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## The assessment-related logics of practice at a South West Multi-Academy Trust

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## The assessment-related logics of practice at a South West Multi-Academy Trust

Morahan, Samuel Gordon

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# UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

The assessment-related logics of practice at a South West Multi-Academy Trust

by

**Samuel Gordon Morahan**

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth  
in partial fulfilment for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF EDUCATION**

Plymouth Institute of Education

**December 2023**

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To my son, Freddie. This is for you. There is no challenge too great.

## **Author's Declaration**

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Education has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment.

A programme of advanced study was undertaken, which included taught modules on:

1. Policy and professional practice
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3. Researching educational practice
4. Social research

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## **Abstract**

### **The assessment-related logics of practice at a South West Multi-Academy Trust**

**Samuel Gordon Morahan**

Over the last 40 years there have been widescale changes to the British education system. Through the process of neoliberalisation, education has become a commodity to be bought and sold with an ever-increasing emphasis on performativity and its related measures. Within this educational market, alternative provision settings provide commissioning schools with opportunities to purchase placements and packages for pupils, who for a variety of reasons, are unable to engage in mainstream education. Alternative provision settings must evidence value for money to these schools, whilst meeting statutory inspection requirements. Assessment practices and the numerical data they generate are central within this commodified and performative climate. Following the removal of what was considered a flawed national curriculum levels system, schools in England, including the one which forms the site for this research, were tasked with the design and implementation of their own assessment systems.

Considering the above, this research addresses the following questions: (1) What are the assessment-related logics of practice at a South West Multi-Academy Trust? (2) How are these logics of practice formed within the educational landscape of commodification? It gains insight from eight professionals in a South West Multi-Academy Trust. The analysis focuses on levels of assessment and an analytics of government to show how assessment logics are formed in the commodified landscape and subsequent impact of performativity on schools, professionals and pupils. The findings highlight the market function of the assessment system whereby the South West Multi-Academy Trust, through metrics, evidences progress and value for money to stakeholders and commissioners. The study highlights a lack of common understanding between staff, pupils and stakeholders and further identifies inconsistencies that exist at the judgement, decision and impact levels of assessment.

In drawing conclusions, the research recommends a process of review related to the current assessment system at the South West Multi-Academy Trust and reflects on the need for a holistic model of assessment which puts the pupils at the heart of its existence. This thesis



contributes to knowledge within the areas of commodification and marketisation of education and examines the implications for assessment policy and practice in alternative provision.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Setting the scene**

This research has come about due to my engagement and experience with assessment practices in my own professional work as a teacher and middle leader at a South West Multi-Academy Trust (SWMAT). Assessment is central to the teaching and learning process and as a teaching professional at the SWMAT, I am tasked to complete an array of assessment activities as part of my contractual duties. As a teacher who has spent almost 10 years in the profession, assessment has played a large role in my professional career. Assessment, within the context of my classroom environment, has proven to be a valuable tool providing me with key information about pupils' learning. However, my personal experience of what literature terms 'summative' assessment practice has led me to question the logics of this practice as, in my view, there seems to be a lack of positive impact on teaching and learning from progress data generated by the SWMAT's numerically-based tracking system. This system replaced the previously implemented national curriculum levels of assessment. My experience of the tracking and assessment technologies has led me to question why we use such a system given the lack of impact it has on classroom practices. This question is further echoed by many of the research participants as I will illustrate later on in this study.

As a teaching professional, I have often heard members of staff ask 'what is the purpose of the tracking system we use?' Furthermore, staff have said, and I quote, 'I don't understand the value of the progress data as it doesn't have any impact on my teaching'. Prior to the Department for Education's (DfE) (2014) legislation instructing their removal, national curriculum levels were the main system of assessment within schools. The system required teaching staff to provide an assessment between levels 1-8 (including sub levels) for all pupils' progress (the removal of national curriculum levels, including the identified issues surrounding levels, is unpacked in the forthcoming sections). Given the removal of levels, the rationale for schools implementing their own systems was to move away from numerically-based systems of assessment to further increase the positive impact on the teaching and learning process, removing the issues identified with the levels system. However, the subsequent assessment and tracking system at the SWMAT is numerically-based and furthermore, has been overlayed with the previous levels of assessment.

The issues identified above have provoked my interest in this particular topic area and have driven me to pursue this through research. At the time of enrolling on the Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) programme at Plymouth University, limited research existed related to assessment systems replacing national curriculum levels within the Alternative Provision (AP) sector. Prior to embarking on the EdD programme I have had an invested interest in assessment through the completion of a Masters in Education programme through which I considered professionals' perspectives on assessment.

## **1.2 Research Context: Overview of the Research setting**

The research setting is an AP provider which belongs to a South West Multi-Academy Trust (anonymity will be maintained through removal of specific information which might otherwise compromise the research setting). Whilst research within this thesis is based within the AP schools which are a setting within the SWMAT, I will refer to the research setting, also my employer, as the SWMAT from this point forward. The AP provider has a number of different schools which offer varying types of provision including:

- An intervention and reintegration provision which provides education for pupils who have been excluded from mainstream settings or who are at risk of exclusion. Pupils are placed at the SWMAT via the local authority whilst others come through referral by their current school.
- A health and welfare provision whereby pupils may be too ill to attend mainstream settings due to their physical and/or mental health. Pupils attending this provision may demonstrate long term refusal to attend their provision.
- Provision based around personalised and bespoke educational packages for pupils who have Education Health Care Plans (EHCPs). These pupils have complex needs that are not being met in other settings.

The AP schools within the SWMAT provide education for pupils from the ages of 4-19 for mixed genders. The schools' funding is secured through pupil placements and individually commissioned packages with referrals coming from establishments such as the local authority, commissioners such as mainstream schools and other educational settings. An individually commissioned package (or simply 'package' for short) refers to the educational provision

purchased for a pupil by a commissioner. The cost of a package is mutually agreed with the commissioner. The setting offers a range of qualifications including entry level certificate and GCSE. The AP schools, operating over multiple sites, currently have over 200 pupils on their roll (statistics are correct at the time of writing – September 2023). The proportion of pupils for whom the school receives pupil premium funding is well above the national average and represented as a percentage is 54% of pupils. According to the SWMAT's published data for the 22/23 academic year, 98.2% of their pupils achieved GCSE or equivalent qualifications; 91.8% of pupils qualified in English and Maths. The SWMAT reports that their examination results have been consistently above the national outcomes in comparison to those from similar settings. Following their education at the SWMAT, 70% of pupils go into further education or employment.

Pupils that attend the SWMAT have different backgrounds, with each having their own unique set of circumstances and challenges within their lives. A large number of pupils that attend the setting suffer with trauma and/or mental health problems, creating a significant barrier to learning. For many pupils, merely walking through the school gates could represent a significant challenge. Equally, for other pupils, being part of a classroom environment demanding interaction with peers and staff could represent a goal they are working towards which might take months to achieve. Pupils attending the SWMAT who have troubled home lives will often come to school in a heightened state of anxiety whereby they are emotionally dysregulated. This is a significant barrier to learning which can often leave pupils unable to engage in lessons for long periods of time. It is remarkable that pupils in such difficult circumstances are able to motivate themselves to face the day each morning and make the journey into school. For many, their circumstances are not helped by the transition from a mainstream school to the SWMAT, which can be highly unsettling, particularly where a permanent exclusion has occurred. For a number of pupils, schools represent a source of trauma.

The SWMAT is situated in a city with a population of approximately 264,000. The employment rate of the area is marginally higher than the national average. The percentage of children in low-income families is 16.3%. Within the area 16-year-olds who are eligible for free school meals are approximately 27% less likely to achieve good GCSEs than their less disadvantaged peers. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have been reported to make slower progress through secondary school; recently 40% of disadvantaged children who achieved age-related



expectations at age 11 went on to achieve good GCSE results in English and maths in comparison with 60% of their non-disadvantaged peers.

The SWMAT received a 'good' judgement from their most recent Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection. The report highlighted the progress made by pupils noting the range of qualifications they leave the school with; these qualifications assist school leavers in securing a variety of destinations. The inspectorate indicates that pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) do well at the school and identify that the high staff-pupil ratio enables staff to know the pupils well and build strong relationships. Ofsted highlight that pupils' attendance improves considerably during their time at the SWMAT.

### **1.3 My Position in the Research Institution**

I have worked in education for approximately 10 years spending the duration of my career at the SWMAT. Prior to my employment at the SWMAT, I completed my Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme within which I completed two placements at secondary mainstream schools. I was offered an opportunity, as part of my ITE programme, to complete a SEND enhancement. Upon accepting this request, I was placed at the SWMAT for a short duration. Within this time, I gained exposure to education within the AP sector. I was assigned a teaching timetable and was required, as part of the ITE, to complete, amongst other tasks, pupil assessments. During my ITE year, national curriculum levels were the main system of assessment.

During my employment at the SWMAT, I have delivered education to pupils in key stages three and four working across multiple sites including the secondary intervention and reintegration alongside health and welfare sites. I have taught Physical Education (PE), Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) and citizenship. As part of my role at the school, I have been a form tutor and academic lead for pupils across key stage three and four whereby I was responsible for arranging multi-agency input for my allocated pupils. I was required to meet regularly with stakeholders such as parents/carers, commissioners, social workers and educational psychologists to provide feedback about pupils' education including their academic progress.

During my first year of employment at the SWMAT, I was successful in my application for a role which secured my place in middle leadership. During my time as a middle leader I have carried out various roles and projects including leading on the social and emotional curriculum. As part of this role I developed an assessment system to assist in identifying when pupils were ready to return to mainstream education. I further introduced a certificated national character education programme into the school. Following my work on this programme, the school became a ‘good practice’ hub for other schools in the surrounding area to visit. During my time as a middle leader, I have also written assessment policy (although I had no involvement in the creation or implementation of the school’s assessment and tracking system), created a whole school rewards programme and I am currently leading on behaviour at the secondary intervention and reintegration site. During the first few years of employment at the SWMAT, I completed a Masters in Education programme which focused on assessment and informed my practice. More recently I have enrolled on the National Professional Qualification in Senior Leadership (NPQSL).

#### **1.4 Situating the Policy Context at the Research Institution**

Since the 1970s, there have been widescale changes to the British education system influenced largely by social, political and economic factors (Feiler, 2010). British schooling previously characterised by its aims of nurturing children culturally, emotionally and intellectually to become confident, critical and active citizens is now, perhaps, very different (Hall and Pulsford, 2019). The re-engineering of the education system has produced tensions between these former aims and contemporary neoliberal narratives of ‘efficiency, excellence and value for money’ (Hall and Pulsford, 2019, p. 242). Fundamental to the notion of neoliberalism is the concept of marketisation which involves the withdrawal of state control of public provision (Maisuria, 2014). Essentially, education has become a commodity within a privatised market and the landscape of neoliberalism (Ball, 2004; Ball, 2018). In accordance with this re-engineering of education, the South West Pupil Referral Unit began the process of academisation in 2016 subsequently becoming the SWMAT which is the institution at the centre of this research. Academisation refers to the process of local authority maintained schools converting to academies which are run by trusts (either single or multi-academy trusts) and are funded directly from government (GOV UK, 2021). The research setting is a multi-academy trust ‘comprised of a networks of schools which work to support each other and raise

standards. For example, a school that is not performing well could benefit from being in a trust with a better performing school, allowing them to share resources and knowledge' (GOV UK, 2021).

As part of the marketisation of the education system, a process of commodification has taken place which introduces the 'language, logic and principles of private market exchange into public institutions' (Yang, 2006, p. 53). Commodification has brought about different challenges for, and pressures on, academies and schools, particularly around assessment. Education professionals are subject to increasing demands in performative and data driven cultures (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017) with both mainstream schools and AP settings being subject to widescale changes in policy and practices. Within the culture of neoliberalisation and marketisation, pupils' removal from mainstream settings and placement within APs has become a commodity - an economy of trade with commissioners and local authorities. Whilst the core focus of AP is discursively constituted as pupils' social, emotional and behaviour development, including the development of confidence and self-belief (Ofsted, 2007), APs are bound by stakeholders, such as Ofsted, to secure pupils' academic attainment and performance. As part of this process of binding stakeholders, assessment data informing of a pupil's academic progress is provided in order to evidence progress and value for money. APs are similar to mainstream provisions in the sense that they are subject to inspection, the 'terrors of performativity' and the 'tyranny of numbers' (Ball, 2003; Ball, 2015). Within the performative educational climate, schools are held accountable by stakeholders for progress and therefore assessment judgements can be categorised as high stakes as they fuel the 'quality culture' whereby professionals' competence is based on their ability to deliver pupil outcomes (Bailey, 2014, p. 664).

As Clarke (2013) has argued, assessment policy and practice is central to the commodified, performative and data-driven education culture; hence, assessment policies are often preoccupied with quantifiable performance measures, accountability and fulfilment of expectations of external stakeholders such as Ofsted (Independent Teacher Workload Review Group, 2016; The National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers [NASUWT], 2016; NASUWT, 2020). Data driven assessment policies and practices promoting measurement, monitoring and improvement have been prioritised, embedded and normalised within this neoliberal landscape (Solomon and Lewin, 2016; Clarke, 2013) and are widely used to judge teachers' performance and related components such as pay and

progression (Hodgson, 2012). Concurrently, the gold standard of ‘outstanding teaching’ is policed through an inspection system that emphasises pupils’ test outcomes gained through summative assessments (Stevenson and Wood, 2014, p. 55).

One of the most prominent changes in educational policy in the last decade is the change that has occurred at the judgement level of assessment. As part of the national curriculum reforms involving schools in England, legislation from the DfE (2014) instructed the removal of the national curriculum attainment levels which provided a national standardised system of assessment. National curriculum levels were a criterion-referenced assessment system describing pupils’ attainment in terms of statements about what they could do within a subject area (Sizmur and Sainsbury, 1997). The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2010, p. 3) argued that such ‘descriptions of performance, originally established in 1995, allow children and their parents, carers or guardians, as well as their teachers, to see how well they are doing in relation to their prior attainment and to expectations for children of their age’. The previously used national curriculum levels enabled professionals to make judgements about a pupil’s attainment within a range of subjects through the assessment of classwork, home learning, test or examination results. Assessments made using the national curriculum levels system involved the use of descriptors which saw pupils being levelled between 1-8, with exceptional performance above level 8 (The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2010). Levels were further sub-divided into categories A, B and C to permit a more precise judgement of performance (Dorset Council, 2011). Once baselined against these national descriptors, pupils were expected to make three levels of progress across set key stages.

According to the commission on assessment without levels (Department for Education, 2015), the removal of national curriculum levels sought to address the profoundly negative impact on teaching and learning. In alignment with the wider policy context centred around the neoliberalisation of education, the removal of national curriculum levels, as with the academisation of schools, represents a substantial shift in accountability within assessment practice in England (Oates, 2014). Considering this change in assessment policy, NASUWT (2015, p. 16) indicated that ‘the removal of levels has caused considerable confusion and anxiety among schools and has led to the development of overly bureaucratic and workload intensive approaches to assessment’.

Following the legislation instructing the removal of curriculum levels, the staff at the SWMAT were tasked, along with schools nationally, to create and implement new assessment policies incorporating their own systems of assessment to track pupils' progress. The subsequent assessment policy at the SWMAT is a numerically-based system of assessment which incorporates a points system ranging from 1-242 (see Appendix 1). The system provides the points scores associated with each stage which range from 0-48 months, reception, stage 1-9, year 10, year 11 and post-16. There are no descriptors within this particular system, however, within each stage the terminology used is beginning, beginning +, developing, developing +, secure and secure +. Alongside this, the assessment system notes the ages of pupils in years and months and maps them against the number line and the various stages outlined above. Within the document, the points number-line is mapped directly against the old national curriculum attainment levels, therefore professionals can view the points equivalent instantaneously. Finally, the assessment and tracking system at the SWMAT maps a range of different qualifications against the points number line including the previous and new GCSE gradings, entry level certification, BTEC, vocational qualifications and A-level. This mapping provides a translation of the points assessment system scores against other national systems of assessment.

## **1.5 Overview of the Research Study**

Within the educational landscape, assessment is a highly contested and controversial aspect of practice which functions to serve trusts, schools, professionals and pupils in numerous ways (Sun, 2012). Within the previous decade, as outlined above, there have been numerous changes to English educational systems, policies and practices, influenced heavily by political, economic and social factors (Feiler, 2010). Assessment of pupils' progress remains a central feature in the process of teaching and learning and encompasses a range of different functions. It is my contention that literature has widely simplified and distilled assessment into two overarching categories and resultantly, the terms commonly used to describe these are formative and summative. Although this simplification of assessment provides a common language for professionals, Newton (2007) believes this to be problematic and therefore in the forthcoming sections, I will introduce Newton's three levels of assessment which will provide a framework with which to replace the language of formative and summative assessment. The literature will address both these terms alongside Newton's critique of them, however it is important to acknowledge the tensions in the terminology at the outset. That being said, in

providing an overview of this research, the primary focus of the study is centred around the numerical, points-based assessment and tracking system that has replaced the national curriculum levels of assessment at the SWMAT. In the language of common literature the focus therefore is on summative assessment described by Pratt and Alderton (2019, p. 595) as the ‘technical mechanism of judgement making about an event, its grade or quality’.

The rationale behind the removal of national curriculum levels contended that schools should focus on the day to day formative practices with a view to enhancing the teaching and learning process, thus furthering the progress of pupils and securing their knowledge, skill and understanding (Standards and Testing Agency, 2015). The Standards and Testing Agency (2015) further argued and made explicit the need for settings to move away from practices heavily reliant on numerical data collection in order to address the previous issues experienced with levels. Although the DfE legislated the removal of curriculum levels making known the rationale, intention and direction of assessment systems subsequently replacing levels, there is evidence within the literature (Poet *et al.*, 2018; Department for Education, 2015) that a multitude of assessment systems across the country exist that are predominantly numerically-based and are similar to the previous levels system. In parallel with these findings, the subsequent assessment and tracking system at the SWMAT is numerically-based and is mapped against the previous national curriculum levels. The SWMAT’s assessment and tracking system exists in contradiction to the ‘intended impact’, rationale and guidance from the DfE and associated organisations.

The tensions between the rationale detailed by the governing authorities and the assessment and tracking system implemented by the SWMAT drove my curiosity in this research area and have led me to question why assessment exists in its current form particularly, as in my own experience, I do not believe it to be effective in enhancing the teaching and learning process. Therefore, given the above, this research asks initially, what the assessment-related logics of practice at the SWMAT are and then questions how these logics come to count in the landscape of commodification. The research makes an original contribution firstly through its context situated within the AP sector. Whilst literature exists that has considered assessment systems through the lens of neoliberal policy, to the best of my knowledge, there is very limited AP-specific literature which considers the logics of assessment practice in this context. Furthermore, given the unique nature of AP settings and how they acquire pupils through placements and packages, originality of this research also comes from analysing how

assessment practices are formed through the lens of commodification. The research uses theoretical frameworks from Mitchell Dean (2010) who, in his work focusing on governmentality, proposes ‘an analytics of government’ which I use to assist my analysis. I also use Newton’s (2007) levels of assessment to frame and enhance my analysis. Whilst these have been introduced briefly, further detail can be found in the literature review and theoretical framework chapters.

## **1.6 Focus and Purpose of the Research Study**

As a result of the neoliberalisation of education policy, academies and schools have been subject to increasing privatisation, marketisation and commodification (Beck and Young, 2005). The process of commodification subjects educational discourses to ideologies centred around the ‘language, logic and principles of private market exchange’ (Yang, 2006, p. 53). The beliefs and values that once informed the production of educational discourse have been exchanged for those that commodify education prioritising an emphasis on output, which is particularly prominent in considering the governance of contemporary education. In light of this educational shift, key educational questions asked of those working in this field are posed by Lyotard (1984, p. 52). Where previously these were ‘is it true?’ and ‘is it just?’ they are now ‘is it saleable?’ and ‘is it efficient?’ The knowledge governing educational establishments, constituted in neoliberal ideologies such as marketisation and commodification, has given rise to the ‘terrors of performativity’ and the ‘tyranny of numbers’ which emphasise quantifiable and measurable ‘quality and excellence’ (Ball, 2003, p. 219). Models of performance management which prioritise measurable indicators of accountability, progress and success, are recontextualised from their origins in commercial establishments and applied to educational settings whilst professionals are organised by ‘targets, indicators and evaluations’ (Ball, 2003, p. 215).

Within educational cultures of performativity, knowledge is commodified through a context of control (Lyotard, 1984). Through the legitimisation of scientific knowledge, the importance of narrative knowledge resulting from beliefs, values and experiences is reduced as it is not easily quantifiable and therefore does not serve as an effective measure of school performance within the educational markets (Clapham, 2013; Lyotard, 1984). Scientific knowledge, originating from the discipline of cognitive psychology, has become central in the development of teaching

and learning practice within educational establishments across the country due to its capabilities as a performative indicator. Ofsted (2019) highlights that their recent Educational Inspection Framework is informed by a growing evidence base of ‘learning sciences’ seeking to apply this knowledge to improve educational practice. The document asserts that research conducted within the domain of cognitive psychology provides moderate to strong evidence that can be used by professionals to enhance learning.

Given the nature of the governing knowledge, professionals are responsibilised for pupils’ learning and therefore must be accountable to leadership teams and wider stakeholders in evidencing progress, proving they are value for money and ultimately, securing their setting’s place in the market. Assessment technologies play a crucial role in this process as systems that are numerically-based objectify pupils’ knowledge, hence forming the basis of a system of accountability. Literature has, however, suggested that the previous national curriculum levels of assessment system was used inappropriately by schools to inform decision making for performance management cycles and appraisal ultimately linking professionals’ performance and their pay progression (NASUWT, 2015; NASUWT, 2016). The intention of removing these levels, in part, was for schools to create assessment systems which aim to enhance the teaching and learning process addressing issues that existed in the previous system. As previously highlighted, there are existing tensions between the intended impact of the subsequent assessment systems replacing levels and their actual impact and use. During the time of this change in assessment policy, Birmingham (2021) indicated that strong neoliberal discourses informed decisions around the development and implementation of assessment technologies. As such, existing research within the field has alluded to the points made above in terms of schools’ reconstruction of assessment truths (Pratt and Alderton, 2019). Professionals find themselves caught in a ‘matrix of calculabilities’ (Ball, 2013, p. 103) within which they must navigate the moral dilemmas associated with assessment policies and technologies.

The SWMAT is accountable to stakeholders and commissioners who are paying for educational placements and packages for those pupils whom they refer. Pupil progress is at the heart of neoliberal discourse and given the commodification of the educational placements and packages the SWMAT provide, the setting must be able to provide evidence of pupil learning and demonstrate that, as a provider, their educational services represent value for money. My view of the assessment and tracking system at the SWMAT is that it does not have the best



interest of pupils at heart in its design and implementation. I believe that the technologies have not been solely constructed to positively impact on the teaching and learning processes and therefore, this results in questions around the intended impact of such a system. The focus and purpose of this research is not to generate a critique founded on a 'for' and 'against' debate due to the fact that this does not lead to a dialogue but to alienation and polarisation (Gergen and Hersted, 2016). Furthermore, Biesta (2015, p. 194) remarks 'in education the question is never whether something is effective or not, but what something is supposed to be effective for'. Linking this directly with the focus of this research, the aim is, through analysis, to illuminate logics of assessment practice at the SWMAT and how they are formed or 'come to count' in the landscape of commodification.

In addressing logics and how they are formed, my analysis will be completed using Mitchell Dean's (2010) 'analytics of government' whereby Dean sets out four dimensions that will be used as a theoretical framework. Dean's 'analytics of government', and the associated dimensions, are born from his work around governmentality which recognises the role of government and therefore power relations in society which can be applied to the educational context of assessment. Dean's (2010, p. 28) work on the 'analytics of government' provides a framework for examining 'regimes of practices' which are 'organized practices through which we are governed and through which we govern ourselves'. These dimensions are discussed in the theoretical framework chapter.

Furthermore, within my analysis I use Newton's (2007) levels of assessment which provide a theoretical framework in considering the judgement, decision and impact levels of assessment at the SWMAT. These frameworks assist in helping to examine logics of practice and how these are formed in the landscape of commodification. To this end the research questions are:

1. What are the assessment-related logics of practice at the SWMAT?
2. How are these logics formed in the landscape of commodification?

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 The neoliberalisation of education**

Prior to the 1970s, fluctuating financial markets meant that the accumulation of capital through traditional markets became increasingly less profitable (Blacker, 2013). In order to reinvigorate this failing capitalist economic system, the neoliberalisation of capitalism led to a rapid restructuring of global economics (Harvey, 2005). In the UK, following the election of a Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher in 1979, a programme of reform was initiated marking a new phase of capitalism that encompassed the deregulation of markets and the commodification and privatisation of state assets (Harvey, 2005; Maisuria, 2014). Central to this process of reform and expansion of the economic system was the promotion of ‘self-interest’ and ‘marketisation’ (Olssen and Peters, 2005; James, 2008).

During the late 1970s, Conservative politicians argued that greater accountability should be placed upon schools through ‘consumer-orientated education’ and increased national testing (Benn and Chitty, 1996). In 1987, a Conservative party manifesto was introduced detailing the national curriculum and simultaneously, the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT), led by Paul Black, advised on the practical considerations related to the national curriculum levels system of assessment (Department of Education and Science, 1987, para 1). The national curriculum was introduced in schools across England and Wales following legislation - the Education Reform Act 1988. Concurrently, national testing, aligned with the national curriculum levels system of assessment, was introduced for pupils at ages of 7, 11, 14 and 16 years. This movement, orchestrated by the Secretary of State for Education and Science (Keith Joseph) and supported by Thatcher, promoted an ideology centred around the marketisation of education accompanied by the establishment of a testing culture across England and Wales (Gillard, 2018).

Considering this shift in ideology, heavily influenced by new public management principles (Gunter, Hall and Apple, 2017), Grace (1994, p. 126) states, ‘The New-Right challenge of the 1980s has been to argue that education is not a public good but a commodity in the marketplace and that this commodity would be delivered more efficiently and effectively in market forces’. To assure ‘consumers’ of the quality of the ‘product’, attainment targets were introduced with testing of pupils implemented at various stages of their education (Morris, 1994). This enabled

standardisation of the 'product' available within the educational marketplace and control measures enabling parent consumers informed choice in relation to the 'product' (Tolofari, 2005). Education professionals therefore became accountable for the quality of the product and were subject to inspection and measurement (Neumann, 2021; Keddie, 2018).

Statutory standardised assessment tests (SATs) were introduced in primary schools in 1991 and allowed for the 'measurement' of pupils' attainment outcomes in Years 2 and 6 enabling teachers to be held accountable just as those in secondary settings were for outcomes at 16 (Murphy, Mufti and Kassem, 2008). Furthermore, the introduction of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in 1992 established policing of 'good teaching' and the judgement of educational establishments (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998). Teachers were controlled in terms of the process of reaching these outcomes, through Ofsted inspection of their teaching practices. Teaching effectively shifts from being a private affair in one's own classroom to that of a public domain open to scrutiny. Under this regime, Jeffrey and Woods (1998, p. 548) state:

*[Pupils are] in need of managing and disciplining and needing to learn certain prescribed things in order to be able to survive in a competitive market... The teacher is seen as someone who has to impart knowledge and understanding of a set curriculum, who supplements deficiencies, assesses and evaluates students' efforts from an hierarchical position, rather than one who removes obstacles to learning and works with children. Students are seen as customers or clients, and teachers as service providers.*

During this period of the marketisation of education and educational reform, power was transferred from both schools and local authorities to the centralised state (Chitty and Dunford, 1999). This diminished the autonomy of schools and local authorities in a shift in power, regulation and control towards regional government (Gray, 2004). The profound shift towards the marketisation of education, included changes such as: parents being free to choose their child's school on condition of meeting selection criteria; schools competing for pupils with funding incentives; and control over the school's financial resources being devolved directly to the educational institutions themselves from local authorities (Bradley and Taylor, 2004).

Education, under the influence of new public management, was redefined as a private good rather than, as previously, a public good, and as a commodity not a social service (Fusarelli and Johnson, 2004). Tolofari (2005, p. 75) states that new public management describes the ‘reforms towards marketisation, or the application of business management theories and practices in public service administration’. Tolofari (2005) further highlights the key principles of new public management including: large-scale privatisation, corporatisation and commercialisation (Boston *et al.*, 1996); processes of managerialism and marketisation (Ferlie *et al.*, 1996); parsimony (Larbi, 1999); the creation of quasi-markets and greater competition (Yamamoto, 2003); devolution and decentralisation (Larbi, 1999); and tighter performance specification (Boston *et al.*, 1996). Quasi-markets are defined as ‘planned markets or internal markets, [and] organizationally designed and supervised markets intended to bring us more efficiency and choice than bureaucratic delivery systems’ (Bevir, 2007, p. 783).

Neoliberalising processes significantly altered the role of educational professionals, bringing the sector in line with managerialist market ideologies found in other privatised sectors; managerialism introduced the management of education as opposed to its administration (Rose, 1999; Tolofari, 2005). Within the context of governmentality, Numerato *et al.* (2012, p. 629) explain that ‘managerialisation represents a new mentality of the ‘conduct of conduct’ and provides a new invisible and all-pervasive technology to govern professionals’. A crucial feature of this neoliberal discourse is the responsabilisation of education professionals which is associated with governing at a distance (Rose and Miller, 1992). As a political programme, responsabilisation can be understood, in part, as a moral project of subject self-governance (Juhila and Raitakari, 2019). The origins of this term can be traced to Foucault’s concept of governmentality, encompassing the ‘conduct of conduct’ relating to the governance of others, self-governance and technologies of the self (Dean, 2010; Juhila and Raitakari, 2019). O’Malley (2009, p. 276) considers responsabilisation to be:

*[A] term developed in the governmentality literature to refer to the process whereby subjects are rendered individually responsible for a task which previously would have been the duty of another – usually a state agency – or would not have been recognized as a responsibility at all. The process is strongly associated with neoliberal political discourses, where it takes on the implication that the subject being responsabilized has avoided this duty or*

*the responsibility has been taken away from them in the welfare state era and managed by an expert or government agency.*

New accountability practices have responsibilised professionals for the cost effectiveness, conduct and outcomes of education (Saario, 2014; Banks, 2004; Neumann, 2021). The professional responsibility of those working in education has been replaced with professional accountability for outcomes based on contractual and organisational expectations and demands; as in the commercial sector, education professionals are held personally responsible for the successes and failures of education (Tolofari, 2005; Clutterbuck, 2022). The term responsibility, as argued by Trnka and Trundle (2014, p. 136), ‘has been colonized in public life and political rhetoric by neoliberal discourses of responsibilisation’. The authors contend that persons are bound by social contract ideologies and through relations of care; the intent of one’s actions is based on the wellbeing of others. It is noteworthy that responsibilisation does not solely concern itself with caring for others but is concerned with care of the self, since taking on responsibility allows for rewards and success and is therefore part of teachers’ professional identity formation; hence some professionals welcome responsibilities while others seem to reject them. Done and Murphy (2018, p. 8) consider how teachers care for their pupils within the modern neoliberal state and its performative educational discourses:

*Care is increasingly bound up with processes of systematisation, quantification, comparative measurement and accountability, hence school-directed marketing promoting web-based assessment tools that purportedly permit teachers to identify, quantify and address deficits in psycho-emotional development through targeted ameliorative interventions. Care here looks remarkably like the pastoral power theorised by Foucault (1978), implying the management of a potentially unmanageable student sub-population; and, again, it is teachers who must not only provide this care but also quantified evidence of ‘effective’ caring within a context of diminished resources.*

Brennan (2019) alludes to tensions resulting from neoliberalisation and marketisation; varied stakeholders - central government, policy makers, teachers, school leaders and parents, competed to claim a role in educational governance. Within this landscape, educational

institutions and their associated stakeholders navigated a government sponsored neoliberal agenda to drive consumerism (Ball, 2004). Education institutions and their agents have seen increased surveillance and enforcement which Powell and Edwards (2005, p. 96) describe as a ‘relentless neo-liberal political campaign to legitimise ‘choice’ for parents and place ‘power’ within schools’. Quantitative performance indicators, such as test result data, were used in pioneering schools’ advertising campaigns as a promotional tool in the education quasi-market. However, these quantitative measures highlighted the care taken by the institution and its agents; those that demonstrated care in this neoliberal sense secured a strong market advantage, while others that were less successful declined or closed unless their performance improved, thus rendering them more attractive to potential customers (Bradley and Taylor, 2004). It is suggested that this quasi-market has worked as it was expected to; the market effectively disciplines schools (Bradley *et al.*, 2000; O’Leary, 2013).

Unsurprisingly, the marketisation of education and its effects has received considerable attention both in England and overseas (e.g. Ball, 2004; Ball, 2009; Wilkins, Gobby and Keddie, 2021; Daliri-Ngametua, Hardy and Creagh, 2022; Clutterbuck, 2022; Holloway and Brass, 2018). Critics of neoliberal policies contend that people and resources are exploited as assets in the shift from social welfare projects to market-based enterprise, thereby infringing the human right to free and compulsory education; subsequently, the perception of education as intrinsically valuable shifts towards a more instrumentalist one (Lakes and Carter, 2011). It is particularly noteworthy that commodified and performative education cultures are supported by a discourse which emphasises that young people must ‘chase credentials’ in order to gain security within future education or employment; hence, the unrelenting focus on summative assessment grades and scores (Jackson and Bisset, 2005, p. 196). Failure to achieve in these societies ‘is deemed to be one’s own fault’ (Lakes and Carter, 2011, p. 108) and ‘human beings are made accountable for their predicaments’ (Wilson, 2007, p. 97). Individuals, in these societies, are responsibilised for their own performance. The neoliberal policies of former and current UK governments encompass the notion that pupils’ academic performance and their subsequent contribution to society is best harnessed through a marketised education system providing ‘efficiency, excellence and value for money’ (Hall and Pulsford, 2019, p. 242). Both pupils and teachers are affected by performativity and failure to perform leads to punitive measures as a feature of accountability regimes.

## 2.2 Commodification

The commodification of education, and related policy discourse, does not merely signify a technical shift in the educational modes of delivery but, instead, represent a widescale cultural and social change in the meaning of education and what it is to be educated (Yang, 2006). Originating from the term commodity fetishism, commodification implies that economic capital forms conceal underlying social relations (Ball, 2004). It highlights ‘social relations conducted as and in the form of relations between commodities or things’ (Bottomore *et al.*, 1983, p. 87) and is a form of reification, that is, ‘the transforming of human properties, relations and actions, into things independent of persons and governing their lives’ (Ball, 2004, p. 4). Furthermore, ‘the process of commodification generates a different organisation of the social where corporations are the typical form of organisation and commodities and services the form of relationship’ (Yang, 2006, p. 53). Commodification describes how consumer culture is subtly embedded in daily life (Gottdiener, 2000).

The process of commodification in education is integral to neoliberalisation (privatisation, marketisation and academisation) and the discourses of market ideologies that introduce the ‘language, logic and principles of private market exchange into public institutions’ (Yang, 2006, p. 53). The consequence is increasing ‘control of corporate culture over every aspect of life as a result of the rising trend of neo-liberal globalisation’ (Yang, 2006, p. 54). The potential and purpose of educational institutions are constituted by an economism that, simultaneously, transforms these institutions into commodity-producing organisations that, purportedly, provide the solution to the failures of public sector education (Shumar, 1997). Rikowski (2003) describes this transformation as capitalisation and Ball (2005) contends that privatisation is idealised while bureaucratic regimes of public education are simultaneously demonised. The driving principles that govern the production of discourses and conditions of knowledge in neoliberal cultures suggest the collapse of moral spheres and concomitant introduction of economic obligations (Walzer, 1984). The beliefs and values that once informed discourse production are replaced by an emphasis on output; education becomes a commodity. Lyotard (1984, p. 52) summarises this shift, stating that the key educational questions of ‘is it true?’ and ‘is it just?’ are now ‘is it saleable?’ and ‘is it efficient?’ In addition to these questions, one might also ask ‘is it effective?’ In this context ‘effective’ is value-free and only associated with ‘effecting’ good measurable outcomes/output. Connell (2013) contends that the impact of commodification can be observed within primary education through to higher education.

## 2.3 Performativity

Following the 1988 Education Reform Act and introduction of a quasi-market into the state education system, competition between schools was discursively constituted as intended to drive up standards (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz, 1995). Further reforms during the 1990s led to the publicising of schools' performance through examination result league tables alongside Ofsted inspection reporting (Solomon and Lewin, 2016). These developments influenced the subsequent behaviour of schools and marked the beginning of an era of performativity in education. Performativity refers to the legitimisation of that which contributes to optimal performance of a system (Lyotard, 1979). Ball (2003) describes performativity as a technology of reform that has led to change at organisation level and transformed what it means to be a teacher. Ball (2003, p. 216) explains:

*Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement.*

A distinctive component of the neoliberal reform agenda in education is the emphasis placed on quantifiable and measurable 'quality and excellence' (Ball, 2013, p. 219; Clarke, 2013). Models of performance management, encompassing measurable indicators of accountability, progress and success, are borrowed from commercial situations and applied to schooling, with practitioners simultaneously organised by 'targets, indicators and evaluations' (Ball, 2003, p. 215). Drawing on Ball, Clapham (2013, p. 372) identifies three key features of performativity: a 'disciplinary system', 'part of the transformation of education, schools and teachers', and a 'shaper of language'. Perryman (2006) further indicates that performativity is characterised by increased surveillance and accountability, placing teachers in situations where they and their schools are judged on performance and outcomes.



Within cultures of performativity, knowledge is commodified through a context of control (Lyotard, 1979). The legitimisation of scientific knowledge within performative education cultures reduces the importance of narrative knowledge that stems from beliefs, values and experiences, as it is not easily quantifiable (Lyotard, 1979; Clapham, 2013). Subsequently, the use value of scientific knowledge becomes of paramount importance due to its capabilities as a performative indicator and it is this knowledge that ultimately controls teachers' professional lives (Jeffrey and Troman, 2011). In this context, knowledge is located in the market, governmentality and normalisation (Clapham, 2013). In the continual drive for increased performance, Ball (2015, pp. 299-300) summarises:

*As neoliberal subjects we are constantly incited to invest in ourselves, work on ourselves and improve ourselves – drive up our numbers, our performance, our outputs – both in our personal lives and our work lives. In teaching, the articulation of performance and improvement in terms of student test scores is more and more widely linked to another set of numbers – money – in the form of reward – that is, performance related pay. We come to make decisions about the value of activities and the investment of our time and effort in relation to measures and indexes and the symbolic and real rewards that might be generated from them.*

## **2.4 An introduction to Alternative Provision**

AP describes education outside of mainstream schooling for pupils up to the age of 18 not attending mainstream provision for reasons including permanent exclusion, behavioural issues, school refusal or illness (Department for Education, 2018b). Within the AP sector, there are varying types of provision including Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), specialist educational settings and elective home education, a provision that sits outside both mainstream and specialist provision (Department for Education, 2018b). In England (2021/22) there are currently 11,684 pupils attending PRUs, a decrease of 9% on the previous academic year; 72.2% of pupils are boys and 54.6% of all pupils in PRUs are eligible for free school meals compared to 22.5% in the overall school population. Concurrently, there are currently 35,600 pupils on roll in local authority funded AP (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Pupils

attending AP settings may do so on varying forms of registration; pupils may be solely registered with AP settings (single registration) or dual registered whereby they attend both their AP and mainstream school (Tate and Greatbatch, 2017). Due to the complexities of pupils' individual circumstances, pupils' registration status, alongside costings, will be negotiated and agreed upon the commissioning of individual packages and placements.

