Politics and Professionalism: The Question of Teacher Autonomy in Relation to Grouping Practices[1]

Abstract[2]

This paper examines the degree of freedom teachers have in making key decisions about grouping practices in primary schools. In doing so, it aims to bring together two debates: one about the professional autonomy of teachers in relation to what has been described as a 'state theory of learning' (STL) and the other on the basis on which grouping decisions are made. The question of the degree of autonomy teachers have over grouping decisions can illuminate the nature and limits to teacher professionalism under the STL. It elucidates the limits and possibilities that teachers have in exercising judgement over grouping practices against a background of contestation over external largely quantitatively based judgements about the progress schools are making in test outcomes.

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Introduction

This paper examines the degree of freedom teachers have in making key decisions about grouping practices in primary schools. In doing so, it aims to bring together two debates: one about the professional autonomy of teachers in relation to what has been described as a 'state theory of learning' (STL) (Lauder, Brown, Dillabough and Halsey, 2006), and the other on the basis on which grouping decisions are made. It

will be argued that the question of the degree of autonomy teachers have over grouping decisions can illuminate the nature and limits to teacher professionalism under the STL.

The STL is so called because it mandates for teachers, modes of assessment, the curriculum and elements of pedagogy. Pedagogy is test driven where the criterion for pupil progress and school improvement turn on improvements in a battery of official tests at the ages 7 and 11 and further tests administered in many primary schools in the county in Year 3 and sometimes Year 4. The tests are used to rank students and to monitor their progress. Testing and monitoring coalesce in the notion of target setting: that is, given previous test results, students are set targets designed to improve their performance. This is intended to motivate them and to monitor their progress. Teachers may not always adhere to the principles and prescriptions that have been laid down but external agencies, such as Ofsted and local Children's Educational Services maintain surveillance on school performance, particularly on the basis of quantitative indicators.

There are at several reasons as to why the issue of grouping in relation to teacher's autonomy is important. In policy terms, the government has clearly indicated its preference for grouping students as constituting best practice. The White Paper: *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (2005) is the latest in a long line of statements encouraging the setting of children into ability based classes. In social terms, grouping practices can be seen as a form of internal selection in which students, according to social class, ethnicity, gender or disability may be placed in

groups that either advantage or disadvantage their progress. Hence grouping may affect who wins and loses in education (Ford, 1969, Ireson and Hallam,2001).

In this respect social class composition and other local contextual factors may drive the grouping practices of schools with different social class compositions presenting greater or lesser behavioural and/or learning challenges that need to be managed. Dreeben and Barr (1988) illustrated this in relation to in-class grouping decisions. They found that in 'easy classes' where pupils learned independently and were compliant with teacher requests, teachers tended to have larger groups of higher attaining pupils and smaller groups of lower-attaining pupils, in order to be able to provide more support to the lower attainers. In 'difficult classes' where there were substantial numbers of pupils who needed support with their learning or who were behaviourally disruptive, they tended to divide classes into even-sized groups, thus sharing out the difficult pupils and the teacher attention. Pupils from higher social class backgrounds learned less in difficult classes. According to this hypothesis we would expect different contrasting practices in middle class and working class schools.[5] For example, the nature of a school's composition may relate to grouping practices designed to control behaviour where misbehaving children are dispersed across groups, (Ireson and Hallam, 2001).

Considerations as to whether to group and what kind of grouping might benefit the most students are clearly complex and require a knowledge and experience not only of the students in a class or school but also how they respond to their peers and to the different kinds of pedagogy presupposed by different grouping practices. But these are not merely technical questions that require reference to the best evidence and

practice since values clearly underlie grouping decisions that may affect, for example, equity. The question then is, whose values are to prevail those of teachers and of schools or of policy makers higher up the policy chain. In this context, Ball (2006) has argued that the STL is a form of social technology which reduces teachers' judgements to merely technical issues in which questions of value that should characterise education both with respect to means and ends are reduced to matters of performance and in particular, numerical targets. In such a system, it is argued, the nature of the teacher as professional is fundamentally altered.

Teacher professionalism and the state theory of learning

The concept of teacher professionalism is a contested concept. Not only has the definition of what it means to be a professional changed significantly over the latter half of the last century (Hargreaves; 2006) but in recent times there has been considerable concern among educational researchers/ practitioners about the reformulation of teacher professionalism as a consequence of the STL. Olssen, Codd and O'Neill (2004) argue that 'neoliberal governmental technologies comprise a new form of power which systematically undoes and reconstructs the practices of professionalism' (185-186). This prizes characteristics of accountability, efficiency and monitoring at the expense of autonomy and trust. However, Ball (2006), while arguing that the state has sought to remove the autonomy of teachers from making value judgements about education, also recognises that: 'We also have everyday opportunities to refuse these ways of accounting for ourselves, not as apathy rather as 'a hyper-and pessimistic activism' (700).

