussion is how teachers

prepare for the national tests. The teachers, who have been involved in taking national tests for the past two years, present how they have been preparing and practicing for the tests.

Excerpt 5

<i>Transcript line</i>	<i>Speaker</i>	<i>Talk / text</i>
(1)	Fredric (Hillside)	For me as a teacher, I think this is interesting because I get feedback on what they tested on this test. But I also get feedback on how we are doing. Am I entirely off the mark when it comes to teaching, or are we more or less within what is expected, as a kind of pointer for myself. And then I got, and this is a bit scary to say compared to what I've argued before, that the test should not tell me how to teach. But at the same time, I've practiced things that I saw the students were not used to when it came up in the national tests. For example, I have become much more aware of reading strategies now, and not only in Norwegian. Vocabulary training, things like that, I have become much more aware of that. So I have picked up things as a teacher because I think more now than before about how, in the national tests, they are trying to get us to think in a different way. And they've accomplished that too ... to a certain degree.

Fredric makes this statement in the middle of the presentation of other teachers about how to prepare the students. The presentations, however, are mainly focused on what is tested and how the preparations were done, and Fredric makes a turn by articulating how the tests are also indicators of how “we” are doing. Fredric uses a narrative strategy and partly legitimizes the national tests by emphasizing how the tests should correct his teaching practice, “am I entirely off the mark”, rather than the other way around (such as in excerpt 3, where the vessel should not be steered off its course with national testing). This also becomes an example of an internal binary within the profession of the role that the national tests should play in teachers’ practice. Fredric also reflects on changes in the curriculum toward becoming more output-oriented and how these are policy efforts with certain effects. He is negotiating his position, however, saying that the tests should not direct his teaching practice.

In a focus-group discussion at Hillside, there is a similar shift in representations. Fredric and his colleagues in this quote all have less than ten years’ teaching experience.

Excerpt 6

<i>Transcript line</i>	<i>Speaker</i>	<i>Talk / text</i>
(1)	Catherine	The tests have become much better than they were.

(2)	Fredric	And I believe that the focus has changed somewhat. Because there's been a lot of attention on classifying schools and classes and everything, and that was the important thing. So that we could yell at the bad and praise the good. In Oslo, it was extremely like that <i>(mm)</i> (...)
(3)	Anders	But it must be interesting for the teacher to know if what you're doing is successful?
(4)	Monica	Maybe not public, ha-ha. <i>(laughter)</i>
(5)	Fredric	Yes, but I agree with you that the debate may have been too extensive in public and too little internally. And that the attention has been directed toward practicing for national tests, to do well, rather than thinking about ...
(6)	Monica	The road ahead <i>(yes, yes)</i> there's not so much focus on that. What we do with the results. <i>(mm)</i>

Catherine and Fredric claim that the tests have improved in quality as there has been a change toward a stronger process-oriented focus (1, 2). Fredric emphasizes the performative aspect by using modality (“could”) and a narrative strategy of referring to his experience of working in Oslo (which is known for a stronger emphasis on tests and results) as an example. Anders makes an objection and mentions that it must be interesting for teachers to know how successful their teaching is (3) using modality and giving a positive evaluation of being performance-oriented, thus also constructing an internal binary within the profession. Monica uses sarcasm, identifying the publication of results as the problem (4), not the tests as such. Fredric and Monica agree with Anders that the focus on the results has been too strong (5, 6) and they welcome testing as a method of improvement.

5.4 Tension around the test situation – caring relations at stake

The following excerpt reveals how an important way of legitimizing practicing for the tests happens through an emphasis on caring for and protecting the students. The following excerpt is from a teacher meeting at Hillside Primary concerning preparations and follow-ups on national tests. Teachers have been describing what they do before the tests and Susanne comments on tasks that are misleading and difficult for the students.

Excerpt 7

<i>Transcript line</i>	<i>Speaker</i>	<i>Talk / text</i>
(1)	Susanne	It's amazing. I'm thinking, poor fifth graders. What it is that greets them (...) So it is important that they have a strategy to use. They're not supposed to read everything.