Literature within the area of AP indicates key areas of research, including the impact of exclusion (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; Wright, Weekes and McGlaughlin, 2000; Graham *et al.*, 2019), pupils' experiences of AP (Jalali and Morgan, 2018; Hart, 2013), what makes effective AP (HCEC, 2018; Tate and Greatbatch, 2017; Department for Education, 2018b; McGregor and Mills, 2012), post-16 and pupils that are not in education or training (NEET) (Tate and Greatbatch, 2017). In a large-scale qualitative study utilising case studies and interviews, the key objectives were 'to understand how schools support children at risk of exclusion; how schools use alternative provision; and how AP providers support children placed in their setting' (Department for Education, 2018, p. 9). A key finding was that schools are seeking better quality AP locally, including a wider offer of qualification, better monitoring, evaluation and communication, and a more rigorous inspection regime as experienced by mainstream schools. Furthermore, research from Trotman, Enow and Tucker (2019) reports on findings from four separately commissioned evaluations of AP using qualitative research methods. The evaluations involved 200 participant young people, along with managers, stakeholders, parents, local authority officers and school governors. Trotman, Enow and Tucker (2019, p. 219) summarise:

*The evaluations report the complexity of needs amongst children and young people; the continuing problem of unsuccessful transitions between key phases/stages of education and the profound consequences of this for young people; assumptions around mainstream reintegration and managed moves; and the curriculum challenges of vocationalism and academic emphasis. While the research data confirms the positive value of multi-agency approaches in AP, it also shows a more recent troubling increase in the number of young people now being referred to AP as a consequence of their exposure to performative school cultures.*

Assessing quality within AP can be problematic due to multiple perspectives on what constitutes quality and this issue is particularly prominent in the context of the marketisation and commodification of AP education. Ball states (2013, p. 132), ‘at its most visceral and intimate neoliberalism involves the transformation of social relations and practices into calculabilities and exchanges, that is into the market form - with the effect of commodifying educational practice and experience’. The government has recently proposed the introduction of performance measures including a dashboard to monitor metrics such as outcomes and value for money alongside the introduction of performance tables (Department for Education, 2023a). What constitutes quality provision is heavily debated as some AP providers ‘stress the importance of personal development as a path to academic attainment whilst others focus on basic literacy and numeracy skills and/or successful transitions back to mainstream school or into post-16 destinations’ (Department for Education, 2018, p. 57). Further issues concerning quality assurance highlighted in the literature include the lack of consistency and efficacy, concerns related to pupils’ learning in maths and English, and the breadth, depth and challenge of AP curriculum (Tate and Greatbatch, 2017; Gazeley *et al.*, 2013b; Martineau, 2018).

## **2.5 The neoliberalisation of Alternative Provision**

Historically, PRUs, alongside other types of specialist provision, have been maintained and funded by local authorities, typically through the ‘high needs block’ where place funding and service level agreements are commissioned by local authorities and schools (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2023). Pre-16 AP places are currently funded at the rate of £10,000 per place, which applies whether the placement or package has been commissioned by the local authority or school (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2023). APs may receive additional top up payments for pupils above the place funding rate dependant on the resources needed to meet their individual needs and package requirements. Funding arrangements for independent AP may be negotiated directly between the provider and commissioner as this sits outside the place funding and top up funding system (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2023). Funding arrangements for AP changed in 2010. Following its first reading (26<sup>th</sup> May 2010), the Academies Act was granted Royal assent on 27<sup>th</sup> July 2010 and became legislation (Legislation.gov.uk, 2010). Once converted to an academy, control of a school (including AP settings) becomes decentralised, shifting power from local authorities to executive teams within newly converted academy trusts. Academised APs no longer receive funding from the

local authority and do so through the Education and Skills Funding Agency. This privatisation of schools through the Academies Act 2010 led to the construction of an educational market, with the DfE (2010, p. 12) purporting those reforms of privatisation and de-regulation would increase freedom and autonomy by ‘removing unnecessary burdens [and] allowing all schools to choose for themselves how best to develop’ whilst enabling academies to generate financial profits for their stakeholders (Maisuria, 2014).

The DfE (2018, p. 13) states:

*[The] AP market does not operate as a traditional market. Unlike traditional markets where growth is a positive characteristic, the AP market is one where there is the need to ensure demand is carefully controlled and aligned to the supply of local provision.*

In apparent contradiction, Malcolm (2020) considered AP market dynamics through responses from head teachers, where one head explained that their AP business was formed to exert greater control over ethos, two heads explained a need for their provision offer, with three others making explicit reference to a ‘gap in the market’. Thomson and Pennacchia (2014) also refer to the highly marketised nature of AP in England and associate this with potentially driving costs down as providers compete for business. Furthermore, they suggest that AP exists as a market not yet regulated in any standardised way. Central to these points, as highlighted above, the Academies Act enables AP settings to produce a profit for stakeholders (Maisuria, 2014).

Considering the marketisation of AP from a local authority level, it has been reported that council expenditure in South West England is, on average, £22,000 per pupil for their education package within an AP setting (Whitehouse, 2018). Clearly, pupils’ education is now a commodity to be negotiated, bought and sold. Lyotard’s questions in relation to the commodification of education (1984, p. 52), ‘is it true?’ and ‘is it just?’ are, indeed, now ‘is it saleable?’ and ‘is it efficient?’, as exemplified in a statement from Plymouth’s Online Directory (2021):

*All [alternative provision] providers submitted their costs as part of the framework evaluation. This allowed the panel to make a value for money judgement for each provider. All schools should be charged the same but there is scope for some negotiation by individual schools to obtain better value for money.*

In this expansion of neoliberalism through the Academies Act 2010, two fundamental concepts embody this process: marketisation (as previously highlighted) and the promotion of self-interest (Olssen and Peters, 2005; James, 2008). Analysis of the annual accounts of 258 academy trusts found that 32 academy chief executive officers (CEOs) earned £200,000 or more, with one earning £455,000 (Schools Week, 2022). As with all businesses, the recent COVID-19 pandemic and current energy crisis, has resulted in many academy trusts, including those delivering AP, struggling to cover basic service costs such as resources for pupils. Struggling academies are forced into re-brokerage or, alternatively, private sector commercial organisations are permitted to provide sponsorship to the academy, enabling the sponsor freedom to direct the management, governance and operation to increase productivity and efficiency under the academy status (Parish, Baxter and Sanders, 2012). Considering this movement and its associated complexities, widescale neoliberal policy developments have significantly impacted on educational establishments through: the deskilling of teachers, high stakes standardised testing, public and private charters, scripted curricula, increased competition between schools, increased marketing costs for schools, increased parental choice, increased ‘cream skimming’ and ‘silt shifting’, and the underfunding of public education (Grand and Barlett, 1993; Hill and Kumar, 2008; Daliri-Ngametua, Hardy and Creagh, 2022; Neumann, 2021).

Clearly, AP in England has been subject to the cultural and economic imperatives of the neoliberal agenda which has driven the reformulation of public policy (Farrell *et al.*, 2017). Gillies (2013, p. 72) considers teachers’ narratives around such restructuring and identifies a blurring of pastoral rationality, ‘in which the aims and goals are around human relations and human wellbeing’, with neoliberal discourses of responsibilisation. Within the literature, the identified strengths of AP settings centre around holistic and pastoral approaches to their pupils’ and flexibility in relation to structure and curriculum (Malcolm, 2020); many pupils attending AP settings are not referred due to their need for academic intervention but, rather, for pastoral

intervention for the social, emotional and behavioural aspects of their educational development. Neoliberal discourses, it seems, have brought about ‘particular kinds of social relations, flows and movements and new narratives about what counts as good policy’ (Ball, 2013, p. 5). Within the governmentality literature, these relations, flows and movements may also be identified as ‘logics of practice’, discussed below (Dean, 2010).

A recently released Green Paper (Department for Education, 2023a) proposes changes to the current AP funding system involving a move from pupil funding per place to multi-year budgets, aiming to ensure increased stability and security. The proposal outlines a standardised national framework of banding and price tariffs for high needs funding to control the high cost of provision. Furthermore, to purportedly increase accountability, all APs and special schools are required to join an Academy trust by 2030. The document also sets out performance monitoring strategies for AP and details national performance tables, which are discussed below.

## **2.6 Performativity within and around Alternative Provision**

Literature indicates that AP has been reformed by neoliberalisation. Schools, teachers and their pupils have become ‘captured in a matrix of calculabilities’ (Ball, 2013, p. 103) described by Ozga (2008, p. 264) as ‘governing knowledge’ - a regime of numbers ‘through which surveillance can be exercised’ ostensibly to improve both quality and efficiency. In this regime, encompassing ‘measures (standards), methods (examination) [and] techniques of analysis (statistics)’ (Ball, 2013, p. 51), statistics enable the classification of populations and individual learners through a ‘technical repertoire’. Quantitative measures, such as metrics of performance, ensure that pupils within AP or those displaying potential need for AP intervention are made visible, objectified and classified according to their performance, from underachieving to gifted and talented (Foucault, 1979). Following Foucault (2010, p. 229), productive subjects or ‘abilities-machines’ and their teachers are brought into ‘the gaze’ of judgement (Ball, 2013, p. 131).

To illuminate the deep-rooted nature of performativity in relation to AP, many head teachers maintain that accountability systems have contributed directly to a spike in exclusion rates (Gazeley *et al.*, 2013a); 6500 pupils were permanently excluded in the 2021/2022 academic year compared with 3900 permanent exclusions in the previous year (Office for National

Statistics, 2023). Analysis from the Children's Commissioner (2017) indicates that the GCSE pass rate in 89% of mainstream schools would have been worse had the results included pupils sent to AP or off-rolled; the GCSE results of pupils in non-mainstream settings tend to be significantly lower, with only 1% of pupils sent to AP achieving 5 A\*-C GCSEs. Unsurprisingly, Farouk (2017) attributes increased levels of exclusion to the marketisation of schools and competitive political agenda. For schools and their stakeholders, the logics of performance and its associated practices are hard to avoid (Ball, 2013). As a mechanism of neoliberal government, performativity utilises comparison, judgements and self-management, with those who underperform being subject to moral approbation (Ball, 2013, p. 140). Ball (2003) explains that professionals who do not assume responsibility within logics of performance are, in a sense, letting down their colleagues and their institutions.

Through the inescapable lens of performativity, it has been acknowledged that there is systemic underperformance in relation to outcomes with AP. In 2016 the DfE released the 'Educational Excellence Everywhere White Paper', setting out the government's commitment to reforming AP and delivering improved outcomes and better value for taxpayers. Tate and Greatbatch (2017) note a lack of rigorous evaluation and monitoring within AP and suggests that more work is needed to examine its effectiveness. This appears to be a topical issue nationally, with literature exposing limited and inconsistent quality assurance measures and, in some cases, no measures at all, leading to calls for scientifically based, rigorous evaluations intended to improve pupil outcomes (Ofsted, 2016; Thomson and Pennacchia, 2014). Kendall *et al.* (2007) consider outcomes within AP, outlining the need for and importance of monitoring and evaluation in four key areas: using measures to demonstrate outcomes; implementing systems for monitoring AP to ensure providers meet the minimum standards required; using stakeholder feedback, including that of clients, in the monitoring and evaluation of AP; lastly, considering cost effectiveness to ensure value for money for commissioners through consideration of AP quality, the outcomes achieved and efficiency in relation to resource. Whilst there are examples of good practice across the AP sector, inconsistencies in practice and performance alongside significant data and evidence gaps mean pupils have a 'poor-to-zero chance of receiving a quality education' (IntegratED, 2022, no page). Within the recently developed AP Quality Toolkit, designed to evaluate AP quality, IntegratED (2022, no page) highlight:

*Significant data and evidence gaps which impede efforts to truly understand current practice and make meaningful and sustainable system improvement. These need to be addressed... The toolkit provides a comprehensive framework, shared understanding and common vocabulary for AP quality at national, local and individual levels. We believe that the AP Quality Toolkit has the power to transform the way AP quality is understood, evaluated and improved and should be adopted by all stakeholders.*

Further to the introduction of this toolkit, the government released the SEND review consultation paper proposing several national policy changes concerning provision, standards and AP budgeting (Department for Education, 2022). The paper outlines local and national inclusion dashboards for SEND provision capturing metrics covering outcomes and experiences, identification of need and value for money. Such data will be used by the government to monitor performance and the progress of schools and pupils over time. The paper also proposes new national performance tables for AP alongside a framework for assessing AP on 5 key outcomes: successful post-16 transitions, effective outreach support, improved attendance, reintegration into mainstream settings, academic attainment with a central focus on English and maths (Department for Education, 2022).

Tensions can be identified between the proposed government policy, particularly performance tables, and the practice of schools operating in the AP sector. Many pupils who are referred to AP have unique educational histories and a range of complex support needs related to behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) (Tate and Greatbatch, 2017). As previously discussed, referrals to AP are generally made according to these complex non-academic needs and mental or physical health issues. The therapeutic nature of AP settings enables staff to meet the needs of pupils through tailored support packages which sit alongside the standard 'academic' curriculum (Tate and Greatbatch, 2017). An intensifying regime of performativity within AP, with pressure on settings to produce outcomes, produces tensions in the practice and priorities of staff at leadership and classroom level. Moore and Clarke (2016, p. 667) consider the tensions between neoliberal and performative government policy and teachers' own views of educational practice, highlighting a key issue that 'concerns the constructed 'other side' of neoliberalism's discourse of localised freedom and choice: that is to



say, the burden of personal and local responsibility that neoliberal policy imposes on schools, teachers and students’.

I contend that many teachers support central policy, willingly accept it and take on responsibility within their schools and classrooms for its implementation. However, Moore and Clarke (2016) note a significant number of teachers for whom there are serious and troubling tensions between central policy directives and their own preferred practice; these tensions may relate to curriculum, purposes of learning and approaches to pedagogy and leave many teachers feeling undermined by central policy directives. Teachers unwilling to accept central policy may be directed to do things they do not believe in, ‘effectively becoming the ‘bearers’ of those ideas as they assume responsibility for their implementation in practice’ (Moore and Clarke, 2016, pp. 667-668). In conclusion, Ball (2014, no page) summarises the consequences of intensified performance measures for education settings and practice:

*This may not all be bad but it might be dangerous. We are incited constantly to work on ourselves, improve ourselves, monitor ourselves, be responsible for ourselves - do the work of surveillance, and we may do it glumly or gleeful and revel in being better than we were, better than others - but it changes our relations to ourselves and to one another.*

## **2.7 Assessment**

Within the current performative educational landscape, assessment is a highly contested and controversial aspect of practice which functions to serve trusts, schools, professionals and pupils in numerous ways (Sun, 2012). Over the last decade, there have been numerous changes to English educational systems, policies and practices, influenced heavily by political, economic and social factors (Feiler, 2010). Through continual scrutiny and evidence-based practice, researchers and education professionals seek to develop and refine existing assessment systems and policies to impact positively on teaching and learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Black *et al.*, 2003; Havnes and McDowell, 2008; Sadler, 1989; Poet *et al.*, 2018). On a global scale, organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have

promoted the measurement of learning through testing or summative assessments (Dumont, Istance and Benavides, 2010). Consequently, within the current neoliberal climate, these measures have generated increased public and political interest and have affected educational institutions that face ever-increasing levels of accountability from stakeholders.

It is generally accepted that assessment within education establishments falls into two overarching categories: formative assessment and summative assessment. Newton (2007) highlights that the distinction between these, and precise definition, is extremely problematic and argues that these terms create a false dichotomy and confusion in practice. Considering Newton (2007) and the function of assessment, Pratt and Alderton (2019, p. 595) summarise:

*Summative assessment being the technical mechanism of judgement making about an event, its grade or quality; and formative being the business of focusing on the use to which this is put. From this point of view both [ ] might be seen as summative – since they represent the technical means of forming a judgement – but might also both be used formatively in future pedagogical activity.*

Although defining these components of assessment can be problematic (Newton, 2007), for the purpose of this thesis the following definition will be used: summative assessment focuses on summarising the achievement of schools, classes and pupils generally in the form of a metric (Bloom, Hastings and Madaus, 1971). Newton (2007) questions if ‘summative’ assessment means anything at all and proposes three levels relating to the purpose of assessment: the judgement level whereby a system of assessment is used by professionals to determine the pupil’s level of attainment (e.g., a grading system, test or formal examination); the decision level concerning the use of an assessment judgement (the process, action or decision which it enables); and the intended impact level of the assessment system.

Formative assessment or assessment for learning can be defined as ‘the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there’ (Assessment Reform Group, 2002, p. 2). Through the lens of Newton, this makes up the decision and intended impact levels of assessment. Whilst both aspects of assessment and their impact in teaching and learning

processes have been substantially researched (Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Wisniewski, Zierer and Hattie, 2019; Alderton and Pratt, 2021; Assessment Reform Group, 2002; Black and Wiliam, 1998; Black *et al.*, 2003; EPPI-Centre, 2002; Poet *et al.*, 2018; Ofsted, 2019; Education Endowment Foundation, 2020) and critiqued, ‘the interest (and investment) in summative assessment has far outstripped that accorded to formative assessment’ (Stiggins, 2005, p. 326).

From a socio-political perspective, assessment processes and policies are often detached from pupils’ learning (NASUWT, 2016). Summative assessment practice is central to the commodified, performative and data-driven education culture; hence, assessment policies are often preoccupied with quantifiable performance measures, accountability and fulfilment of expectations of external stakeholders such as Ofsted (Independent Teacher Workload Review Group, 2016; NASUWT, 2020; NASUWT, 2016). Data driven assessment policies and practices promoting measurement, monitoring and improvement have been prioritised, embedded and normalised within this neoliberal landscape (Solomon and Lewin, 2016; Clarke, 2013) and are widely used to judge teachers’ performance and related components such as pay and progression (Hodgson, 2012). Concurrently, the gold standard of ‘outstanding teaching’ is policed through an inspection system that emphasises pupils’ test outcomes gained through summative assessments (Stevenson and Wood, 2014a).

However, one can also consider assessment through the lenses of neoliberalisation, performativity and commodification. Whilst formative assessment features in a significant proportion of the literature, given the direction of this thesis, summative assessment is the primary focus, with particular focus around assessment without levels. At this point, it is necessary to briefly clarify how the term neoliberal is being used and its relationship with assessment and accountability. Harvey (2007, p. 22) describes neoliberalism as a theory of:

*Political economic practices proposing that human well-being can be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.*

Assessment, and the related systems and associated data, is a key element in neoliberal education policy (Hill and Kumar, 2008) enabling schools to compete within markets through league tables and educational establishments, professionals and pupils to be held accountable for their performance. In essence, it presents a way of commodifying learning and thus creates the economic unit for a market to exist.

## **2.8 Assumptions of knowledge and assessment**

To fully understand and analyse the policies, practices and systems of assessment, the assumptions and underpinning theory of knowledge must be understood as this is predominantly what professionals are responsabilised to assess. Considering Ofsted's (2019) inspection framework and overview of research document, knowledge is assumed to be primarily rooted in cognitive structures within the brain (Department for Education, 2019b). The influence of Ofsted on schools is profound and given the high stakes around inspection in England many schools will unquestioningly implement the advice of Ofsted across their settings. Ofsted (2019, p. 19) draws on a growing evidence base of 'learning sciences' that seek to apply cognitive science to educational practice. This research document asserts that cognitive psychology provides moderate to strong evidence that can be used to enhance learning (Willingham, 2008).

Ofsted (2019) define learning only as a change in long-term memory and outline the importance of knowledge retention in long-term memory. More recently, this has been enshrined in regulations for training new teachers (Department for Education, 2019a), with the cognitive science of memory at the centre of how pupils learn. It is unsurprising therefore that Ofsted's (2023) latest inspection handbook states that 'learning can be defined as an alteration in long-term memory. If nothing has altered in long-term memory, nothing has been learned'. Ofsted (2023) further highlights the importance of assessing pupils' knowledge and testing their ability to recall something that has been learned in the past.

For pupils' knowledge to be measured through summative assessment, it must be objectified, that is, transformed through a process of reification; knowledge becomes independent of the person and governs their lives (Ball, 2004). Specific measures and indicators are attributed to

knowledge within the school's assessment system, permitting the enumeration of knowledge and enabling its measurement and audit (Bryman, 2012); the resulting metrics are commonly termed data (Pratt, 2016). Knowledge, considered to be both abstract and complex, is transformed through systems of assessment into a concrete and objective common-sense reality capable of being measured (Jaspal, 2014). This is in opposition to suggestions in contemporary learning theory dating back to Vygotsky (1978) that:

*Knowledge and learning might best be understood as historically and culturally situated, socially-constructed and distributed, [the discourse in relation to curriculum and assessment demonstrate how knowledge in schools is] understood as epistemologically objective and as an individual possession, and learning as a form of acquisition. (Pratt, 2016, p. 898)*

Within the discourses of accountability and performativity, the theoretical underpinning of cognitive psychology enables teachers to be held accountable for the quality and quantity of knowledge stored in pupils' cognitive structures as determined by the metrics of summative assessment. This objectification of knowledge, as theorised in cognitive psychology, forms part of Ball's 'tyranny' and it is through these metrics that pupils and professionals are made visible and responsibilised (Ball, 2003; Ball, 2013; Ball, 2015). Pratt (2016, p. 897) summarises the role of assessment data in relation to commodification:

*Whilst the services and goods of assessment practices are not therefore being reconfigured in order to be bought and sold directly they are nonetheless being reconfigured so as to be measurable with state-specified use value. Furthermore, this use value is not only about being 'useful' for the pupil. It is also to be 'used by', even 'used on', teachers in order to drive changes in school outcomes.*

This is particularly pertinent since national summative assessments, e.g., SATs, GCSEs and A-Levels all constitute high stakes testing and carry accountability implications. These assessments are designed to objectify pupils' knowledge in the form of a metric, grade or number. The assessments themselves serve a multitude of purposes; at GCSE/A-level they

determine qualification grades, however, under the cognitive psychological model, these assessments further enable professionals to be held accountable for a pupils' knowledge and performance, and performance tables. In relation to inspection, Ofsted (2023) states, 'national assessments and examinations are useful indicators of pupils' outcomes... inspectors will consider any outcomes data, where this is available in published national data'. Again, summative assessments are integral to the marketised and performative education culture as discussed in forthcoming sections.

## **2.9 Assessment: Judgement level**

During their school careers, pupils will be subject to judgement through various forms of summative assessment; these may take the form of grading by a professional, a test or formal examination (Newton, 2007). Summative assessments completed by a professional 'determine the level of attainment achieved by the pupil... specified for each core subject which applies to him' (His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1995, p. 4.2) whereas tests and formal examinations exist to produce, for each pupil, a single test level related to a subject area (School Curriculum and Assessment Authority/Department for Education, 1994). Newton (2007) considers the term judgement and uses it to refer to an overall outcome from an assessment event that represents a pupil's competence, specifically, their knowledge, skill and understanding. Newton (2007) further describes judgement as a realisation by a pupil, an evaluation by a teacher and a pronouncement from a testing company. Through the application of so-called learning sciences, specifically cognitive psychology, to the assessment process, professionals, through technologies of knowledge and production, make judgements about the quality and quantity of information (knowledge, understanding and skill) stored within pupils' cognitive structures (Ofsted, 2019; Department for Education, 2019b). Newton (2007) considers judgements of a pupil's educational attainment to exist along a continuum, from summative judgements (characterised by appraisal and a professional's decision related to the quality or value of competence) to descriptive judgements (characterised by analysis or a professional's reflections on the nature of competence). Newton (2007, p. 158) states:

*At the summative end of the continuum are judgements that (purely) summarize the value of an educational attainment in essentially quantitative terms, for example: self-referenced judgements (e.g., attained better this time*

*than before); norm-referenced judgements (e.g., attained at a higher level than n% of students). At the descriptive end of the continuum are judgements that (purely) describe the nature of an educational attainment in essentially qualitative terms, for example: concept-referenced judgements (e.g., understands in this respect but not in that respect); performance-referenced judgements (e.g., succeeds in this respect but not in that respect). In between these extremes we find judgements that combine elements of summary and description, for example: criterion-referenced judgements (e.g., can do x, cannot do y or z); standards-referenced judgements (e.g., likely to be able to do x, y and z).*

As identified earlier, high stakes testing and summative assessment in England such as SATs, GCSE and A-Levels remain at the forefront of the judgement level within schools. However, within the last decade, one of the most prominent changes at the judgement level of assessment relates to the national curriculum reforms which legislated the removal of attainment levels previously used by schools in England to provide a national standardised system of assessment. National curriculum attainment levels were a criterion-referenced (judgement) assessment system, with pupil attainment described in terms of statements about what they could do within a subject area (Sizmur and Sainsbury, 1997). The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2010, p. 3) indicated that such ‘descriptions of performance, originally established in 1995, allow children and their parents, carers or guardians, as well as their teachers, to see how well they are doing in relation to their prior attainment and to expectations for children of their age’.

The national curriculum levels system of assessment involved professionals making judgements about pupils’ attainment through the assessment of classwork, test or examination results and home learning. Assessments against national curriculum descriptors resulted in pupils being levelled between 1-8, with exceptional performance above level 8 (The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2010). Levels were further sub-divided into categories A, B and C to permit a more precise judgement of performance (Dorset Council, 2011). Despite attempts to enhance assessment validity and reliability, through the sub-division of levels and their subsequent descriptors, the subjective element of levels remained as professionals judged ‘which level description best fits the pupil’s performance’ (The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2010, p. 5). National benchmarking, denoting the

expectations of pupils' performance at each key stage, enabled comparison of pupils' performance in their actual subject attainment to that specified within the subject's age related expectations. Once baselined against the descriptors, pupils nationally were expected to make three levels of progress within set key stages. Target setting and regular progress reviews, involving professionals, pupils and parents/carers, were central within the process of accountability. National curriculum levels enabled performance visibility of cohorts and individual pupils through judgements. Correspondingly, the judgements made by professionals on pupils' progress enabled subsequent judgements on professionals, thus making them and their performance visible. Within a performative educational climate, schools are held accountable by stakeholders for progress and therefore, assessment judgements can be categorised as high stakes as they fuel the 'quality culture' whereby professionals' competence is based on their ability to deliver pupil outcomes (Bailey, 2014, p. 664).

Aligning with the neoliberalisation of education, the removal of national curriculum levels, as with the academisation of schools, represents a substantial shift in accountability within assessment practice in England (Oates, 2014). Nicky Morgan (2015), the former Secretary of State, illustrated the power shift from central government to academy leadership when stating, 'I don't mind if they're scientists, businesspeople... or nuns. I want to give them greater freedom and flexibility, more control and creativity'. Following the removal of national curriculum levels, schools across England were tasked with the design, development and implementation of their own assessment policy and practice. Consequently, practice within the judgement level of assessment, as defined by Newton (2007), has changed dramatically. From an inspection perspective, Ofsted (2023) state that they do not advocate any particular method of assessment, however, they are clear that assessment plays a central role in their overall inspection judgements around the overall quality of education within settings. Ofsted (2023) further indicate that leaders need to acknowledge the limitations of systems, avoiding unnecessarily burdensome workloads.

Considering the changes to assessment, Michael Gove (2013) stated they had been 'developed with due regard to the views of subject experts and teachers and to the findings of international best practice comparisons' and further contended that the changes allow teachers to use professional judgement. The DfE (2014) argued that the removal of levels would allow for greater flexibility in the planning and assessment process. Previous publications (Department for Education, 2014; Department for Education, 2015; Department for Education, 2010) have



outlined intentions around reviewing assessment, however, ‘strong discourses of accountability, autonomy, and neoliberal ideologies of social improvement, impacted these reviews on curriculum and assessment’ (Birmingham, 2021, p. 79). Inevitably, these changes led to tensions in schools across England; many viewed this as a positive response to a flawed and detrimental system of assessment while others viewed it as yet another inadmissible innovation from the government (NASUWT, 2015). The guidance from the DfE to schools was limited, with NASUWT (2015, p. 16) stating ‘the removal of levels has caused considerable confusion and anxiety among schools and has led to the development of overly bureaucratic and workload intensive approaches to assessment’.

In the drive for educational excellence and high performance, politicians and their advisors look to international education systems for comparison to assist reform in policy and practice. Speaking in relation to assessment after levels, Nick Gibb (2017), who previously held the title Minister for School Standards, confirmed the government’s commitment to evidence-based practice and spoke of the importance of studying other high performing countries to drive renewal of English policy and practice. Through international comparison, countries scoring highly in relation to PISA, such as Finland, Singapore and Hong Kong, do not use a levels system of assessment to make judgements on progress; rather, they focus on encouraging a deep, secure knowledge and understanding of key curriculum areas (Gibb, 2015).

Utilising international comparison to positively impact assessment policies and practices is not, however, without criticism (Volante, 2017). Critics of PISA indicate a plethora of ideological and methodological issues (Araujo, Saltelli and Schnepf, 2017) therefore, whilst international comparison may be useful, caution should always be exercised in the interpretation of metrics and subsequent analysis. The influence of PISA on assessment policy and practice is, nevertheless, undeniable, particularly in light of the reforms to key summative assessments such as GCSEs and A-levels. Nicky Morgan (2015) highlighted that the success of the reforms would be measured in part by gaining the views of employers and universities to assess how successfully the reforms prepare pupils for modern Britain. Further measurement of the effectiveness of those reforms would be through international tables of pupil performance such as PISA.

At the judgement level of assessment, a particularly prominent issue related to attainment levels was progress being ‘synonymous with moving onto the next level’ (Department for Education,

2015, p. 12). Rather than focusing on securing and deepening pupils' knowledge and understanding, priorities for teaching and assessment judgements were to ensure pupils progressed through the levels system. This prompted criticisms from those delivering GCSE and A-Level syllabuses that 'teaching to the test' strategies are employed within the overarching aim of positive performance (Zakharov and Carnoy, 2021). Given that levels were a best-fit assessment judgement, pupils could achieve the next level but have serious gaps in their knowledge. The DfE (2015) understood this to have had a profoundly negative impact on teaching and learning. Further implications at the decision and impact level are discussed in forthcoming sections. Abolishing this system of judgement has resulted in a multitude of assessment systems in England, many similar to attainment levels in that they use numerical values. The issues outlined by the Commission on Assessment Without Levels remain (Department for Education, 2015). One line of enquiry suggests that there is an existence of manipulation or fabrication in assessment judgements made by professionals (Ball, 2000). Given the high stakes and accountability related to assessment judgements, manipulation or fabrication may be viewed as a technology of the self, as defined by Foucault (1982a; Martin, Gutman and Hutton, 1988).

The contemporary position of education, particularly around economic capacity, national identity, global competitiveness and performativity (Marginson, 2005; Hennessey, 2013) means that assessment judgements in neoliberal contexts are high stake given their associated accountability measures. Webb's (2006, p. 201) concept of the 'choreography of accountability' denotes that school improvement within current educational discourse can be secured through accountability measures. There is a belief amongst policymakers that, where there is transparency in relation to data, professionals work harder to attain improved results (Brennan, 2018). Webb (2006) suggests that the actualities in practice are very different (particularly at the judgement level), with professionals feeling compelled to produce choreographed fabrications in order to satisfy the demands of observation and inspections, and thus accountability.

For many professionals, accountability signifies a lack of trust and, simultaneously, a mechanism to support performativity regimes imposed by politicians striving for improvement in PISA rankings through centralised hegemonic policies (Brennan, 2018; Wyse and Opfer, 2010). Ball (2003, p. 215) identifies the impact of state regulation on professionals who '[organise] themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations [setting] aside

personal beliefs and commitments’ to ‘live an existence of calculation’. Ball (2003, p. 221) uses the term ‘values schizophrenia’ to describe the rapid changes to moral context in education resulting from the costs associated with this particular type of regulation; it occurs where ‘commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance’. Evoking Webb’s (2006) concept, Ball (2000) discusses fabrications as a consequence of performativity whereby performance is simulated to appease those monitoring and evaluating practice. Again, fabrications result from pressures related to neoliberal agendas whereby markets and management monitor professionals who, in turn, monitor themselves in the belief that educational standards will rise (Ball, 2000). Ball describes a struggle over visibility, suggesting a paradox whereby tactics to promote transparency actually ‘produce a resistance of opacity’ (Ball, 2000, p. 3). Fabrication is:

*an escape from the gaze, a strategy of impression management that in effect erects a facade of calculation. [conversely it] requires submission to the rigours of performativity and the disciplines of competition - resistance and capitulation* (Ball, 2000, p. 13)

Hennessy and Mannix McNamara (2013) argue that professionals often find their values challenged and displaced through the pervasive ‘terrors of performativity’ and furthermore, face the dilemma of conformity or rebellion to neoliberal ideologies and agendas often at the expense of meaningful pupil development and engagement. For many professionals, submission prevails in an effort to support pupils’ achievement amidst ever-increasing assessment and testing (Greene, 2005; McNess, Broadfoot and Osborn, 2003). It is contended that the discourse of professionalism constructs teachers as committed to self-improvement while embedding a ‘mentality of self-regulation’ in which the teachers ‘become the mechanism for legitimising the surveillance, marketisation and codification of their work practices’ (Hill, 2004, p. 512). Given the demands on professionals continually striving to achieve targets within audit cultures, they are often pressured into setting aside their personal beliefs and values (Perryman *et al.*, 2011) in a ‘corrosion of character’ (Sennett, 1998). Ball (2013, p. 140) summarises:

*Those who “under-perform” are subject to moral approbation and the tyranny of “little fears”. Systems designed to “support” or encourage those who are unable to “keep up” continuously teeter on the brink of moral regulation. The force and brute logic of performance and its “modest and omniscient” (Rose, 1996, p. 54) practices are hard to avoid. To do so, in one sense at least, means letting ourselves down, in terms of the logic of performance, and letting down our colleagues and our institution.*

## **2.10 Assessment: Decision level**

This section considers the decision level of assessment which concerns ‘the use of an assessment judgement, the decision, action or process which it enables’ (Newton, 2007, p. 150). There are multiple complexities surrounding assessment at the decision level, particularly when it is taken as an objective representation of learning (Birmingham, 2021). Scharaschkin (2017) describes assessment as a measurement of something which exists independently of the context in which it occurs. Judgements in this context therefore, as previously outlined, are made in relation to pupils’ progress and their associated levels of ability, teacher performance and the overall quality of education provided by a setting.

Assessment has become a discourse strategically used at decision level by stakeholders, leadership and management to hold settings and professionals to account (Birmingham, 2021). Whilst assessments and associated decision making should serve the improvement of the teaching and learning process, putting pupils at the centre, decisions resulting from assessment judgements are often divorced from this core purpose (Parliament UK, 2008). The inappropriate use of assessment judgements in decision making was, in part, the rationale provided for the removal of attainment levels reported by DfE (2015). Although curriculum attainment levels have been eradicated, literature indicates that many issues remain albeit under new regimes of truth surrounding assessment. Alderton and Pratt (2019, p. 590) consider the ways in which professionals have formed new assessment ‘truths’ following the removal of levels, noting that the continued presence and pressure of accountability post-levels has increased performance pressures and resulted in a reconstructed understanding of assessment:

*[As] largely validated through testing and normalised – to define what is (ir)relevant, (in)essential and central/marginal to schools' practice [ ] This provides teachers with a (reconstructed) discourse of control, allowing them to participate again in taking responsibility for pupils' learning and to merit their performance as teachers.*

Tensions exist in the assessment literature, particularly around the inappropriate use of assessment judgements to inform decision making in relation to performance management cycles or appraisal which ultimately determine how well teachers teach, linking them to performance related pay and progression (NASUWT, 2016). In a small-scale study, Pratt (2016) investigated the effect of policy changes on assessment practices within English mainstream primary schools and the subsequent impact on relationships between pupils and teachers in a marketised education system. A key consideration was the link between 'teachers' professional and financial rewards to outcomes' (Pratt, 2016, p. 898). The marketisation and commodification of education has led to performative and responsibilised professionals having a financial stake in their practice due to performance related pay (Ball, 2003). The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2023) contends that performance related pay creates a direct link between professionals and the performance of their pupils, thus improving pupil outcomes. Furthermore, the EEF (2023) states that distinctions can be draw between:

*Awards, where improved performance leads to a higher permanent salary, and payment by results, where teachers get a bonus for higher test scores in a particular school year. Approaches also differ in how performance is measured and how closely those measures are linked to outcomes for learners. In some schemes, students' test outcomes are the sole factor used to determine performance pay awards. In others, performance judgements can also include information from lesson observations or feedback from pupils, or be left to the discretion of the headteacher.*

Seemingly, only learning that can be objectified through numerical assessment and testing is valued. This leads one to question the autonomy of schools in creating systems of assessment as performance regulation measures privilege settings who maximise test and assessment

output (Wilkins, 2015; Birmingham, 2021). The logics of performance rationalise teaching to the test for the improvement of quantitative assessment output. For Foucault, technologies of the self, alongside technologies of domination, produce effects that constitute the self, both defining the individual and controlling their conduct (Foucault, 1982a; Martin, Gutman and Hutton, 1988). These technologies produce useful, docile and practical citizens for the state (Foucault, 1982a), in this instance professionals who orient their practice around performance, particularly in relation to assessment measures. Ball and Olmedo (2013, p. 88) crystallise this reorientation of individuals:

*Neoliberalism requires and enacts a 'new type of individual', that is a 'new type of teacher and head teacher' formed within the logic of competition. The apparatuses of neoliberalism are seductive, enthralling and overbearingly necessary. It is a 'new' moral system that sub-verts and re-orient us to its truths and ends.*

This new moral system responsabilises professionals for their performance and the performance of others; those in the system are burdened with the responsibility to perform or risk being seen as irresponsible. This reiterates tensions between belief and representation (Ball, 2003) within the judgement, decision and impact levels of assessment. Professionals are concerned that their actions '[on one hand] will not be captured by or valued within the metrics of accountability and, on the other, that these metrics will distort their practice' (Ball, 2003, p. 223). Assessment output is prioritised over beliefs which are part of a discourse which has been displaced (Ball, 2003). The types of knowledge held in beliefs have become 'inadequate to their task' and 'disqualified knowledges' (Foucault, 1980b, pp. 81-82). Performativity regimes require professionals to alter their beliefs and principles so that they come to believe in the new truths they create (Pratt and Alderton, 2019).