Few studies have related teachers' views to their practices. For example Locke's et al's (2004) study into the meanings of professionalism for primary school teachers in England and New Zealand shows that while, on the whole teachers, are negative about policies which have reduced their autonomy, some teachers felt that prescriptive pedagogies actually enhanced their professionalism when they were successful in improving learning outcomes in the classroom: the implication being that teachers are prepared to finesse some autonomy if they see their pupils making progress.[6]

In turn, this finding seems to be one element of a balance that has never been adequately struck between state prescription and teacher autonomy. According to Hargreaves (2006), in the post-war age of 'professional autonomy' teachers were free to indulge and develop their subject specialisms in ways of their choosing, they were also free to choose how and what they taught in school. However, he argues that in effect teaching became highly individualised and in lacking collaboration with peers and evaluation of their practice, teachers lacked confidence to create the curriculum and stuck to prescribed patterns of teaching. For Hargreaves, in reaction to the age of professional autonomy the government has seized back the reins, the danger here is in an over-compensation of direction whereby only the elite control how and what is learned.[7]. However, such a broad statement needs closer examination as to where decision-making with respect to particular educational practices lie and ought to lie.

Teacher professionalism and decision-making over grouping practices

Theoretically, the debate about whether teachers rather than external agencies, policy makers and parents should influence or make decisions over grouping turns on three

related issues. The first concerns the research evidence on the relationship between grouping practices and learning, the second, the degree of 'local knowledge' that is required in translating the theoretical and empirical evidence on grouping practices into decisions 'on the ground' and the third relates to where decisions over the underlying values concerned with groupings should be located.

As regards the first, Baines, Blatchford and Kutnick (2003a) and Blatchford, Kutnick, Baines and Galton (2003b) have argued that there has been little research on the relationship between grouping strategies and pupils' development and learning and that consequently teachers often make grouping decisions on related factors such as behaviour rather than directly in relation to learning. However, the status of research evidence, even it were available, requires consideration. It would be most unlikely to show that the same grouping practices lead to optimum learning outcomes for all students regardless of context.[8] If so, the use of such knowledge would need to be leavened by an understanding of local circumstances if it were to be usefully applied. This brings us to the second and third points because even if there is a sound evidential basis for pupil learning and grouping decisions, then teachers' judgements based on experience, local knowledge and values will remain important. With respect to values, the locus of where they are debated is crucial to our understanding of education. If values are imposed from 'above' or externally, then it could be argued that a key part of education, debate over values, has been removed from the site where they should be discussed, the school; otherwise, teachers are no longer educationists but are in danger of becoming technicians as Ball (2006) suggests. We stress that this is arguable because the position taken will depend upon where in a democracy key decisions ought to be made. Nevertheless, if local knowledge is key to grouping

decisions, then it is difficult to divorce values from pedagogical practice and there is little doubt that value judgements will enter decision-making tacitly or explicitly. For example, Roberston and Symons (2003) report that when children of professional classes are streamed together they perform far better than would be predicted from their prior achievement scores, whereas working class students perform worse than predicted. In contrast, in mixed ability classes both perform to their predicted levels. Values relating to questions about who should win and lose in education clearly underpin these grouping arrangements.

However, when we turn away from the theoretical issues to policy and practice some of the former appear to have been 'settled': that is imposed by government policy. One way of understanding the present concept of professionalism in practice is to look at the government concept of earned autonomy. Under this concept schools are not 'trusted' as competent until they can show success in test performances. However, since the majority of 'failing' schools are in low socio-economic areas, it follows that the degree of school and teacher autonomy will be related to the socio-economic composition of the school. Hence, we shall explore the possibility that the degree of teacher autonomy in decisions about grouping practices will be mediated by the socio-economic composition of the schools: in particular, whether solidly working class schools or those with a mixed intake with a significant proportion of working class children are subject to external intervention. In turn this raises two issues.

The first is that the site of conflict over teacher autonomy becomes centred on the reliability and appropriateness of the data used to judge schools. There are two dimensions to this. The first concerns the way in which teachers consider their

autonomy to be constrained by the STL and especially the system of numerical target setting related to prior achievement and predicted outcomes on tests. The second concerns the way these data are used to judge teachers and schools. Every head we talked to gave accounts, often off the record, of how they had sought to challenge the data used both with Ofsted inspectors and with the LA. In this paper we present two examples of when heads have disputed data that they were prepared to talk about.

Secondly, if pressure is applied to poor performing, largely low SES schools then this could be seen as part of a policy of 'earned autonomy' in which schools that subsequently do perform well are given greater freedom in the professional judgements they can make. However, it may also be the case that such schools have low staff morale because they see their professional judgements as being diminished, which adds a further dimension to the struggle between teacher autonomy and state control.