		It's an incredibly difficult English text. It's not certain you'll find what you're looking for. And then I don't understand, if we are not supposed to go in and make students feel secure in the test situation, then it won't provide a real picture. Because if a child doesn't feel secure, he becomes stressed. And can't do their best. They must think that they are detectives, trying to figure out what I should choose here. And there are so many difficult texts.
(2)	Kari	Yes, that's right, and I also think like that for us, that we have to lead them forward, that it may be like this and that. If we were not to spend time on this, I would have thought that the teacher was out to get me.
(3)	Susanne	And I had a student once, he did not do anything because it was a new situation, he just sat and looked right at me for the whole hour, and he was completely paralyzed. So to be comfortable in the situation to be able to do something, that is very important (...)
(4)	Principal	Great. Are there any other comments, not just concerning the national tests in themselves, but in general with test situations, assessment? Are there any views on that? Do we test just to test now, or...? Test just to test, or what do we do? (<i>pause</i>)
(5)	Fredric	I guess we do get better.
(6)	Principal	Yes. And what happens then?
(7)	Fredric	Each one of us. But I think we've become a bit better in terms of cooperating, holding courses, focusing on some students in particular, especially the weakest. That's a challenge to work further on.
(8)	Principal	Other comments?
(9)	Kari	I think it's important what was said about working consciously with the tests in advance, but we must not stress the students so much that they get performance anxiety, "I cannot do this." That there's a balance.

Susanne makes an outburst, a negative evaluation that develops after she has been outlining several shortcomings of the tests, but immediately follows up by justifying why it is important to prepare the students for the tests (1). This is legitimized in terms of students' wellbeing, and also for the tests to give a "true" picture. Her language is prescriptive, adding strength to her arguments. Kari agrees and elaborates by emphasizing how the teacher should be loyal to the students (2) in this situation. Susanne also agrees and adds strength to her argument by using a narrative (3). The principal then interferes (4) by attempting to change the direction of the conversation and by posing a broader question about whether or not the tests used are mainly evaluative (yet including himself in the group through the pronoun "we"). There is a pause of a few seconds, before Fredric describes a development toward increased cooperation and follow-up of students (5, 7). Yet by using weak verbs such as "guess" and "think", he makes reservations. The principal asks for more information about formative aspects (8), and Kari repeats the argument about the need to prepare students in order to "protect" them (9).

There are several examples of this concern with a possible reduction in the social and relational aspects of teaching, here from a focus group discussion at Lakeview:

Excerpt 8

<i>Transcript line</i>	<i>Speaker</i>	<i>Talk / text</i>
(1)	Lisa (Lakeview)	There are these three terms, we're given trust, responsibility, and freedom, and within this, we can do a lot (...) there are new things coming, but I think that when we work specifically with the social aspects, it does something to us. Even if it's easy for us to walk into the ditch now that it should be demonstrated as to what the students know in Norwegian and math and ...

A tension is created between new expectations referring to more emphasis on subject and learning outcomes, and the social aspects of teaching. The excerpt also involves intertextuality relating to current policies on how teachers are given “trust, responsibility, and freedom.” The freedom and “scope of action” in terms of classroom practice is valued positively, yet this is negotiated alongside how testing practices might narrow the curriculum, especially concerning students’ social development. Lisa uses the metaphor of “walk into the ditch”, and through using modality she suggests how national tests represent a drift toward practices that could lead to adverse effects in terms of the social, relational aspects.

The relational aspect and the representation of “protecting the students” are prominent. This representation is discursively linked to the test preparation and results; that is, if students do not feel secure, they will not be able “to show what they know” and provide a reliable picture. In this sense, preparing and practicing for the tests is legitimized largely through protecting the students, especially the weaker students. In addition, these students are also protected in the sense that teachers highlight the need to tell the public how the tests do not measure crucial aspects of schooling; namely, the broader and humanistic aims of education. The representation of “protecting the students” and being concerned with the social aspects of education is thereby related to normative values among teachers. This also illustrates how it is

not regarded as acceptable for primary school teachers to say that they practice to achieve good results. When the principal evokes the question of “do we test just to test now”, implying if this is just instrumentalism, engagement from the teachers is low. There seems to be a somewhat paradoxical account between the reasoning for practicing and more instrumentalist implications, if tests are merely used for summative purposes.