Given the use of assessment judgements at decision level and the subsequent actions and processes which they enable, the validity of these assessments must be considered, particularly in regimes governed by numbers (Rose and Miller, 1992). In this instance, the ability of an assessment activity to measure a pupil's knowledge, skill and understanding is key; validity therefore refers to the 'degree to which a test measures what it claims, or purports, to be measuring' (Brown, 1996, p. 231). The validity of an assessment is not necessarily dependent

on the system that the professional uses but more so on the professional's interpretation of an assessment outcome that is measured through the system or procedure (Cronbach, 1971). Given the multitude of technologies influencing a professional's assessment judgement, the validity must be called into question. These assessments generate data at individual, class and whole school levels used for a variety of purposes. Subsequent decisions, based on assessment data, concerning pupils and professionals may be potentially distorted, thus compromising the processes and actions at decision level. Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017, p. 945), in considering assessment inaccuracies, acknowledge the problem of 'tactical game-playing' whereby pupils' earlier scores, such as baselines, are deliberately reduced to ensure more progress. As Sellar (2015, p. 131) states:

*[Professionals'] use of student performance data for accountability purposes, which requires that data have the capacity to change perceptions about school and teacher performance and, in turn, to change leadership and teaching practices through systems of reward and sanction.*

Considering decisions based on performance data, Page (2018) identifies the surveillance of teachers as professional sorting, highlighting those posing a risk to child welfare, exam results and inspections. This is achieved through the creation of normalised visibility in which teachers under continual surveillance, are 'broken down into abstracted data and reassembled as data doubles, more easily categorised and sorted' (Page, 2018, p. 378). The Standards and Testing Agency (2015) argues that rather than focusing on assessment practices heavily reliant on numerical data collection, schools should focus on the day to day formative practices to enhance the teaching and learning process; however, there is a strong evidence within the literature that this is not the case.

It is worth summarising that, although not extensively covered due to the limitations of space, there are several agencies and agents who use judgements at the decision level. Of course, for pupils, their performance in assessments and subsequent judgements from professionals ultimately enable decisions related to educational progression pre and post-16, qualification pathways, grading and predicted grading, target setting, intervention, class ability setting and the shaping of future teaching. Further decisions enabled by assessment judgements may

involve professionals working in education settings, for example, in meetings and appraisals, promotion, pay progression and performance review. Higher level decisions by stakeholders such as Ofsted, the Regional Schools Commissioner and DfE may include, but are not limited to, school closure, special measures, re-brokerage to another academy trust and repeat inspection.

## **2.11 Assessment: Impact level**

This section will consider the impact level of assessment which concerns ‘the intended impacts of running an assessment system’ (Newton, 2007, p. 150). The impact of assessment is far reaching and has many intended and unintended impacts. As highlighted previously, the performance of pupils is a key issue related to assessment given the focus on outcomes (particularly those from formal qualifications such as GCSE and A-Levels) and, for many schools, league table positions. Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) suggest that, due to the logic of market incentives, schools can be selective about their pupils as those who achieve better assessment outcomes are often less costly to teach, easier to manage and enable the school greater control over league table positioning and outcome data. In contrast, pupils who negatively impact the performance or reputation of the school are de-selected or excluded; hence, increases in pupil exclusions, particularly those in years 10 and 11 (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; Office for National Statistics, 2023). Resultantly, many pupils will, as previously highlighted, arrive in AP due to exclusion from mainstream school. Pupils remaining in mainstream schooling often receive an education largely orientated towards teaching to the test in order to increase outcomes (Zakharov and Carnoy, 2021).

Although it is the intention of assessments to measure and report the outcomes of education, their impact has exerted a controlling influence over school intake and curriculum and, through the processes of selection and certification, operate as an intermediary between education and the economy (Torrance, 2007). Competition has intensified due to the growing demands of performance on schools, furthering the individualisation of responsibility for educational success and failure; pupils and teachers are responsibilised in a landscape where the quality of education is dominated by grades (Torrance, 2007). Ball and Olmedo (2013, p. 91) state ‘results are prioritised over processes, numbers over experiences, procedures over ideas, productivity over creativity’; ‘value displaces values’ (Peters, 2001, p. 17).



Pratt and Alderton's (2019) research considered the removal of levels and subsequent reorganisation of assessment truths in English primary schools and found that truths constructed around assessment enabled professionals to 'participate again in taking responsibility for pupils' learning and to merit their performance as teachers [affording] the opportunity to take responsibility' but also imposing 'on teachers a form of responsibilities' (p. 17). These authors question whether the new language of levels better supported teaching and learning as this was, in part, the rationale for the removal of levels (Department for Education, 2015). The intended impact of removing levels was that new systems would enable assessment to be more formatively focused, however, Pratt and Alderton (2019, p. 594) provide evidence to the contrary:

*These are strategic practices, making pupils ever more intelligible by differentiating them into groups to manipulate the grid – literally, on a spreadsheet of intelligibility. Such practices have been reported elsewhere as a means of producing progress (Ingram et al. 2018) which, in turn, produces the conditions for competition between teachers (Pratt 2016a; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Pratt 2016b) and pupils (Keddie 2016).*

Seemingly, the impact of removing levels is not as the DfE intended; the Teacher Workload Review Group (TWRG) (2016, p. 7) argues that 'schools should not feel pressure to create elaborate tracking systems or work at grade approaches', however, there are numerous pressures on schools around accountability and reporting to various stakeholders. The TWRG (2016) highlight that many schools have since introduced new assessment reporting systems mimicking levels, attempting to overlay a new system onto the one previous. This has resulted in unnecessary data burdens. Qualitative research from Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017) (2017) considers the prioritisation of quantitative data collection in practice by leadership teams and teachers across England to show continual progress made by children. Assessment and its related data have 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 terms of value added' (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017, p. 944).

Assessment practices, replacing levels, that emphasise quantitative data maintain the datafication of education within English schools whereby ‘practices, values and subjectivities shift towards a focus on the production and analysis of data, most often related to assessments’ (Bradbury, 2019, p. 7). Datafication assumes that objective, valid data can be collected in schools and provides a reliable method of assessing the quality of education (Bradbury, 2019). The impact of datafication is now widespread and, perhaps, most pronounced for children who are reproduced as a ‘data double’, stripping them of all complexity and rendering them visible through an extracted and distilled version of themselves (Bradbury, 2019, p. 10). As part of the reforms to AP, datafication plays a central role in measuring outcomes for children in their data form and, alongside contributing to accountability cycles and inspection regimes, data assists in evidencing value for money for the taxpayer within AP (Department for Education, 2018a; Department for Education, 2018b).

Research from the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT, 2014) on the impact level highlights that professionals using levels to report on attainment have an adequate grasp of their meaning, however, the DfE (2015) identified a lack of clarity concerning levels amongst education professionals, pupils and parents. By eradicating levels, the government has removed the common language of assessment (NAHT, 2014). Previously, using the levels system, professionals could communicate pupils’ attainment and provide a standardised description related to their learning to external institutions and stakeholders. Given that there could be as many assessment systems as there are schools, the new language of assessment has proven to be a challenge, and one which extends to initial teacher education providers in delivering assessment training to trainees. This is a concern since the Standards and Testing Agency (2015, p. 8) highlights that assessment is a weakness within programmes and that throughout teacher training it is ‘necessary to improve teachers’ understanding and use of assessment and to ensure we achieve the highest standards of educational practice to compete with the most successful educational jurisdictions around the world’. The impact of changes to assessment policy has been felt at all levels.

## **2.12 Conclusion**

In conclusion, this section has provided an overview of the key literature in relation to the areas of AP and assessment. Considering the research questions for this thesis, it is clear that, whilst

research has addressed the effect of markets and commodification on education at a systemic level (Alderton and Pratt, 2022), there is limited research addressing how assessment logics of practice are formed within the landscape of commodification, particularly within an AP setting. Closely related research from Pratt and Alderton (2019) analysed how teachers reconstructed the truth of assessment; however, the proposed research intends to focus not on objective truths of assessment but on how assessment-related logics of practice (unpacked in chapter 3) develop, where they come from and how they ‘come to count’ (Foucault, 1980b). Pratt and Alderton (2022) consider logics of practice but do so in the context of primary education in specific relation to assessment software.

The contribution to knowledge and originality of the proposed research relates, in part, to its context, namely, AP given the limited assessment-related research within this sector. Within this context, the Department for Education (2018) has stated there is a need to build an evidence base for teaching, learning and assessment. Additionally, there is limited research surrounding the commodification of AP, particularly in terms of the buying and selling of packages, and the assessment-related logics of practice that are formed within this landscape. Therefore, this research demonstrates the potential to address a gap within the literature.

## Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

Within this chapter, I will draw upon the work of Mitchell Dean (2010) and Paul Newton (2007) in providing the theoretical frameworks for this research. Whilst this chapter is short, its purpose is to make explicit to the theoretical frameworks which will be used in the analysis of assessment logics.

### 3.1 An analytics of government

Dean (2010, p. 30) introduces an analytics of government which he explains is,

*a type of study concerned with an analysis of the specific conditions under which particular entities emerge, exist and change... [and furthermore,] examines the conditions under which regimes of practices come into being, are maintained and are transformed.*

To provide further clarity, Dean (2010) highlights that regimes of practices are ‘the organized practices through which we are governed and through which we govern ourselves’ (p. 28). In applying an analytics of government to the research related to the logics of assessment practice within this thesis I attempt to show how professionals’ ‘taken-for-granted ways of doing things and how we think about and question them are not entirely self-evident or necessary’ (p. 31). Dean summarises that an analytics of regimes of practices,

*seeks to identify the emergence of that regime, examine the multiple sources of the elements that constitute it, and follow the diverse processes and relations by which these elements are assembled into relatively stable forms of organization and institutional practice. It examines how such a regime gives rise to and depends upon particular forms of knowledge and how, as a consequence of this, it becomes the target of various programmes of reform and change. It considers how this regime has a technical or technological dimension and analyses the characteristic techniques, instrumentalities and*

*mechanisms through which such practices operate, by which they attempt to realize their goals, and through which they have a range of effects. (p. 31)*

Within this research I address the assessment related logics of practice at a SWMAT and how these are formed. In considering logics, an analytics of government will,

*seek to constitute the intrinsic logic or strategy of a regime of practices that cannot be simply read off particular programmes, theories and policies of reform. The strategic logic of a regime of practices can only be constructed through understanding its operation as an intentional but non-subjective assemblage of all its elements (Gordon, 1980). That is to say that regimes of practices possess a logic that is irreducible to the explicit intentions of any one actor but yet evinces an orientation toward a particular matrix of ends and purposes. (p. 32)*

Simplifying the concepts above into a framework, Dean (2010) explains that an analytics of government is concerned with ‘how we govern and are governed and are governed within different regimes, and the conditions under which such regimes emerge, continue to operate, and are transformed’ (p. 33). As such Dean (2010, p. 33) distinguishes four dimensions of an analytics of government which are utilised with this research:

1. The forms of visibility concerning ways of seeing and perceiving illuminating certain objects whilst obscuring others.
2. The technical aspect of government is concerned with the means, mechanisms, procedures, instruments, tactics, techniques, technologies and vocabularies by which authority is constituted and rule accomplished.
3. The forms of knowledge that arise from and inform the activity of governing concerned with the forms of thought, knowledge, expertise, strategies, means of calculation and rationality employed in practices of governing.
4. The forms of individual and collective identity concerned with the forms of person, self and identity are presupposed by different practices of government and the transformation sought by these practices. This dimension is also concerned with the statuses, capacities, attributes and orientations assumed by those who exercise authority and those who are to be governed.

### 3.2 Logics of practice

To inform the research, a working definition of logics of practice is briefly considered in this section along with its theoretical underpinning. It should be acknowledged that an understanding of logics of practice is dependent on the author's theoretical interpretation. The theoretical framework used within this research draws on Foucault's concept of governmentality (see Foucault 1978 and 1979), as interpreted by Dean (2010). As discussed above, Dean (2010, p. 28) proposes an 'analytics of government' for examining 'regimes of practices', that is, 'organized practices through which we are governed and through which we govern ourselves'. Through an analysis of these regimes of practice, 'one seeks to discover the logic of such practices' (Dean, 2010, p. 41). Pratt and Alderton (2022, p. 503) also consider logics of practice within their research, explaining that care is needed with the term logic; here, it implies 'some directions of thought [that] seem to flow more easily, affording rather than constraining, certain actions over others'.

From a Foucauldian perspective, the notion of governmentality considers the ways in which the discourses of social practice make it reasonable to act in certain ways. Foucault questions how discourses have created and shaped meaning systems that have gained the status and currency of truth (Foucault, 1980a). For Weedon (1987, p. 108), discourse refers to:

*ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern.*

It is this concept of governmentality, within which discourses of social practice render actions reasonable, that assists in conceptualising a logic of practice. This research does not concern itself with the objective reality of what is true; instead, it seeks to question how discourses have shaped meaning systems, that is, how things 'come to count' as true (Foucault, 1980a). For teachers and professionals, there appears to be a natural flow to practice or logical ways of acting or practising within educational settings, hence, the term logics of practice (Alderton and Pratt, 2022). Within this research, therefore, a logic of practice is concerned with how what

is considered true comes into existence and how this then forms part of the logic of practices in which professionals are involved in educational settings. Through a similar theoretical lens to the proposed research, Pratt and Alderton (2022, p. 503) consider the use of assessment software and how ‘primary teachers, teaching and learning, and school mathematics [are] produced and governed within a logic of practice’.

### **3.3 Levels of assessment**

Alongside the framework outlined above, the analysis within this research is also informed by Newton’s (2007) levels of assessment which are comprised of the judgement, decision and impact level. Whilst these levels of assessment were introduced and used to provide structure to assessment research within the previous literature review chapter, the purpose of this section is to bring together the detail of Newton’s levels and how these align with Dean’s (2010) four dimensions.

Newton (2007, p. 149) outlines the need for clarity in educational assessment discourse challenging the supposed distinction between ‘formative’ and ‘summative’ assessment arguing ‘that the latter only applies to a kind of assessment result while the former only applies to a kind of use of assessment results’ (see section 2.7). Considering this, Newton (2007, p. 149) identifies two major obstacles to effective communication around assessment, ‘(1) the term ‘assessment purpose’ can be interpreted in a variety of different ways (2) the uses to which assessment results are put are often categorised misleadingly’. Thus, Newton (2007, p. 150) proposes the three levels of assessment which as previously outlined are: the judgement level ‘which concerns the technical aim of an assessment event’; the decision level ‘which concerns the use of an assessment judgement, the decision, action or process which it enables’; and the impact level ‘which concerns the intended impacts of running an assessment system’. Newton argues that each of the three holds their own distinct implications for assessment system design and where the three discrete meanings are not distinguished clearly, the design of systems is likely to be ineffective and policy debate is likely to be unfocused.

Bringing together the theoretical frameworks of Dean and Newton to conduct the analysis provides, in part, the originality of this research. Dean provides a lens to analyse assessment through his four dimensions; the forms of visibility, the technologies, the forms of knowledge

and identities that are constructed related to assessment practice. Of course, these dimensions do not exist in isolation but are interrelated. For example, assessment technologies may provide a mechanism whereby individuals can be made visible; professional knowledge is then applied and identities are constructed. Dean's dimensions interact with and can be overlayed with assessment at each of the three levels. The same can also be said for Newton's levels of assessment. Whilst Newton has deliberately created three distinct levels, in reality they do not exist in isolation, for example assessment judgements are needed to shape professional action at decision level. From a wider perspective at impact level, judgements and the decisions they enable, fit into the 'bigger picture' of assessment whereby accountability might, for example, be a key component. Through the interaction of Newton and Dean's theoretical frameworks, the researcher is provided with a tool to examine logics of practice within the judgement, decision and impact levels of assessment. Both theoretical frameworks are multidimensional and through their interaction, they provide an effective analytical lens which assists in addressing the research questions.



## Chapter 4: Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

Quality research makes clear the underpinning philosophical assumptions (Grix, 2010) and therefore, within this chapter I aim to provide a clear rationale for the approach I use. Methodologies and methods can appear more as a maze than a pathway to structured, orderly research as literature and social science texts often feature confusing and inconsistent use of terminology (Crotty, 2015). Crotty (2015) argues that researchers may often find the same term used in a number of contradictory ways. In order to address this predicament, I use his four elements (outlined below). In relation to the terms used in Crotty's four elements, he suggests that this is not the only defensible way to use the terms, nor of analysing and understanding the research process. Rather he (2015, p. 2) contends:

*It aims to provide researchers with a sense of stability and direction as they go on to do their own building; that is, as they move towards understanding and expounding the research process after their own fashion in forms that suit their particular research purposes.*

The table below details the four elements as proposed by Crotty (2015, pp. 3-5).

**Table 1: Crotty's (2015) Four elements**

Epistemology	Theoretical perspective	Methodology	Methods
The theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology.	The philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria.	The strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular research methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes.	The techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypothesis.

It is noteworthy that ontology, frequently mentioned in research literature, does not feature in the four elements shown in table 1. This was an intentional decision taken by Crotty (2015) who explains that ontology is concerned with ‘what is’ and should it be introduced to the framework, it would exist alongside epistemology which informs the theoretical perspective:

*Each theoretical perspective embodies a certain way of understanding what is (ontology) as well as a certain way of understanding what it means to know (epistemology). Ontological issues and epistemological issues tend to emerge together... writers in research literature have trouble keeping ontology and epistemology apart conceptually. (Crotty, 2015, p. 10)*

## **4.2 Theoretical positioning**

A researcher’s positioning relates to their epistemological and theoretical perspective which enables them to form a particular view of the world. This influences the ways in which it is possible to discover meaning in terms of the logics of assessment practice; it determines what is knowable and how to go about acquiring knowledge (Grix, 2010). Epistemology, concerned with ‘how phenomena come to be known’ (Giacomini, 2010, p. 131), makes explicit ‘the nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope and general basis’ (Hamlyn, 1995, p. 242). Maynard (Maynard and Purvis, 1994, p. 10) explains that ‘epistemology is concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate’. Epistemologies encompass their own variety of assumptions in relation to the nature of the relationship between the subject of the research and the researcher, that is between the ‘knower and the known’ (Hiller, 2016, p. 100). These assumptions are reflected in the remaining elements listed by Crotty, that is the theoretical perspective, methodology and method. This section provides an overview of the two main epistemologies, along with their contrasting theoretical perspectives, justifying the stance adopted within this research.

The first epistemological position to consider is objectivism founded on ‘the notion that truth and meaning reside in their objects independently of any consciousness’ (Crotty, 2015, p. 42). Given that an objectivist epistemology holds that meaningful reality exists separately from the

operation of consciousness, ‘understandings and values are considered to be objectified in the people we are studying and, if we go about it in the right way, we can discover objective truth’ (Crotty, 2015, p. 8). Objectivism emphasises reason as the primary means for knowledge acquisition whereby researchers ground their work in observable, concrete and measurable aspects of reality. Research underpinned by objectivist assumptions reject those which are influenced by subjective interpretations, beliefs or personal biases. Hiller (2016, p. 15) explains:

*An objectivist stance accepts as ontologically true the notion of a singular reality existing independently of humans’ experience of it, and that it is possible to increasingly know this extant reality empirically through the senses (or via measurement devices that substitute for observation). Thus, the meanings of observed objects or phenomena are believed to be in those objects or phenomena; they exist before a researcher intentionally accesses them through observation methods. For instance, from this viewpoint, a tree in a field is a tree, with all of the understandings of what a tree means that goes with it (e.g., wood for fire and furniture, shade, leaves to rake, the provision of a higher viewpoint than from the ground) regardless of whether a human happens upon it or not.*

Aligning with the objectivist epistemology is the theoretical perspective which Crotty (2015, p. 7) describes as the ‘philosophical stance that lies behind our chosen methodology... [explaining] how it provides context for the process and grounds its logic and criteria’. Aligning with the objectivist epistemology is the theoretical perspective termed positivism (including post-positivism which recognises the fallibility of knowledge). This perspective outlines the importance of objectivity as the cornerstone of knowledge. Positivism is held in natural science research and focuses on explanation of cause and effect relationships between inanimate objects (Hiller, 2016). It is based on the rules of logic, measurement, truth, absolute principles and prediction (Halcomb and Andrew, 2005). Newby (2010, p. 34) explains:

*Positivism emphasises the power of evidence and, nowadays especially, is very much associated with the use of quantitative analysis. It works by testing assumptions and a key element in its procedure is the generation of a*

*hypothesis. It assumes that the researcher is a searcher after truth, neutral in the whole process and uninfluenced by social and economic relationships and processes.*

Since the aim of this research was to uncover logics of assessment practice and how these are formed within the landscape of commodification, I concluded that the objectivist epistemology along with its associated positivist theoretical perspective would not be suited to addressing the research question posed within this thesis. In contrast to objectivism is the epistemology termed constructionism which rejects the view that a meaningful reality exists apart from consciousness. Constructionism differs due to its aim of understanding phenomena through interpretive processes which are intended to explain meaning as opposed to explanations of cause and effect identified through observation (Hiller, 2016). From this epistemological position, ‘meanings (and meaning-making processes) that people ascribe to their experiences that are of greatest interest and these are internal processes that are context bound, unpredictable, and independent of natural laws’ (Hiller, 2016, p. 111). Crotty (2015, pp. 8-9) offers the following explanation of constructionism:

*There is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in or world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed. In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon.*

In parallel with the constructionist epistemological position is the interpretivist theoretical perspective. Interpretivism differs significantly from positivism as it encompasses the view that multiple truths and realities exist placing emphasis upon peoples’ understanding and explanation of events (Lowenberg, 1993). These unique understandings and explanations are provided within this perspective through individuals’ differing experiences of the world (Creswell, 2003). The goal of an interpretive theoretical perspective is therefore to understand peoples’ realities and to learn how experiences are interpreted along with the meaning and value attributed to them (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

A constructionist epistemology and interpretive theoretical perspective were deemed the most appropriate for this research due to the alignment of theoretical assumptions with my own position. Following Crotty's four elements, constructionism and interpretivism enable the selection of methodologies and methods which can provide an insight into logics of assessment practice through qualitative data provided by professionals' experiences at the SWMAT. The interpretivist perspective provides opportunity for the voices of professionals to be heard, enabling the construction of meaning related to assessment logics and how these come to count. Professionals within the research provide experiences and understanding through a range of different lenses given the variation in their backgrounds, contextual knowledge, roles and positions held within the SWMAT (Allidina and Cunningham, 2023). The professionals' experiences of assessment led to the construction of meaning through the multiple realities offered by the individual interpretations of practice. Given that the focus of this research was examining the assessment-related logics of practices and how these are formed within the landscape of commodification, the constructionist epistemology and interpretivist theoretical perspective provided an appropriate set of assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge, along with methodologies and methods to assist me in addressing the research questions.

Although this section has considered an alternative epistemological position, objectivism along with its positivist theoretical perspective, I concluded that these would not have been appropriate and are better suited to quantitative research. The notion that there is a fixed objective reality existing outside of human consciousness whereby objective truth can be observed and measured does not align with the assumptions and position of this research and therefore, would be ineffective in addressing the research question. The positivist perspective would not enable the construction of meaning in relation to assessment logics as it does not provide scope for the collection of appropriate data and its subsequent interpretation. The methods employed within this research enabled me as the researcher to become the co-constructor of knowledge as opposed to one that simply receives it (Rallis, 2003).

## **4.3 Methods of data generation**

### **4.3.1 Research setting**

As specified within the introduction, which provides an overview of the research context, the research setting is an alternative provision (AP) school which belongs to a South West Multi Academy Trust (SWMAT). As indicated previously, anonymity will be maintained through removal of specific information which might otherwise compromise the research setting and participants. The eight participants who took part in this research were recruited from the AP school which belongs to the SWMAT.

### **4.3.2 Participants**

Within this research, eight teaching professionals from the SWMAT, all of whom had varying roles and experience, were purposively selected to take part in the interviews. Participants whom I selected to take part in this study were approached in person (where physical distance made this possible). Where it was not possible to speak to the potential participants in a physical meeting, conversations were held over the phone and via email.

The participant sample size of eight was sufficient due to the quality of the data gained from the interviews. Two additional participants who were recruited for the research both unfortunately had to pull out due to long term sickness. Given that notice from both participants was given late during the interview stages, it was not possible to recruit alternative participants due to the impact this would have on me completing the EdD programme in a timely manner. The interviews were conducted during a period of time whereby the UK had not long emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. It is noteworthy that given the pressures on professionals to ‘catch up’ on their own work and ensure pupils could ‘catch up’ of their academic subject content, this had an impact on my ability to recruit for the interviews. Understandably, professionals that were already under pressure needed to prioritise their educational commitments. The interviews that did take place were in depth and provided rich qualitative data, thus enabling me to effectively address the research question.

Through purposive sampling, I selected the participants based on my perception of their ability to provide information rich data which would assist me in addressing my research questions (Patton, 1990). Given that my focus was on the logics of assessment practice and how these are formed within the commodified educational landscape it was central to gain data related the participants' values, beliefs and experiences to illuminate how such logics come to count and are formed. My decisions therefore were deliberate in selecting those who could provide such information ensuring that it was meaningful and purposeful and not based on convenience or availability (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Table 2 provides a summary of participants in the study. All participants names have been anonymised and replaced with pseudonyms and their role has been described in the most generic sense as to help preserve the participants' anonymity.

***Table 2: Participant information***

<b>Participant number</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Role in SWMAT</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Joseph</b>	<b>Core subject teacher</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Rihanna</b>	<b>Core subject teacher</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Michael</b>	<b>Senior Leadership member</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Jacob</b>	<b>Foundation subject teacher</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Peter</b>	<b>Foundation subject teacher and middle leadership member</b>

<b>6</b>	<b>Natasha</b>	<b>Core subject teacher and middle leadership member</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Tom</b>	<b>Core subject teacher and middle leadership member</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Mitchell</b>	<b>Executive member and Ofsted inspector</b>

### **4.3.3 Semi-structured interviews**

As a researcher my interest is in the assessment-related logics of practice and how these are formed within the landscape of commodification. In light of assessment practice, I am not just interested in what professionals do, but rather their interpretation of assessment practice, the meaning attributed to this and therefore how such logics come to count and are formed. To gain an insight into, and investigate, these logics, semi-structured interviews were implemented. Semi-structured interviews represent the sole method of data collection within this particular research and considering the range of methods available to me as a researcher, semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate. At the outset, it is important to understand that within research conducted from a constructionist position, the interviewer's questions and contributions form part of the meaning generated, that is, both the interviewee and interviewer co-construct situated data (Kalekin-Fishman, 2001).

Semi-structured interviews were considered as the most efficient method of data collection in order to gain insight into assessment-related logics of practice through participants' interpretations. Morse and Richards (2002), in considering semi-structured interviews, highlight that through the incorporation of open-ended questioning, participants are provided with time and scope to discuss their knowledge and perception. In relation to the research questions which are constructed with the view of gaining insight into logics of assessment practice, this method enables the researcher to illuminate the existence and extent of issues whilst also stimulating actions and interventions which can lead to policy change (De Vaus,



2002). In gaining an insight into assessment logics, semi-structured interviews allow for the collection of rich qualitative data resulting from a deeper level of interviewee engagement. They simultaneously provide the researcher with flexibility in shaping the direction of the interviews thus greater possibilities for knowledge in the dynamics of conversational exchange (Mangal and Mangal, 2013).

At the outset, I considered conducting interviews with both staff and the pupils at the SWMAT. I made the decision to use staff and not pupils for the interviews due to the usefulness of the data that would be gained through the process. Due to my insider perspective at the SWMAT, I know that the pupils have a limited understanding/awareness of the assessment system and therefore, this would not provide rich data that would assist in addressing the research questions. Additionally, the use of pupils in interviews also presents an ethical issue due to the vulnerability of the population that attend this provision. I felt that building relationships of trust would be compromised by potentially objectifying interviews without any immediate benefit to the pupils. Prior to selecting semi-structured interviews with the staff body, I also considered using focus groups with both staff and pupils. Again, selecting pupils for focus groups presents the issues that I have outlined above. Simultaneously, using focus groups with staff presents further issues due to the sensitivity of the subject area. Staff may not have felt they could talk openly and honestly about the assessment and tracking system in a group of their colleagues for fear of repercussion. Due to the impact this would have on staff and the subsequent data, I decided not to use focus groups. This provides further justification for my choice of method.

When compared with structured interviews which follow a rigid format, semi-structured interviews are flexible by their very nature thus allowing researchers to probe for responses in areas deemed relevant to the study. Through this method, deeper insight and understanding can be gained as to the perceptions' of the individuals (Bell, 2005). In order to gain quality data and therefore insight and understanding, it was important to focus on the design of the semi-structured interviews and their delivery. Considerable attention was paid to the objectives of the interviews and how question design would enable me to address the research questions. Seidman (2013) contends that not only should attention be directed to the interview construction, but also how the interviews are carried out. Therefore prior to commencing on

the semi-structured interviews, pilot interviews were conducted in order to assist me in refining the interview construction and design.

In conducting the interviews with the teaching professionals, I invited them to name their preferred location and time in order to help ensure they were relaxed and comfortable but also to ensure privacy and reduce the risk of interruption. To address issues of power I ensured that I arrived to the interviews dressed casually and during the interviews used ordinary conversational language (Merrill, 2012). Of the eight interviews that were conducted six interviews took place in face-to-face physical meetings at the individuals' specified locations, however due to distance and travel implications, two interviews took place online using Microsoft Teams. The quiet settings used for the interviews encouraged an environment conducive to building rapport and enabling the generation of rich data. The semi-structured interviews were conducted on an individual 1-1 basis, therefore meaning I was able to probe and extend conversation further in drawing out in-depth information from individuals, whereby they were encouraged to elaborate on issues discussed. Within the interviews, I recognised the importance of actively listening to the interviewees, through this I was able to build upon responses and probe with supplementary questions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). The questions I asked within the interviews (see Appendix 4) were predominantly open ended which encouraged free and meaningful responses by individuals; simultaneously these types of questions assist in building rapport (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). In parallel with this and the guidance from Riessman (2008), I initiated the interviews with a broad opening question, 'considering your role, can you tell me what you use the school's assessment system for?' to help establish rapport and encourage participants to take the lead within the conversation. Denscombe (2014) contends that this type open question further harvests rich data which reflects the complexity of the individual's views. At the end of each interview I finished by asking participants if there was any relevant or important information related to assessment that they felt we had missed or would like to add.

It was important to follow a process when setting up the interviews, and I used that suggested by Merrill and West (2009). Permission was granted for the research to take place at the SWMAT by the head teacher. Participants were recruited via purposive sampling (see sample section). Upon giving their consent to take part in the semi-structured interviews, participants were provided with a full brief concerning the nature of the research and their rights as a

participants. They were given the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 2) which provided detailed information about the research which they were required to sign, confirming their consent. At the start of each of the interviews issues from the Participant Information Sheet were clarified and discussed in further detail where necessary. Where interviews were conducted face-to-face, I used a USB Dictaphone to record the voice of both the participant and me. Upon completion of the interviews, transcripts were typed and sent to the respective participants who were requested to look through the transcript and identify any inaccuracies or information that they wanted to be changed or removed. Once participants were satisfied with the transcript, confirmation was sent back via email.

#### **4.4 Methods of analysis**

In selecting the method of analysis, the researcher's epistemological position, theoretical perspective and methods will influence the chosen methods of analysis alongside consideration of the research questions (Crotty, 2015). Following the collection of data through the use of semi-structured interviews, I have selected thematic analysis as my chosen method of analysis. Whilst some literature argues that thematic analysis cannot be classified as a method in its own right, due to it forming the basis of other qualitative methods of analyses (Ryan and Bernard, 2000), Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis can however be classified as a method of analysis in its own right. As a method of analysis, thematic analysis is used to identify, analyse and report on themes within data sets (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is compatible with constructionist paradigms and 'provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 5). In considering what counts as a theme, Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 10) highlight that,

*a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.... the 'keyness' of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures – but in terms of whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question.*

Given that the focus of this research was on gaining insight into and identifying the logics of assessment practice and how these are formed, thematic analysis provides scope to focus on patterns of meaning assisting me to address such research questions. Braun and Clarke (2006) propose a number of considerations related to the selection of thematic analysis in particular whether the method is to be used inductively or deductively. The authors indicate:

*An account of themes 'emerging' or being 'discovered' is a passive account of the process of analysis, and it denies the active role the researcher always plays in identifying patterns/themes, selecting which are of interest, and reporting them to the readers (Taylor & Ussher, 2001).<sup>4</sup> The language of 'themes emerging': Can be misinterpreted to mean that themes 'reside' in the data, and if we just look hard enough they will 'emerge' like Venus on the half shell. If themes 'reside' anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them. (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997: 205-6) . (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 7)*

In considering this 'emergence' from the dataset, themes or patterns are identified in one of two primary ways, inductive analysis or deductive analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Joffe (2011) argues the 'emergence' of themes can occur through deductive analysis whereby theoretical concepts are applied to the research or through inductive analysis whereby the themes emerge from raw data. An inductive approach presents themes that link directly to the data and have not been identified through the application of a theoretical framework or the researcher's pre-existing concepts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The authors indicate that a purely inductive approach cannot be followed due to the fact that researchers are unable to escape personal biases, for example their epistemological position, and are ultimately guided by their research questions. The very nature of this research acknowledges the existence of assessment logics of practice and therefore seeks to uncover these alongside gaining an understanding of how they are formed. This research uses Dean's (2010) an analytics of government and Newton's (2007) levels of assessment as theoretical frameworks. Given the use of the theoretical frameworks and their nature, I argue that the research is positioned further towards deductive analysis than it is inductive. As analysis was conducted towards the deductive end of the continuum, this theoretical approach required prior engagement with the literature. Given

the above, Joffe (2011) argues that a quality analysis will adopt both inductive and deductive positions therefore holding preconceptions of the research whilst simultaneously remaining open to new concepts and themes that may emerge.

Further decision-making considerations within thematic analysis relate to the level at which themes are to be identified; identification of themes may be completed at a semantic level also termed explicit level, or at a latent or interpretive level (Boyatzis, 1998). In order to summarise and interpret the data resulting from the semi-structured interviews, this study utilises a combination of both semantic and latent coding. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 13) summarise:

*Ideally, the analytic process involves a progression from description, where the data have simply been organised to show patterns in semantic content, and summarised, to interpretation, where there is an attempt to theorise the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications (Patton, 1990), often in relation to previous literature (see Frith & Gleeson, 2004, for an excellent example of this). In contrast, a thematic analysis at the latent level goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data.*

The six phases of thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), can be found in the table below alongside their associated guidance. The authors clearly explain that qualitative guidance does not spell out clear rules for the process and will need to be applied flexibly to fit with the research questions around assessment logics (Patton, 1990). The process is not linear but recursive whereby the researcher moves backwards and forwards throughout the phases (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Appendix 5 provides examples of my engagement with the phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) in table 3.

**Table 3: *Phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).***

Phases of thematic analysis	Description
1. Familiarising yourself with your data	Data from the interviews is required to be transcribed into written form to conduct thematic analysis. The researcher immerses themselves in the data to become familiar with the breadth and depth of the content. This might include ‘repeated reading’ in an active way.
2. Generating initial codes	At this stage an initial list of ideas about what is in the data and what is interesting about them is generated. Following this codes are produced which identify a feature of the data that appear interesting and are utilised systematically across the dataset. In this instance coding was completed manually through writing notes and highlighting segments of text from the interview transcripts.
3. Searching for themes	Once all data from the interview transcripts have been coded and collated the result is a list of codes which have been identified across the dataset. This phase involves sorting the codes into potential themes. Essentially, through the analysis of codes one considers how they are combined to form overarching themes. In this instance visual

	representations were used to sort codes in themes.
4. Reviewing themes	At this phase the researcher begins the process of refining the set of candidate themes. Data within the themes should cohere together meaningfully whilst simultaneously a clear and identifiable distinction is visible between themes. Once a thematic map that works has been achieved the researcher moves onto the next phase. 'At the end of this phase, you should have a fairly good idea of what your different themes are, how they fit together, and the overall story they tell about the data' (p. 21).
5. Defining and naming themes	Once a satisfactory thematic map of the interview transcript data has been achieved the final refinements of this map are executed. Themes that are to be presented for the analysis are defined and refined in order to identify the essence of what themes are about and the aspect of data each theme captures. The researcher goes back to the collated data extracted for the individual themes and organises them into coherent and consistent accounts with an accompanying narrative. At this point the researcher will consider names of themes to be used in the final analysis. These should be concise and provide the reader with a sense of what each theme is about.

6. Producing the report	At this stage, once themes have been fully worked out, the researcher completes the final analysis and report write up. The task here is to create the complicated story of the data in a manner which convinces the reader of the validity and merit of the analysis. The write up must provide a logical, concise, coherent and interesting story told by the data. Vivid extracts are selected to capture the essence of the point being demonstrated. Extracts should be embedded within an analytic narrative in relation to addressing the research questions.
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#### 4.5 Quality within the research process

A key question posed by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 290) asked ‘how can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?’ Scholars have since provided insight as to best practice for qualitative research (Creswell, 2003). In addressing issues of quality throughout this research, the ‘eight big-tent criteria for excellent qualitative research’ (Tracy, 2010, p. 837) has provided a framework summarised as an ‘eight point conceptualisation of qualitative quality that is unique, and perhaps provocative, because it delineates eight universal hallmarks for high quality qualitative methods across paradigms’. Tracy and Hinrichs (2017) contend that there are complexities surrounding the contextual work of qualitative research and therefore argue the need for standardised quality criteria. In considering quality, Tracy and Hinrichs (2017, p. 1) highlight:

*Whereas the quantitative community has well-established research aims for validity, reliability, generalizability, and objectivity, the qualitative methodological landscape possesses a large variety of concepts and discussions around quality—and even questions whether we really need criteria at all.*



The ‘big tent’ model proposes standards by which researchers can evaluate, assess and consider qualitative research with a consistent and common understanding (Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017). Although it has been argued that the development of standards for qualitative research are problematic (Guba and Lincoln, 2005), LeGreco and Tracy (2009) believe that a language of best practice provides researchers with a way to frame their work in a structured and systematic manner. Table 4 below provides an overview of the ‘big tent criteria’ (Tracy, 2010).