External state agencies may not be the only source of pressure on schools, parents are another key constituency with respect to stakeholders. We noted above Robertson and Symons' (2003) findings that there was a relationship between social class background grouping strategies and performance. We might, therefore, expect in more socially mixed schools that parents may add to the pressure on teachers to pursue particular grouping policies that advantage their children (Ball, 2003; Lareau, 2000; Stuart Wells and Serna, 1997). The question here is whether indeed it is only the professional middle class that apply pressure over grouping strategies in the way that the literature suggests.

The Sample

The data for this analysis is based on the HARPS project which is a mixed method study of school composition effects in Hampshire examining primary school progress between years 3 and 4. The research design has three elements constructed like a Russian doll: a sample of 300 primary schools for which data on contextual variables and test outcomes has been collected; second a sample of 46 primary schools in a district called Greenwood with far more detailed occupational, income and family structure data has been gathered and a detailed qualitative analysis of 12 of the 46 schools.[9] The schools have been given the names of trees in order to preserve their anonymity.

Head teachers and staff were also interviewed and we have used the head teacher and curriculum leader interviews to gain a greater insight into the issues concerning professional autonomy over grouping practices. Head teachers, in particular, can be seen as pivotal in the relations between schools, parents and external agencies. It is for this reason that we have chosen to focus on their views. They may not always represent the views of all teachers within the school but they should have a far greater understanding of the relationships between the school and those exerting external pressure on it and will have an intimate understanding of how and why grouping decisions have been made. That said, as we note below they appeared to be candid in saying when they did not think that their views also represented the views of their staff. These views could also be seen as a way of presenting an agenda to researchers that they may have thought could help them in their debates with external agencies (Walford, 1994) but if this was the case then it would speak to the real concerns they

had concerning the threats to their autonomy. We provide a brief description of the 12 schools with respect to socio-economic status and achievement, below.

The distribution of students by socio-economic status in the 12 schools

In the graph below we can see the distribution of students by SES for each of the 12 schools:

[INSERT FIG 1 ABOUT HERE]

It will be seen from the above graph that there is a wide variation in the distribution of pupils between these schools according to socio-economic status. Beech, Willow and Cedar have few or no pupils from professional middle class families, while having a significant proportion of those from low SES families or families who did not respond to our questionnaire but who, we have established are most likely to have no one at home working (Kounali, Robinson, Goldstein and Lauder, 2007).

Attainment levels in the 12 primary schools[10]

[INSERT FIG 2 ABOUT HERE]

It will be seen from the above figure that there is a strong relationship between socio-economic composition and performance at baseline and KS1. For example, five out of

the six schools with the highest proportions of pupils from professional backgrounds are also amongst those with the highest test scores. The relationship does not map on perfectly, Beech and Rowan are 'anomalies' but the trend is clear. These data enable us to examine more precisely the relationship between the socio-economic composition of schools and teacher autonomy over grouping decisions.

However, in order to understand the policy context in which the question of teacher autonomy is made we need first to examine the place of testing and target setting in relation to pedagogy because this will inform the degree to which teachers' value judgements and views as to the aims of education have been framed by the STL.

The social technology of performance and the aims of education

Whatever the many aims that schools and teachers have for their students, the issue of test performance is central. If there is a degree of autonomy that teachers have, then the additional educational aims they retain have to be negotiated around the central focus on test performance.[11] In our interviews with head teachers, the central aim of improvement in test results was either viewed, at best as an inconvenience to be tolerated and at worst as an obstruction in seeking to meet the more important aims of education. These points are reflected in all but one of the heads' views of the testing culture in the 12 schools in our sample.

The Hollybush head, articulating views expressed by many staff in schools with children suffering from social deprivation, felt that the testing culture compounded some children's sense of lack of self worth and confidence which they would seek

through criminal means if not through the school system. Commenting on how success in education is measured he noted that:

it has to be SATs results [but] SATs results do not make …positive citizens of our future, if we carry on this journey of rewarding the ones that do well at SATs … then we're going to have quite a high percentage of people who are going to be looking for rewards in other places, …in terms of vandalism, gang warfare those sorts of issues because all people… have got to have a sense of belonging and self worth."
(Hollybush head) [12]

The Aspen head acknowledged the importance of having a measure by which to assess children's attainment but was very doubtful as to whether SATs were the best way to do it, because of the pressure of the test situation upon vulnerable children:

I'm not saying I'm against testing, because I'm not, but for some of these kids it is traumatic. They've got enough traumas in their lives without the pressure of having to worry about exams. (Aspen Head) [13]

The Willow head raised the question of trust and professionalism in relation to the STL directly:

I think its league tables which I totally disagree with, the sending away to marking etc, I mean these are supposed to be tools… to help us, I mean they're basically saying that you can't be trusted teachers, that somebody else has got to mark papers, someone else has got to check on it for you and everything else, …why are we doing

that, we are we telling the teaching profession that somebody else has got to check you out. (Willow head).