6 Discussion

The purpose of this paper has been to present findings from an investigation into the tensions that occur in meetings when teachers discuss national testing. National tests are especially interesting to discuss as they are examples of a “concrete” and mandated accountability policy that intervenes directly into relations between teachers and students, subjects, and principals. To some extent, the findings can all be discussed in relation to an “internal-external” binary, where national testing is mainly placed outside of teachers’ work, in contrast to the internal, represented through professional knowledge, the curriculum, caring relations, and formative assessment. Concerns over these issues characterize the professional discourse, and are put forth as being particularly at stake for teachers with national testing. Especially interesting when constructing the “internal-external” is the use of metaphors that emphasize how national testing is mainly placed outside teachers’ main work. The use of metaphor as a tool appears powerful in terms of uncovering teachers’ ideas, values, and attitudes (Cameron et al., 2009), increasing our awareness of ways in which accountability policies are negotiated locally.

What is seen as internal to teachers can be discussed from two perspectives. First, it can be discussed from within an individual and emotional perspective where national testing challenges what teachers perceive as their main tasks and values. These internal explanations or models are often quite deep and rich, and are crucial for being able to perform everyday practices of teaching (Kelchtermans, 2005; Gee, 2011). Second, it can be discussed from

within a more collective and strategic perspective in terms of how national testing challenges the profession. By acting according to normative values, teacher professionalism is enacted in what is seen as appropriate to do – and not to do. Evoking such normative values and discourse models can be especially important with events that disrupt existing practices (Barley & Tolbert, 1997) and can be interpreted as ways of doing boundary work.

Yet this does not mean that practices are unchanging and the reshaping of professional discourse forms part of the micro-processes of boundary work. An analysis of situated meanings can provide a richer understanding of how teachers transform their “everyday” theories under accountability policies. First, the teachers in this study communicate a greater drift toward performance and the integration of national testing as a part of their work, implying processes where professional boundaries are (re)drawn. They are concerned with being accountable, creating legitimacy, and restoring public trust. However, even though there is a stronger drift toward evidence and evaluation, it is constantly negotiated. Second, especially beginning-of-career teachers more greatly approve the tests by giving them a more authoritative and legitimate status than experienced teachers, for example, by being a corrective to their own practices. There is reason to argue that national testing has become more accepted than when it was first implemented, and younger teachers might be able to balance issues of accountability and autonomy better (see also Troman, 2008; Wilkins, 2011). However, these issues should be further investigated as this study only involves few younger teachers and there was no particular focus on age and experience when selecting schools.

When epistemic dimensions of teaching are challenged with national testing, it seems harder for teachers to accept external control, and the tests are placed as external to teachers’ work. Paradoxically, teachers’ responses, such as practicing for the tests to protect the students, are also self-renewing as teachers act in ways that reinforce the unintended social effects that they worry about. The responses can be related to how it is crucial for teachers to maintain control

over their core work – what is happening in the classroom (Ingersoll, 2003). What is placed as internal to the profession can also be interpreted as a form of social control where teachers draw strongly on discourse models central to teaching, and where positive and caring relations to students are particularly prominent and defining (e.g., Lortie, 1975; Rinke, 2008).

One could also ask if the Norwegian context is the reason that the actors talk in the way they do. Some researchers have, for example, argued that in Norway, assessment has been a political battleground and particularly controversial and ideological for decades (Lysne, 2006). Nevertheless, it is important to discuss more specifically what is “ideological” and what can be regarded as more legitimate accounts based on teachers’ knowledge. However, the findings imply that national testing also influences practice in a low-stakes policy context, where teachers have historically enjoyed quite a high degree of autonomy. Yet these issues should be further investigated, in similar contexts as well as in more high-stakes contexts where accountability has been present for longer. However, even though there is evidence that alternative discourses on professionalism are developing, there is reason to believe that such changes should be viewed as multifaceted and constantly under negotiation. Attending to micro-studies of professional discourse can provide important insights into these processes.

7 Concluding remarks

Education policies are only symbolic until there is more knowledge about policy in-situ, that is, how teachers “do” different policies in their everyday work. Looking at the teachers’ meaning-making provides knowledge about how testing policies can develop in directions other than those intended. This is important knowledge for policymakers and educational leaders in terms of how and why (or why not) teachers relate to and involve themselves in external control initiatives. Furthermore, involving teachers in dialogues around national testing can possibly contribute to promoting a more informed discussion. Furthermore, it is

important that teachers are made more aware of these normative pressures and arguments that are put forth by politicians and bureaucrats in order to take active part in discussions about the purposes and local practices around the testing. Lastly, there is a need for reflection upon how responses to national testing that follow from the reshaping of professional discourse also reinforce similar effects as those that create the tensions.

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