**Table 4: Overview of the ‘big tent criteria’ (Tracy, 2010)**

**Table 1.** Eight “Big-Tent” Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research

Criteria for quality (end goal)	Various means, practices, and methods through which to achieve
Worthy topic	The topic of the research is <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevant</li> <li>• Timely</li> <li>• Significant</li> <li>• Interesting</li> </ul>
Rich rigor	The study uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theoretical constructs</li> <li>• Data and time in the field</li> <li>• Sample(s)</li> <li>• Context(s)</li> <li>• Data collection and analysis processes</li> </ul>
Sincerity	The study is characterized by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s)</li> <li>• Transparency about the methods and challenges</li> </ul>
Credibility	The research is marked by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (nontextual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling</li> <li>• Triangulation or crystallization</li> <li>• Multivocality</li> <li>• Member reflections</li> </ul>
Resonance	The research influences, affects, or moves particular readers or a variety of audiences through <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aesthetic, evocative representation</li> <li>• Naturalistic generalizations</li> <li>• Transferable findings</li> </ul>
Significant contribution	The research provides a significant contribution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conceptually/theoretically</li> <li>• Practically</li> <li>• Morally</li> <li>• Methodologically</li> <li>• Heuristically</li> </ul>
Ethical	The research considers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Procedural ethics (such as human subjects)</li> <li>• Situational and culturally specific ethics</li> <li>• Relational ethics</li> <li>• Exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing the research)</li> </ul>
Meaningful coherence	The study <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achieves what it purports to be about</li> <li>• Uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals</li> <li>• Meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/foci, findings, and interpretations with each other</li> </ul>

#### **4.5.1 Worthy topic**

Good qualitative research, ‘is relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or evocative... however, worthy topics just as easily grow from timely societal or personal events’ (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). Research that lacks significance or personal meaning ‘likely to be pursued in a shallow way, with less care devoted to design and data collection’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 290). Justification for this research around its relevance and significance is made explicit throughout the thesis. It contributes to, and assists in filling, knowledge gaps of assessment in AP through the lens of commodification. The research is timely due to the current reforms and political changes surrounding AP which increase performative pressures and therefore, I believe, the research provides an interesting analysis of assessment logics and how these come to count. The research has personal meaning to me as my motivation to enrol on the EdD course centred around the issues and questions I have about current systems of assessment I use within my practice.

#### **4.5.2 Rich rigour**

Qualitative research considered to be high quality is marked by a rich complexity of abundance when compared to its quantitative counterpart which is appreciated for its precision (Winter, 2000). It must be rigorous. I have made every attempt to ensure descriptions and explanations throughout this research are rich and bountifully supplied (Weick, 2007). The research further provides detail about the methodological craft skills and processes that were followed (Tracy, 2010). To assist the researcher in evidencing their due diligence, effort, care and thoroughness, Tracey (2010, p. 841) poses the following questions about rigour to which I have recorded responses to address these in light of my research:

- Are there enough data to support significant claims?

Although the sample size within this research is small in comparison to similar studies, the data is new, unique and rare therefore I argue I have achieved a valuable contribution with data that is limited in number, but rich in detail (Tracy, 2010; Ann Scarduzio and Geist-Martin, 2008). Through the use of purposive sampling I was able to choose interview participants who provided me with unique data related to assessment logics within AP that enables the research to make a valuable contribution.

- Did the researcher spend enough time to gather interesting and significant data? Is the context or sample appropriate given the goals of the study?

As Tracey (2010) suggests, there is no set, or magic, amount of time that a researcher should spend in the field. The more important consideration is whether data will substantiate meaningful and significant claims, in this instance addressing the research question. Prior to this research, I spent 2 years of the EdD programme studying assessment in the context of AP producing a total of four essays related to the topic. A further three years of the EdD programme were spent in the field in a research capacity, however I had spent a total of 10 years in the research setting working closely with professionals. In this sense, the experience I have gained constitutes a dataset, albeit one that is internalised rather than primary data. This has enabled me to filter the primary data through my experience to ensure the claims are trustworthy in a professional sense.

- Did the researcher use appropriate procedures in terms of field note style, interviewing practices, and analysis procedures?

The interviews conducted within this research demonstrate rigour in terms of the processes and procedures that were followed. Although specific details related to the interviews have been provided previously, I can briefly comment on a number of factors as described by Tracy (2010). I demonstrated rigour through quality of the interviews I conducted as I spent a great deal of time designing effective questions and ensuring these were trialled and refined through pilot interviews. The breadth of the interview sample was appropriate in addressing the research question as it included teaching professionals who held a multitude of roles at a SWMAT. Demonstrations of rigour throughout the transcription process can be seen in the accuracy of the transcripts and the resultant number of pages. The data analysis itself followed a rigorous thematic analysis process as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006) (see above).

#### **4.5.3 Sincerity**

Tracy (2010, p. 841) understands sincerity to mean that research ‘is marked by honesty and transparency about the researcher’s biases, goals, and foibles as well as about how these played a role in the methods, joys, and mistakes of the research’. At the centre of sincerity is self-reflexivity which is:

*considered to be honesty and authenticity with one's self, one's research, and one's audience... researchers can practice self-reflexivity even before stepping into the field through being introspective, assessing their own biases and motivations, and asking whether they are well-suited to examine their chosen sites or topics at this time... Questions to ask include 'Why am I doing this study?' 'Why now?' 'Am I ready for this?' (Tracy, 2010, p. 842).*

Within this research I have been clear about my personal views, biases and motivations around the area of assessment. My initial engagement with the EdD programme stemmed from a viewpoint that assessment at the AP schools doesn't serve the staff and pupils as I believe it should and therefore, in this research, I ask questions about logics of practice and how these come to count. As well as a declaration of my positionality within the research and outlining my professional perspective of assessment, I dedicate a section of the analysis terming it researcher's perspective. I believe this adds to the richness of the data and further crystallises my position. In light of transparency, which refers to honesty about the research process (Tracy, 2010), the thesis provides 'a methodologically self-critical account of how the research was done' (Seale, 1999, p. 468) and further provides an audit trail which details 'clear documentation of all research decisions and activities' (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 128).

#### **4.5.4 Credibility**

Where credibility within quantitative research is earned through accuracy, consistency, reliability and replicability (Golafshani, 2003), 'Qualitative credibility is instead achieved through practices including thick description, triangulation or crystallization, and multivocality and partiality' (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). Throughout the thesis, I provide thick description which accounts for the complex circumstantiality and specificity of my data (Geertz, 1973). At all levels I aim to provide enough detail so that readers may draw their own conclusions. Tracy (2010, p. 843) explains that 'showing is rhetorically more difficult and usually requires more words than telling'.

This research used multiple data sources, examining similar research in the field through contrasting methods and similar theoretical lenses. Comparison and contrast is drawn between

data sources in chapters 4 and 5. Crystallisation ‘encourages researchers to gather multiple types of data and employ various methods, multiple researchers, and numerous theoretical frameworks’ (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). As I have previously highlighted this research reflects multiple data types, methods, researchers and draws upon theoretical frameworks such as Dean (2010) and Newton (2007). The inclusion of multiple, varied voices throughout the analysis illustrates the multivocality of the research.

#### **4.5.5 Resonance**

In considering resonance, Tracy (2010, p. 844) uses the term:

*to refer to research’s ability to meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience. Even the best written report is unable to provide direct insight into the lived experiences of others (Schutz, 1967). However, researchers can engage in practices that will promote empathy, identification, and reverberation of the research by readers who have no direct experience with the topic discussed. The potential of research to transform the emotional dispositions of people and promote greater mutual regard has been termed ‘empathic validity’ by Dadds (2008). Resonance can be achieved through aesthetic merit, evocative writing, and formal generalizations as well as transferability.*

In considering the aesthetic merit, I tried to ensure that my writing is presented in an evocative and artistic way whilst significantly intertwined with its content (Tracy, 2010). Within my writing I also carefully considered the qualitative narrative ensuring it was creative, engaging, vivid and structurally complex (Bochner, 2000). I actively sought feedback during the writing stages as to how my writing made the reader think and feel. Transferability and naturalistic generalizations refer to the potential of the research to be valuable across a variety of situations and contexts; ‘qualitative research engages in-depth studies that generally produce historically and culturally situated knowledge’ (Tracy, 2010, p. 845). Tracy (2010) further argues that understandings of transferability and generalisability from quantitative research, in general, are unhelpful as they are not applicable to qualitative research. To address the issue of

transferability in my research I needed to ensure I made the reader ‘feel as though the story of the research overlaps with their own situation and they intuitively transfer the research to their own action’ (Tracy, 2010, p. 845) which, as Tracy (2010) suggests, I did through the mechanisms of providing rich description, trying to write accessibly and invitationally and through gathering direct testimony. Finally, Stake and Trumbell (1982) argue that naturalistic generalisations lead to resonance, that is the feeling of personal knowing leading to improved practice. Therefore in line with this, throughout my writing I attempt to provide the reader with a vicarious experience so as to make the ‘readers make choices based on their own intuitive understanding of the scene, rather than feeling as though the research report is instructing them what to do’ (Tracy, 2010, p. 845).

#### **4.5.6 Significant contribution**

Tracy (2010, pp. 845-846) succinctly details issues surrounding the significant contribution of the research,

*researchers gauge the current climate of knowledge, practice, and politics, and ask questions such as ‘Does the study extend knowledge?’ ‘Improve practice?’ ‘Generate ongoing research?’ ‘Liberate or empower?’ The answers to these questions point to the ways in which the research will ‘contribute to our understanding of social life’ (Richardson, 2000a, p. 254), ‘bring clarity to confusion, make visible what is hidden or inappropriately ignored, and generate a sense of insight and deepened understanding’ (Tracy, 1995, p. 209).*

This thesis considers the significant contribution made by the research to knowledge and makes this explicit in both the introduction and concluding remarks and implications chapters.

#### 4.5.7 Ethical

In addressing ethical considerations Tracy (2010, pp. 846-847) understands ethics not merely as a means,

*but rather constitute a universal end goal of qualitative quality itself, despite paradigm... Just as multiple paths lead to credibility, resonance, and other markers of qualitative quality, a variety of practices attend to ethics in qualitative research, including procedural, situational, relational, and exiting ethics.*

Ethical considerations are central to all research conducted and therefore it was of paramount importance to ensure that these were taken seriously with the appropriate policies, procedures and guidelines followed by myself as a researcher. The British Educational Research Association's (BERA) (2018) 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research' informed my ethics application (Appendix 3) which provides detail surrounding the associated ethical considerations for my research. Following the submission of the ethics application to Plymouth University's ethics board, full ethical approval was granted for my research. All participants that were recruited for the interview were fully briefed and provided with Participant Information Sheets (Appendix 2) which they were required to sign to provide their consent prior to undertaking the interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were made explicit as part of the ethical application. Measures such as the use of pseudonyms were put in place to address issues of anonymity and confidentiality with further measures taken to protect participants by anonymising the research setting as well as the specific sites and systems that are referred to throughout the interviews. It must be acknowledged however, that colleagues close to the participants within this research may be able to identify them through particular phrases or comments. This information was included in the participant brief. As a professional who is employed within the research setting I acknowledge that being a researcher and an employee may impact upon the interviews as participants would potentially be more open with me due to my role. However, it may also have had the opposite effect whereby participants would become less forthcoming and open as they may feel information they provide could in some way compromise them. This was discussed during the participant brief and I assured each of them that the discussion within the interviews would remain confidential and that their identity would be anonymised.

#### **4.5.8 Meaningful coherence**

The final component outlined in the ‘big tent criteria’ is meaningful coherence. Tracy (2010, p. 848) details,

*Meaningfully coherent studies (a) achieve their stated purpose; (b) accomplish what they espouse to be about; (c) use methods and representation practices that partner well with espoused theories and paradigms; and (d) attentively interconnect literature reviewed with research foci, methods, and findings.*

This thesis has made clear, from the outset, the research questions which it has sought to address. Throughout the thesis my writing refers back to these questions and details at each stage how the chapters contribute to addressing them. The research has been carefully designed and evaluated at each stage so that it achieves its stated purpose which relates directly to the logics of assessment practice at a SWMAT and how these logics are formed in the landscape of commodification. Particular focus was given to the research questions and their associated knowledge, which formed the basis of the literature review structure. Within this I addressed research literature which was both meaningful and coherent with my specified research questions and aims. The detail resulting from the literature review was meaningfully connected to the data within my both analysis and discussion chapters enabling me to achieve my overarching aims. Furthermore, within the methodology I have explained and justified my epistemological position, theoretical perspective and methods providing detail about how these have helped me address the aims and questions posed.

#### **4.6 Summary**

In summary this section has outlined my epistemological position, theoretical perspective, methods of data generation, methods of analysis and has addressed issues surrounding research quality, including ethical considerations. The following chapter provides an analysis of the data resulting from the interviews with participants.



## Chapter 5: Analysis

### 5.1 Introduction

Within the 2021/2022 academic year, eight semi-structured interviews were carried out with staff from the AP schools (comprised of multiple sites) within the SWMAT to gain access to their understanding of the logics related to assessment practice and how these logics are formed within the commodified educational landscape. As discussed in the previous chapter, the richness of the data gained from the interviews provides the foundation for the analysis. At this point I would like to make it explicit to the reader that my own ‘insider’ view, and the way I have reflected on what people said, forms part of the data. At the end of this analysis chapter I add a specific section tilted ‘researcher perspective’. This research took place approximately ten years after legislation from the Department for Education (2014) instructing the removal of national curriculum levels. As a reminder to the reader, the research questions were as follows:

- *RQ1 What are the assessment-related logics of practice at a South West Multi-Academy Trust?*
- *RQ2 How are these logics of practice formed within the educational landscape of commodification?*

Through analysis of the identified themes, this chapter will primarily address RQ1 and provide an insight into the assessment-related logics of practice while the subsequent chapter will address RQ2 which asks how the logics are formed in the commodified landscape. To guide the analysis, this chapter draws on Dean’s (2010) analytics of government and his four dimensions outlined below:

- Forms of visibility: ways of seeing and perceiving.
- Technical aspects of government: the means, mechanisms, procedures, instruments, techniques, technologies, and vocabularies through which authority is constituted and rules accomplished.
- Forms of knowledge that arise from and inform the activity of governing: the forms of thought, knowledge, expertise, strategies, means of calculation or rationality that are employed in practices of governing.

- Forms of individual and collective identity: the forms of person, self and identity that are presupposed by different practices of government.

The analysis also benefits from Newton's (2007) three levels relating to the purpose of assessment as outlined earlier in the literature review. The three levels outlined by Newton (2007) are as follows:

- The judgement level whereby a system of assessment is used by professionals to determine the pupil's level of attainment (e.g., a grading system, test or formal examination).
- The decision level concerning the use of an assessment judgement (the process, action or decision which it enables).
- The intended impact level of the assessment system.

Through a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, themes have been identified, providing the structure for this chapter. The three themes are: progress; accountability; and commonality of understanding. The final section will include the researcher's perspective. At this point I, once again, take the opportunity to remind the reader that whilst the research is based within the AP school, which is a school belonging to the SWMAT, I refer to the research setting as the SWMAT.

## 5.2 Theme 1: Progress

Following Newton's (2007) levels of assessment, this section of the data analysis begins with consideration of the judgement level which, as previously specified, relates directly to the system of assessment used to determine a pupil's level of attainment. Based on professionals' responses in the interviews, an overview of the assessment system judgement level can be given. Following the 2014 legislation from the DfE which removed national curriculum levels, the SWMAT involved in this research project responded by creating a new assessment policy incorporating a subject tracking system based on an assessment points number line. Where the previous levels system ranged from levels 1-8, the subsequent assessment points number line ranges from 1-242 and is mapped against the previous curriculum levels, the GCSE and A-Level grading systems and key developmental stages including P-levels (See Appendix 1). Expected progress across the academic year for pupils, except those on reduced flight paths, is 12 points of progress across 3 tracking points (4 points of progress per term). Michael (senior leadership member) summarises:

*...essentially our academic assessment system is used to measure the progress across our academic subjects, three times a year. All of the subjects have a baseline, so we have a start point measure and then we have expected progress that pupils should make each term... Input that into our data management system and then we run a report to say X percentage of pupils are at or making expected progress or exceeding expected progress. Then the real trick for us, and actually one of the things I'm not convinced we've got right yet, is what do we do when we identify somebody that hasn't made those four points of progress?*

This response from Michael aligns directly with Ball's (2003) argument that the nature of a culture of performativity is a mode of regulation through which judgement and comparison occur with performance serving as the measure of output and productivity. Understood through Dean's (2010) analytics of government, progress is seen to be constituted in the use of technologies, language and scores of assessments. Logics of assessment practice can then be identified. One such logic at the judgement level is that of illumination, or in Dean's (2010) terms, the forms of visibility, enabled by the performative assessment and tracking measures,

their associated progress scores and the subsequent reporting technologies employed by the schools. The use of such technologies enables the comparison, judgement and control of both pupils and professionals made possible through visibility; and this visibility occurs through the objectification of pupils and teaching staff through the tracking system's prioritisation of progress scores that are quantifiable and measurable (Ball, 2013). In concurrence with Bradbury (2019), pupils at the SWMAT are reproduced as 'data doubles' through progress scores, stripping them of all complexity and rendering them visible through this extracted and distilled version of themselves. The school's assessment practices illustrate the argument that teachers and their pupils have become 'captured in a matrix of calculabilities' (Ball, 2013, p. 103), with 'governing knowledge' (Ozga, 2008, p. 264) based on a regime of numbers and enabling surveillance to be exercised through classification of populations and individuals in a 'technical repertoire' (Ball, 2013, p. 51).

These technologies and the governing knowledge they produce, can be seen as the (re)construction of both pupil and teacher identity; pupils' identities are constructed through their progress scores; and the forms of knowledge associated with the visibility of these scores appear to change teachers' ways of knowing their pupils and their practice. This is illustrated by Rihanna (core subject teacher) who highlights that:

*the idea is to hone in on those individuals' levels and then ensure that we put the right steps in place so that they can make the improvements they need to make and therefore then progress can be gained... the data for me is useful in that respect because then it helps to inform my planning so I can really look at that and think, OK, there's a gap there that's holding that person back. I need to make sure I'm putting in place the right kind of learning to move them forward to get them the grade they're potentially capable of achieving.*

Through my informed and inside perspective, it is worth noting that, following analysis of the transcripts, I believe there to be aspects of assessment, specifically progress, which remain intentionally invisible. For example, considering the interview responses concerning the analysis of pupils' progress data, there was an absence of explanation, or even simply a description of what is done for those pupils who were achieving expected and above progress in their subject. According to what was said in the interviews, interventions, seemingly, only

existed for those pupils who were below expected progress and therefore, required intervention. In a somewhat different context, Ofsted (2013) uses the term ‘unseen children’ but it is perhaps applicable in this context to those pupils who may become invisible due to their meeting of the required progress standards. Ofsted (2013, p. 4) argues:

*a large minority of children still do not succeed at school or college, becoming increasingly less visible as they progress through the system... this unseen body of children and young people that underachieve throughout our education system represents an unacceptable waste of human potential and incurs huge subsequent costs for all of us.*

Whilst these children may not underachieve in relation to the assessment standards and benchmarks set by the SWMAT, they may underachieve relative to their own personal potential as they are not prioritised in terms of intervention. The logic of such a practice in an education system striving for equality is contradictory, however, it appears that neoliberalised assessment practice, whether intentionally or unintentionally, creates inequalities (Pratt and Alderton, 2023). In a landscape of neoliberalisation, teaching staff are responsibilised for their pupils’ performance and are undoubtedly under immense pressure to perform in delivering efficient teaching and learning. Perryman (2006) indicates increased surveillance and accountability associated with performativity as teachers and their schools are judged on performance and outcomes. Ball (2013, p. 140) contends that those who ‘under-perform’ are subject to moral approbation and the tyranny of ‘little fears’. Systems designed to ‘support’ or encourage those who are unable to ‘keep up’ continuously teeter on the brink of moral regulation (Ball, 2013, p. 140). Joseph (core subject teacher) explains the need for evidence of performance in terms of securing progress:

*[A line manager or senior leader will ask] where's the evidence that you have actually moved this student on and that they've actually made sufficient progress or rapid progress in the time frame that they're talking about.*

Following the progress data tracking reports, it is likely that the performance of those pupils achieving expected and above progress, while initially making them visible, rendered them invisible as teaching staff felt they needed to focus interventions on those below target. A logic of such assessment practice might be considered a technology of the self whereby staff, under

continual surveillance and judgement, adjust their practice ‘so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality’ (Foucault in Martin, Gutman and Hutton, 1988, p. 18). Newton’s (2007) framework considers the intended impact of assessment systems, however, perhaps an unintended impact of the assessment system is that certain groups of pupils become invisible and hidden through their ‘data double’. This then calls into question how practices are formed in the landscape of commodification.

Similarly, teachers’ identities are constructed through the visibility of their pupils’ progress scores (both individual and class) in the form of market terminology. Teacher identities link directly to their performance (or under-performance), attributing to them knowledge of how efficient they are at securing pupils’ progress and whether or not they offer the setting value for money. This is perfectly illustrated by a member of the school leadership team.

*Michael: If I'm spending huge, vast amounts of money on staff and they're not making great progress, there's not financial value there.*

As Jeffrey and Woods (1998, p. 548) summarise, ‘students are seen as customers or clients, and teachers as service providers’. It is noteworthy that Jeffrey and Woods said this back in 1998, long before all this took place and therefore provided a real insight into what was to come. In undertaking this analysis, I am aiming to show how the logic of such technologies and knowledge allows schools to exist and compete in the neoliberal landscape. The SWMAT and their professionals presume a set of assessment standards or norms of conduct through which progress can be judged, regulated and controlled rationally; what Foucault called the ‘conduct of conduct’ (1982c, pp. 220-221). Regulation at the school, enabled through visibility, is multi-dimensional; schools and their teaching staff regulate the action and behaviours of pupils through assessment scores and, of course, teachers themselves are made visible and subject to regulation, comparison and judgement by management and leadership staff as well as stakeholders. It is important to note that professionals who are in leadership and management roles themselves are held to account in the same way by the demands of the market system and its regulation by Ofsted and DfE. It is not to cast leadership and management teams as ‘the problem’ as they are as much part of the ‘solution’, played out in regulatory/accountability

terms. As agents, teaching staff are responsabilised for the progress of their pupils and therefore held accountable for this (further analysis around accountability can be found in section 3).

A further logic of practice, therefore, is that assessment technologies and the subsequent visibility of progress scores also provide evidence of school, department or individual performance as data. This data is used by professionals, schools, and stakeholders for a variety of purposes and reasons. Whilst the AP setting within the SWMAT is not a mainstream school, the pupils are referred to the SWMAT from mainstream settings and therefore the same logics apply, albeit in a different context. Performance data is a prominent factor in mainstream schools and underachieving pupils' progress scores negatively impact the impressions given by the data or the possibilities for using it. The point here is the data is no longer neutral; the numbers themselves are constructed as a technology that is used by schools for the purposes that matter to them. It is important to distinguish how the two terms 'the numbers' and 'the data,' being used here, the latter being the technology that is being created through the context that the 'numbers' are read within. Negative impressions from progress data present a cause for concern at impact level particularly in terms of the school's identity in the market.

At the assessment decision level, progress score visibility enables mainstreams to make decisions based on the risk that pupils pose to their performance data. This is particularly prominent where year 10 and 11 pupils put the school's formal examination performance data at risk and these pupils are more likely to be permanently excluded and placed within alternative provision settings (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000). Considered through the opposing lens of 'pupil-centred' logic, decisions made would be based on what the pupils themselves might benefit from. Referring to meetings with mainstream school staff who have placed their pupils in the SWMAT, Peter (core subject teacher and middle leadership member) explains:

*[mainstream] schools are always looking for reasons not to take them [the pupils] back.*

To further illustrate the above points, Michael considers key stage 4 pupils who have not been permanently excluded but have been placed with the SWMAT on a dual registration package:

*I think they're [mainstream schools] more bothered when the pupil is dual reg and they're staying dual reg for year 11 as they want to know about outcomes because it impacts their whole school data.*

The practices around assessment data seemingly become a game where schools need to be seen to be playing their best hand. During the interviews, Joseph used the term rapid progress which initiated further discussion leading to the identification of assessment gaming.

*SM: I'd like to ask you about a term you mentioned which was rapid progress. Where does that term come from and what does rapid progress mean in relation to the school's assessment system?*

*Joseph: Well, it's a term that Ofsted introduced in their framework for assessing progress in schools and in our case, we have students who have been bought into packages by other schools in order to be educated in our setting. We have to be able to demonstrate through means of assessment, that rapid progress is being achieved. The trouble is that it can become a little bit of a game because if you want to prove that rapid progress has been made, often the temptation is to look at assessing the student and we under assess, I think, in terms of giving them a grade which artificially shows that we can then prove that they've made rapid progress. In actual fact, we've probably given them a score, an arbitrary number, that says that they are working at a particular level, and oh yeah, we've done this piece of work and look what's happened. They've got a certain score and they've made two levels or more of progress which then equates to them being able to have that score and that narrative that they have made rapid progress.*

AP settings and the professionals that act within them are informed by the 'priorities, constraints and climate set by the policy environment' (Ball, 2000, p. 10). At judgement and decision levels, the outlined gaming and manipulation, or fabrications, associated with the assessment system produce alternative versions of the SWMAT and its actors which do not exist independently of the act producing them; they are not 'outside the truth' but are produced 'to be accountable' (Ball, 2003, p. 224). 'Truthfulness is not the point - the point is their effectiveness, both in the market or for Inspection or appraisal, and in the 'work' they do 'on'



and ‘in’ the organization – their transformational and disciplinary impact’ (Ball, 2003, p. 224). One might consider assessment gaming another technology of the self with the logic of such a practice rooted in the preservation of one’s identity as an efficient professional who represents value for money. This is particularly prominent when the expectation from the inspectorate is progress that is ‘accelerated’ and ‘rapid’.

The response from Joseph highlights how a professional’s knowledge of assessment technologies and systems can be applied to change their own way of knowing and how others know them and their pupils. This knowledge has the potential to render a member of staff, once visible, invisible. The way in which professionals are known by others leads inevitably to the gaze, their level of visibility, and so these fabrications ‘are an escape from the gaze, a strategy of impression management that in effect erects a facade of calculation [and] requires submission to the rigours of performativity and the disciplines of competition’ (Ball, 2000, p. 10). Arguably, not all professionals may want to escape ‘the gaze’, those who are more ambitious might need it in promoting themselves. Again, whilst, in the marketised world of schooling, the intended impact of such technologies and their calculations is to make organisations such as SWMAT more transparent to their stakeholders, it could be argued that the unintended impact is that this technology and knowledge surrounding associated assessment identities results in making the school more opaque (Ball, 2003). Furthermore, gaming and fabrication result in issues surrounding assessment accuracy.

A view of education that focused on the welfare of pupils individually, outside of the concerns of a market economy, would assume that assessment should have a positive impact on the teaching and learning process and therefore pupils’ progress. This process breaks down amidst the tensions between professionals’ personal beliefs and moral values and the requirements of the performative educational climate; subsequently, the impact, be it intentional or unintentional, is the ‘corrosion of character’ (Sennett, 1998). The notion of character is particularly prominent within the context of AP as arguably character, and modelling socially responsible behaviour, is at the heart of what AP settings do. The pupils that attend these settings are, arguably, those most in need of development in relation to character. Reflecting on my own experiences in the setting allows me to contend that fabrication and gaming of assessment might occur as a strategy to provide professionals with the time, space and opportunity to develop character whilst appeasing the requirements of progress expectations.

In light of fabrications, if assessments are not accurate questions are raised about how effective use can be made of them. Analysis surrounding the logics of assessment practice, as previously highlighted, suggests that these are intended for market purposes raising further questions as to how these come to count in the commodified educational climate. Before proceeding, the term accuracy needs attention as although the professionals interviewed discuss accuracy, in research terms they are actually referring to validity and reliability. Questions of validity ask whether assessment is measuring what it claims to be measuring and further considers if assessment is completed carefully enough for us to be confident in the measure. In terms of reliability, if other professionals were carrying out the same measurement, would the pupils be getting the same grade? Professionals use of the term ‘accuracy’ which I interpret to be a belief that there is a ‘true’ ability in children which can be measured. Practices in schools often revolve around finding ways to make assessments ‘more accurate’, often taking the form of processes such as moderation and standardisation. In considering the accuracy of assessment judgements Joseph states:

*I'm afraid to say that I don't believe that the accuracy is tight enough... So actually does the accuracy of the data that we have, that we're inputting or that we're starting from have any meaning or value?*

Similarly, when asked about the accuracy of the assessment data Jacob responded:

*Well, we like to call it the random number generator. The baselines are very irregular. I think from teacher to teacher, one teacher in the department might think the student should be baselined at 41. I might then look at it and go actually I think it's a 51. So straight away there's ten points of progress that could be different. We've got nothing to set that against.*

Peter summarises:

*A lot of subjects have baseline testing, which is quite good. This isn't across the board though as there are some subjects where, to be honest, they make up the baseline and they compare it to the other students.*

At the judgement level, it is cognitive psychology that underpins the knowledge and assumptions of the assessment technologies and progress that enables the visibility of professionals and pupils, their identity construction and the subsequent actions at decision level. Knowledge is assumed to be stored in cognitive structures in the brain with Ofsted's (2023, no page) cognitive research-driven inspection handbook defining learning 'as an alteration in long-term memory. If nothing has altered in long-term memory, nothing has been learned'. The importance of assessing pupils' knowledge and testing their recall ability is central to Ofsted's (2023) assessment ideology. The SWMAT's assessment system transforms knowledge through a process of reification in which it becomes independent of the pupils, governing their lives (Ball, 2004). Assessment progress scores permit the enumeration of a pupil's knowledge rendering it a concrete and common-sense reality capable of being measured (Jaspal, 2014). Theories of learning that are 'historically and culturally situated, socially constructed and distributed' (Pratt, 2016, p. 898) become invisible, making way for those rooted in learning sciences and the logics of performance (Hordern and Brooks, 2023). As in the literature review, performative educational cultures legitimise scientific knowledge and reduce the importance of narrative knowledge stemming from beliefs, values and experiences as these are difficult to objectify and quantify (Lyotard, 1979; Clapham, 2013). It is cognitive scientific knowledge that enables the construction of assessment technologies which, in turn, provide a form of validity that people are willing to make use of therefore, providing a mechanism to control the professional lives of the staff within the AP setting. Natasha (core subject teacher and middle leadership member) makes an interesting point in her response to progress expectations:

*Natasha: The other thing here is that most of our students are out at interventions weekly like physical interventions like climbing or forest school. And obviously we have the daily sort of trauma informed interventions. So actually, aside from those points, you might not have those four points progression. But you will have an awful lot of social, emotional and mental health progression. Naturally when you look at the education,*

*health and care plans of our students, that cognitive development is such a tiny part of what their plan of action is and actually that's social interaction communication. So, for example, I've got a student that has only made two points progress probably since September. However, he wouldn't engage at any English whatsoever; and now he does 30 minutes of English every day, but to correlate that to the school's points is actually impossible. So, someone coming in and just looking at their points, sometimes I feel like it doesn't facilitate really a very accurate picture.*

There are a few points to highlight from this quote, the first being that for the many pupils who are placed within AP settings their needs may be based around the social, emotional, mental health and behavioural aspects of their development rather than academic subject input. The second point taken from Natasha is that the school tracking system does not capture these aspects of development through the assessment point scores and, therefore, one might be misled into thinking that a pupil had made no progress due to the fact that the tracking system is concerned with academic subject progress. Whilst Natasha makes their argument with the word accuracy, it may be better considering this as an issue of validity. It is not that the measure is 'inaccurate'; it is that which is not measured which perhaps illuminates the wider issues and tensions that exist.

Responses from others indicate there are systems in place to record 'soft skills' and other aspects of a pupil's development; however, these feel very much like 'bolt-ons' that do not inform the main, academically driven, system of assessment and which therefore do not 'count' for pupils and teachers in the market of assessment practices. As identified in the review of literature, the SEND Review by the DfE (2022) proposes new national performance tables for AP alongside a framework for assessing AP on 5 key outcomes. Academic attainment (with a central focus of English and maths) is one of the key outcomes, however, there is no mention of other developmental aspects in the outcomes despite literature indicating that pupils are generally referred to AP for complex, non-academic needs (Department for Education, 2018b). The intensifying regime of performativity clearly produces tensions between the practice of schools and the government policy drive for outcomes. Again, this legitimises the need for cognitive science and provides a rationale for the logics of practice whereby academic subject progress is prioritised over non-academic progress.

### 5.3 Theme 2: Accountability

In turning to the second theme, accountability, I remind the reader that these themes are separated in order to report them in this text, but in practice interact in many ways. As highlighted in the previous section of analysis, schools, through the use of technologies and knowledge, make both professionals and pupils visible through assessment data (also termed evidence of learning/progress) and subsequently (re)construct their own identity and the identities of the actors. Here begins the process in which the SWMAT, their professionals and pupils are held to account for their actions. Newton's (2007) assessment levels assist within this particular section as they provide an analytical lens for assessments carried out not only by schools, but also for assessments made on schools.

At this point, it is noteworthy to revisit the previous points made concerning the principles and theoretical underpinning of the SWMAT's assessment policy and technologies as, without this underpinning knowledge, the accountability cycle would exist in a completely different form. The points made previously remain paramount; if knowledge resides in pupils' cognitive structures in the brain, knowledge can therefore be assessed, judged and consequently, teachers' responsibilised. Concurrently, it is also essential at the outset of this section that consideration is given to the role of the education regulator, Ofsted, which prioritises the knowledge from cognitive psychology in the policing of 'good teaching' and the judgement of the SWMAT through the scrutiny of educational outcomes. In relation to accountability, Jeffery and Woods (1998, p. 548) assist in this introduction by summarising:

*[Pupils are] in need of managing and disciplining and needing to learn certain prescribed things in order to be able to survive in a competitive market... The teacher is seen as someone who has to impart knowledge and understanding of a set curriculum, who supplements deficiencies, assesses and evaluates students' efforts from an hierarchical position, rather than one who removes obstacles to learning and works with children.*

By their own admission, Ofsted draws attention to the research behind its inspection framework (2019, p. 19) and acknowledge that it draws from a growing evidence base from the 'learning sciences' and seeks to apply the understanding and principles from cognitive science

(psychology) to classroom and educational practice. In considering both memory and learning, arguably pivotal areas of neoliberalised assessment practice, Ofsted (2019, p. 19) contends that ‘this field is increasingly generating moderate to strong evidence of practices that can be used to enhance learning across phases and remits’. In Dean’s terms, the knowledge and evidence from the field of cognitive psychology governs the Ofsted inspection framework research and shapes the technologies at judgement and decision level of the Ofsted assessment criteria, more specifically the inspection procedures, vocabularies and the high-stake outcomes (currently outstanding, good, requires improvement and inadequate). Due to its epistemological assumptions, cognitive psychology enables the objectification, subsequent judgement and decision as to which outcome the school receives, (re)constructing their identity, that is, their effectiveness and efficiency within the market. In this sense the school is identified by a judgement and this reflects on the identity of the professionals who operate within the setting.

Assessment data is at the centre of the accountability process rendering the SWMAT visible not only to agencies such as Ofsted, but also external stakeholders such as the local authority, other settings and parents. The assessment data illuminates their effectiveness to such stakeholders. Through this mechanism the SWMAT is held accountable for the education it provides. Due to the referral-based nature of AP, there are serious consequences for an underperforming AP provider. At decision level, consequences may involve the termination or reduction in number of placements/packages inevitably leading to a reduction of income/funding. Underperformance may also trigger the rebrokerage of the SWMAT whereby they will be instructed to join another academy chain. The response from Michael illustrates the points made above and provides an explanation of the logics of assessment practice and the accountability associated with these:

*The other bit is Ofsted. They have to know other than looking at outcomes for AP, which is really tricky. You know, they go into lessons now. They pick books up and they want to see the evidence of learning. They're not watching teaching. They're looking for learning. And I think that is a massive change. So actually, I want to know that ultimately, for a school like ours where we are very much commissioned on our success, if we went down the pan our City Council will say to us, listen, I'm not sure we want to place our most vulnerable pupils in the city at your school, nobody does any learning. So*

*yes, we do it for governors. And yes, we do it for appraisal. And yes, we do. But yes, we do it for Ofsted and we would be naive to say we have a set of criteria that's actually not only for our commissioning in some of the operational stuff... we have that accountability measure and ultimately it's government money and we are a government regulated organisation. So however philosophical we want to be about it we have to consider that. The email that came out this week from the trust about the three pillars. It's about finance. I'm ultimately accountable to make sure that I spend the money effectively. The pupils are making good progress. If I'm spending huge, vast amounts of money on staff and they're not making great progress, there's not financial value there. Educational outcomes, fairly obviously, and the pillars of governance that somebody is holding me to account to say you're getting great outcomes from a non-qualified set of staff. Tell me how you're doing that and is that data real? So those three pillars, I suppose, of what ultimately financially, educationally, and from a governance point of view, are what we are held to and assessment across it all fits to all three.*

This extract from Michael highlights the importance of Ofsted and other stakeholders at both judgement and decision level and clearly portrays how settings and professionals are made visible through outcomes, assessment technologies and progress data. Given the importance of the education regulator Ofsted and its impact on schools, it is unsurprising that its research and evidence base underpinning the inspection framework, primarily sourced from the discipline of cognitive psychology, trickles from the top down into schools and has subsequently, been adopted by leadership teams, shaping their assessment policy and practice. Again, these principles are clearly visible within the SWMAT through its numerical assessment and tracking system and how they evidence, or make visible, progress and learning. Principles from this particular discipline seem to have overridden intentions and guidance of key agencies involved in the removal of levels. In relation to this, literature contends that assessment has become a discourse strategically used at judgement and decision levels by professionals and stakeholders with the intention of holding both settings and professionals to account (Birmingham, 2021). Whilst the intended impact of assessment is to serve the improvement of the teaching and learning process, decisions resulting from assessment judgements are often divorced from this core purpose (Parliament UK, 2008). This was recognised by DfE (2015) who highlighted that

the inappropriate use of assessment judgements informed, in part, the rationale behind the removal of levels. Further to this, the Standards and Testing Agency (2015) contested that schools should focus on the day-to-day formative assessment practices to enhance the teaching and learning process. There is strong evidence from the research conducted within the SWMAT that this is not the case. This is also reflected within the literature in relation to the assessment systems of other schools across the country (Poet *et al.*, 2018). Tom (core subject teacher and middle leadership member) provides insight into the intended impact of the tracking and assessment system:

*...the rate of progress is a managerial thing. I think as a teacher you're going to know it before you've even bitten a number off the spreadsheet. What is an appropriate way of setting these targets? I mean, I could set up the system to automatically go, every pupil 12 points. Let's just assess against that which might be a fair and equitable way of doing it, especially when we look at, OK, so we've got a pupil in one of our provisions who is a £70,000 pupil, £70,000 is what we're charging the local authority to provide an education package. Now, if we can't show that we are making progress and how we are using that £70,000 there's something wrong. Ultimately, if you talk about the rate of progress as the idea of education total which, you can argue whether it is or not, but take that as a kind of concept of actually the idea is to progress.*

Tom goes on to say:

*To increase their [the pupils'] acquisition of knowledge, both in their ability to acquire knowledge and in actually acquiring knowledge. Actually, if we're not spending that £70,000. So take that kid who in mainstream would only be able to do that acquisition of knowledge at a very low rate. If we're not spending £70,000 to bring him up to at least what he'll be able to achieve in mainstream without £70,000 it's kind of like hang on you're spending £70,000 and this pupil is making the same level of progress as he was in the mainstream setting. Something's not right here. That difference is quite key*



*and we're not alone in the market. I mean there's plenty of schools that are buying into online teaching systems where they say look we'll just do online lessons and your kid will make XYZ progress and it costs what? £100 a term not 70 grand. You've got to show value for money in that respect, definitely.*

In keeping with the comments from Tom, Birmingham (2021, p. 79) reiterates that ‘strong discourses of accountability, autonomy, and neoliberal ideologies of social improvement, impacted these reviews on curriculum and assessment’. The logics of assessment practice and intended impact arguably result in the datafication of pupils via the assessment and tracking system. The assessment technologies play a central role in measuring outcomes, contributing towards accountability cycles, inspection regimes and also in providing evidence of cost effectiveness and value for money. Tom clearly illustrates the role of assessment and the identity work it does for the SWMAT; their intention is to identify a cost-effective service provider through the technologies, knowledge and language of the market. Given that schools and professionals are judged through research-driven inspection frameworks and technologies, at the heart of which is objectification and datafication, it seems almost illogical for schools not to adopt such measures in their own assessment practice. At the centre of the inspection framework, as discussed above, is the discipline of cognitive psychology which lays the foundation for the objectification and datafication of pupils. The adoption of this discipline in the school’s assessment policies may very well form part of Ball’s ‘terrors’ and the subsequent fear felt by schools, leadership teams and teachers to conform to governing knowledge.