This view is echoed by Ash's curriculum leader who sees the imposition of SATs as directly related to a loss of trust in the teaching profession:

 it's a shame the profession lost the trust of politicians so they imposed something. If there were no SATs, children would still be assessed in depth in Year 6 before transferring to secondary school; children would still be assessed because teachers would want to know what they've learnt and what are the gaps in their learning.

Of the 12 heads interviewed only one (Rowan's) took the view that the preparation the school made towards KS2 SATs did not compromise other aspects of the curriculum and yet even she acknowledged that her teachers would claim the contrary. All other heads felt compromises were made and many were highly critical of the testing culture and the varying pressures this put on the school. As we shall see, in some schools there was a tension, if not outright contradiction between the major focus of the school on the lowest attaining or those with particular social or emotional needs and the demands to improve test performance. In this context, grouping decisions can be seen as one aspect of the conflict that teachers engage in to preserve their autonomy. But whatever autonomy they have, the imperative of achieving the expected test results is to the fore: the role of triage (Gilborn and Youdell, 2000) in external agency interventions to raise schools' test performance is significant in this respect, as we shall see.

Decision-making on grouping practices

Within schools decisions about grouping practices are made in a range of ways as indicated in the table below. Decisions can be made by the head, in consultation with upper and lower school staff, year teachers and individual classroom teachers. There were variations within schools over decision making on grouping practices, both in terms of the nature of the locus of internal control over these decisions and in terms of interventions from the LEA. Perhaps the most striking pattern shows a connection between the number of agents exerting influence on decision making processes and the socio- economic status of a school. All three high SES schools determined their grouping strategies internally, and all as a joint decision made in consultation with the management and teaching staff.[14] However, as we shall see there were still external pressures on these schools, in particular parental pressure, as we document in the case of Juniper.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

However, among the mixed and low SES schools external agencies were much more likely to have a role in the decision-making process. The methodology for intervention is that the LEA develops its own strategies for identifying schools that may need support and may put in some additional help in the form of, for example, literacy or numeracy support. This is 'informal', or non-statutory and may include an active role for inspectors attached to schools and consultants.

OFSTED inspect schools on a cycle and if they identify a school at serious risk or failing they can issue a notice to improve. At this point a statutory time-sequence of required reports from the school kicks in and the LA will support the school to deliver an action plan. OFSTED have to rule if it is acceptable.

The school then has a time limit to improve and will be subject to further OFSTED inspections. The LA will usually allocate additional support resources from its base funding to help the school. If all these measures fail to improve the school OFSTED may recommend to the Secretary of State that the school is closed. As one official explained it: 'OFSTED are judge and jury, the LA the prison warders and prisoner support staff'.[15]

The first striking pattern emerging from these tables is that for high SES schools, grouping practices are made internally, although in one case parental pressure is taken into account – see below. However among the mixed and low SES schools the influence of external agencies is far more apparent with five out of the nine schools being subject to external influence, as in one case is the consideration of parents' views. While it must also be recognised that there are other factors impacting upon grouping decisions including, building/cohort size, and school budget, nevertheless these tables are interesting as they suggests that the decisions regarding grouping practices may be more complex for low and mixed SES schools. However, before looking at these it is worth considering the point that few schools escape pressure, if it not from the state it is from the market in terms of parental pressure. In this case, however, the market works for high socio-economic schools, rather than low.[16]

Parental pressure

Although there is no formal external agency pressure identified that influences decisions on grouping practice amongst the high SES schools, in the case of Juniper there is some external pressure experienced on grouping arrangements stemming from parents. However, in contrast to the state agencies, parents seem more concerned with the placement of individual children in groups, rather than the grouping policy per se. [17] The Juniper head described this as coming from certain parents who feel their child has been incorrectly held back, she explained this as; *"parents like to see their children progressing"*. This results in what the Juniper head describes as "*unpopular decisions*" among parents as to which registration class a child is to be placed in at the beginning of the school year. However, while she was acutely aware of parents' concerns, such unpopularity was unlikely to move the head to amend grouping arrangements.

The same kind of pressure was experienced by the head at Ash school from parents who would like to see their children in the upper as opposed to lower sets in literacy or numeracy. However, unlike Juniper school the Ash head felt that in cases where children are on the attainment margins between sets, the parent's view was an important consideration for the school:

If a parent is going to get so upset about one of these children on the margins being in the wrong set , then we are likely to take that into account, because ultimately we need their support with the child.

It is significant though that at Ash, with a more mixed socio-economic composition, the head felt unable to resist the pressure. This may be because of his market position, he was acutely aware that he was in competition with a private primary school.

The nature of decision-making for mixed and low SES schools

The second and perhaps more interesting pattern emerging from these findings is in regard to the *nature* of the decision making powers in high SES compared with low and mixed SES schools. Whereas for all the high SES schools decision making was internal, for five of the low and mixed schools, specific reference was made to the external agencies, in the form of the LA attached inspectors, curriculum consultants or Ofsted in impacting upon grouping decisions.