Biesta (2007), in noting how education is becoming an evidence-based profession, explains that the push for evidence has become prominent in Britain since reports concerning educational research from the Department for Education and Employment (Hillage *et al.*, 1998) and Ofsted. He illustrates the strong drive for experimental research, as seen in the Ofsted (2019) inspection framework, which according to proponents of evidence-based education is the only method capable of providing secure evidence about ‘what works’. The author further reports that many believe that any practice not based upon experimental research or scientific knowledge is ‘inferior and should ultimately be banned’ (Biesta, 2007, p. 3). A critical point manifested from Biesta’s article which can be used to inform this analysis is that of visibility and the responsabilisation of pupils’ progress. He conveys that a substantial amount of research evidence exists suggesting that the ‘most influential factors in school success are the home

environment and, even more important, children's experiences in their first years' (Biesta, 2007, p. 9). If success in school is considered in terms of a pupil's progress, applying the underpinning assumptions and findings from such research would make it impossible to responsabilise schools and their professionals therefore preventing or protecting them from being held to account. In the performative climate, knowledge, technologies and identities resulting from social theories, particularly those which may compromise the responsabilisation of professionals for pupils' progress, remain intentionally invisible. Knowledge that permits the responsabilisation of professionals, thus upholding accountability for their pupils' progress, is prioritised and made visible. Visible knowledge is largely underpinned by cognitive psychology and its respective evidence base. It is clear from the data in this study, that logics centring around the responsabilisation of pupils' performance dominate policy and practice across the SWMAT and the lives of professionals. In light of the above, Joseph alludes to the intended impact of technologies underpinned by knowledge which, as I argued above, ultimately originates from practice underpinned by the domain of cognitive science; and which therefore enable the objectification and datafication of pupils' progress.

*Joseph: Ok. The data in terms of my understanding is used, and to put it crudely, fills up a spreadsheet. And of course, when you fill up a spreadsheet and can produce a graph that then shows whether the progress being made shows an upward trend or downward trend, or a flat trend. You can pretty much make that what you want it to be, so you can say well we really think that some things are going pretty well on our curriculum. The curriculum is being taught to a high level. Students are making progress and we banged these numbers into the system and the data has come out and somebody's crunched the numbers and it comes out and says, yeah, good job the curves going in the right direction and you must be doing well with every pupil in your cohort, and your provision must be doing exceptionally well.*

In considering the nature of AP and its ever-increasing quality assurance processes (see DfE SEND report 2023), it is clear the stakes of inspection are high as the SWMAT's survival depends on the number of packages/placements they secure; this is ultimately determined by their effectiveness within the landscape of performativity. These were key points made above by Michael. Performance pressures are ever increasing particularly in light of the recent

announcements by the DfE in their SEND report whereby accountability on AP settings will be increased in key areas of performance. The increasing performance pressures felt by mainstream schools is recognised by Pratt and Alderton (2019, p. 590) in terms of the formation of new assessment ‘truths’. The authors note the continued increasing performance pressures and accountability post-levels with the reconstructed assessment understanding providing ‘teachers with a (reconstructed) discourse of control, allowing them to participate again in taking responsibility for pupils’ learning and to merit their performance as teachers’. In light of this responsibilisation of professionals, the following extract from Ball (2003, pp. 218-219) highlights, in market terms, how the logics of performativity exist through the assessment and tracking system and the subsequent impact of these on identity:

*There is ‘the possibility of a triumphant self’ of becoming a new kind of professional or of entry into the ever expanding ranks of the executors of quality. We learn that we can become more than we were and be better than others - we can be ‘outstanding’, ‘successful’, ‘above the average’. All of this involves, in one way or another, ‘intensive work on the self’ (Dean 1995: 581). This is work which some caught up in the struggle over what it means to be a teacher are unwilling to undertake.*

In considering accountability, the interviews give further insight into the logics of assessment practice particularly when considering the intended impact. Responses from various staff reveal conflicting views and inconsistencies related to accountability and challenge. When asked about challenge Rihanna responded:

*I haven't been challenged on students that have not made progress. We could sit here and have the conversation that that's not right. I should be challenged on that. And why has this student not made progress?*

Jacob (foundation subject teacher and middle leadership member) provides further insight:

*Um no one. Looking at it like I said before, as long as those 12 points of progress have been made, so each term you're hitting the points of progress, it doesn't get overlooked as long as it's filled in and there's a comment made or be it, some teachers I know take ages filling out a comment, but then even if you just put Jimmy made progress, no one's regulating or moderating this and so you could have a teacher spending hours on this, and actually there's not much point as it's not being used, it doesn't get looked at and as a head of department, I don't have to go into anyone and say look, staff member A has filled in his information, I think he needs to add more information. That doesn't happen. I'm not happy with how the baselines are looking. That just doesn't happen. And so it brings it back to this point. It kind of makes it a pointless exercise.*

Further on in the interview when Jacob was asked about how the assessment system contributes to staff and pupil development Jacob responded:

*It doesn't. Pupils don't know about it, I think it's done in the background. It's done as a thing that has to be done for a tick box exercise.*

In relation to challenge from other schools Peter explains:

*I can't recall a time when schools have asked me whether they're making expected progress or not. I can't think of any school that's ever asked me how they're getting on in academic terms or progress. They just want to know that their pupil is attending, what their behaviours is like, that sort of thing, are they ready to come back to us? And then they're always looking for reasons to not take them back, to be honest.*

When asked if she was ever challenged on her data input into the tracking system, Natasha responded:

*Never. I've never been challenged on it. I've never in all honesty, I've never had a conversation with anyone about tracking.*

Considering the responses above and the wider responses within the interviews, it is clear that there are vast inconsistencies in relation to assessment practice and certainly tensions between the reality and what the literature indicates. Some staff are held accountable and challenged on their tracking and assessment data/progress whilst others are not. Some stakeholders such as the local city council provide challenge and scrutinise the progress made by pupils who are placed at the SWMAT. Other stakeholders, such as schools that refer pupils for placement at the SWMAT, rarely challenge or hold them to account for the assessment and progress data. There seem to be pockets of visibility within the accountability regimes. To reiterate Michael's previous point made in relation to mainstream schools and accountability:

*I mean it's a really interesting question because do schools want to know? Because if I'm honest that most schools are fixated with the fact the student is out of their hair. So, you know, dealing with three points compared to four points this term of expected progress in PE because we were doing squash, I don't think a lot of them are bothered is my honest answer.*

All views considered, staff at the SWMAT, on the whole, do not believe the assessment system is useful in making decisions about the teaching and learning process or in improving their own practice. In their view, current assessment practice represents a 'tick box' or 'pointless exercise' which 'fills up a spreadsheet'. Furthermore, Peter, in relation to the system, argues:

*I would say that the system we've got right now probably isn't fit for purpose.*

Couple the points above regarding accountability and challenge with the views related to mainstream schools, not being 'bothered' about the progress made by pupils on packages and the result is a breakdown in the accountability cycle. Furthermore, there is a clear contrast between the views of professionals for instance the staff member in a management position who is invested in the 'truth' of the assessment because it secures £70,000, and the classroom

teacher who is effectively saying it's a game of randomly ticking a box. Clearly, there are certain stakeholders that do hold the SWMAT and its professionals accountable for pupils' progress data, however it seems, across the board, that this is not the norm. In considering further trends outside of the norm, there is a lack of evidence from the interviews that progress data is used for performance management and pay progression which is in contrast to the points made in the literature (NASUWT, 2015; NASUWT, 2016). An overarching theme from the interviews is that many staff are not invested in the system and therefore, there is one line of argument to suggest it is perhaps not used how it was intended. The reconstructed knowledge amongst the staff body attributed to the assessment technologies and procedures may be very different to the knowledge set out around its intentions. One could argue that if this is seen as a 'tick box exercise' it is perhaps used as one particularly when part of an accountability cycle.

The literature would suggest that for many professionals accountability signifies a lack of trust and is, simultaneously, a mechanism to support performativity regimes imposed by politicians and other key stakeholders in the field of education (Brennan, 2018; Wyse and Opfer, 2010). In light of the neoliberal accountability regimes, given the issue highlighted by Hennessey and Mannix McNamara (2013) it may be argued that professionals at the SWMAT find their values challenged and displaced and face what is described as a dilemma of conformity or resistance to such neoliberal ideologies and agendas which are often prioritised at the expense of meaningful pupil development and engagement (Ball, 2003). Within the interviews Rihanna believed that her role was more 'holistic' with further data from the transcripts indicating that pupils are not referred to SWMAT for academic subject intervention; taking this view, academic progress is not the core purpose of the provision. The logic may be that for some staff at the SWMAT, submission to the assessment and accountability ideologies has prevailed whereas others resist the measures by not using the technologies to challenge or hold others accountable. As previously specified, accountability is visible in certain aspects of practice however in other aspects it remains invisible. The intended impact and wider logics of the system, one might argue, are to fulfil accountability functions externally within the market and within inspection regimes, justifying the SWMAT's position and affirming its identity. The assessment system is one of 'truths' constructed locally that everyone can believe in and which maintains the primary function – namely to justify paying (or receiving) money for a pupil. I return to this point and explore it further in theme 3. To conclude this section of analysis, Mitchell, who is an executive leadership member and currently holds a position as an Ofsted inspector, summarises:

*I've always felt that data only gives you the questions that you want to ask. It never gives you the answer. So I've never been an advocate, and certainly never inspected a school where I've made a judgement based on the data or the assessment information that I've got.... Special provision is often about preparation for adulthood and the transition into the next step. I would never want anyone to use the data in its own right as a means to make a judgement about how to support staff or children, but I'd want them to use it as the base or starting point.*

#### 5.4 Theme 3: Staff, pupil and stakeholder understanding of the assessment system

The commonality of understanding between staff, pupils and stakeholders is an identified theme from the interviews that provides a multitude of contradictory perspectives. Newton's (2007) intended impact is critical in analysing this particular theme as there is disparity between the intended assessment impact outlined by the government and the intended impact of the assessment system at the SWMAT. As previously highlighted, legislation from the DfE (2014) instructed the removal of national curriculum levels, simultaneously tasking schools with the creation and implementation of their own assessment systems. The intended impact of this policy change, as outlined in the literature, was to address the profoundly negative impact that levels had on teaching and learning and the inappropriate use of assessment judgements in decision making (Department for Education, 2015). Furthermore, the Standards and Testing Agency (2015) argued that this gave schools the opportunity to focus on the day to day formative practices with the intention of enhancing the teaching and learning process rather than focusing on assessment practices heavily reliant on numerical data collection. In their reflection on the previous levels system, the DfE (2015) points to the lack of clarity amongst professionals, parents and pupils; the intended impact of the outlined policy change therefore is to improve assessment clarity and common understanding. In practice, however, Peter discusses the intended impact of the policy change and the actual impact of the system as follows:

*the idea of removing levels was because parents and other agencies had no idea what a 6A meant. So the idea was to bring in something less confusing that parents were able to understand and schools were able to understand a bit better as well. We've currently got system which, as you said, ranges from about 1 to 200, which, to be honest, is actually more confusing than the original levels that we had before. Trying to explain even to another school that have different assessment systems that a student is currently working at 143, that means nothing to them really. We have to translate it into something else.*



This perspective is representative of the majority of the professionals that were involved in the interview process. There are perhaps different ways in which one can consider the logics of practice in this particular area. In considering the word logic by its dictionary definition, it encompasses rationality, specifically ‘a particular way of thinking, especially one that is reasonable and based on good judgement’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Through the lens of the DfE’s (2014) intended impact on assessment policy, the ‘particular way’ of thinking related to the removal of levels and implementation of new systems, was to enhance teaching and learning and increase commonality of understanding between professionals, pupils and stakeholders through systems prioritising formative assessment over practices heavily reliant on numerical data. Based on this definition of logic (I will examine the way in which the idea of logic works below), the definition attributed to it and the knowledge of the DfE’s intended impact, the decisions made in the creation and implementation stage by the SWMAT seem illogical.

Examining workings of the SWMAT’s numerical based tracking system and the commentary given within the interviews by professionals who use this system suggests that it operates in contradiction to the aims outlined by the DfE (2014) and other associated organisations such as the Commission on Assessment Without Levels. Professionals at the SWMAT argue that the tracking system and the assessment data it generates do not impact positively on teaching and learning. In light of this, Jacob explains the absence of positive impact made by the assessment and tracking system:

*Pupils don't know about it, I think it's done in the background. It's done as a thing that has to be done for a tick box exercise. But does that correlate to the teaching? Not at all. Teaching and learning is not impacted by it, and students rarely know where they're at. Even if they're at below, expected or above. And because it has no impact, we just don't use it as common language throughout lessons.*

Natasha adds:

*I wouldn't say that the points are a key factor in sort of like driving my planning or driving my monitoring here.*

Staff further acknowledge that, rather than just 8 levels, the replacement tracking system operates from numbers 1-242 which they believe has led to increased confusion amongst staff, pupils and stakeholders due to the lack of common understanding, a point made above by Peter. When asked for their view on the assessment system, Rihanna reinforces points related to confusion:

*I don't think it has a place. And the only reason that it doesn't have a place is because I don't understand who it's meant for other than us. And if that's the case it must mean something more than I'm aware of because I don't understand. I did ask this question when I first started teaching here to be honest. What is the purpose of having our own assessment system? I don't quite understand that. Firstly, it doesn't correlate with mainstream assessment so we have to convert it anyway, as we've discussed to send data back. Secondly, if you were a teacher that hasn't worked here, you wouldn't have a clue unless you had the correlation in the document I was talking about earlier. And thirdly, if it is a system that stands alone, what is its purpose? And I can't answer that question.*

In harmony, Peter reflects on the system, and summarises:

*I think it's overcomplicated. The idea of getting rid of the old system as I said before is to try and make things more simple so that it's easily accessible and understandable for the general public. And it's not even understandable for the staff that we've got here. So I would say that the system we've got right now probably isn't fit for purpose.*

To reinforce a point made previously, the responses outlined above clearly illustrate inconsistencies between the intended impact of the tracking system and the actual impact on

practice at the SWMAT. To develop the analysis in this section it is worthwhile focusing on a point made by Rihanna who, considering the tracking system says ‘it must mean something more than I'm aware of because I don't understand... if it is a system that stands alone, what is its purpose? And I can't answer that question’. This raises a key point in understanding the logics of practice. A dictionary definition of logic would position the school’s response as illogical in relation to the commonality and understanding of assessment whilst simultaneously contradicting guidance from the DfE. However, given that this research uses Pratt and Alderton’s (2022, p. 503) notion of logics, described previously as that which seems to ‘flow more easily’, what may seem illogical in a rational sense may be logical in governmentality terms. The purpose of the tracking system therefore, whilst seemingly not fulfilling its intended impact at classroom level, perhaps fulfils its intended impact in justifying the school’s existence in the marketised educational climate. Tom helps to unpick this point:

*The requirements for it [the assessment and tracking system] are basically it's got to work for stakeholders in the outside school sense and it's got to work for stakeholders in school. The reality is because of our class sizes it's useless to class teachers because the classes are so small. You know where kids are anyway. I don't think it's going to add any value on that.*

As stated above, Birmingham (2021, p. 79) indicates ‘strong discourses of accountability, autonomy, and neoliberal ideologies of social improvement, impacted these reviews on curriculum and assessment’. These discourses of educational assessment practice make it reasonable to act in certain ways, creating and shaping meaning systems that have gained the status and currency of truth (Foucault, 1980b). Accountability is at the heart of assessment discourse with systems strategically used at decision level by stakeholders, leadership and management to hold settings and professionals to account (Birmingham, 2021). Schools, under neoliberal policy, are organised in relation to market forces and competition with the stated aim of ensuring equality (Department for Education, 2022). The assessment data generated by the SWMAT’s tracking system is paramount in neoliberal education policy (Hill and Kumar, 2008). It enables the SWMAT to compete within markets through league tables, to show value for money to commissioners and for professionals and pupils to be held accountable for their performance – the research data presented above has clearly begun to show how the themes, within this analysis, clearly illustrate the theoretical ideas from the literature operating in

practice. The assessment practices that have replaced levels at the SWMAT, emphasising quantitative data, maintain what Bradbury (2019) describes as the datafication of education within English schools. Professionals at the school highlight that stakeholders are continuing to ask for data. In his response considering assessment data, Tom explains:

*But the reality is all schools and all local authorities ask for it either in GCSE grades or national curriculum levels still. They ask for it in age-related expectations. They're asking for it in levels just in different words. It's the same thing across the board.*

Tom then goes on to say:

*Levels never went away with assessment without levels. All it did was it changed to are they progressing as you would expect in say the subject, what are the expectations? Well, here's the descriptors of what they should be doing at year seven. Year eight. OK, we've got levels again. So it never went away. My personal opinion is that it was a pure political movement that means b\*\*\*\*\*.*

This illuminates clear tensions between the intended impact of government legislation and the constraints felt by the SWMAT and its leadership team within the neoliberal regime. To further illustrate these tensions is the statement from the TWRG (2016, p. 7) who argue that ‘schools should not feel pressure to create elaborate tracking systems or work at grade approaches’. The TWRG (2016) report that many schools have since introduced new assessment reporting systems mimicking levels and have attempted to overlay a new system onto the one previous. This is exactly what has been done by the SWMAT involved in this research.

Tension results, as on one hand the government have stated the priority of assessment systems and policy is to positively impact on teaching and learning moving away from numerically-based systems, however, on the other hand the climate that schools exist in remains the same. Indeed, the pressures and demands from stakeholders and inspection regimes are ever increasing. Around the time of the DfE’s introduction of the new legislation NASUWT (2015, p. 16) stated that ‘the removal of levels has caused considerable confusion and anxiety among

schools and has led to the development of overly bureaucratic and workload intensive approaches to assessment'. The knowledge of assessment at all levels is conflicting and it is understandable why there was considerable confusion and anxiety felt by leadership teams. The data presented above shows clearly that the SWMAT and its leaders have made the decision to construct their assessment system using knowledge that best enables their survival in the market; their assessment technologies prioritise the construction of their identity as a setting that provides efficient, and cost-effective, education thus rendering them visible as an effective service, placement and package provider. Essentially, the SWMAT relies on a positive identity to exist and secure funding as a school. The form of knowledge about assessment constructed by the DfE (2014) has seemingly become 'invisible' prioritising the knowledge demanded by the market. The knowledge and understanding of the assessment technologies vary at different levels within the SWMAT creating inconsistencies and disparities in common understanding. The logics of assessment practice in this case are not necessarily to improve the teaching and learning process but, as previously highlighted, are to preserve the schools' identity to ensure their survival in the market.

## 5.5 Researcher perspective

When I applied for the Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) programme I did so as ‘its focus is on the ways in which learning can be understood and might be developed in a professional context’ (University of Plymouth, 2023). Thus far the views of professionals at the SWMAT have been central in the analysis. However, as both a researcher and a teacher at the SWMAT, I hold my own position in relation to assessment. This section therefore will intentionally incorporate my own viewpoint into the analysis drawing on points made previously to extend the knowledge of assessment within this thesis. When I started my career as a teacher at the school in 2014, I had my reservations about the assessment and tracking system that staff were tasked to use. Over the last 8 years, as a middle leader, I have developed and implemented assessment policy across the schools, however in light of such policy developments I have found tensions in relation to recommendations of current assessment research, the views of the teaching staff body and the views of leaders. Whilst I did not develop our current assessment and tracking system, alongside a number of middle leaders I questioned its purpose and impact on staff and pupil development.

Within the neoliberalised educational climate, I have attempted to keep the pupils at the centre of my work with a view to positively impacting on the teaching and learning process particularly when developing policy. To date I have struggled to understand why there was often a high level of resistance from leadership particularly when alternative assessment proposals seemed ‘logical’. In the dictionary definition of the word logic, rational judgement for proposals was based on research, the views of the staff body and measures that would positively impact on the teaching learning process. Through the EdD programme I set out to increase my understanding of assessment and uncover the logics of practice. Central to this understanding is recognising that the word logics in a governmentality context, as previously highlighted, differs to its dictionary counterpart. The ‘directions of thought [that] seem to flow more easily’ (Alderton and Pratt, 2022, p. 503) are based around neoliberal ideals, more specifically the market, accountability and objectification/datafication of staff and pupils and as this analysis would suggest, are not primarily concerned with enhancing teaching and learning.

At all 3 levels of assessment as described by Newton (2007) (judgement, decision and intended impact) I have been subject to ‘values schizophrenia’ which Ball (2003, p. 221) describes as

the rapid changes to moral context in education occurring where ‘commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance’. The assessment technologies at the SWMAT portray how professionals have ‘[organised] themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations [setting] aside personal beliefs and commitments’ to ‘live an existence of calculation’ (Ball, 2003, p. 215). The knowledge underpinning the technologies, as previously explained, (re)constructs pupil and staff identities creating ‘data doubles’ (Bradbury, 2019, p. 10); this process of datafication renders actors and settings visible and plays a central role within accountability cycles and inspection regimes. Furthermore, data assists in evidencing value for money for the taxpayer within AP (Department for Education, 2018a). This idea that ‘data doubles’ refers to staff as well as pupils is a contribution of this thesis to knowledge.

At decision level within the teaching and learning process, I would argue, as many of the professionals involved in this research have done, that the assessment and tracking system has little to no impact. The neoliberal educational climate in which we exist has, in my opinion, created a damaging obsession with and reliance on data; the resulting logics of such practice coalesce not around staff and pupil development nor the teaching and learning process but around the data-driven governing knowledge which is used for the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Dean, 2010, p. 17). Whilst a vast amount of data is collected at the school, the points above show that data remains invisible for certain aspects of practice, particularly, as specified many times, the teaching and learning process. At decision level, the school does not effectively turn data into information in order to enhance the teaching and learning process. To illustrate my point, Tom argues:

*[Data has] got to have action on the end of it and you’ve got to turn the data into information. If it’s not going to information, it makes it useless... I don’t think there’s enough to turn it into information in school. I think we’re missing a trick.*

Furthermore, in considering the usefulness of data, Mitchell who is a current Ofsted inspector and executive leadership member explains:

*And I've always felt that data only gives you the questions that you want to ask. It never gives you the answer. So I've never been an advocate, and certainly never inspected a school where I've made a judgement based on the data or the assessment information that I've got.*

Mitchell goes on to say:

*Ofsted's focus on data has definitely lessened and whether it's about qualitative or quantitative, I think quality is more important now than the amount. But I think it's fair to say that the deep dive methodology was designed very much with the principle that we're going to make judgements about learning that doesn't include data at all. I think probably that was an aspiration at one point of the HMCI when they came in was to get rid of the use of data altogether. What's his name? The old director of education for Ofsted made a promise not to look at internal data in schools, and there was some conjecture about whether it was actually possible to make a judgement without doing it and Ofsted have since proved that you can.*

Yet again tensions arise when one considers the data generated from the schools' assessment technologies. There are huge inconsistencies between literature, Ofsted and the views of professionals at the SWMAT related to the importance and use of assessment data. In highlighting my point of tensions and inconsistencies regarding data in inspection practice outlined above, an extract from the interview with Peter reads:

*SM: Have you had any experience with Ofsted or inspections. If so, have you ever had to provide assessment data or have you been asked about data and within those inspections?*

*Peter: Never. So I've had three or four Ofsted inspections throughout my career. I've always been advised to make sure I've got all this data prepared. I've never been asked for any data from Ofsted. They're more interested again, I'll use the good word, narrative. They're more interested in a*



*narrative. They want to know the success stories. They want to know the challenges you've had and what you've done to overcome them. They didn't want to know about the numbers. Realistically, if you're turning around to Ofsted and you say, oh, 60% of our kids are making progress, they want to know why aren't those 40% making progress and what you're going to do about it, they don't want to know about, they're not really interested in numbers. I've never been asked for them. I've had it ready, but I've never been asked to provide them with the information. They've never asked me for any of it.*

*SM: When you say you were advised to have all this data ready for Ofsted in preparation for inspection, who advised you to do this?*

*Peter: So that would be the senior leadership team have advised me and all middle leaders to make sure that there's a bank of evidence ready to share. I'll be honest, it's quite a large workload on staff and it's quite difficult for certain members of staff who especially aren't data focused in their roles to try and get that information from.*

The above supports the previous points I have made about the intended impact of assessment and tracking systems and the subsequent data it generates. In this instance I believe the intentions of the school and its leaders, and therefore the logics of practice, to be the creation of what Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017) terms an 'Ofsted story' through the data. The assessment technology and its attributed knowledge enables the school and its staff to construct a specific identify for Ofsted and the story of progress. In my experience, the pre-inspection data-driven tasks set by leadership have led to an increase in staff workload, stress and anxiety. Professional knowledge regarding assessment at the judgement and decision level seems to be driven by 'inspection myths' as the view from Mitchell (above) and Ofsted (2023, no page) surrounding the schools' internal assessment data are clear:

*Inspectors will not look at non-statutory internal progress and attainment data on inspections of schools. That does not mean that schools cannot use data if they consider it appropriate. Inspectors will, however, put more focus on the curriculum and less on schools' generation, analysis and*

*interpretation of data. Teachers have told us that they believe this will help us play our part in reducing unnecessary workload. Inspectors will be interested in the conclusions drawn and actions taken from any internal assessment information, but they will not examine or verify that information first hand.*

I previously witnessed the negative impact that levels had on educational settings, their professionals and their pupils. My perspective aligned with that of the literature surrounding the area, particularly where the use of levels was divorced from enhancing the teaching and learning process. The logic behind their removal was for schools to design their own effective systems that learnt from a system that was previously flawed (Poet *et al.*, 2018). Given the scale of change following the DfE's (2014) legislation instructing the removal of curriculum levels, I believed this to be an opportunity for assessment to be done differently. The subsequent assessment and tracking system however is a numerical system that has been based on levels, but rather than having 1-8, we now have 1-242. Where it is viewed independently of other existing assessment technologies, the system is meaningless. The tracking and assessment number line has been mapped against the previous curriculum levels alongside GCSE grades and other qualifications. The knowledge of other external technologies gives the SWMAT's tracking and assessment system meaning enabling its staff to use the technologies through transposing their knowledge of previous systems and finding the equivalent on the subsequently implemented system.

The system is purely based on academic progress across subjects. This surprised me as the core purpose of the SWMAT is not academic intervention (a point which has been previously made in the analysis above). For the main part we offer placements and packages for pupils who, on the whole, require intervention in areas such as their social and emotional development along with intervention related to their behaviour within school. The largest of the AP schools within the SWMAT aims to reintegrate pupils back into a mainstream setting following a period of intervention. As this is a core purpose of an alternative provision school, I have often found myself questioning why a purely academic tracking system was implemented. There are systems that measure 'soft skills' which staff are tasked to use, however these feel very much like 'bolts on' and do not feed into the main system. The knowledge which forms the core purpose of what it means to be educated in an AP school becomes invisible, whereas our

governing knowledge, which fits with the performative and marketised educational climate, again provides the logic around such systems. Aligning with my viewpoint is that of Mitchell, who comments on an assessment system that he came across whilst inspecting a school providing specialist provision:

*One of the places I've seen that I've liked assessment best, was a specialist provision. They'd developed their own system for judging each individual's progress, and it used a kind of pie chart approach and it used different percentages of the children's lived experience and work and learning to make a judgement about how they were doing. So about 40% of it was their learning in speech and language and mathematics and reading and then about 20% was feedback that they got from parents and 10% feedback they had from the work experiences, you know, they're kind of vocational offer.*

*They kind of had this system that basically when you broke it down, a behaviour instance for each individual child, whether it's going up or down and all that kind of stuff. But basically this in its entirety gave them a scoring system to say actually this child would was making outstanding progress in their scoring because it was out of 100. You know, they're scoring 86 out of 100 on scale. And that's not just English and mathematics, it's their behaviour. It's their engagement with the community. So it's a really rounded, holistic thing and it was right for that curriculum in that school. So I wouldn't say it was right for every school. I wouldn't say it is right for all alternative provision, but what I quite liked about it was that assessment system was really closely linked to what their curriculum offer was and was bespoke and was individualised. And it wasn't done for Ofsted and it wasn't done for the national curriculum. It was done for what's going to be best to get the best outcomes for those children. So that was probably the best one I've seen.*

*The interesting thing about that really is that they created data. It was their own data and they could only compare children with other children, so they couldn't do national comparisons. But when you looked at the individual stories and what it told them, including when it wasn't going well, you could see the real strength of what it allowed them to do. You know, annual reviews,*

*where it wasn't going well, were really well informed with quite a holistic picture of assessment.*

The commentary above highlights that it is possible to implement successful technologies that provide a more holistic picture assessment. To conclude this section, I'd like to outline an extract which arose during the interview with Joseph which I found I kept coming back to. Joseph comments:

*But what does the number line mean? I mean, who puts the numbers on the line? Is it just simply a score out of 10 or a score out of something else and then we attach maybe a grade to a particular score? Assessment is very blurry at the best of times.*

This sums up some of the questions this analysis has sought to answer and leads into the forthcoming section where I consider some of these questions in the wider arena of commodification. Where this section has addressed the logics of assessment practice, the following discussion will consider how these logics are formed within the landscape of commodification.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

The previous chapter has addressed RQ1 through analysis drawing upon Newton's (2007) levels of assessment and Dean's (2010) analytics of government utilising his four dimensions. Within this chapter, I acknowledge to the reader that I have re-used some of the interview verbatims from chapter 5 to inform and develop the discussion. In bringing together the previously identified themes and the literature, this chapter considers RQ2 which, in light of the assessment-related logics of practice, asks:

*RQ2: How are these logics of practice formed within the educational landscape of commodification?*

### 6.1 Measurement and output

Since the late 1970s, greater accountability has been placed upon schools through 'consumer-orientated education' (Benn and Chitty, 1996); education is seen not as a 'public good but a commodity in the marketplace and that this commodity would be delivered more efficiently and effectively in market forces' (Grace, 1994, p. 126). This is particularly prominent in the alternative provision sector as AP schools compete to secure the custom of commissioners such as local authorities and mainstream settings who purchase placements and packages for their pupils. At the heart of this movement of neoliberalisation (encompassing marketisation, privatisation, performativity and commodification) is the displacement of beliefs and values, that once informed the production of educational discourse, now replaced by those emphasising output, marketisation and competition, transforming education into a commodity (Ball, 2004). This shift in values views education '... in terms of quantities; everything is simply a sum of value realised or hoped for' (Slater and Tonkiss, 2001, p. 162).

In commodifying education, the process of reification, that is the 'transforming of human properties, relations and actions, into things independent of persons', enables quantification/objectification and the subsequent measure of output. For AP schools, measures of output within the educational market include the DfE's performance tables reporting on the results of pupils at various stages of their education. Furthermore, Ofsted inspection reports

detailing the judgement received by the school are made publicly available for all to view. In considering the current educational climate, the recent report on SEND and AP from the DfE (2022) outlines that despite substantial investment, the system in its current form has become financially unsustainable and is failing to deliver improved outcomes for children, particularly those with SEND. The report proposes that local authorities will, through reform, achieve value for money from their budgetary spend in this sector of education. Authorities will ensure that decisions are made using robust data and evidence to secure high quality services and education that are financially sustainable. The report further highlights that the current accountability measures in place are not effective enough in securing improvement within SEND and AP. The DfE (Department for Education, 2023b, p. 71) proposes:

*to establish a national and local inclusion dashboard that will present timely performance data across education, health and care. The dashboards will improve public transparency, help to enable better decision- making at a national and local level and drive self-improvement across local areas. The metrics in the dashboards will support an assessment of overall system performance and provide a basis for measuring whether we are achieving our mission of improved outcomes, better experiences and a financially sustainable system. Ultimately, the dashboards will help to incentivise the behavioural and cultural change.*

Considering Newton's 'intended impact' level of assessment, the DfE (2014) (2014) was clear in their rationale behind the removal of levels, which they outlined caused numerous issues. The DfE responsibilised schools to implement policy and systems to enhance the teaching and learning process, and increase commonality of understanding through the prioritisation of formative assessment over practices heavily reliant on numerical data. The 'assessment without levels: qualitative research' paper from Poet *et al.* (2018, p. 8) considered the intended impact from the DfE reinforcing that 'the intention was to reduce the time spent by teachers in recording and tracking progress towards numerical targets and release time for more in-depth teaching and formative assessment approaches that would support progress'. In achieving the intended impact, the authors concluded:

*Teachers and senior leaders said that they were focusing more on formative assessment since the introduction of Assessment without Levels (AWL). This was reported to be enabling teachers to differentiate activities, refine their planning and provide support more effectively. Some interviewees (especially those using a 'mastery' approach) reported that pupils now had a deeper understanding of topics, rather than focusing on progressing as quickly as possible through a series of levels.*

Through examining the SWMAT's assessment technologies and the analysis data from the previous chapter, it appears that the school's numerically-based tracking and assessment system exists in contradiction to the intended impact of DfE's legislation. Tensions can be drawn with the research conducted by Poet *et al.* (2018) particularly in considering the absence of the positive impact that the SWMAT's assessment and tracking system has on the teaching and learning process. Jacob, in considering the tracking system argues 'teaching and learning is not impacted by it' with Peter adding:

*And it's not even understandable for the staff that we've got here. So I would say that the system we've got right now probably isn't fit for purpose. It just seems a bit backwards to go through and put an assessment system in place that's more complex and makes less sense than the original system that was already there when the opportunity was put in. It was like, hey, we're getting rid of levels, but then other schools have opted for a very similar system to that. Our system is not good.*

As the data has shown, professionals find themselves caught in a moral dilemma whereby they can submit to neoliberal assessment ideologies or resist them. One might argue that the decisions made by individuals to adopt these assessment practices can be viewed as a 'technology of the self' or as 'practices of the self' (Foucault, 1997, p. 291) through which the 'subject constitutes itself in an active fashion'. These technologies or practices of the self are 'not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group' (Foucault, 1997, p. 291). In considering Foucault's technologies and practice, Kelly (2013, p.

518) explains that ‘the care of the self was not exclusively about oneself, but also about others, even if it was primarily directed towards the self’. Through this lens, policy makers have adopted the numerical assessment ‘so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality’ (Foucault in Martin, Gutman and Hutton, 1988, p. 18). The implementation of the system allows policy makers to achieve perfection or immortality in the commodified landscape through the identity work they are able to do with progress data. Policy makers can show the effectiveness and efficiency of their educational placements and packages through their assessment outcomes delivering them ‘salvation’ within the educational market.

The assessment technologies, through measurement and output, make visible the risk posed to the school by professionals and pupils. This risk can then be ‘managed’ this with a view to securing the SWMAT’s place in the market. This process, which is unpacked in further detail in the forthcoming sections, enables the SWMAT to achieve ‘perfection’ through the assessment technologies delivering its ‘salvation’ in an era of performativity and commodification. The terms ‘salvation’ and ‘perfection’ present a timely opportunity to reiterate that governmentality originates from Foucault’s concept of ‘pastoral power’, wherein the pastor shows the congregation the way to ‘salvation’ and how they can manage themselves to achieve this (Foucault, 1982b). In parallel with this concept, Ball (2013, p. 140) states, professionals who ‘under-perform’ are subject to moral approbation and the tyranny of ‘little fears’. Assessment technologies can be used by leadership to fulfil their own roles in the drive for ‘perfection’ and managing potential risk through ‘support’ with those unable to ‘keep up’ continuously teetering on the brink of moral regulation. It provides them with a mechanism of surveillance. The assessment technologies at the SWMAT enable a ‘...(reconstructed) discourse of control, allowing them [professionals] to participate again in taking responsibility for pupils’ learning and to merit their performance as teachers’ (Pratt and Alderton, 2019, p. 590). Ball (2003, p. 219) summarises that through intensive work of the self, professionals can become more than they are and become better than others; they can be ‘outstanding’, ‘successful’, ‘above the average’.



## 6.2 Governing knowledge

Dean (2010, p. 24), from the theoretical position of governmentality, highlights that rationality ‘means any way of reasoning, or way of thinking about, calculating and responding to a problem, which is more or less systematic, and which might draw upon formal bodies of knowledge or expertise’. Dean (2010, p. 24) further argues that systematic ways of thinking are privileged explaining:

*The notion of mentalities might not carry this rationalist weight. It entails the idea that thinking is not a collective activity. It is a matter not of the representations of individual mind or consciousness, but of the bodies of knowledge, belief and opinion in which we are immersed.*

Analysis has illuminated the formal bodies of knowledge underpinning the theoretical assumptions of the SWMAT’s assessment technologies. The discipline of cognitive psychology or cognitive science, as it is also termed in the literature, is highly visible and is made explicit in specific aspects of educational practice at the SWMAT. Cognitive psychology is visible in the SWMAT’s teaching and learning strategy related to ‘what works’ in classroom teaching practices to optimise knowledge stored in pupils’ cognitive structures and secure rapid progress. The way knowledge is conceptualised in the discipline of cognitive psychology is more subtly embedded in the rationalities of the SWMAT’s assessment and tracking technologies providing systematic ways of thinking which ultimately privilege the reification and objectification of pupils’ progress. Knowledge originating from socio-cultural theories of learning or research, becomes invisible as it conveys that there are other factors beyond a professional’s classroom teaching or instruction that impacts on a pupil’s ability to ‘learn’. Professionals, through these conceptualisations of knowledge, are therefore, unable to be responsibilised for a pupil’s learning. Subsequently, this type of knowledge is not beneficial in serving commodified and performative regimes.