A significant factor positively associated with external pressure on grouping practices was whether schools were on the LAs intensive support programme for schools which are deemed to be underperforming. Two of the five mixed SES schools on the programme experienced LA influence on grouping decisions while one was able to resist this pressure with time: one of the low SES schools experienced the same pressure although another successfully resisted it.

The decision to consent to or resist external pressure is wholly dependent upon whether external agencies views on grouping are the same as head teachers. For Hollybush the external agent's views on grouping were in line with those of the head's. This was evident from the Hollybush head's words on the value of grouping which echoed the attached inspector's, professing the importance of mixed ability

groupings because more confident students could provide role models for the less confident.

Children, particularly in the core skills, can perceive things about themselves because of the groups that they are joining…the dynamics of that group can impact upon the lower ability children, just because you are working with response partners or with a group that is actually giving you a secondary support with regards to that group. (Hollybush Head)

However, both Ash and Ivy heads described how external agencies were opposed to their views on grouping strategies. When asked what informed the current grouping arrangements the head of Ash replied:

It was originally drawn up when we had mixed-age classes, with Y4/5/6 integrated vertically. This arrangement didn't survive the OFSTED inspection, which fed back that one of the best maths teachers was fully stretched trying to teach a mixed-age class. Though I prefer mixed-age classes, the imperatives we face at the moment make it a harder task for teachers. (Ash Head)

The Ivy Head was asked about the recent change from setting to mixed ability teaching at the school as advised by the LA maths consultants, to which she responded:

We are feeling quite unsafe about it because we feel that we could move them on better if we ability group them. (Ivy Head)

A similar sense of anxiety was expressed by the Aspen head:

You do get the feeling that if you don't follow the advice given then they are quick to blame you if standards don't rise… although if you do get it right that you will get commended for it.

External agencies' pressure in changing grouping practices, may go some way in explaining some of the contradictions between head teachers' grouping preferences and the actual grouping practices that they employ. For example, while the Ash head makes specific reference to his preference for mixed-aged classes, there are age cohort groups across the year. Similarly, while the Ivy head talks about the school's anxiety in relation to teaching mixed ability classes, this practice was employed for almost a year in maths across the school in deference to the wishes of the maths consultant. However, when it was realised, at the end of the year, that mixed ability teaching had not improved student progress the school was able to revert to setting.

The issue of conflict between heads, staff and external agents raises important questions, not only about teacher autonomy and professionalism but also in terms of the new managerialism (Thrupp and Willmott, 2003). According to this view organisations perform best when they can develop their own culture based on the leadership of head teachers. However, it is clear from the above quotes that external agency advice is often at cross purposes with the core beliefs and visions of head teachers. Moreover, as was made clear by the Ash head, being subject to intensive

support measures, which he objected to (see below) had a major impact on staff morale, raising questions about how effective such external agency influence is.

Triage and External Pressure

This point takes us to the heart of the issue of teacher autonomy and professionalism and can best be investigated by looking at the issue of triage (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). Educational triage concerns the attempt to raise the performance levels of students who are judged to be just below what is considered an acceptable performance. In primary schools at Key Stage 2, students are expected to achieve a level 4: schools with a significant proportion of students below this level are considered to be underperforming.[18] Consequently, there may be pressure on schools to target resources for those students who may be able to raise their performance sufficiently to hurdle the level 4 barrier. Implicit in this triage strategy is the assumption that there are trade-offs to be made between the resources and focus devoted to some students (those that are just below level 4) at the expense of others (those that are unlikely to achieve level 4 at KS2).

We were able to identify four schools where there appeared to be a policy of triage emanating from the LA which resulted in the identification of 'priority groups of children. Amongst the high SES schools Juniper had a policy to raise pupils, identified as working at Level 4, to Level 5. This was designed to satisfy the aspirations of predominantly professional middle class parents.

In Ivy school the LEA advisor and the curriculum consultants both felt that mixed ability teaching best served the needs of the potential KS 2 level 4 children. As such the school had reluctantly conceded to trial mixed ability classes for a year at the school. However Ivy has traditionally had a culture of focusing on the lowest attaining children whom they felt were best served using setting and had strong parental support for the school's focus on the lower attaining children. Here the clash between the school and the LA over seeking to raise the numbers of children achieving level 4 raised a series of issues affecting the principles and culture of the school and the positive reputation it had earned in the locale.

Given these data patterns it appears that low and middle SES schools are more likely to experience external pressure from external agencies with a particular focus in raising the proportion of students achieving Level 4. The case of the schools with mixed social class compositions is interesting because it may have been assumed that they could perform better hence the need for external agency involvement. However, this begs the question that informs this strategy that the processes involved in school composition and attainment are understood (Thrupp, Lauder and Robinson, 2003). However, this is most unlikely to be the case since there is no agreement in the research literature on this point and it is interesting that for schools in intensive support there is debate between the heads and external agencies as to the basis on which such judgements are made. This brings us to one of the key sites of conflict over teacher autonomy, namely the debate over how judgements as to school performance are made and correspondingly how resources that may aid that performance are distributed.

The Conflict Over Judgements of School Performance

Judgements over school performance are strongly informed by quantitative data that seeks to determine the value added that a school provides given the background characteristics of the students. For example, Ash school has a high level of pupil turbulence[19], the head believes that the level of disadvantage to the school occasioned by turbulence is not recognised. He calculates the level of disadvantage in terms of equivalence with Free School Meals (FSMs). His school has 8 per cent eligible for FSMs but he judges that when turbulence is added, his school has the disadvantage equivalent to about 20 per cent of students eligible for FSMs. However, instead of this disadvantage being recognised, the school has been subject to an intensive support programme. The head described the impact on his teachers as follows:

It's been exceedingly taxing… it has been particularly burdensome for teachers in year four, they realise they're under the microscope.

For the Aspen head the disagreement over data concerned the marking of SATs. Since the SAT results are crucial to how a school is judged this is a key issue. However, she had little confidence in the way SAT's were marked :

And it's not reflecting their true ability (despite the fact a number of them come back marked incorrectly. We had 11% marked incorrectly in English last year. We had six children marked as Level Three when they were Level 5 because the examiner had forgotten to add on a whole set of results"(Aspen head).

External influence and the nature of grouping practices

Given that there are relationships between external agency pressure and grouping strategies is there a pattern to how the external agents want schools to group?. Do they advocate a particular type of grouping practice?

Overall, there appears to be no set pattern for several reasons. In part this may be because their interventions are aimed at different target groups within schools (e.g. those just below Level 4, or the 'gifted'). But it also the case that even among those where the target groups are similar and in similar SES composition schools, grouping practices are different and this appears to be because external consultants bring their own theories and evidence as to which grouping strategies are likely to be most effective. While the present government appears to believe that grouping strategies are essential in raising standards, there is no mandated policy as to which strategies are most effective. Hence, when the official rhetoric is decentralised to the local level it produces a variety of 'solutions', including, as we have seen a commitment to mixed ability teaching by some advisors.

Conclusion

There are three broad conclusions to be drawn from this study and several insights into the details of how grouping strategies are constructed that are of relevance to the question of teacher autonomy.

The first is that teacher autonomy has to be constructed in the face of a range of stakeholder interests e.g., the central and local state and parents. In this respect the situation now is substantially more complex than that which Hargreaves (2006) may have had in mind when he argued that the balance between the interests of the state and the professional autonomy of teachers had never been adequately struck. Teachers' professional judgements, including those about values can be exercised so long as schools conform to the STL's criteria for progress and live up to parental expectations but their values are already circumscribed by what counts as 'progress'. While the market may operate in applying pressure to mainly high SES schools in decisions about grouping strategies, it is the state that it is more likely to apply pressure in mixed and low SES schools. In particular, triage strategies were applied to some of these schools in order to raise performance on the basis of test outcomes: although, we should note that one high SES school had pressure applied to raise the proportion of pupils achieving at level 5.

The second is that conflict and resistance by schools often turns on the validity of the data used to judge performance. Two examples were given in this paper: in one case there was a dispute about the significance that should be attached to turbulence, while in another, the failure to raise test performance after a one year trial with mixed ability classes led to a reversion to the grouping strategy the school wanted.

Given the centrality of data based on testing to the degree of autonomy that schools and teachers can 'earn', it is salutary to reflect on the reliability of these data. Kounali, Robinson, Goldstein and Lauder (2006) have shown that Free School Meals (FSMs) as a measure of disadvantage is highly unreliable. For example, they calculate that the

measurement error associated with FSMs when seeking to 'explain' the value added between baseline and KS1 results is between 17 and 50 per cent. Moreover, that using FSMs as a measure of disadvantage is likely to underestimate the challenges that schools face. Given this situation it seems that what teachers confront is a form of extreme performativity in the sense captured by Ball (2006):

> Truthfulness is not the point –the point is their effectiveness in the market or for inspection, as well as the work they do 'on' and 'in' the organisation –their transformational impact (696).

In this context, professional autonomy, when it is won is not secured because of the status conferred by secure claims to professional knowledge but through effective resistance to the imperatives of the statistics by which schools are judged and by debate with the advisors that are mobilised by the warning 'signals' raised by the data. Inevitably, when a model of the teaching profession is developed involving multiple stakeholders the management of conflict will be integral to what it means to be a professional. What underpins the terrain on which these conflicts are played out are the performance data by which schools are judged.