Biesta (2007), for example, recognises that the ‘most influential factors in school success are the home environment’, which might expose teaching and learning to theories of capital (see Bourdieu, 1986). Conceptualising learning in terms of capitals renders it less visible and may

subsequently reduce accountability on professionals, therefore compromising the process of responsibilisation. In relation to the SWMAT's assessment technologies, knowledge from disciplines outside of cognitive psychology would make evidencing or making visible the effectiveness of the school and its professionals problematic. Thus, in order to secure their place in the educational market, the SWMAT's governing knowledge conforms with that underpinned by experimental disciplines and with the knowledge of the inspectorate, Ofsted, who have based their latest inspection framework on research from the cognitive domain.

The SWMAT must 'play the game' to survive in the market and therefore submit to the governing knowledge; this is conveyed by Michael:

*We have that accountability measure and ultimately it's government money and we are a government regulated organisation. So however philosophical we want to be above it we have to consider that. The email that came out this week from the trust about the three pillars. It's about finance. I'm ultimately accountable to make sure that I spend the money effectively. The pupils are making good progress.*

Knowledge from the domain of cognitive psychology/science dominates the commodified educational landscape with its influence coming from government regulators. This knowledge is prevalent in the SWMAT's assessment technologies and shapes the practice of professionals within the setting. Ofsted's research paper argues that the organisation is committed to ensuring that the inspection framework is informed by research evidence however the inspectorate, in compiling their research collection, reveal that they have not surveyed the entire field of education research, 'limiting our review to what evidence is directly related to our inspection judgements and criteria' (Ofsted, 2019, p. 3). The theoretical underpinning of the research outlined in Ofsted's report is primarily rooted in cognitive psychology and science which affirms Ofsted's own words within which they recognise they have limited, by design, the research informing the inspection of key areas of teaching, learning and assessment. To further outline how this form of knowledge dominates the educational landscape, the Education Endowment Foundation, who are funded by the DfE, provide evidence based resources to improve educational attainment and practice, such as assessment, with a focus on 'what works'.

These resources are used by the leadership team of the SWMAT in the drive for school improvement.

Through the lens of Dean (2010), this form of knowledge becomes visible due to its role in the neoliberal and commodified landscape. Ofsted's (2019) chosen body of research evidence knowledge which they use to inform inspection judgements encompasses an experimental methodology which seeks to address 'what works' through the use of randomised control trials (RCTs). RCTs are seen as the gold standard in the world of medicine and have now become the preferred and prescribed method in education research (Biesta, 2007). At the heart of this research perspective and model of evidence based practice is the concept of professional action as effective intervention (Evans and Benefield, 2001). The assumptions of these evidence based models originates from a causal model of professional action (Burton, 2000); this notion is based on teaching professionals administering an intervention (cause) or treatment to pupils, in order to bring about a certain outcome or result (effect). Consider the example of teaching or direct instruction, as a treatment or cause and increased knowledge within a pupil's cognitive structures, which one might term learning, as the outcome or effect. Therefore, RCTs show the 'effectiveness of treatments beyond reasonable doubt' (Biesta, 2007, p. 5). Tensions arise when transposing knowledge from the field of medicine and experimental science to that of education, Biesta (2007, p. 8) argues:

*This first problem with this approach is the role of causality: apart from the obvious fact that the condition of being a student is quite different from that of being a patient — being a student is not an illness, just as teaching is not a cure — the most important argument against the idea that education is a causal process lies in the fact that education is not a process of physical interaction but a process of symbolic or symbolically mediated interaction. If teaching is to have any effect on learning, it is because of the fact that students interpret and try to make sense of what they are being taught. It is only through processes of (mutual) interpretation that education is possible. Despite the attempts of many to transform education into a causal technology (often based on the idea that we only need more research in order to find and ultimately control all the factors that determine learning), the simple fact that education is not a process of “push and pull”— or, in the*

*language of systems theory, that education is an open and recursive system  
— shows that it is the very impossibility of an educational technology that  
makes education possible.*

Considering the points above and focusing them towards the research question, Biesta (2007, p. 8) provides a line of enquiry in considering the logics of assessment practice; it is meaningless to talk about whether the assessment and tracking system at the SWMAT is effective, the ‘question that always needs to be asked is, effective for what?’ The responses from those professionals interviewed conveys, in their view, that the system is not effective in positively impacting the teaching and learning process at both judgement and decision level. Given the data one might argue the logics of such a system are formed in the neoliberal and commodified landscape for the SWMAT to provide evidence of its effectiveness and efficiency to those who purchase package and placement. Assessment is effective in providing, in numerical terms, a measure (evidence) of progress/learning as a direct result of teaching. The assessment technologies are effective in enabling school to (re)construct their identity as a ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ educational provider in the commodified landscape securing the SWMAT’s place in the market. The knowledge attributed to the assessment technologies, as previously highlighted, enables direct accountability. Knowledge from the domain of cognitive psychology views teaching as a process of cause and effect and similarly to the field of medicine concepts, measures and indicators can be assigned to pupils’ learning so that it can be measured. Just as research uses RCTs to measure the impact of interventions, in the instance of the SWMAT the assessment technologies provide a measure of effectiveness in relation to teaching (the intervention). Thus, this assessment data can be used to hold schools and professionals to account for the educational services that commissioners are paying for.

### **6.3 The product and the service**

Dean’s (2010, p. 31) analytics of government enables illumination of these subtly embedded rationalities of cognitive psychology and the ‘taken-for-granted’ ways of ‘doing’ assessment underpinned by the theoretical assumptions. Within the SWMAT’s assessment technologies, these embedded rationalities are not entirely self-evident to the vast body of professionals; neither are they questioned. The logics of a numerically-based assessment system, contradicting the intended outcomes from DfE (2014), are formed in the landscape of

commodification, specifically the educational market. The SWMAT's survival is dependent on finance based on pupil numbers which is ultimately secured through commissioned placements or packages. Through this process, the SWMAT itself becomes a site of consumption with pupils' education subsequently commodified, becoming a product or service to be bought and sold (Ball, 2004).

Pupils are given a price tag carrying different monetary values depending on their complexity. These price tags of pupils are made explicit by Tom who states,

*£70,000 is what we're charging the local authority to provide an education package. Now, if we can't show that we are making progress and how we are using that £70,000 there's something wrong.*

In this instance, perhaps what is most prominent in the landscape of commodification is the need for the SWMAT to evidence value for money to the commissioners of the placement or package. Alongside this process of commodification, education providers are subject to Ball's 'terrors' and 'tyranny' which dominate the discourse of accountability within the educational market, thus constraining commissioners and service providers. Whilst the DfE guidance instructed change directly to the systems of assessments, the way in which AP Schools were held accountable by both commissioners and stakeholders however remained the same. At the heart of the SWMAT evidencing value for money is its measures of pupil progress within the numerically-based assessment and tracking system. This enables the 'datafication' of pupils and their progress whereby professionals measure the learning in the form of knowledge retained in pupils' cognitive structures resulting directly from their teaching. To reinforce a point made previously, pupils' knowledge is subject to a process of reification through the assessment technologies becoming independent of the pupils, governing their lives (Ball, 2004). This form of reification enumerates a pupil's knowledge rendering it a concrete and common sense reality capable of being measured in its resultant form of a numerical progress value (Jaspal, 2014).

Through the lens of Dean (2010), the knowledge driving assessment and the subsequent progress measures, specifically that from cognitive psychology or science, is legitimised through 'the pragmatics of 'optimization' – the creation of skills or of profit rather than ideals.

Again, it is economism which defines the purpose and potential of education' (Ball, 2004, p. 18). The progress scores generated by the SWMAT are provided to commissioners with the intention of evidencing value for money in relation to the educational package or placement they are providing. The SWMAT is effectively held accountable for the service or product it provides through pupils' progress measures. The schools' progress judgements enable commissioners to make decisions about their preferred placement/package provider. The logics of the market give rise to assessment 'truths' represented by numerical progress values enabling schools to make visible their efficiency within the market; tensions can be drawn with the intended 'truths' proposed by the DfE (2014). To summarise, Ball (2004, p. 14) crystallises the above how the logics of assessment practice are formed in the landscape of commodification:

*The performances of individual subjects or organisations serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. Metrics are constructed which are used to make different sorts of activities commensurable. They stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement. The human being is commodified. We come to value others solely for their performance, their contribution to the performance of the group or the organisation, rather than their intrinsic worth as persons.*

As the analysis has highlighted, the assessment technologies at the SWMAT do not necessarily impact positively on teaching and learning as was the intention following the removal of levels. One can argue that the intended impact of such technologies are to fulfil accountability functions within the educational market, that is proving effectiveness, efficiency and therefore value for money to those who commission placements and packages and to inform judgements from stakeholders such as Ofsted. One prominent finding of the analysis was the widespread inconsistencies related to the accountability measures both internally within the SWMAT and externally through commissioners and stakeholders. In relation to the progress data generated by the assessment technologies, a small number of professionals in the interview sample stated that they have been challenged on their assessment and progress data, whereas the majority have not. This point is echoed by Rihanna who summarises '*I haven't been challenged on*

*students that have not made progress', Natasha adds 'Never. I've never been challenged on it. I've never in all honesty, I've never had a conversation with anyone about tracking'. Tom provides discussion regarding the usefulness of the data at classroom level:*

*Yeah, basically, if the assessment system causes minimal workload, but minimum workload, maximum accuracy and it's meeting the purpose that it's required to do. The requirements for it are basically it's got to work for stakeholders in the outside school sense and it's got to work for stakeholders in school. The reality is because of our class sizes it's useless to class teachers because the classes are so small. You know where kids are anyway. I don't think it's going to add any value on that. One exception to that is mock exams, but I'll come back to that and how you analyse that data. It doesn't add any value to class teachers.*

If the assessment data is seen as 'useless' by teaching professionals at the SWMAT, and in the opinion of professionals, does not serve as an effective tool at judgement and decision level within the classroom then further issues arise. This issue related to the system, the data it generates and its subsequent use for internal accountability processes. Furthermore, as contended in the analysis, assessment is viewed by professionals as a 'tick box' or 'pointless exercise' which 'fills up a spreadsheet' and as such, it seems to be treated in this manner in relation to accountability processes. This research argues that the system, and the data it generates, has been engineered to be more useful when used externally. A prominent finding from the analysis is the inconsistencies and discrepancies in accountability measures and challenge from commissioners paying the SWMAT for packages and placements. The following extracts illustrate these tensions:

*Tom: So the commissioner will challenge strongly. The commissioner can be quite fierce over progress and you know when you've got the meetings coming up you dread it because they are fierce over them.*

In contrast, Mitchell highlights:

*I mean it's a really interesting question because do schools want to know? Because if I'm honest that most schools are fixated with the fact the student is out of their hair. So, you know, dealing with three points compared to four points this term of expected progress in PE because we were doing squash, I don't think a lot of them are bothered is my honest answer.*

Similarly Peter adds:

*I can't recall a time when schools have asked me whether they're making expected progress or not. I can't think of any school that's ever asked me how they're getting on in academic terms or progress. They just want to know that their pupil is attending, what their behaviours is like, that sort of thing, are they ready to come back to us? And then they're always looking for reasons to not take them back, to be honest.*

This illustrates tensions in relation to accountability logics and provides explanation as the views and perspectives of commissioners. Two of the commissioners in the extracts above are identified as mainstream schools and given that they are paying the SWMAT for educational services one must question the logics surrounding the lack of accountability measures surrounding the service that they are paying for. Again, if the word logic is considered through the dictionary definition, that is a 'a particular way of thinking, especially one that is reasonable and based on good judgement' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023), the lack of challenge from mainstream schools surrounding the packages/placements they are paying for seems, on the surface, illogical and certainly not based on good judgement from an education or financial perspective. Considered from a governmentality perspective, the mainstreams logics around the lack of challenge towards the SWMAT should be questioned and considered in terms of the direction of their thought that seems to 'flow more easily, affording rather than constraining, certain actions over others' (2022, p. 503). One must consider these logics in relation to market relevance.



To develop discussion around the points made above, Bernstein (1997, p. 87) outlines that market relevance has become a 'key orientating criterion for the selection of discourses' with this movement having profound implications for educational settings. Ball (2004) explains that the educational market is a sophisticated system of consumption and production providing services, goods, experiences and routes provided for consumers publicly and privately. The market is no longer a matter of choice and competition between educational institutions. For parents, the market presents a plethora of educational opportunities for their children in which they are faced with choices about how best to secure their child's future in the climate of increased competition and unpredictability in relation to the future (Giddens, 1991). To inform parental choice, key information in the market is supplied through Ofsted inspection reports containing information and judgements about the effectiveness of education offered at settings. Further information informing parental choice comes from school league tables which provide key performance data for schools.

#### **6.4 Securing market identity**

Ball (2004, p. 10) argues that the current operation of the educational market provides evidence of 'another kind of commodification of the child', with the market creating:

*...local 'economies of student worth'. In effect schools compete to recruit those students, most likely to contribute to 'improvements' and 'performance', the easiest and cheapest to teach, and most likely to contribute to the attraction of others like them. As many Headteachers seem ready to admit, the best way to improve your school and thrive in the performative culture is to change your intake.*

Within this commodified climate, some pupils are seen as 'value-adding' and are highly sought after whereas others are considered to be of low value adding 'negative value' to the educational setting and therefore, should be avoided where possible (Kenway and Bullen, 2001, p. 140). Both pupils and their parents may be viewed as the producers of the exchange value of educational institutions (Kenway and Bullen, 2001). Considered through the lens of

Dean (2010), pupils and parents are essential in the construction of the educational settings identity in the market, making the educational provider visible. In terms of the decision making process surrounding a parent's choice of school, schools will simply be seen as a positive place for their children to be educated or will be classified as a setting to be avoided. To secure their identity in the market, thus ensuring their survival, schools in terms of their admissions and tactics of management of their pupil population, resort to 'cream skimming' and 'silt shifting' (Grand and Barlett, 1993; Hill and Kumar, 2008); the process becomes a game. To this extent the child becomes a commodity that is, 'a means to an end – a thing' (Ball, 2004, p. 10) discussed in terms of their exchange value and risk they pose to the educational setting.

It can be argued that the lack of challenge related to the progress of pupils, from the mainstream setting towards the SWMAT in the accountability process, may be explained by applying the above principles to the management of their pupil populations in securing their market identity. Responses from the interviews particularly Michael and Peter highlight, in their views, that mainstream settings 'aren't bothered' about progress being made at the SWMAT. From these responses it seems that the mainstream settings have placed their pupils on packages at the SWMAT to alleviate issues and ensure that the '*student is out of their hair*' (Michael). In market terms these pupils, as a commodity are those seen to be adding 'negative value' posing risk to the mainstream settings and their identity within the market. These pupils impact negatively on schools' league table position and inspection outcomes, therefore logical decisions are taken to remove them from the mainstream settings through purchase of an educational package or permanent exclusion. Whilst the purchase of an educational package tends to be temporary for a fixed period of time, mainstreams are '*always looking for reasons to not take them back*' (Peter). Subsequently, using assessment at decision level, an array of tactics are employed by schools to preserve their performance data and inspection judgements; off-rolling has proven to be a controversial strategy in removal of those pupils adding 'negative value' (Kenway and Bullen, 2001, p. 140). This is particularly prominent with those pupils in years 10 and 11 as they put the school's formal examination performance data at risk. Resultingly, these pupils are more likely to be permanently excluded and placed within alternative provision settings (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000). This perhaps suggests how the logics around the lack of challenge and accountability are formed in the landscape of commodification.

The consequences of mainstream settings gaming the system, through the removal of those pupils 'adding negative value' from their learning environment, is increased pressure on the

SWMAT whose pupil numbers are ever increasing, meaning the school's capacity to support these pupils with complex needs becomes increasingly difficult. Alongside pressures around the capacity of educational delivery are the ever increasing demands of the performativity regime, the DfE's (2023b, p. 3) report details prioritises the need for 'evidence-based provision, delivered through new National Standards... [with a view to creating an] SEND and alternative provision system that delivers timely, high-quality services'. In light of the ever increasing culture of performativity within AP, the DfE (2023b, p. 71) proposes:

*to establish a national and local inclusion dashboard that will present timely performance data across education, health and care. The dashboards will improve public transparency, help to enable better decision-making at a national and local level and drive self-improvement across local areas. The metrics in the dashboards will support an assessment of overall system performance and provide a basis for measuring whether we are achieving our mission of improved outcomes, better experiences and a financially sustainable system. Ultimately, the dashboards will help to incentivise the behavioural and cultural change across the SEND and alternative provision system to achieve maximum impact of reform.*

This drive for improved outcomes and provision for a performance dashboard evidences the 'terrors' and 'tyranny' faced by the SWMAT that act in accordance with the 'priorities, constraints and climate set by the policy environment' (Ball, 2000, p. 10). The analysis has highlighted themes of gaming, manipulation and fabrication in relation to the assessment of progress. To expand on the points made in the analysis, fabrication constructs an alternative version SWMAT's identity, formed within the landscape of commodification, to portray a cost effective and efficient educational service, consequently making the setting accountable. Ball (2000, p. 10) summarises, 'Truthfulness is not the point - the point is their effectiveness, in the market or for the Inspection, as well as the 'work' they do 'on' and 'in' the organisation - their transformational impact'.

In considering assessment without levels, Poet *et al.* (2018, p. 9) highlights a widespread issue in relation to schools' new assessment technologies and in recognising progress with those pupils who have SEND stating, 'only a minority of interviewees felt that their school's

assessment approach worked well for pupils with special educational needs (SEN). Others said that their school's approach did not adequately recognise the small steps of progress made by pupils with SEN'. This is particularly prominent for AP settings as the DfE (2023b, p. 5) highlight that '82% of children and young people in state-place funded alternative provision have identified special educational needs' thus representing a large proportion of the school population. Given the difficulties reported in showing progress in these populations of pupils, this perhaps provides further explanation as to the logics involving gaming, manipulation and fabrication. As pupils are required to make 'rapid progress', professionals use their knowledge of assessment technologies to 'game' the system in order to assist in securing their identity within the neoliberal landscape. The extract from Joseph reinforces these points:

*We have to be able to demonstrate through means of assessment, that rapid progress is being achieved. The trouble is that it can become a little bit of a game because if you want to prove that rapid progress has been made, often the temptation is to look at assessing the student and we under assess, I think, in terms of giving them a grade which artificially shows that we can then prove that they've made rapid progress. In actual fact we've probably given them a score, an arbitrary number, that says that they are working at a particular level, and oh yeah, we've done this piece of work and look what's happened. They've got a certain score and they've made two levels or more of progress which then equates to them being able to have that score and that narrative that they have made rapid progress.*

Building on the discussion from Joseph, Sellar (2015, p. 131) summarises:

*Consider the use of student performance data for accountability purposes, which requires that data have the capacity to change perceptions about school and teacher performance and, in turn, to change leadership and teaching practices through systems of reward and sanction. The bodies involved – school principals and teachers – undergo change due to the measurement of their performance, and this affects their capacities for action; for example, their capacity to retain their job or gain promotion.*

Given the SWMAT's accountability processes with commissioners and its need for a positive identity within the educational market and Ofsted inspection regime, pupils' progress and performance data contributes to the construction and maintenance of the school's identity and the identity of professionals who work there. Although there is evidence from the analysis that the emphasis on quantitative progress data, generated through the assessment technologies, the commodification of educational landscape has subjected assessment technologies to a process of normalisation. This process has modified the behaviour of schools and professionals to fit within acceptable standards which Perryman (2009, p. 614) explains is a mechanism of power achieved through 'hegemonic internalisation of discourses of control'. Professionals at the SWMAT:

*are subjects of power [who] internalise expected [assessment] behaviours and learn these behaviours through acceptance of a discourse. In an inspection context, normalisation describes the process by which schools operate within the accepted norms of an 'effective school', a concept dictated by the discourse of school effectiveness research. (Perryman, 2009, p. 614)*

In this current high stakes, performative and commodified educational market, Plowright (2007, p. 384) outlines that inspection is 'a game that is understood by all parties ... schools ignore playing the game at their peril' however this perhaps applies to other mechanisms of accountability used on and by the SWMAT. In light of fabrication and game playing, Ball (2000, p. 2) argues that the 'tactics of transparency produce a resistance of opacity, of elusivity - an escape from the gaze - and that this resistance is also paradoxical and disciplinary'. This new mode of social and moral regulation impacts professionals through the 'reforming' and 're-forming' of identity and meaning whereby new 'professional subjectivities' are produced (Ball, 2000, p. 2). Building on this argument, is Sellar (2015, p. 221) who, thinking through the lens of Ball, illustrates:

*Ball points to the emotional dimensions of performativity: 'these technologies have an emotional status dimension, as well as the appearance of rationality and objectivity. Thus, responses to the flow of performance information can engender individual feelings of pride, guilt, shame and envy.*

Ball's analysis makes clear the importance of the relationship between commensuration and the feelings that data engender within performativity regimes. Gaming and fabrication of assessment technologies are strategies of impression management in the commodified landscape. These strategies are deployed to alter identities through the knowledge attached to them. These are ways of knowing; knowing how stakeholders, regulatory bodies and commissioners know schools, their professionals and pupils and how professionals know themselves. Tensions are visible throughout the educational landscape in considering ways of knowing but are particularly prominent when it comes to professionals knowing themselves. In the changing moral context of education professionals must set 'aside personal beliefs and commitments' to 'live an existence of calculation' (Ball, 2003, p. 215) where 'commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance' (Ball, 2003, p. 221). The result is a 'corrosion of character' (Sennett, 1998). Aligning with the above, Besley (2007) considers the relationship between truth telling and technologies of the self, detailing the four questions as proposed by Foucault (2001, p. 170), 'who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relation to power'. The questions provide further scope to extend discussion around fabrication.

Given the normalised discourse of progress data in commodified and performative landscapes, it is not within the interests of schools and professionals to illuminate the truth around those pupils who do not meet the progress standards and expectations. The school's relationship to power is one which makes them accountable. The consequences of not meeting expectations or the standards required by commissioners could ultimately lead to the reduction of pupil placements/packages and jeopardise the SWMAT's financial security. These power relationships place the SWMAT in 'a state of conscious and permanent visibility at the intersection of government, organisation and self formation' (Ball, 2000, p. 4). As detailed above, not only is there a moral dilemma in performative education cultures, but there is also an emotional dimension. This is where one observes the emergence of a new subjectivity, whereby a professional's self-image, sense of self and others and possibilities of existence is organised by experiential and emotional contexts, memories, images and feelings (de Lauretis, 1986); thus 'a new kind of teacher' is created (Ball, 2000, p. 5). Through this lens the authors provide us with 'practices through which we act upon ourselves and one another in order to make us particular kinds of being' (Rose, 1992, p. 161). Crucially, 'there is a 'splitting' between the teachers' own judgements about 'good practice' and students' 'needs' on the one hand and the rigours of performance on the other' (Ball, 2000, p. 8). This leads us back to the point of

gaming and fabrication as a technology of the self; fabrication enables professionals to make themselves visible as effective and efficient practitioners securing their self-image and existence within the educational market. Gillies (2020, p. 4) explains:

*All in all, therefore, in Foucauldian terms, when someone shapes their own conduct, behaviour, actions, for a chosen purpose, there is governmental reason at play – governmentality; they are engaged in power relations (albeit with the self); (self-) discipline is involved; and these actions constitute technologies of the self.*

As a technology of the self, professionals' fabrications of assessment data is paradoxical, in one sense it is an escape from 'the gaze' through the (re)construction of identities whereas in another, fabrication 'requires submission to the rigours of performativity and the disciplines of competition - resistance and capitulation. It is, as we have seen, a betrayal even, a giving up of claims to authenticity and commitment, it is an investment in plasticity' (Ball, 2000, p. 10).

## **6.5 The validity of assessment technologies**

The final aspect of assessment at the SWMAT to consider is what the system measures and how this logic is formed within the landscape of commodification. The numerical assessment technologies at the SWMAT have been implemented with the intention of measuring pupils' progress in their academic subjects such as English, maths and science (amongst others). When considering the intended impact of the educational service provided by the SWMAT, the primary concern is not with academic subjects. As literature portrays, numerous pupils who are placed in AP schools have a range of complex support needs which include behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (Department for Education, 2018b). The nature and delivery of the AP curriculum is, as described by Rihanna 'holistic' enabling staff to meet the needs of pupils through tailored support packages which sit alongside the standard 'academic' curriculum (Tate and Greatbatch, 2017). Mitchell explains:

*this type of provision...is often about preparation for adulthood and the transition into the next step, the schools that do that best will track that for*

*two or three years because it's the ones that don't succeed, that tells them the most about where their provision didn't provide that readiness for the next step.*

One might come to question therefore, how the logics around measuring solely academic subjects, on the main assessment system, are formed given the nature of the provision. One might further question the validity of the assessment given the specialist nature of the AP schools. Simply put, that is to ask does the assessment measure truly reflect a pupil's progress within their school 'journey?' It has been made clear within the interview data that the SWMAT measures 'soft skills' alongside other aspects of a pupil's non-academic development, however these are very much 'bolt-ons' and do not carry the weight that perhaps they should given the nature of the provision. Again, as highlighted in the analysis, one arrives back at the question of validity relating to the progress measures and as to whether the progress measures reflect the true nature of a pupil's overall development at the SWMAT. The point here is not to argue that it is not important to measure academic subject progress, rather, the point is how the sole measurement of academic subjects has become the focus of the main assessment technologies. It is more a question of how it has 'come to count'. Michael discusses:

*And if we are better school in 12 months' time than we are now I don't care what you call it really, but I am not naive enough to know that actually I can't go off and do a curriculum on, you know, Latin and tap dancing. And they're the two things they'll be brilliant at because we have that accountability measure and ultimately it's government money and we are a government regulated organisation. So however philosophical we want to be above it we have to consider that.*

In the current regime of performativity within AP there is, as previously highlighted, pressure on settings to produce and evidence outcomes particularly in relation to core subjects. This lessens the focus on the development and assessment of 'soft skills'. Resultingly, tensions arise between the practice and priorities of professionals and the requirements of government policy. These tensions are considered by Moore and Clarke (2016) who contrast neoliberal and performative government policy and teachers' own views of educational practice. Moore and



Clarke (2016, pp. 666-667) make visible ‘the constructed ‘other side’ of neoliberalism’s discourse of localised freedom and choice: that is to say, the burden of personal and local responsibility that neoliberal policy imposes on schools, teachers and students’. In light of the comments above from Michael, Moore and Clarke (2016) examine the existence of serious and troubling tensions between central policy directives and teaching professionals’ own preferred practice; as noted in the prior chapters, these tensions, including but not limited to curriculum, intentions of learning and pedagogical approaches, leave many professionals feeling undermined due to these central policy directives.

Professionals unwilling to accept these policy directives practice in ways that contradict their personal beliefs, ‘effectively becoming the ‘bearers’ of those ideas as they assume responsibility for their implementation in practice’ (Moore and Clarke, 2016, pp. 667-668). At the time where schools were tasked to develop their own assessment technologies to replace levels, Birmingham (2021, p. 79) reiterates that ‘strong discourses of accountability, autonomy, and neoliberal ideologies of social improvement, impacted these reviews on curriculum and assessment’. These discourses focus on reductive outcome measures failing to provide space for creativity. Education has lost sight of the needs of the pupils failing to recognise the widespread capacities within the diverse pupil population (Birmingham, 2021). Given the commodification of a pupil’s education, and the financing of pupil packages/placements by commissioners, the SWMAT must ‘be accountable’. Academic subjects seem to fit or ‘flow’ naturally, and through the assessment progress data generated by the SWMAT, the school can provide evidence of the effectiveness of their educational service. To show ‘rapid progress’ is the intention of the assessment technologies although this may translate to a ‘rushed curriculum’ which ‘asks us to more efficiently deliver information - to spoon feed what ought to be discovered. This may improve test [and assessment] scores without improving retention’ (Silbaugh, 2011, p. 329). The assessment priorities of the SWMAT do not capture the complex nature of the education provided to the pupils it serves. In the landscape of commodification ‘it is not so much what the school can do for its students but what the students can do for their school’ (Ball, 2000, p. 17). To conclude, Silbaugh (2011, pp. 329-330) summarises:

*Schools cannot test team-building behaviour, problem-solving, attitude, adaptability, motivation, curiosity, situation sense, flexibility, leadership, ethics, open-mindedness, patience, compromise, conflict-resolution, or self-*

*expression. But many agree that children need to develop these capacities to be happy, good, and successful individuals, citizens, and workers in their adult lives. That we cannot place those values onto the central metric for measurement diminishes their importance to educational culture today, and the market becomes flat, the character of the item corrupted, and genuine value is lost. If the question, What does a child need to become a fulfilled adult? were the same as the question, What makes a good education?, education would look different from today's standards and benchmarks-based institution.*

## **Chapter 7: Concluding remarks and implications**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This thesis began by posing questions about the logics of assessment practice at a SWMAT and further asked how these logics come to count in the landscape of commodification. Despite my own professional engagement with assessment practice, literature and previous research I have conducted in the field, I was not fully aware of the complexities around assessment logics and their formation. Like many aspects of practice within education, assessment technologies at the SWMAT have become taken for granted, reconstructed ‘truths’ which have been normalised in the daily lives and practice of professionals. In this sense I am using the phrase taken for granted to illustrate the way that professionals, myself included, perhaps fail to properly notice or appreciate the logics of assessment practice and how these relate to the wider landscape of commodification; largely, professionals take on and accept practices out of duty with many too busy to allow their questioning to get in the way of ‘getting on with things’.

The research conducted within this thesis has provided the focus and mechanism to consider and make explicit assessment logics and their formation at the SWMAT which, without appropriately allocated resource, would remain invisible. What cannot be ignored throughout the entirety of this research is the impact of neoliberalism on assessment policy and practice. Again, to reiterate a previous point, it is not the intention of the research to place blame onto leadership teams and professionals that are at the forefront of policy design and implementation. As with professionals at the macro level of the classroom, leadership staff also work within the constraints of the neoliberalised and commodified landscape. The constraints on these staff are particularly prominent within AP given how pupils’ education is commodified through the allocation of placements and packages.

At this point, I’d like to note that market imperatives, experienced by AP settings, are also felt by mainstream schools in slightly different ways. What makes it different in the context of AP, is the intensity, and explicitness of the market language and behaviour. In this sense, AP acts as a touchstone, or critical case, showing how markets distort all education systems. This thesis offers an insight into the system as a whole which is difficult to see if you only consider education through the lens of mainstream settings.

It is also worthwhile at this stage to reflect on the research as a whole and highlight to the reader that the final study went beyond the scope of the original two research questions (as set out on p. 22). The thesis presents a powerful account of the lived experiences of the staff at the SWMAT as they try to make the current assessment and tracking system work. The lived experiences include the significant challenges faced by the staff body in relation to assessment and the subsequent impact on their professional lives. These include the tensions and dilemmas that staff face when having to use the assessment and tracking number line despite it solely measuring the academic progress. The reality of progress within this setting, as previously highlighted, might be a pupil attending school or being able to remain in a classroom environment. It is not just academic progress that ‘counts’ for staff working at the SWMAT. Whilst I have not added a third research question, alongside considering assessment logics and their formation in a commodified educational landscape, I acknowledge that the research within this thesis also addresses the participants’ lived experiences at the SWMAT.

## **7.2 Local policy at the SWMAT**

Throughout this research, Newton’s (2007) levels of assessment have provided a theoretical framework for the analysis of assessment logics. The interviews have highlighted widespread inconsistencies in what staff believe the intended impact of the assessment and tracking system to be. Some staff believe that the assessment and tracking system serves a market function enabling the SWMAT to ‘be accountable’ to Ofsted and commissioners, thus providing evidence through the visibility of pupils’ progress scores whilst simultaneously evidencing their educational services as value for money. The work the system does for the school and its professionals in this sense is largely related to market identity which is directly associated with the knowledge that surrounds outstanding, good, requires improvement and inadequate identities therefore shaping what it means to be an effective AP setting. Within the interviews there is an acknowledgement from Tom that the system was constructed to serve stakeholders, stating that, ‘the reality is because of our class sizes it’s useless to class teachers because the classes are so small. You know where kids are anyway. I don’t think it’s going to add any value on that’. A further branch of the analysis has suggested that there are staff who are unclear on the purpose and intended impact of the assessment system, asking questions around what value the assessment and tracking system brings to their practice.

The intended impact of any assessment system is paramount as it provides the overarching aims, purpose and justification for the system's existence. Ofsted (2018) recognise 3 strands of assessing quality which are intent, implementation and impact, within which similarities can be drawn with Newton's assessment levels. Following the previous chapters, I believe there is strong rationale for the leadership and professionals involved with assessment policy to critically evaluate the intended impact of the current assessment and tracking system. Using a framework such as Newton (2007) the SWMAT, would, in my opinion, find great value in revisiting questions around purpose of the system and the role it fulfils at both judgement and decision level. Clearly there are different strands in relation to the intended impact of the system, I acknowledge that accountability within the educational market is crucial and inescapable (Ball, 2000; Ball, 2003; Ball, 2004; Ball, 2013; Ball, 2015), but this seemingly comes at the expense of teaching and learning which the system, as outlined within the interviews, has little to no positive impact on.

If the system, in part, is being used to fulfil accountability functions then staff should be informed and made fully aware of the work the assessment does. Data from the interviews suggests that currently staff are not fully informed or aware of the wider functions. In my experience of leadership, I have found it important to be clear about the intentions of systems and why professionals have been tasked to use them. Clarity forms the basis of effective systems and in my experience, clarity leads to increased staff engagement with policy. It is noteworthy at this point that the leadership within the SWMAT has undergone a multitude of changes in the last 5 years. The current leadership team, I believe, has adopted a positive mindset in relation to reviewing practice and policy, representing a potential opportunity for change.

I strongly argue that the SWMAT, in evaluating the intended impact of their assessment and tracking system, further consider the work that it does for them at the judgement and decision levels and how they can maximise impact on pupils' learning through actions within these. In addressing the intended impact of the assessment and tracking system and communicating this across the SWMAT, the setting will gain a consistent understanding of what the intended impact of the system is. Whilst there were strong neoliberal discourses at the time of schools being tasked with the creation and implementation of new assessment systems (Birmingham, 2021), the use of pupils' progress data to impact positively on learning has come second to its functions for the market. Whilst it is highly unlikely that neoliberal and commodified

educational climates will cease, teaching and learning should certainly become more of a focus in the intended impact of the system. I believe both professionals and pupils would benefit from an assessment system which works for them and enhances the development of pupils.

In considering the intended impact of the assessment and tracking system a further issue of contention relates to decisions around what the system is designed to measure. In its current form, the system measures academic progress in the subjects that the pupils study. Throughout this research, I have reiterated the unique nature of AP settings contending that pupils are not referred due to the requirement of academic intervention. Pupils are often referred to AP settings for non-academic intervention in relation to their needs. These include but are not limited to their behaviour, mental health and also for medical needs. The point here is not to argue that a pupil's academic development is not important as clearly it is, however its role in assessment is perhaps disproportionate and is not representative of the provision.

AP settings prepare pupils for their next steps whether that is reintegration into mainstream schools or preparation for post-16 training. As highlighted by an executive member and Ofsted inspector within the interviews, 'the best' assessment systems in these specialist provisions, in their opinion, are those that capture a holistic picture of the pupil's school life. Rather than having bolt on systems which measure aspects of a pupil's non-academic development, operating alongside the main assessment and tracking system, there is an argument for these to become part of the main system. An assessment and tracking system providing a more rounded and holistic picture of a pupil's progress at the SWMAT would perhaps better capture the nature of the provision enabling increased understanding of progress for pupils, professionals and stakeholders.

Within the interviews it was highlighted that mainstream settings and stakeholders who commission packages/placements were not 'bothered' about progress data. One must question the relevance of academic progress data to a mainstream setting which has referred a pupil to the SWMAT for intervention related to their behaviour or attendance. Furthermore, questions must also be raised as to stakeholders' understanding of pupils' progress scores which are presented in the form of a numerical points score ranging from 1-242. Without translation from other assessment systems, it is arguable as to whether commissioners fully understand the meaning of this metric. Given that many professionals using this system do not fully understand the metrics themselves, there is a strong argument that a lack of common understanding exists

across the board. There is further work to be done by the SWMAT around providing training to both staff and stakeholders in relation to the assessment and tracking system. Furthermore, there is also work to be done in relation to how the system supports the teaching and learning process at classroom level. I believe that training alongside a package of support for staff in the use of the assessment and tracking system would be beneficial in maximising positive benefits for pupils and professionals along with providing a consistent approach across the SWMAT. Progress data needs to be seen and used as more than just a 'tick box' or 'pointless exercise' which 'fills up a spreadsheet', otherwise it will be treated as such.

Due to the highly specialised educational provision provided at the SWMAT and the nature of the pupils (as outlined on p.13), I recommend that the setting carry out a full review of the assessment and tracking system that is currently in place. I strongly argue that there is scope for a more effective and holistic system which captures the progress of the pupils, both academic and non-academic, and more accurately reflects their development and the impact of the provision. As part of a wider review process, I recommend that the SWMAT gain staff, pupil and parent feedback on the current assessment system as a starting point. Once this is completed, the school should set up an assessment task force encompassing staff at different levels including those from senior leadership, middle leadership alongside those who are current classroom teachers. I would also recommend including parents and pupils with the assessment task force. Using Newton's (2007) framework to guide the review, staff at the SWMAT have an opportunity to 'step back', consider all view points and then ultimately ensure that pupils are placed at the heart of the process, considering what this means at the 'intended impact' level. I believe that an effective assessment model would be a pupil 'pie chart' which is comprised of key areas of development, including academic progress, social, emotional and behavioural progress, careers progress and rewards progress alongside the progress pupils have made towards their termly review targets. Considering this model, whilst the overall assessment score might be displayed as a metric, the assessment criteria used by staff would be underpinned by clear descriptors which can be understood easily by all stakeholders.

### **7.3 National policy**

The process of decentralising assessment which involved the removal of levels has clearly had huge implications for national policy. These implications can be found in considering common

understanding between professionals, pupils and stakeholders. Revisiting a previous extract outlined in the analysis, I draw upon the points made by Peter who illustrates:

*the idea of removing levels was because parents and other agencies had no idea what a 6A meant. So the idea was to bring in something less confusing that parents were able to understand and schools were able to understand a bit better as well. We've currently got system which, as you said, ranges from about 1 to 200, which, to be honest, is actually more confusing than the original levels that we had before. Trying to explain even to another school that have different assessment systems that a student is currently working at 143, that means nothing to them really. We have to translate it into something else.*

In terms of the national educational landscape in England, there are approximately 24,000 schools (British Educational Suppliers Association, 2021). Given the directives of the DfE's (2014) policy whereby schools were tasked with the creation of their own assessment systems, there are potentially 24,000 different assessment systems in England which in itself creates an issue related to common understanding. Although it is contended that removal of the national curriculum levels system of assessment was a positive decision due to the identified flaws which were associated with it, others argue that levels served a generation which had an adequate grasp of its meaning and were therefore able to effectively use the system to communicate progress and attainment (NAHT, 2014). Consequently, the national implications of this legislation change were that schools and their professionals lost their shared and common understanding of progress through the removal of this national benchmarking system. Where there is pupil movement between schools, be this between mainstream or AP, communication of pupils' current academic attainment forms an important section of this process. Due to the lack of common and shared understanding between schools, professionals, pupils and stakeholders, assessment systems have to be translated to facilitate understanding. In many instances, schools translate their assessments back to the previous language of levels in the goal of common understanding. This issue is particularly prominent in AP because of the transactional nature of these meetings within which settings meet with commissioners and stakeholders to report on progress made by pupils who have a placement or package.



When considering the decision level of national assessment policy, schools are heavily influenced by their identity within the market. Neoliberal ideologies dominate the decision making process whereby schools are bound by performative regimes particularly given the commodification of pupils' education. As Ball (2003, p. 217) remarks, 'value replaces values'. There is a tactical aspect to decisions taken at this level whereby schools calculate the level of risk pupils pose to their identity within the market; that is, how their overall performance output (portrayed through data) is impacted by these 'high risk' pupils and consequently the implications this has for league table positioning. 'High risk' pupils compromise inspection outcomes. Due to this level of risk, I have witnessed first-hand how these pupils are 'moved' or 'removed' either by placements, packages, managed moves or permanent exclusion. These implications are perhaps beyond the remit of this research (but see Done and Knowler, 2021) however, it is clear that the judgement and decision levels of assessment play a pivotal role in the fate of many pupils who possess a certain data identity. There is a clear argument here that these practices, centred around 'high risk' pupils do not have their best interests at heart. In terms of commodification and cost efficiency, pupils that do not pose a risk to schools, possessing positive data identities, are the cheapest to teach and add value to the school's identity. Keeping these pupils on role provides a substantial benefit and is logical.

A further implication from a national assessment perspective is in the assumptions that dominate the systems and practice of APs and schools. An analysis of assessment policy and systems has made visible the discipline of cognitive psychology which shapes technologies enabling the objectification and measurement of pupils' learning and development. Popkewitz (2018, p. 79) argues that through curricula and forms of practice schools 'inscribe cultural norms that simultaneously create social stability and progress'. The role of psychology is made explicit by Popkewitz (2018, p. 79) who outlines that 'the language of psychology created a way to reason about social conduct as defined tasks to be evaluated in relation to universal attributes of individuals and notions of efficiency'. Pratt and Alderton (2023, p. 589) add, 'crucially, he [Popkewitz] argues that modelling childhood as a developmental process... has made it possible to analyse children's work as a representation of the student's progress against a hypothetical norm'.

Cognitive psychology has proven itself to be an effective tool in neoliberal assessment policy which enables schools, within the landscape of commodification, to make visible pupils' progress through technologies that are numerically-based. The result is a mechanism, driven

by technologies and knowledge, whereby AP settings and mainstream schools can ‘be accountable’ and provide evidence that secures their place in the market as effective and efficient providers of educational services. The knowledge of cognitive psychology complements the governing knowledge shaped by neoliberal ideologies and is intensified within AP due to the strength of market orientations and performative pressures. It is not my intention to argue against the use of cognitive psychology in shaping assessment policy and technologies however, it is important to recognise the knowledge that underpins assessment, how it comes to count and what it is effective for. Furthermore, in recognising the underpinning assumptions of assessment, professionals can therefore begin to question the logics of assessment practice and how such technologies shape professional and pupil identities and the identities of the schools.

#### **7.4 International policy**

In terms of implications around international policy, Connell (2013) delineates the impact of neoliberalism on education in Australia and considers the market agenda and its consequences for education. Outside of England, Connell (2013, p. 100) makes clear that education has been affected by the ‘neoliberal political, economic and cultural agenda’ whereby markets redefine educational practice through implementing the ‘mechanics of competition’, the ‘redefinition of schools as firms’, the ‘revival competitive testing’. Furthermore, in parallel with consequences seen in England, professionals are subject to Ball’s ‘terrors’ and associated accountability measures which result in a narrowing curriculum and a workforce in the educational sector which is insecure. As has been a key theme through this research, ‘the knowledge base of education is impacted, with technicization of professional knowledge and a growth of cultural fakery around education’ (Connell, 2013, p. 100). To summarise, Connell (2013, p. 107) understands there to be:

*A gradual change in relationships between classroom teachers and school executives is thus under way, with public schools being reshaped on the model of private schools, even without formal privatization. This re-engineering, to use a business term, does not stop at the classroom door. Teachers’ relations with their pupils are also being re-shaped. The most obvious part of this change reflects the intensified testing regime that is so*

*central a part of the neoliberal agenda in education. High-stakes competitive testing produces formidable pressure to teach to the test: narrowing the curriculum to the knowledge and skills being tested, and drilling the specific performance that pupils have to emit during the test. This is a familiar effect of competitive examinations, for instance for entry to university or to selective schools.*

Given the high stakes testing and assessment regimes that exist, one of the most prominent implications which occurs as a direct result of this is teaching to the test. For professionals that are subject to the ever-increasing pressures of performativity, teaching to the test is a strategy that presents a clear benefit and provides an advantage in England and internationally. The teaching and learning process therefore changes and subsequently involves professionals delivering content that relates directly to assessment. The intended impact is that through strategic content delivery professionals can secure improvements in pupils' assessment scores or allocated assessment levels. Herein lies, in part, the rationale for the removal of national curriculum levels in England whereby the process of teaching, learning and assessment became 'synonymous with moving onto the next level' (Department for Education, 2015, p. 12), thus arriving back at the concept of teaching to the test. Consequently, pupils could have serious gaps within key subject areas. It is not the intention to place the blame onto professionals for this type of practice as their performance is key to surviving in the educational market and any advantage gained amidst these pressures is beneficial to them. Rather the intention is to outline how assessment practices play out in neoliberal and commodified landscape and the implications this has on schools, professionals and pupils.

## **7.5 Research originality and contribution**

This research used Dean's (2010) analytics of government, specifically the four dimensions he outlines, alongside Newton's (2007) levels of assessment to further understanding of the assessment-related logics of practice at a SWMAT and also understand how these logics are formed in the landscape of commodification. This study makes an original contribution to the research field through the context of assessment-related logics which are situated within AP. As previously highlighted, there is an abundance of literature related to assessment from a

neoliberal perspective however the research has generally been conducted within the context of mainstream schools (Alderton and Pratt, 2022; Pratt, 2016; Pratt and Alderton, 2019).

Alternative provision is an area, on the whole, that is under-researched in comparison to mainstream settings, this has been identified by the DfE (2018b) who have attempted to fill certain gaps of professional knowledge. As highlighted in the literature review, a large quantity of research on assessment has been conducted, but this generally focuses on summative and formative assessment, their components and the effect this has on teaching, learning and assessment. From a neoliberal perspective, and more specifically through the lens of commodification, this research fills a gap in the published literature around how assessment-related logics are formed in the context of AP within this educational climate. Furthermore, by using Dean's and Newton's frameworks, this study has offered a new way in which to consider assessment in general – in the context of contemporary education systems – and to understand the complexities of AP in particular.

Through the analysis of interviews conducted with professionals at the SWMAT, the research has highlighted the logics of assessment practice which are illuminated through Dean's dimensions comprising of knowledge, technology, visibility and identity. Despite the changes in legislation (Department for Education, 2014) instructing the removal of levels, the research has shown that SWMAT has adopted an assessment and tracking system that is numerically-based and reports on pupils' progress in terms of a numerical points score. The system exists in contradiction to the guidance contending that schools should focus less on numerical assessment scores. The research has illuminated the logics that surround the subsequent assessment technologies implemented at the SWMAT which have been heavily impacted by neoliberal ideologies.

The thesis exposes tensions that exist throughout impact, judgement, and decision levels of assessment (Newton, 2007) and identifies inconsistencies and discrepancies in relation to professionals' perspectives and understanding. Although the guidance and legislation changed in 2014, the climate of commodification in which the SWMAT exists did not and, arguably, pressures around finances and accountability have increased. Analysed through the lens of Dean's (2010) dimensions, professionals' responses indicate that the assessment and tracking system has limited positive impact on the teaching and learning process. Rather, it is effective for functions of accountability in the market enabling the construction of the SWMAT's

identity. This assists the SWMAT in making visible their place in the market as an effective and efficient provider of AP placements and packages. I strongly argue on the basis of the findings within this research that the pupils are not placed at the heart of assessment technologies and systems at the SWMAT.

## **7.6 Limitations of the research**

This research provides an insight into the complexities around the logics of practice at the SWMAT and how these are formed in the landscape of commodification. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 9 professionals employed by the SWMAT who gave their consent to take part in the research process. The small number of participants in the interview sample provided rich data in relation to assessment and enabled illumination of logics of practice. A limitation of this research however is the small sample size. Furthermore, limitations can be identified in relation to space within this thesis. Given this limitation of space, the level of detail presented to the reader, particularly in relation to the interview transcripts in chapter 4 and 5, only offers a partial insight within key themes and therefore does not offer a full account of each participant's perspective.

Participants within this research were chosen through purposive sampling which is advantageous when used where the sample is small in size. Participants were selected on the basis that they would be best suited in providing 'an answer' to the research question. Through purposive sampling I was able to recruit professionals with a wide range of roles, experience and perspectives. Professionals from the SWMAT that were recruited ranged from those in roles as classroom teachers, middle leaders, heads of subject, leadership and executive leadership and therefore covered a variety positions. A limitation of purposive sampling however is that the sample of participants recruited for the research is based on subjective judgement and is therefore prone to bias. To address this issue, the sample within this research was carefully selected; the professionals recruited held a variety of different positions at the SWMAT (executive leadership, senior leadership, middle leadership and classroom teachers) with each having different levels of experience and lengths of service. Consequently, I believe the sample has enabled me to effectively address to research questions.

The interviews took place within the 2022 calendar year and participant responses were based upon their accounts and perspectives from that particular period of time. Given the dynamic nature of AP, including the evolving local and national policy impacting on professionals at the SWMAT, participants could only provide an account of their perspectives at the time of interview and will not include more recent developments in policy and practice.

## **7.7 Future research directions**

Future research directions may include:

1. The recruited sample of participants could be invited to take part in a follow up study which considers assessment following the release of the SEND report.
2. Research to further develop insight into the governing knowledge formed by cognitive psychology how this impacts the wider teaching and learning process beyond assessment.
3. Research that considers the commodification of educational placements and packages specifically focused on pupils with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

More generally, I hope that the research might provoke further thinking about the role of Alternative Provision and the effects of increasing marketisation on the ways in which it operates.

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## Appendix 1: SWMAT's Assessment and tracking system

New National Curriculum		Old NC	Reading Age	Points	Phonics Sounds	Phonics Book Colour	Old GCSE	New GCSE
0-11months	0-11 beginning	P1		1				
	0-11 developing			2				
	0-11 secure			3				
8-20 months	8-20 beginning	P2		4				
	8-20 developing			5				
	8-20 secure			6				
16-26 months	16-26 beginning	P3		7				
	16-26 developing	P4		8				
	16-26 secure			9				
22-36 months	22-36 beginning			P5				
	22-36 developing	11						
	22-36 secure	12						
30-48 months	30-48 beginning	P6		13				
	30-48 developing	P7		14				
	30-48 secure			15				
Reception				P8				
		17						
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		26						
Stage 1	Beginning	1c	27					
	Beginning +		28					
	Developing		29					
	Developing +	1b	30					
			31					
			32					
	Secure	1a	33					
			34					
			6-y	35				
			6y 1m	36				
Secure +		6y 2m	37					
		6y 3m	38					
		6y 4m	39					
		6y 5m	40					
Stage 2	Beginning	2c	6y 6m	41				
	Beginning +		6y 7m	42				
	Developing		6y 8m	43				
	Developing +	2b	6y 9m	44				
			6y 10m	45				
			6y 11m	46				
			7y	47				
			7y 1m	48				
	Secure		7y 2m	49				
			Secure +	7y 3m	50			

Stage 3	Beginning	2a	7y 4m	51				
	Beginning +		7y 5m	52				
			7y 6m	53				
	Developing	3c	7y 7m	54				
	Developing +		7y 8m	55				
			7y 9m	56				
Stage 4		3b	7y 10m	57				
	Secure		7y 11m	58				
	Secure +		8y	59				
			8y 1m	60				
			8y 2m	61				
			8y 3m	62				
	Beginning	3b	8y 4m	63			G	1
	Beginning +		8y 5m	64				
	Developing		8y 6m	65				
	Developing +		8y 7m	66				
			8y 8m	67				
	Secure		8y 9m	68				
Stage 5	Secure +	3a	8y 10m	69				
			8y 11m	70				
	Beginning		9y	71				
	Beginning +		9y 1m	72				
	Developing		9y 2m	73				
	Developing +		9y 3m	74				
		4c	9y 4m	75				
	Secure		9y 5m	76				
	Secure +		9y 6m	77				
			9y 7m	78				
			9y 8m	79				
			9y 9m	80				
Stage 6		4b	9y 10m	81				
			9y 11m	82				
	Beginning		10y	83				
	Beginning +		10y 1m	84				
	Developing		10y 2m	85				
	Developing +		10y 3m	86				
		4a	10y 4m	87			F	
	Secure		10y 5m	88				
	Secure +		10y 6m	89				
			10y 7m	90				
			10y 8m	91				
			10y 9m	92				
		5c	10y 10m	93				
			10y 11m	94				
	Secure		11y	95				
	Secure +		11y 1m	96				
			11y 2m	97				
			11y 3m	98				

Stage 7	Beginning	5b	11y 4m	99			E	2
	Beginning +		11y 5m	100				
			11y 6m	101				
	Developing		11y 7m	102				
		5a	11y 8m	103				
	Developing +		11y 9m	104				
			11y 10m	105				
	Secure		11y 11m	106				
Stage 8	Secure +		12y	107				
			12y 1m	108				
			12y 2m	109				
			12y 3m	110				
	Beginning	6c	12y 4m	111			D	3
	Beginning +		12y 5m	112				
			12y 6m	113				
	Developing		12y 7m	114				
		6b	12y 8m	115				
	Developing +		12y 9m	116				
			12y 10m	117				
			12y 11m	118				
Stage 9	Secure		13y	119				
	Secure +		13y 1m	120				
			13y 2m	121				
			13y 3m	122				
	Beginning	6a	13y 4m	123			C	4
	Beginning +		13y 5m	124				
			13y 6m	125				
	Developing		13y 7m	126				
		7c	13y 8m	127				
	Developing +		13y 9m	128				
			13y 10m	129				
	Secure		13y 11m	130				
Year 10			14y	131				
			14y 1m	132				
			14y 2m	133				
			14y 3m	134				
		7b	14y 4m	135				
			14y 5m	136				
			14y 6m	137				
			14y 7m	138				
			14y 8m	139				
			14y 9m	140				
		7a	14y 10m	141				5
			14y 11m	142				
			15y+	143				
				144				
				145				
				146				



Post 16	195		
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## Appendix 2: Participant information sheet



# UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

### Information and Consent Form

#### The assessment related logics of practice at a South West Multi-Academy Trust

Thank you for agreeing to be involved in this project. Please read the following ethics information and decide if you are happy to give your informed consent. If so, there is a form to sign on the next page.

Assessment practices and the numerical data they generate are central within the commodified and performative climate of modern schooling. For teachers and professionals there appears to be a natural flow to practice or logical ways of acting or practising within educational settings, hence, the term logics of practice. Considering this, **it is the aim of this research** project to gain an understanding of the research topic through identifying assessment logics of practice and how they come to count within the context of alternative provision.

The proposed research presents the following questions:

- (1) What are the assessment related logics of practice at a South West Multi-Academy Trust?’
- (2) How are these logics of practice formed within the educational landscape of commodification? The envisaged outcome is to enhance knowledge within this particular area of alternative provision practice.

**The research design** is based on semi structured interviews conducted by the researcher. Research participants will be recruited through purposive sampling (a sample chosen by the researcher). Following the semi-structured interviews, data will be analysed through thematic techniques. See Braun and Clarke (2006) for further detail.

**The outcomes of the project** will be as follows:

1. A final doctoral thesis submitted for the award of an EdD. This is submitted to Plymouth University
2. A viva voce examination (oral examination) whereby the thesis is defended to expert commentators

In addition there may be other dissemination through workshops and conference presentations. Where not publicly available, copies of outcomes can be made available on request.

**The key ethical issues** in terms of your involvement in this project are as follows:

1. I will endeavour to be open and honest in the research and no deliberate deception is involved.
2. I will ask to audio record interviews. These will be transcribed in full. *You have the absolute right to withdraw yourself and your data from the project at any time, without penalty.* Data, in this context, relates to quotes from you or those the directly referencing you.
3. Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality. Additionally, any data from the interview will only be used with your permission. An exception to this however would be in the very unlikely event that I felt professionally obliged to divulge information because a participant was deemed as being at risk of significant harm. Although I will endeavour to maintain anonymity through pseudonyms please keep in mind that the setting within which the research is being conducted is relatively closed and due to this it is possible that anonymity may be compromised

Please feel free to contact me at any point about this research. Please use these contact details should you also wish to withdraw from the research.

Sam Morahan

University of Plymouth

Plymouth, PL4 8AA

Email: [sam.morahan@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:sam.morahan@plymouth.ac.uk)

Should you have any concerns/complaints about the conduct of the research which you wish to raise independently of the researcher you can contact the Director of studies for this particular research project at the University of Plymouth.

Dr Nick Pratt

University of Plymouth

Plymouth

PL48AA

Tel: 01752 5885439

Email: [N.Pratt@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:N.Pratt@plymouth.ac.uk)



**Consent Statement:**

I agree to take part in this research, and am aware that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving reason. I agree that a recording can be made and used for the purposes of the research. I understand that the information I provide will be treated in confidence by the researchers and that my identity will be protected as far as possible using pseudonyms in any presentation/publication of findings.

Name .....

Signature .....

Date .....

## Appendix 3: Research ethics application

Have you successfully completed the University of Plymouth's GDPR training?

- ☒ Yes  
☐ No

### Ethics Support

[Plymouth Ethics Online System Support](#) | [Arts, Humanities and Business Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Health Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Plymouth Sponsor](#)

### Project Title

Project short title

The assessment related logics of practice at an Alternative South West Multi Academy Trust

Project full title - *This is the title by which your project will be known. Please state the full title of your research project as it appears on all relevant documentation and ensure that it matches the title on any existing external approvals etc.*

The assessment related logics of practice at an Alternative South West Multi Academy Trust

### Status

What's your status?

- ☐ Staff Application  
☒ Postgraduate Research (e.g. PhD, EdD/ResM) Application  
☐ Taught Masters (including MCLinRes) Application

### Faculty and School

Please select your faculty (faculty you'll be submitting your application to) from the list below

Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business

Please select your school or department from the list below

Plymouth Institute of Education

### Study Type

Please choose your study type from the options below:

Research

#### Ethics Support

[Plymouth Ethics Online System Support](#) | [Arts, Humanities and Business Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Health Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Plymouth Sponsor](#)

Does your research study involve any of the following?

**Does your research study involve any of the following?** please select all that apply:

- ☒ Human participation in research excluding any of the options listed below
- ☐ Adults lacking capacity to consent for themselves
- ☐ Disclosure of protected information from the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority Register
- ☐ Exposure to ionising radiation
- ☐ Human tissue (e.g. blood, saliva)
- ☐ Independent Health Care Clinics
- ☐ Investigational medical devices
- ☐ Investigational medicinal products
- ☐ Local Authority - Social Care Research Ethics Committee
- ☐ NHS patients or staff, their tissue or data or NHS resources/premises
- ☐ Nursing Homes
- ☐ Practising midwives
- ☐ Prisoners
- ☐ Private and voluntary health care
- ☐ Processing confidential patient information without consent
- ☐ Residential care homes
- ☐ Social Workers or their clients employed by the NHS
- ☐ None of the above - please note that if you choose this option, you should contact your faculty ethics committee and not submit your form (unless they have advised you to do so).

**Ethics Support**

[Plymouth Ethics Online System Support](#) | [Arts, Humanities and Business Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Health Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Plymouth Sponsor](#)

**Has your project got External Ethical Approval?**

Has your project been reviewed by an external review body other than the Health Research Authority (HRA)? (Such as REC, another Higher Education Institute, Ministry of Defence, Prison and Probation Service, South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust or another Faculty Research Ethics and Integrity Committee).

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

**Ethics Support**

[Plymouth Ethics Online System Support](#) | [Arts, Humanities and Business Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Health Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Plymouth Sponsor](#)

**Nature of approval sought**

Nature of approval sought.

*Note: In most cases, approval should be sought individually for each research project. A programme is research comprising an ongoing set of studies or investigations utilising the same methods and methodology and where the precise number and timing of such studies cannot be specified in advance.*

- ☒ Research Project
- ☐ Programme

Please indicate which approval category

- ☐ Funded/unfunded research project (staff)
- ☒ MPhil/PhD, ResM, MD, DPA, DBA, DClinPsy, EdD
- ☐ Taught Masters (including MClRes)

#### Ethics Support

[Plymouth Ethics Online System Support](#) | [Arts, Humanities and Business Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Health Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Plymouth Sponsor](#)

### Principal Investigator

Principal Investigator details - **\*PLEASE NOTE\*** Since the University personal profile pages were decommissioned, users have not had a way to update their personal information or add an address. This means that there are no address details being pulled through to the PEOS system. However, if you would like to amend this, then you can do so by updating your personal details, which can be found in the location where you log in and at the top right of the screen. Click on your name and choose **personal details** and then amend your details in the box that appears. Once saved, this will then (only) update the PEOS system PI address.

Title

Mr

First Name

Sam

Surname

Morahan

Organisation

Are there any other investigators? Please note, any other investigators who are external to the University, cannot access the system due to the single sign on authentication and needing a University account, so will not be able to sign the form online via the system. Should you need to provide details of any other investigators, please upload this information within the "Any other miscellaneous supporting documents" at the end of the Ethical Aspects of Research section.

☐ Yes

☒ No

#### Ethics Support

[Plymouth Ethics Online System Support](#) | [Arts, Humanities and Business Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Health Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Plymouth Sponsor](#)

### Director of Studies

Director of Studies

Title

Dr

First Name

Nick

Surname

Pratt

Organisation

University of Plymouth

Department

Education

Faculty

Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business

Campus

Rolle Building

**Address**

Room 502

Rolle Building, Drake Circus

**City**

Plymouth

**County**

Devon

**Postcode**

PL4 8AA

**Telephone**

01752 600600

**Email**

N.Pratt@plymouth.ac.uk

**Country**

United Kingdom

**Funding Body**

Please specify funding body (if any)

NA

**External Peer Review**

Has your research been externally peer-reviewed at any stage (such as at bid application stage)?

☐ Yes

☒ No

**Conflict of Interest**

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### Conflict of interest

Is there a potential conflict of interest in the research arising from the source of the funding for the research (for example, a tobacco company funding a study of the effects of smoking on lung function)?

- ☐ Yes  
☒ No

### Ethics Support

[Plymouth Ethics Online System Support](#) | [Arts, Humanities and Business Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Health Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Plymouth Sponsor](#)

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### Project duration

Please enter the project start date

01/09/2021

Please enter the project end date

01/09/2023

Please enter the date on which data collection/recruitment of participants is expected to begin

01/09/2021

Has this group of participants/subjects already been the subject of research in the current academic year?

- ☐ Yes  
☒ No

### Ethics Support

[Plymouth Ethics Online System Support](#) | [Arts, Humanities and Business Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Health Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Plymouth Sponsor](#)

<mailto:FOHEthics@plymouth.ac.uk>

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### Background

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**Background:** concisely explain the research area including references, and, where appropriate, relevant policy and practice developments or professional agendas

Over the last 40 years there have been widescale changes to the British education system. Through the process of neoliberalisation, education has become a commodity to be bought and sold with an ever-increasing emphasis on performativity and its related measures. Within this educational market, alternative provision settings provide mainstream education establishments with opportunities to purchase packages and placements for pupils, who for a variety of reasons, are unable to engage in mainstream education. Alternative provision settings, just as with mainstream providers, are subject to the 'errors of performativity' and the 'tyranny of numbers.' They must evidence value for money to those schools who purchase packages from them whilst meeting statutory inspection requirements. Assessment practices and the numerical data they generate are central within this commodified and performative climate.

Within the South West Multi Academy Trust to be used within this research project, my role is currently teacher of personal, social, health and economic education and Physical Education. I am also a middle leader who takes on various assessment and policy projects designated by the head teacher. These projects are not static, once implemented I am then tasked with a different project.

## Aims and objectives

**Aims and objectives:** State what your study will achieve, key findings and any hypotheses. Include how you anticipate the fulfillment of the aims and key questions will move forward knowledge and where appropriate, policy or practice

Considering the above, the proposed research presents the following questions: (1) What are the assessment related logics of practice at an alternative South West Multi Academy Trust? (2) How are these logics of practice formed within the educational landscape of commodification? It is the intention of this proposal to provide the context, key literature and methodology related to the future research. Key findings will relate directly to the topics of within these questions. Fulfilment of these questions will be through the methods specified in the section below.

## Methods

**Methods:** please explain what data will be collected and how it will be analysed (statistical tests, sample size considerations). This should include references of the particular methodology being used; how it will be employed in relation to this study; which techniques of analysis will be used once data are collected and how this will be applied to the particular data set.

The chosen method of data collection is semi-structured interviews. Through the use of less structured techniques such as semi-structured interviews, arguably providing scope for greater exploration, researchers are able to pose questions to participants and probe individuals further when they deem it necessary (Galletta and Cross, 2013). The subsequent collection of qualitative data through these methods provides depth and detail related to a topic, potentially leading to improved understandings of an area which cannot be elucidated through statistics (Rahman, 2016). Bryman (2012) contends that it is through these less structured approaches that researchers can use the data to construct, themselves, new concepts and theoretical ideas about the topic. Consequently, it is argued that complex issues, such as assessment, can be better understood through constructionist approaches (Rahman, 2016). Thematic analysis, from Braun and Clarke (2006) will be used to analyse the data. Phases of analysis include: data familiarisation, generating initial codes, constructing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report.

As part of the data collection process I will be keeping a research journal. The journal will be in two sections. Section one will be an anonymised data/factual section whereby information relevant to the research can be recorded. The second section of the journal will be a reflective section whereby I will record (anonymously) my own thinking/thoughts I've constructed related to the data/facts in section one. On request, interested parties will be provided access to section one of the journal, that is the data and facts. The data will contribute to the topic area.

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## Recruitment

Recruitment: please explain how participants will be recruited (for example, where, by whom, how many; inclusion and exclusion criteria)

Participants will be recruited through the technique of purposive sampling, that is, the "intentional selection of informants based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon" (Robinson, 2014). Participants will be selected from my workplace, referred to within the research proposal as the South West Alternative Multi Academy Trust. This setting enables access to a range of teaching professionals within an alternative provision setting, including NQTs, Teachers, Middle leaders, Seniors and Head teachers. Participants will be known to me however I will select those who I do not know personally/have a close working relationship within the SWMAT. To further enhance the data within the study, participants from mainstream schools (specifically those mainstreams that buy packages from our setting) may be recruited for interviews. Our relationship with these schools is that we provide packages for their pupils, we are not in competition with mainstream settings.

Participants will be chosen to reflect the range of experience across the SWMAT. I will select some participants within leadership roles and others that are in teaching roles. The chosen participants will be asked due to their current ongoing contribution to assessment. Furthermore, participants chosen for the research, I believe, are at the forefront of contemporary assessment practice with AP and will provide responses that enrich the research project. When recruiting participants I will first gauge their interest verbally. If they confirm that they are interested in being a participant I will provide them with the relevant information sheets and consent forms fully detailing the nature of the research. It will be explained from the outset that there is no pressure to take part in the research. For those that wish to be involved in the research and approach me, the same process as above will be followed should I deem them a suitable potential participant.

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## Anticipated findings and their relevance

Please provide anticipated findings and their relevance

The proposed research area centres around assessment-related logics of practice at a SWAMAT and how these are formed within a commodified educational landscape and within a context of socio-economic and political debate around the neoliberalisation of education. This is a broad topic area, however, the associated specific debates on the neoliberalisation of education relate to marketisation, commodification, academisation, accountability, assessment and performativity.

The anticipated findings relate to the logics of practice related to assessment within an alternative provision setting. For teachers and professionals there appears to be a natural flow to practice or logical ways of acting or practising within educational settings, hence, the term logics of practice (Alderton and Pratt, 2021). It is anticipated that the data gathered will help highlight these logics and provide an insight into tensions that exist within alternative provision forming a basis for analysis.

It should be noted that whilst the proposed research is not based on entirely new ideas and debates within the context of education, the subsequent literature review indicates minimal research related to AP and assessment related logics of practice, and how these are formed within a landscape of commodification.

### Ethics Support

[Plymouth Ethics Online System Support](#) | [Arts, Humanities and Business Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Health Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Plymouth Sponsor](#)

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## Participant Information, Consent and Debrief

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## Participant Information, Consent and Debrief

Please attach the information requested below for participants. This should include, in lay language, the nature and purpose of the research and participants' right to withdraw. You will have the option to upload more than one document if required.

### Participant Contact - Queries, Concerns or Complaints

#### Participant Contact – Queries, Concerns or Complaints

All participants should be given a Participants' Information Sheet which gives details of a named person to whom they can address any queries concerns or complaints, in the first instance, or whom they can inform if they wish to withdraw. This will be a member of the research team, normally the Principal Investigator or Director of Studies if applicable on the project. Participants should also be informed of a contact to whom a complaint about the conduct of the research may be directed. This will normally be the Research Administrator to the Faculty Research Ethics and Integrity Committee.

- ☒ Please confirm that the Participants' Information Sheet contains this information

### Participation Information Sheet

Please upload your Participation Information Sheet(s)

**\*this is a mandatory question and must be completed**

Type	Document Name	Documents			
		File Name	Version Date	Version	Size
Participation Information Sheet	Participant Information Sheet	Participant Information Sheet.docx	21/09/2021	2	50.9 KB
Participation Information Sheet	Participant Information Sheet	Participant Information Sheet.docx	04/10/2021	3	50.5 KB
Participation Information Sheet	Participant Information Sheet Dec 21	Participant Information Sheet Dec 21.docx	07/12/2021	4	52.4 KB

### Consent Form

Please upload your Consent Form(s)

**\*this is a mandatory question and must be completed**

Type	Document Name	Documents			
		File Name	Version Date	Version	Size
Consent form	Participant Information Sheet	Participant Information Sheet.docx	15/07/2021	1	50.2 KB
Consent form	Participant Information Sheet	Participant Information Sheet.docx	04/10/2021	3	50.5 KB
Consent form	Participant Information Sheet Dec 21	Participant Information Sheet Dec 21.docx	07/12/2021	4	52.4 KB

### Debrief Information

Please upload your debrief information, if applicable.

(If you do not have any to upload, you can skip this question)

### Sample Questionnaire

Please upload your sample Questionnaire (including any online questionnaires), if applicable

(If you do not have any to upload, you can skip this question)

### Sample set of interview questions or focus group prompts

Please upload your sample set of interview questions or focus group prompts, if applicable

(If you do not have any to upload, you can skip this question)

Type	Document Name	Documents	Version Date	Version	Size
		File Name			
Sample set of interview questions	Potential questions	Potential questions.docx	21/09/2021	1	13.1 KB

### Scales or other diagnostic tools

Please upload your scales or other diagnostic tools, if applicable

(If you do not have any to upload, you can skip this question)

#### Ethics Support

[Plymouth Ethics Online System Support](#) | [Arts, Humanities and Business Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Health Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Plymouth Sponsor](#)

### Ethical aspects of research

## Ethical aspects of research

Please indicate how you will ensure this research conforms to each clause of the University of Plymouth's [Principles for Research Involving Human Participants](#). Please address each of the ethical principles set out below

### Informed Consent

#### Informed consent

How will informed consent be gained? Are there any issues (e.g. children/minors, learning disability, mental health) that may affect participants' capacity to consent? If so, how will these be resolved? Will research be carried out over the internet? If so, please explain how consent will be obtained.

Informed consent will be gained through participants' completion of the consent forms. The research information is contained on the information and consent form to make sure participants are informed about the nature of the research they will be involved in. There will also be prior discussion between participants and I, the researcher, to ensure they are provided with the necessary information. This will also give participants the opportunity to ask any questions they might have prior to signing the consent form. I will also be sending a whole school email about the project that I will be undertaking. At this point I will also communicate that I will be keeping a research journal. The journal will be in two sections. Section one will be an anonymised data/factual section whereby information relevant to the research can be recorded. The second section of the journal will be a reflective section whereby I will record (anonymously) my own thinking/thoughts I've constructed related to the data/facts in section one. On request, interested parties will be provided access to section one of the journal, that is the data and facts. I don't envisage any issues with participants' capacity to consent.

### Openness and Honesty

#### Openness and honesty

How will you ensure that participants are able to have any queries they have answered in an open and honest way?

I will of course endeavour to ensure openness and honesty throughout the research project. Prior to the research I will be open and honest about what the research entails and participants' rights within the research should they sign the consent form. Whilst this is fairly straightforward prior to commencing the research, there are a number of issues to consider during and following the research. There will be scenarios where as a researcher I won't be able to be fully open and honest with participants. For example in cases where questions may be asked about other participants' responses that have been recorded. The issue of confidentiality and anonymity preserves participants' rights and prevents me as a researcher from being open and honest where questions/issues relate to other participants. Where these issues arise, I will provide generic/broader responses to questions rather than focusing on specifics which could compromise participants.

### Deception

Is deception being used? Could the participants be misled or wrongly informed about the aims of the research? Types of deception include (i) deliberate misleading, e.g. using staged manipulations in field settings, deceptive instructions; (ii) deception by omission, e.g., failure to disclose full information about the study, or creating ambiguity. The researcher should avoid deceiving participants about the nature of the research unless there is no alternative and then this would need to be judged acceptable by the reviewers.

☐ Yes

☐ No

## Right to Withdraw

### Right to withdraw

Please indicate here how you will enable participants to withdraw from the study if they so wish

Participants are able to withdraw themselves and their data at any point within the period of fieldwork by contacting the researcher (me). The date for this period of fieldwork is 3 weeks (21 days) from the date of interview. This information is provided on the information sheet and will be verbally explained to participants. I will send all participants a final reminder concerning the deadline date to withdraw. It will be made clear in the consent form that participants have the absolute right to withdraw their data without any detrimental effect.

When available, transcripts may be reviewed and amended. As transcripts may not be available immediately, a copy of the interview recording may be sent to the participants work email on request.

## Protection From Harm

Does this research involve:

- ☐ Children and young people
- ☐ Vulnerable Adults - e.g. those with a learning disability or cognitive impairment, or individuals in a dependent or unequal relationship
- ☐ Adults lacking capacity to consent for themselves
- ☐ Sensitive Topics - e.g. participants' sexual behaviour, their illegal or political behaviour, their experience of violence, their abuse or exploitation, their mental health or their gender or ethnic status
- ☐ Permission of a gatekeeper for initial access - e.g. ethnic or cultural groups, native people or indigenous communities
- ☐ Research that will induce psychological stress, anxiety or humiliation or cause minimal pain
- ☐ Intrusive intervention (e.g. the administration of drugs, vigorous physical exercise or hypnotherapy)
- ☐ Research involving access to records of personal or confidential information, including genetic or other biological information, concerning identifiable individuals
- ☐ Other (please specify)
- ☒ None of the above

Will your samples include students whose coursework will be assessed by the researcher(s) (for example you are recruiting students for your study which includes some that will be assessed by you as part of their degree/diploma)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

## Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks

Do researchers require Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks? For example, researchers contacting children as an aspect of their research must be subject to DBS checks. These can be arranged through Human Resources.

- ☒ Yes
- ☐ No

How will this be managed?

The researcher and staff being interviewed have all been DBS checked as per the school's policy.

## Debriefing

Debriefing

If appropriate, describe how you will debrief participants

Throughout the research check points will be set up to debrief participants/keep them informed about the developments within the research. As a professional this is important as they have taken the time to be involved in my research therefore this provides me with an opportunity to give information and updates back to them. A verbal debrief will be conducted with participants; this will give me a chance to pass on any relevant information and also gives the participants a chance to raise any outstanding questions.

## Dissemination of Research

Please provide a clear statement regarding what information has been provided to participants regarding dissemination of this research and how you intend this to take place.

Information regarding the dissemination of this research is clearly provided within the information and consent form. Alongside this verbal information will be given to the participants prior to the research commencing.

## Anonymity

Anonymity

How will you ensure anonymity of participants?

Similarly to my response in the openness and honesty section, I will endeavour to ensure participant anonymity. I will do this by anonymising all participant responses through pseudonym/coding. Rather than referring to staff by their exact title such as 'Head teacher', 'Head of subject' and teacher of subject I will refer to them as a senior leader, middle leader with core/non core subject responsibilities and teachers. Through imposing more general titles this should assist in preserving participants' anonymity. However due to the fact that the research setting is a closed community, others may be able to guess certain participants's responses. It will be made clear to research participants at the outset that I am not able to guarantee anonymity. To assist within this particular area I will check with participants that they are happy for me to use and record their responses during the research.

## Confidentiality

### Confidentiality

How will you ensure confidentiality and security of information?

I will endeavour to ensure confidentiality and security of participants information. All information will be held in accordance with GDPR and University guidelines. Similarly to anonymity, I may find that confidentiality is compromised as others may guess participants responses and who they identify as despite pseudonyms and coding. Throughout the research process I will continually check with participants to ensure they are happy with me recording and using their data and of course ensuring that they are ultimately happy for this to be published. Should a safeguarding concern arise from any interview that I am professionally bound to report I will be unable to maintain confidentiality I will be required to report this to the safeguarding lead and/or the LADO.

## Online and Internet Research

Will any part of your project involve collecting data by means of electronic media, such as the Internet or e-mail?

- ☐ Yes  
☒ No

Is there a significant possibility that the project will encourage children under 18 to access inappropriate websites, or correspond with people who pose risk of harm?

- ☐ Yes  
☒ No

Is there a significant possibility that the project will cause participants to become distressed or harmed, in ways that may not be apparent to the researcher(s)?

- ☐ Yes  
☒ No

Will the project incur any other risks that arise specifically from the use of electronic media?

- ☐ Yes  
☒ No

## Payment of Participants

Do you intend to offer participants cash payments or any other kind of inducements or compensation for taking part in your project?

- ☐ Yes  
☒ No



## Professional Bodies

Are there any professional bodies whose ethical policies apply to this research?