However, in terms of the management of schools there are costs to be born. The conflicts between a schools' philosophy and that of the LEA as in the case of Ivy, is perhaps the most important because it may generate dissonance between heads, staff and the LA. The lowering of staff morale because schools are effectively being told that they are not doing a sufficiently good job is another, while heads and staff also have to take up valuable time in resisting and debating these impositions. Given these

'downsides' to the STL and the flawed foundations on which aspects of its social

technology rest, there are questions to be raised about whether the construction of

what may be called performative professionalism is the best way of enabling schools

and teachers to develop effectively.

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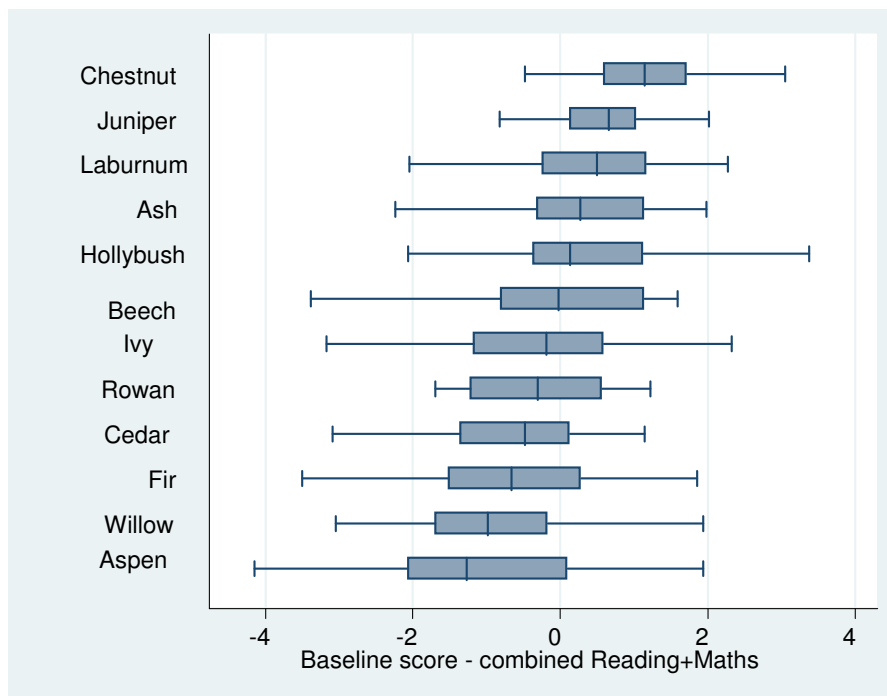
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Figure 1: The Distribution of Students by Socio-Economic Status[20]
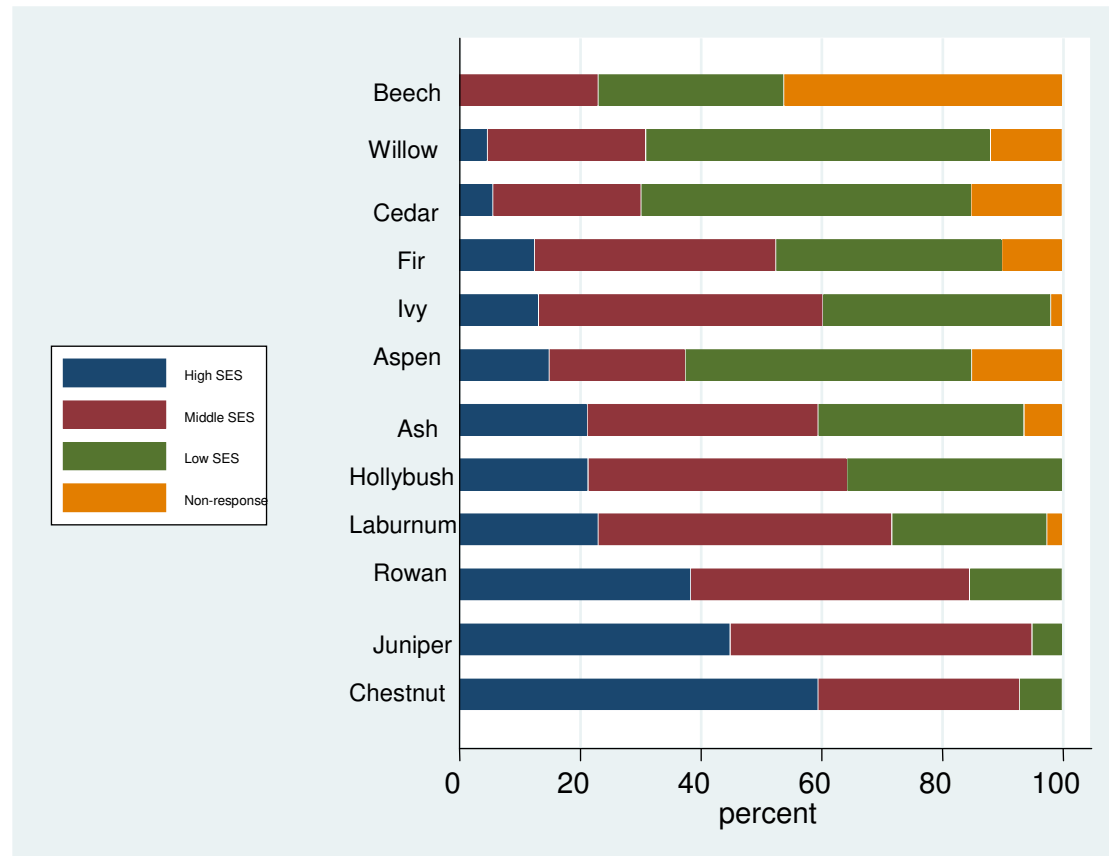
Figure 2 The Performance of the 12 Schools on Baseline and KS1 Tests