- ☐ Yes  
☒ No

## Any other miscellaneous supporting documents

Please upload any other miscellaneous documents, if applicable  
(If you do not have any to upload, you can skip this question)

### Ethics Support

[Plymouth Ethics Online System Support](#) | [Arts, Humanities and Business Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Health Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Plymouth Sponsor](#)

## PREVENT

Does the proposed title or theme of the research, present a potential risk that views/opinions expressed may incite others to engage in harassment, intimidation, verbal abuse or violence directed at others, as defined within law and within the University's policies governing bullying and harassment, either within the UK or abroad, which could incite hatred or draw others into terrorism?

- ☐ Yes  
☒ No

### Ethics Support

[Plymouth Ethics Online System Support](#) | [Arts, Humanities and Business Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Health Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Plymouth Sponsor](#)

## Online Surveys

Are you planning on using an online survey for your research project?

- ☐ Yes  
☒ No

## Researcher Safety and Risk Assessment

### Researcher Safety and Risk Assessment

Please upload your risk assessment below applying the University's risk assessment policy to the project. It is the Principal Investigator's (PI's) responsibility to ensure that all relevant safety procedures are in place to assess and minimise risk to participants, the research team or the general public and the environment. This will include reviewing risk assessments, referring to lone working guidelines, updating training and appropriate certification. Think about the risk to participants, researchers and any other persons involved in the project. Please consider and refer to the university's lone working and offsite working policies where applicable. Please consider the equipment in use. Please consider the risk of data breach. Please communicate all reasonable steps proposed to mitigate, reduce or eliminate risk. For any of the above information, please visit the University of Plymouth's [Code of Good Research Practice, Health and Safety webpage](#) (to find the lone working and risk management policies for example, go to A-Z of topics and click on lone working and risk management) and [Research Ethics Policy](#).

Type	Document Name	Documents			
		File Name	Version Date	Version	Size
Risk Assessment	Risk assessment considerations	Risk assessment considerations.docx	15/07/2021	1	16.0 KB

### Ethics Support

[Plymouth Ethics Online System Support](#) | [Arts, Humanities and Business Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Health Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Plymouth Sponsor](#)

## Research Data Management Plan

### Research Data Management Plan

Please familiarise yourself with the University of Plymouth [Research Data Policy](#) and the [Code of Good Research Practice](#). Please upload your Research Data Management Plan, which should include how your data will be stored securely and for how long (e.g. for 10 years). It should state the level of data intended to be collected and indicate who will have access to raw, processed and long term stored data. Please indicate the location of stored data (short term and long term storage) as well as the protection in place for this data at each transfer point.

For useful guidance on creating a Research Data Management Plan, there is a comprehensive [research data management guide](#) that the University of Plymouth library have provided. [DMPonline](#) is also an easy to use, online tool that helps you to create, review, and share data management plans that meet institutional and funder requirements. It is provided by the Digital Curation Centre (DCC).

Type	Document Name	Documents		Version Date	Version	Size
		File Name				
Research Data Management Plan	EdD_Thesis data management plan	EdD_Thesis data management plan.pdf		07/12/2021	2	37.4 KB

### Ethics Support

[Plymouth Ethics Online System Support](#) | [Arts, Humanities and Business Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Health Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Integrity Committee](#) | [Plymouth Sponsor](#)

### Principal Investigator

To the best of my knowledge and belief, this research conforms to the ethical principles laid down by the University of Plymouth and by any specified professional bodies

**Signed:** This form was signed by Mr Sam Morahan (sam.morahan@plymouth.ac.uk) on 07/12/2021 21:04

### Director of Studies

Please select **request signature** to enable you to send this to your Director of Studies to sign.

**Signed:** This form was signed by Dr Nick Pratt (N.Pratt@plymouth.ac.uk) on 08/12/2021 16:04

## **Appendix 4: Interview questions**

1. Considering your role, can you tell me what you use the school's assessment system for?
2. What assessment activities do you complete on a daily/weekly/termly basis?
3. How accurate, do you believe, is the pupils' recorded assessment data? (baselines/progress made ect)
4. Considering the data generated by the school's assessment system, how is this data used? How does it contribute to both staff and pupil development?
5. What is your view on the school's assessment system?

## Initial coding examples

Data collection – Interview 1 – Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> February

Let's make a start with question number one. Considering your role, can you tell me what you use the schools' assessment system for?

VIS  
TEC  
KNO

↓.

progress

progress

Judgement  
Rapid  
progress.

packages vote for money.  
artificial game playing under asset baseline.

Logic  $\Rightarrow$  Need for this tactic.



Sufficient Progress

subsequently assess because we then have to use that number scheme and based on what we may have been doing in the classroom, we say have they done well this on what we may have been doing in the classroom, we say have they done well this this term? Oh yeah. So they've got two more points of progress on that ladder. So they've made the sufficient levels of progress that we've deemed every pupil should be making whoever they are and we just say yeah, they've done it because if we don't then somebody's going to ask this question. Well, why? Why do you think that pupil has not made that level progress that is projected for them.

And of course it comes back then to, well, then you look at the evidence for that. What evidence have you got? If the pupil's had poor attendance, then the evidence is going to be minimal.

And so it's very difficult to then accurately, probably, fairly, give a grade to a student in terms of their real progress or ability? It's more of a hope than an accurate, meaningful data point.

Accuracy

**Moving on to question number 4. Considering the data that's generated by the schools assessment system, how is this data used? So that's the first part and then the second part is how does it contribute to both staff and pupil development?**

Ok. The data in terms of my understanding is used, and to put it crudely, fills up a spreadsheet. And of course, when you fill up a spreadsheet and can produce a graph that then shows whether the progress being made shows an upward trend or downward trend, or a flat trend. You can pretty much make that what you want it to be, so you can say well we really think that some things are going pretty well on our curriculum. The curriculum is being taught to a high level. Students are making progress and we banded these numbers into the system and the data has come out and somebody's crunched the numbers and it comes out and says, yeah, good job the curves going in the right direction and you must be doing well with every pupil in your cohort, and your provision must be doing exceptionally well.

And of course, the problem with that is that the data might be used to inform the local authority, when it comes to admissions and taking on students and looking at the bigger picture financially in terms of our position as an Academy, for being able to employ the right number of teachers, class sizes and making progress with the students. So this data would contribute to those sorts of discussions. It's hard to see how just that data would do that, but that's I think, probably as much as it as it could be used for. I'm probably thinking as long as it gets filled in and as long as the total boxes are complete, everybody has done it. That might be as far as it goes sometimes, and we move and wait till the next time the data entry point happens, which in our case we used to do that six times a year.

We've reduced that because of the, I think we've reduced it because we've recognised the limited value of doing it more often. It's now down to 3 assessment points during the year.

Could ask why? Why? Why has that? Why is that the case? Does it mean that assessment isn't as important if we've reduced six data entry points down to three?

7

The first question, which is considering your role, can you tell me what you use the schools assessment system for?

Working out where the pupils are at and working out patterns between bases quite a lot, so patterns between sites, patterns between classes, patterns between teaching staff, more to work out who has done the work and who hasn't done any of it. So sometimes to look at the blank spots more than actually looking for patterns. Which pupils I should be flagging to SLT for issues which pupils I should be flagging to SLT for doing really well and as a prompt to say when they should go back to mainstream education.

VIS

And there's a lot of feeding back. It feeds into a lot of multi-agency and schools, LA level to be able to prove stuff. For example, at the moment I'm doing a huge report as it happens to the local authority that has everything on it so that they can scrutinise what we do. It's relevant for pupils that come on packages for example. We've got to prove our worth. We've got to prove it.

logic  
value  
you money  
archival  
active  
consequential  
package  
we paid  
for

ID  
Self-ref  
duties  
governed by

The mainstream schools tend to be more data driven, they put more weight on their quantitative data than qualitative data. We actually do the opposite. In some ways, it's turning that qualitative into quantitative and having the systems to demonstrate that, for example, actually for us, let's face it, are you doing just a comment on how they've done each day. If we weren't particularly looking at sending pupils back to school, then it would be fine. But because we have to, then we want the quantitative built into it. Then the ratings come in to it. Everything is subjective.

TEC

Subjective

When you talk about giving people descriptors, because you are measuring a human being and you're measuring behaviour, particularly behaviour not in a controlled setting in anyway shape or form, that's through the lens of a member of staff, it's all going to be subjective. There's no clean data in school. Even the assessment data is not clean.

not  
clean data

It's all subjective. Actually I can use a good example, when I'm teaching at a particular site pupils come in and for the key stage 3 group you know what, pupil A was sitting down doing work, he's making great progress. Well, he may not be making great progress if I compare him to the pupil B that I teach on another site. Yeah, he's doing really good progress. However pupil B has done a whole a-level topic in of a couple of weeks. They're doing really well. Their physics knowledge has also expanded well. Pupil A who was in my science lesson, yeah, he may have only done one equation in that time that he actually used and applied it within his learning. Yes, it's progress on both levels, but it's not equitable progress.

Baseline  
18  
Subjective

So actually, if you think about it, yes, we know that our target setting is slightly out, well it's quite out. But short of individually sitting down with each teacher for each child and setting the target of where that pupil should be at it.... any time saving ideas are welcome. That might take me a couple of years.

If you've got a pupil on a package, can you talk me through what sort of quantitative data is expected to be provided to the other schools that are associated with that pupil?



not really interested → commissioners.

*league table?*  
*EC/US*  
You tend to find the schools have a fairly loose idea of where they are academically, like, pretty loose. They'll go we think they're a grade three in science or we think they're a grade six in science.

*logic*  
*mainstream*  
*league table*  
You actually look back on it and this kid last attended science a year and a half ago. That was the last time he was allowed to do a practical experiment in a lab with fire. So actually that is completely out of date, so they will often ask for more up-to-date information, particularly where they are academically, their attendance and behaviour. Obviously they're interested in those aspects.

But I think especially with the rise of E-Bacc, I think that's seen the rise in more scrutiny on the academic side from the schools. Now it's like are they going to make our league table results look alright.

**I know you said previously that you're involved in local authority meetings, can you talk me through their view on the assessment and points tracking ladder.**

So they like it because it stretches from one extreme to the other. I mean, it doesn't actually go high enough. We need to include up to A-star-star for a-level I think it is now. It needs to go higher. They like it because it's stage, not age. Man, that's a primary cliché! But you can then say actually this kid is down here. The trick is then mapping that so the points fit.

*logic?*  
*levels*  
*never really went away*  
*re-packaging*  
Levels never went away with assessment without levels. All it did was it changed to are they progressing as you would expect in say the subject, what are the expectations? Well, here's the descriptors of what they should be doing at year seven. Year eight. OK, we've got levels again. So it never went away. My personal opinion is that it was a pure political movement that means b\*\*\*\*\*.

*Schools still ask for levels of progress different work*  
But the reality is all schools and all local authorities ask for it either in GCSE grades or national curriculum levels still. They ask for it in age related expectations. They're asking for it in levels just in different words. It's the same thing across the board. I need one way of mapping that across the board with a pupil, when they ask for that data I can turn around and go and here's the GCSE data. And here it is in levels rather than having to constantly go back to the class teacher and go by the way, can I now have all this data in levels? Take looked after children for example, three times a year going up to six times a year, the local authority, they want every single subject they're doing and they want how they are progressing in that. Yeah. Now I can pretty much, I can pick that up off three tracking periods. That's fine and they know all in between. I can disperse that without having to a annoy staff just by reading the behaviour logs, reading attendance logs and actually he's picking up a shed load of positive behaviour logs.

He's evidently doing ok on the flight path he's supposed to be on. Flight paths are another slight issue, but we'll come to that in a minute. I can pick that up and go right ok he's there, without causing extra workload. Yeah, basically, if the assessment system causes minimal workload, but minimum workload, maximum accuracy and it's meeting the purpose that it's required to do.

*TEC.* ↓ *workload/accuracy.*



VIS/TEC/KWY logic - the system isn't for class teachers  
10.

The requirements for it are basically it's got to work for stakeholders in the outside school sense and it's got to work for stakeholders in school. The reality is because of our class sizes it's useless to class teachers because the classes are so small. You know where kids are anyway. I don't think it's going to add any value on that. One exception to that is mock exams, but I'll come back to that and how you analyse that data. It doesn't add any value to class teachers however does add value to base leads and it does add value for heads department to go oh wow, look OK Mr X is doing a really pants job with that class. None of them are performing and according to his comments, they're all in lessons and just throwing chairs out of the window. When I've cross-referenced that with English you know what they're all sat down working. So what's teacher X doing that's different to the English teacher. Then it's got a value within it but in terms of academically for example, the head of department can look through and go sugar in that one class he's got a GCSE pupil on Grade 7 and he's got another who's 14, barely able to make entry level 1 and write their name on the paper.

Accountability through system.

If I look at that as a head of the department, teacher X is in his own little world, he hasn't really, he's hasn't really focused on dealing with it. He hasn't asked for help, but as a head of department you could turn around and say, you know what? Actually, if I can do a couple of extra sessions on that base, I'll do the higher top up. Obviously he carries on with the entry level bottom. Yeah. Then it's got a value. It's got to have action on the end of it and you've got to turn the data into information. If it's not going to information, it makes it useless.

progress  
Data  
↓  
turns into information  
needs action

**In terms of the school providing data to outside agencies, is there a sense that the school is trying to provide a picture that they're value for money?**

Yes, you want to provide a picture that the school is value for money and you'll use every bit of data honestly to prove that.

logic value for money  
value for money  
evidence  
not be proven

10 of the school

If you shoved everything at them and they go yeah OK, you know what, they still behaved awfully in PE, and that's why there's no progress there. And he can't handle being off site so we're putting XYZ in place. But you can go, here's science, he's doing really well. Yeah. Then you can prove it. In PEP meetings the data gets scrutinised really heavily there. So all those tracking comments teachers write get scrutinised by outside agencies there and by the parents and the carers, they see them there and they scrutinise them really heavily and go right. OK, well, why is that kid not doing that well, why? Why's Jim messing up in science? Why's the teacher written he needs to pay more attention? Why is he not paying attention in there? So it does get very scrutinised and that's where having good quantitative can then back up the qualitative. Yeah, because the qualitative is almost is even more subjective because actually it depends on. You know what? If the teacher is sat there doing his subject tracking on last day and he had a beer that evening while he's doing it and there's spelling and grammar's mistakes the way through it. That doesn't paint a very good picture of the school. It happens. Honestly, I've seen it. I've seen the wrong children's names in comments. It requires quality assurance all the time.

Depend their data!

Quality assurance on tracking.

The idea of the behaviour data being recorded wrong, we're all familiar with that. We've all seen that happen when someone has typed in: I want to report something about Tom and then just selected 15 Toms across the service. I mean that is the

checked as it logic to agencies + goes forward

## Theme development

### Theme 1

#### Progress and assessment data

- Ps talked about rapid/accelerated progress made by pupils.
- Provides evidence of value for money to stakeholders particularly where pupils are on packages
- Fabrications in progress, manipulating progress data for example numbers and purposely under assessing baselines to artificially show progress within the tracking system. Pupils are assessed using arbitrary scores. Ps spoke of game playing with the tracking system.
- Staff are unsure on what progress/rapid progress looks like. If some staff are tracking for soft skills/social interaction using the main tracking system how do you know what the progress actually represents? Inconsistencies. Progress data is subjective.
- There are inconsistencies in baseline data
- Progress data used to identify pupils making less than expected progress and interventions are put in place to attempt to improve progress. Although some staff say that it is not a key factor in driving planning/monitoring – “I wouldn't say that the points are a key factor in sort of like driving my planning or driving my monitoring here.” Is it just merely for reporting to stakeholders then?
- The language of progress has changed but levels never really went away
- Progress data isn't for class teachers it's for stakeholders
- Progress data needs to be turned into information, it needs to have an action otherwise it's useless.

#### From interviews:

*“Well we like to call it the random number generator.”*

*The baselines are very irregular. I think from teacher to teacher, one teacher in the department might think the student should be baselined at 41. I might then look at it and go actually I think it's a 51. So straight away there's ten points of progress that could be different. We've gotten nothing to set that against.”*

*“Yes, you want to provide a picture that the school is value for money and you'll use every bit of data honestly to prove that.”*

*“Yeah, basically, if the assessment system causes minimal workload, but minimum workload, maximum accuracy and it’s meeting the purpose that it’s required to do.*

*The requirements for it are basically it's got to work for stakeholders in the outside school sense and it's got to work for stakeholders in school. The reality is because of our class sizes it's useless to class teachers because the classes are so small. You know where kids are anyway. I don't think it's going to add any value on that”*

*“Levels never went away with assessment without levels. All it did was it changed to are they progressing as you would expect in say the subject, what are the expectations? Well, here's the descriptors of what they should be doing at year seven. Year eight. OK, we've got levels again. So it never went away. My personal opinion is that it was a pure political movement that means b\*\*\*\*\* . But the reality is all schools and all local authorities ask for it either in GCSE grades or national curriculum levels still. They ask for it in age related expectations. They're asking for it in levels just in different words. It's the same thing across the board.”*

*“We have students who have been bought into packages by other schools in order to be educated in our setting. We have to be able to demonstrate through means of assessment, that rapid progress is being achieved. The trouble is that it can become a little bit of a game because if you want to prove that rapid progress has been made, often the temptation is to look at assessing the student and we under assess, I think, in terms of giving them a grade which artificially shows that we can then prove that they've made rapid progress. In actual fact we've probably given them a score, an arbitrary number, that says that they are working at a particular level, and oh yeah, we've done this piece of work and look what's happened.”*

*“How do we map and accelerate progress?”*

*“as I mentioned earlier, if you set that initial score or baseline too low then that can artificially inflate the real progress that the student has made.*

*“A lot of subjects have baseline testing, which is quite good. This isn't across the board though as there are some subjects where, to be honest, they make up the baseline and they compare it to the other students. So if someone, if a student comes in that's brand new, who's slightly better than somebody else, they'll get a slightly higher score. And I've seen that across different subjects where there's good practice of baseline testing and there's poor practice.”*

*“Wow, it's a bit of a controversial topic, actually. It's come up this week for tracking, so we are told that students need to make four points progress a term. However, our students absolutely do not make four points progress. So when I first came here that was what was happening. Students were just being totalled up four points and I was like this is just a made up number. And I was actually told when I first got here, like, I'll just put them up four points”*

*“And there's a lot of feeding back. It feeds into a lot of multi-agency and schools, LA level to be able to prove stuff. For example, at the moment I'm doing a huge report as it happens to the local authority that has everything on it so that they can scrutinise what we do. It's relevant for pupils that come on packages for example. We've got to prove our worth. We've got to prove it.”*

*“When you talk about giving people descriptors, because you are measuring a human being and you're measuring behaviour, particularly behaviour not in a controlled setting in anyway shape or form, that's through the lens of a member of staff, it's all going to be subjective. There's no clean data in school. Even the assessment data is not clean.”*

- Narratives of teachers, when talking about progress, often come across as defensive almost like they were attempting to justify to the interviewer why progress was/wasn't being made.

*“Their progress is their progress and one of the things that will always hinder their progress is attendance. If they're not in the lesson, I can't teach them. And if they're not in the lesson, they're not learning, and obviously if they are in the lesson, they've got to be ready to learn. So all of these factors have a huge impact on whether their progress is actually sustained and whether they are actually making the progress they should be making. A lot of these students should be making that progress and could make that progress, but there are lots of factors that mean that they won't.”*

*“And when it comes to tracking, we enter a comment to which is probably the most valuable part of the tracking, if I'm being honest. This is because it gives you proper information as to possible reasons why they're not making progress”*

*“So actually aside from those points, you might not have those four points progression. But you will have an awful lot of SEMH progression. Naturally when you look at the EHCPs of our students, that cognitive development is such a tiny part of what their plan of action is and actually that's social interaction communication. So for example, I've got a student that has only made two points progress probably since September. However, he wouldn't engage at any English whatsoever, and now he does 30 minutes of English everyday, but to correlate that to the school's points is actually impossible. So someone coming in and just looking at their points, sometimes I feel like it doesn't facilitate really a very accurate picture.”*

- Accountability and challenge in relation to assessment and progress is not as strong as staff suggest that it should be internally however this seems to be different externally by stakeholders. Quality assurance on progress data as there appears to be mistakes.

*“Do we hold that to account? Are we rigorous with that? Probably not.”*

*“In PEP meetings the data gets scrutinised really heavily there. So all those tracking comments teachers write get scrutinised by outside agencies there and by the parents and the carers, they see them there and they scrutinise them really heavily and go right. OK, well, why is that kid not doing that well, why? Why's Jim messing up in science? Why's the teacher written he needs to pay more attention? Why is he not paying attention in there? So it does get very scrutinised and that's where having good quantitative can then back up the qualitative”*

*“If the teacher is sat there doing his subject tracking on last day and he had a beer that evening while he's doing it and there's spelling and grammar's mistakes the way through it. That doesn't paint a very good picture of the school. It happens. Honestly, I've seen it. I've seen the wrong children's names in comments. It requires quality assurance all the time.”*

*“There is not a strong enough level of challenge in my opinion. The issues I flag up I don't challenge because my position is a very weird one in that I'm not the data manager. Challenge works on an individual level, nicely worded reminders by email, do work or telephone calls, do work. It has to be individual and specific.”*

- In relation to the assessment system and progress there isn't a consistent/standardised approach on training staff to use the system. This doesn't seem to be part of the induction process when teaching staff join the school. This has led to issues with tracking.

*"I don't know whether they have information and training on it and induction because I'm not part of the induction process. I don't know if that's part of it. My feeling is it's not part of the induction process. All staff get an email to say tracking's up now this is how you complete it and they just tell you how to fill in the form. They don't tell you how to actually score or assess various bits and pieces within that. And I would say that it's probably not consistent across subjects. And I think people do it in different ways. From what I've seen, there were errors most times from different departments and everyone's got a different way of doing it. And I think the comments aren't standardised either. Some people prioritise talking about what they studied in that subject and people talk about what that kid has behaviourally been like. It's not clear what you need to put in the comment box as to whether it should be what they have they been studying because I've seen people put in what they're studying."*

*"I feel like this is really controversial, isn't it? It definitely is. Ah, I feel like there was nothing. So no, in answer to that"*

VIS –

progress makes pupils visible – high low/achieving

progress makes teachers visible – high low/achieving

progress makes schools/trusts visible – high low/achieving

TEC – policy determines that staff need to assess progress using the schools tracking ladder. This is done 3 times per academic year, pupils are expected to make 12 points of progress unless they are on a reduced flightpath. There seems to be a package of technologies (a combination of assessment systems) implemented to measure a range of different developmental aspects – motional profile, PASS, skills builder. The need to objectify and label

all aspects of a pupils development. Perhaps this is to show value for money in those non-academic areas.

KNO – Using knowledge and information generated by assessment mainstream schools may calculate risk of taking pupils back on their roll as this may impact upon their assessment data. What does expected progress look like? Do staff have the knowledge to assess this effectively? What exactly should staff be assessing using the main tracking ladder, responses highlight inconsistencies. Are staff given the appropriate knowledge at induction?

*“You tend to find the schools have a fairly loose idea of where they are academically, like, pretty loose. But I think especially with the rise of E-Bacc, I think that's seen the rise in more scrutiny on the academic side from the schools. Now it's like are they going to make our league table results look alright.”*

ID – Assessment makes pupils and teachers visible. Individual identities are constructed using data. The datafication of individuals constructing another identity as a data double. Are teachers good/high performing or are they low performing/pose a threat to the progress of pupils. Similar with pupils. Are teachers fulfilling their duties/responsibilities? Teacher's have re-assessed pupils progress on their entry to the school as they want to be seen as doing things properly. Schools identity in the commodified market culture – are they providing value for money given the packages they are providing?

## Logics

The assessment system is used to show progress and therefore demonstrates how effective the school is in securing the progress of pupils. All teaching staff record progress 3 times a year. Pupils are required to make set progress targets. Ultimately this shows value for money to commissioners and the taxpayer. Due to the high stakes teachers manipulate data to improve progress outcomes of pupils, hence the term game playing. There seems to be an obsession with words such as rapid and accelerate suggesting that pupils should make progress quickly. Staff are unsure on what rapid progress looks like. Does this mean pupils are being rushed through the curriculum? This represents a logic of practice. There are defensive connotations

within teacher's narratives as without challenge from the interviewer they instinctively defend their practice and offer justification of why some pupils don't make expected progress. This forms part of the reporting procedures within the school's tracking system.

Academic progress within subjects is prioritised due to market logics and the need to show value for money to commissioners for those pupils on packages. Interviews suggest that pupils are lacking in essential 'soft skills' and that these aren't assessed within the schools main assessment tracking ladder. Progress is assessed elsewhere for these through a combination of other systems that don't seem to be mentioned in terms of formal reporting. Pupils are not placed within alternative provision settings for intervention in subjects. What is the core purpose of the school and should this not be reflected in the main assessment and tracking system and reported more formally? It is suggested that this data is used to guide interventions.

## **Theme 2**

### **Accountability and assessment**

- Ps talked about being challenged by management in terms of their assessment data and progress made by students. However there were huge inconsistencies in this area as a number of ps said that they had never been challenged on their assessment
- Ps spoke about the need for evidence to prove their classes and pupils were making progress and to back up their assessment judgements however this again was hugely inconsistent as some ps has never been asked for this.
- Seems to be a lack of challenge from mainstreams commissioning packages, ps spoke about these schools being happy that pupils were out of their hair. Ps said they were rarely asked for academic progress data by mainstream commissioners, conversations were mainly about how pupils are getting on and if they were going to be returning. Logics around this may be related to the schools performance data as some ps hinted at.
- Some ps' responses came across as 'defensive when they were speaking to the interviewer about their pupils performance. Accountability culture embedded for some ps.
- Ps explained that they were relieved academic assessment doesn't seemingly hold as much weight as mainstream as it's more holistic perhaps this is why there is a lack of challenge in this area. Logics – pupils aren't referred to AP because they have low assessment scores in academic subjects. Interventions for social, emotional ect. Emphasis on personal development and soft skills which are being measured. However these run alongside the main assessment system and are not built into it. Why? This is at the core of what APs do. Logic - academic subjects hold more weight are perhaps needed to show value for money and that AP is accountable for progress. Current assessment system shows this.



- Cognitive psychological approaches to assessment enable accountability culture – evidence ect. Makes knowledge testable and outcomes measurable. Reference to Rosenshine.
- Ps believe QA processes are more about improving than proving.
- Ps acknowledge that there isn't strong enough challenge across the school
- 

#### **From interviews:**

*"I mean it's a really interesting question because do schools want to know? Because if I'm honest that most schools are fixated with the fact the student is out of their hair. So, you know, dealing with three points compared to four points this term of expected progress in PE because we were doing squash, I don't think a lot of them are bothered is my honest answer. I think they're more bothered when the pupil is dual reg and they're staying dual reg for year 11 as they want to know about outcomes because it impacts their whole school data. So I don't think they're particularly bothered, that is my feeling"*

*"And if we are better school in 12 month's time than we are now I don't care what you call it really, but I am not naive enough to know that actually I can't go off and do a curriculum on, you know, Latin and tap dancing. And they're the two things they'll be brilliant at because we have that accountability measure and ultimately it's government money and we are a government regulated organisation. So however philosophical we want to be above it we have to consider that. The email that came out this week from the trust about the three pillars. It's about finance. I'm ultimately accountable to make sure that I spend the money effectively. The pupils are making good progress. If I'm spending huge, vast amounts of money on staff and they're not making great progress, there's not financial value there. Educational outcomes, fairly obviously, and the pillars of governance that somebody is holding me to account to say you're getting great outcomes from a non-qualified set of staff. Tell me how you're doing that and is that data real? So those three pillars, I suppose, of what ultimately financially, educationally, and from a governance point of view, are what we are held to and assessment across it all fits to all three"*

*'Yeah, I think that's a really interesting question. If I'm honest for the purposes of being honest one of the things for me is that I trust the staff here. And if you say that somebody is making expected progress, I expect there to be evidence to show it. So for me, that professional*

*autonomy is 50% of it and in terms of my job it's that I employed you to teach. I understand that you have the skills and knowledge necessary to elicit that learning and ultimately when it comes to that data set, you will put the data in."*

*"So I think for me it's much more about what does expected progress look like as opposed to the challenge. I genuinely believe that these QA processes are about improve as opposed to prove. I'm leading an MPQSL cohort this year and it's really interesting because we've just done a section on appraisal and performance management and part of it is we've got to do that appraisal to say to our governors, all the staff here are making expected progress towards their targets."*

*"Um no one. Looking at it like I said before, as long as those 12 points of progress have been made, so each term you're hitting the points of progress, it doesn't get overlooked as long as it's filled in and there's a comment made or be it, some teachers I know take ages filling out a comment, but then even if you just put Jimmy made progress, no ones regulating or moderating this and so you could have a teacher spending hours on this, and actually there's not much point as it's not being used, it doesn't get looked at and as a head of department, I don't have to go into anyone and say look, staff member A has filled in his information, I think he needs to add more information. That doesn't happen. I'm not happy with how the baselines are looking. That just doesn't happen. And so it brings it back to this point. It kind of makes it a pointless exercise."*

*"A tick box exercise is mainly what I feel when I have to fill it in. It's a waste of time because it doesn't have impact on teaching and learning and it's not looked at by senior leadership. It's just something that we fill in and then it's forgotten about until six weeks later."*

*"Never. I've never been challenged on it. I've never in all honesty, I've never had a conversation with anyone about tracking, however a member of my team challenged it as a supply teacher when they first came and asked how can the students make 4 points progress when they're on interventions all the time. Someone responded saying if they are on interventions all the time they should definitely be making progress."*

*It was obvious that there was a discrepancy over what the interventions we were doing were. So I suppose people might think interventions were like sort of really intense focus, like an English intervention, whereas I said, our interventions are like SEMH. They're, very physical, sort of like climbing, football. So I think that just comes from, again, maybe, a misunderstanding of a difference in setting and need. But me personally, no, I've never been questioned on anything."*

*"Do we hold that to account? Are we rigorous with that? Probably not."*

*"In PEP meetings the data gets scrutinised really heavily there. So all those tracking comments teachers write get scrutinised by outside agencies there and by the parents and the carers, they see them there and they scrutinise them really heavily and go right. OK, well, why is that kid not doing that well, why? Why's Jim messing up in science? Why's the teacher written he needs to pay more attention? Why is he not paying attention in there? So it does get very scrutinised and that's where having good quantitative can then back up the qualitative"*

*"If the teacher is sat there doing his subject tracking on last day and he had a beer that evening while he's doing it and there's spelling and grammar's mistakes the way through it. That doesn't paint a very good picture of the school. It happens. Honestly, I've seen it. I've seen the wrong children's names in comments. It requires quality assurance all the time."*

*"There is not a strong enough level of challenge in my opinion. The issues I flag up I don't challenge because my position is a very weird one in that I'm not the data manager. Challenge works on an individual level, nicely worded reminders by email, do work or telephone calls, do work. It has to be individual and specific."*

*"So one of the first things you ever did and same in mainstream schools now is understand the cohort. So what is the level of need? What is the challenge? What's their cognitive ability? What's their starting points? How does the curriculum relate to those starting points and where they want to take them? How well are they using the information they've got to identify gaps and where that extra learning is needed to be able to sequentially work through that*

*curriculum? So actually having been inspector in specialist world, it wasn't as tricky as it was for others."*

### **Theme 3**

#### **Staff, pupil and stakeholder understanding of the assessment system.**

##### **Is it fit for purpose?**

- Huge inconsistencies in understanding and uses of assessment from different groups
- Difficulties with new assessment system following the removal of levels. There seemed to be a common understanding with levels alongside the ability for national benchmarking and comparison however that now doesn't happen
- Ps use the term arbitrary numbers to describe the points system.
- Many Ps don't understand what the system is for, some use it for intervention for their classes and pupils, some don't. Some use data from the system in meetings and are asked to provide information and some aren't. Agencies need data translating as they don't understand it.
- Assessment isn't shared with pupils, they don't own their data and parent. They don't understand or know what points mean.
- Lack of formal training for staff on assessment – almost like word of mouth to get a feel for it.
- Ps ask does the data have any meaning or value – LOGICS
- PS highlight that you can't relate to the system unless you are in the school – no relevance outside the school. "what is the purpose of having our own assessment system? I don't understand it. It doesn't correlate to mainstream assessment so we have to convert it anyway"
- Staff advised by leaders to have a bank of assessment evidence and data ready for inspectors however Ofsted are trying to move away from data and as quoted by a HMI, are able to make judgements without using this data. Data gives you the questions and not the answers. You need to turn the data into information to make it useful.

**"Has there been any explanation from any members of your leadership team to say this is how the points system works?"**

*No, not at all and I think. For me it could be 6, it could be 12. It wouldn't make any difference. It's just that's what we've been told. It's 12 points. So that's what we do."*

*“It doesn't. Pupils don't know about it, I think it's done in the background. It's done as a thing that has to be done for a tick box exercise. But does that correlate to the teaching? Not at all. Teaching and learning is not impacted by it, and students rarely know where they're at. Even if they're at below, expected or above. And because it has no impact, we just don't use it as common language throughout lessons.”*

*“There's an Excel spreadsheet that was designed about four years ago, when they removed levels. From my understanding, from attending training at the time, the idea of removing levels was because parents and other agencies had no idea what a 6A meant. So the idea was to bring in something less confusing that parents were able to understand and schools were able to understand a bit better as well. We've currently got system which, as you said, ranges from about 1 to 200, which, to be honest, is actually more confusing than the original levels that we had before. Trying to explain even to another school that have different assessment systems that a student is currently working at 143, that means nothing to them really. We have to translate it into something else.”*

*“So that's mainly how it's used, to be honest. We don't use it for things like supporting the learning, I guess or anything like that. We tend to use our feedback from the previous lesson to inform the next lesson. So we don't go oh that child achieved this on their tracking and they're currently working at this so therefore that's what I'm going to do. We do it based on their previous lesson.*

*How it contributes to both staff and pupil development. Because of that reason, I'd say it doesn't, if I'm being honest. I don't think the assessment system we've got has any contribution to the staff development or pupil development. It doesn't affect how I teach my lessons.”*

*“Yep. Absolutely. They want to know the stories. They want to know that sort of thing. They're not interested, really, in the data, in terms of attainment tracking. They may be interested to know about behaviour points depending on the child or safeguarding concerns, but they want to know the narrative. They don't want to know the hard data apart from when it comes to attendance, they would like to know attendance figures.”*

*“I think it's overcomplicated. The idea of getting rid of the old system as I said before is to try and make things more simple so that it's easily accessible and understandable for the general public. And it's not even understandable for the staff that we've got here. So I would say that the system we've got right now probably isn't fit for purpose.”*

*“Our system is not good. I don't see how you can justify the difference between a kid who's 118 and 119. How can you evidence the difference between those two kids? What does that look like on paper? And the answer is there is no difference. You can't see the difference between a kid who's 118 and 119 because it's completely fictional. It's made up.*

*“So my view on the school assessment system, I think it needs a review and I think they need to look at what other schools are doing because we can't be feeding back to schools that a kids 123 in maths because it means nothing to them. And if that's if that's the information that we've got, we need to change the information. We shouldn't have to be translating the schools points into something that's understandable for schools. The assessment system should speak for itself.”*

*“So Ofsted's focus on data has definitely lessened and whether it's about qualitative or quantitative, I think quality is more important now than the amount. But I think it's fair to say that the deep dive methodology was designed very much with the principle that we're going to make judgements about learning the doesn't include data at all. I think probably that was an aspiration at one point of the HMCI when they came in was to get rid of the use of data altogether. What's his name? The old director of education for Ofsted made a promise not to look at internal data in schools, and there was some conjecture about whether it was actually possible to make a judgement without doing it and Ofsted have since proved that you can. It doesn't mean you get it right, does it? Of course. I think the other thing that happened was with quite a lot of schools on a data set would look like they were underperforming and got better judgements than was expected. And there was some pushback then, which was you can't ignore the historical data. So just because the curriculum was well planned and it looks like it's been delivered well and the children seem to be remembering it, they're not actually performing well in their GCSE's, A-Levels or Sats or whatever”*

## Theme 4

### Assessment and the AP market

- Provides evidence of value for money to stakeholders particularly where pupils are on packages – LOGICS commodification
- Local authority scrutiny on pupil placements and if needs are being met
- Pupils on £70,000 packages – how is the school showing value for money. Evidence/assessment ect.

*“There has to be because if we don’t have any system, if we’re not able to provide figures that support progress through assessment then we’re going to be in a very difficult position. If we can’t back up the whole results of assessment with data then we’re going to be finished. We will not get the financial backing.”*

*“And I think that is a massive change. So actually, I want to know that ultimately, for a school like ours where we are very much commissioned on our success, if we went down the Pan our City Council will say to us, listen, I’m not sure we want to place our most vulnerable pupils in the city at your school, nobody does any learning. So yes, we do it for governors. And yes, we do it for appraisal. And yes, we do. But yes, we do it for Ofsted and we would be naïve to say we have a set of criteria that actually not only for our commissioning in some of the operational stuff. It’ll be really interesting with our new CEO as an Ofsted Inspector. I’ve got no interest in outstanding, I’ve got interest in making things better, you know, good place to learn, good place to teach.”*

*“And they’re the two things they’ll be brilliant at because we have that accountability measure and ultimately it’s government money and we are a government regulated organisation. So however philosophical we want to be above it we have to consider that. The email that came out this week from the trust about the three pillars. It’s about finance. I’m ultimately accountable to make sure that I spend the money effectively. The pupils are making good progress. If I’m spending huge, vast amounts of money on staff and they’re not making great progress, there’s not financial value there. Educational outcomes, fairly obviously, and the pillars of governance that somebody is holding me to account to say you’re getting great outcomes from a non-qualified set of staff. Tell me how you’re doing that and is that data real?”*

*So those three pillars, I suppose, of what ultimately financially, educationally, and from a governance point of view, are what we are held to and assessment across it all fits to all three.”*

*“What is an appropriate way of setting this targets? I mean, I could set up the system to automatically go, every pupil 12 points. Let's just assess against that which might be a fair and equitable way of doing it, especially when we look at, OK, so we've got a pupil in one of our provisions who is a £70,000 pupil, £70,000 is what we're charging the local authority to provide an education package. Now, if we can't show that we are making progress and how we are using that £70,000 there's something wrong. Ultimately, if you talk about the rate of progress as the idea of education total which, you can argue whether it is or not, but take that as a kind of concept of actually the idea is to progress.*

*To increase their acquisition of knowledge, both in their ability to acquire knowledge and in actually acquiring knowledge. Actually, if we're not spending that £70,000. So take that kid who in mainstream would only be able to do that acquisition of knowledge at a very low rate. If we're not spending £70,000 to bring him up to at least what he'll be able to achieve in mainstream without £70,000 it's kind of like hang on you're spending £70,000 and this pupil is making the same level of progress as he was in the mainstream setting. Something's not right here. That difference is quite key and we're not alone in the market. I mean there's plenty of schools that are buying into online teaching systems where they say look we'll just do online lessons and your kid will make XYZ progress and it costs what? £100 a term not 70 grand. You've got to show value for money in that respect, definitely.”*