Table 1: Decision-making on grouping practices

High SES School	Decision influencing agencies
Chestnut	-Teaching and managing body as an internal decision
Juniper	- Teaching and managing body as an internal decision - Parent pressure
Rowan	-Teaching and managing body as an internal decision

Mixed SES School	Decision influencing agencies
Ash	**- Ofsted** - Head Teacher in consultation with staff - Parent pressure **- LA Curriculum consultants**
Fir	- Teachers' individual choices In consultation with the Head
Ivy	- **LA: curriculum consultants**

	- **LA: attached inspector**
	- Head teacher in collaboration with Year teachers
Hollybush	- **LA: attached inspector** - **LA: curriculum consultants** - Head Teacher in consultation with - Lower school teachers - Upper school teachers
Laburnum	- Head teacher and curriculum management team -

Low SES School	Decision influencing agencies
Aspen	- The whole staff with individual teacher variations
Willow	- The whole staff
Cedar	- **LA: curriculum consultants** - Head teacher in consultation with individual teachers
Beech	- Head teacher and Senior Management Team

	- **LA**

Notes

[5][5] However as Lupton (2003) has shown, the picture is complex. Local contextual factors such as the local housing market and the numbers of transient or disrupted families, the local labour market, the numbers of travelling families or children in care, and the school's position in the local education market, as well as differing ethnic and cultural make up of neighbourhoods may all present specific management issues for schools that blur the more obvious social class distinctions.

[6] What counts as 'progress' is debatable, especially if is seen in terms of test outcomes.
[7] It should be emphasised that the nature of teacher autonomy will also change as other elements of society change. See Quicke (1998) for one account of what contemporary teacher autonomy might involve.
[8] We use the term optimum because as the discussion below suggests, in all grouping decisions there are likely to be trade-offs in terms of winners and losers.
[9] Details of the data set are given in Kounali Robinson, Goldstein and Lauder (2006).
[10] This graph shows the aggregate performance of schools over baseline and KS1 tests. Both combine tests in Reading and Maths.
[11] In some respects means and ends cannot be divorced from education, if we want students to develop as citizens in a democracy, it could be argued that the basic dispositions for citizenship need to be developed in schools through practices of negotiation, tolerance, respect for one another and indeed in Hampshire schools, attempts are being made through the Rights, Respects and responsibilities programme to foster these dispositions.

[12] This is a point which comes close to the critique by Broadfoot and Pollard (2006). They argue that a performative pedagogy will finesse a commitment to lifelong learning for short term outcomes.
[13] These views were also echoed by the Fir head.
[14] It could be argued that these decisions were subject to external validation from Ofsted, since had Ofsted disapproved these decisions would have been changed.
[15] LAs have a central role in the local implementation of national policies in raising 'standards' (Fletcher-Cambell and Lee, 2003)
[16] It is noteworthy that Beech with the lowest socio-economic intake had LA curriculum consultants advising it, despite on our calculations, performing better than might be expected, while Rowan which seemed to perform less well was not subject to external intervention. But our data do not take into account value added measures.
[17] While we could not identify collective action by middle class parents in relation to grouping practices, it not should be discounted as a more general possibility see Stuart Wells and Serna (1997).
[18] Considered underperforming by whom is a moot point. Ofsted now takes into account the prior achievement level with which students enter school. However, in terms of league tables and parents' perceptions schools with a significant proportion of students achieving below level 4 are not likely to be considered 'good' schools. LAs are not likely to favor such schools either as they may well reflect badly on their management of 'standards'.

[19] Turbulence can be defined as ' A child joining or leaving school at a point other than the normal age in which children start or finish their education at that school, whether or not this involves a move of home' (Dobson and Henthorne, (1999:5).

[20] This SES characterization is based on the highest occupation given in the parental questionnaire. High SES corresponds to the Professional Occupation category; Low SES corresponds to the following occupational categories: Personal and protective services; plant and machine operatives and sales. The rest of the categories make up the middle class. Non responses are also included.