

# How can we think about data in schools? Atmospheres of progress and forging futures in a data-based school

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*“But without data, teachers and schools are **blind**.*

...  
*Without data, school and student improvement is **virtually impossible**.”*

(Kelly, 2013, “From the Editor - Your number's up if you don't embrace the data”, Times Educational Supplement Editorial)

*“Far too often levels are an easy way to make summative judgments of a process that is ongoing. Any formative impact they may have gets lost in a welter of jargon and cliché which, **while it is present on most classroom walls, means little or nothing to students**.”*

...  
*Let's **free ourselves from this tyranny** and trust our professionalism to tell us about progress”*

(‘Secret Teacher’, 2013, “Secret Teacher: our students deserve more than levels and data”, The Guardian, Teacher Network)



Selwyn, 2014, Selwyn et al., 2015  
Ball, 2015

### *Core skills – Level 4 – 5*

- Listen effectively to others in the group
- Work with others to plan how to complete a task
- Support and help other members of the group when they don't understand
- Suggestion a solution to a problem

### *Intermediate skills – Level 5 – 6*

- Assume a leadership responsibility with your group
- Identify strengths and areas for improvement within your group
- Suggest alternative solutions to problems

### *Advanced skills – Level 6-7*

- Use creative approaches to solve problems
- Analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of the group

## **Assessing Pupil Progress (APP) board – Communication and Problem solving skills**

“He said,

‘Don’t care what I get,  
I’m goin’ to work for me dad’.

**That’s nice [for him] but what about *me*?”**

Two key ideas:

1. that changes in the production and use of **data** in schools have made the creation and maintenance of **'atmospheres of progress'** a key technique of governance in schools.
2. that teachers' and pupils' **futures become bound together** as they become responsible for securing each other's futures through the co-production of learning **data**.

PhD research in a secondary school  
(for pupils aged 11-16 years old)  
serving an economically deprived  
area in the North East of England

Draws on:

- **Ethnography** (over one year, and of 11 days of lessons)
- **Interviews** with pupils (with nineteen 14-16 year olds)
- **Interviews** with teachers (with 12 teachers at various career stages)
- **Short participatory project** - pupil's defined and conducted their own research about the school which they presented to staff and to Geography department colleagues



**We're No 1!**  
is 1st  
out of over 3,500 schools in England  
for adding value to pupils exam results

Government Performance Tables for schools, published recently show Parkside Academy to add more value to pupils' exam results than any other secondary school in England.

*Edited image from school website, 2014*

## Two moves

1) shift from a focus on assessing *teaching* to judging whether *learning* has taken place

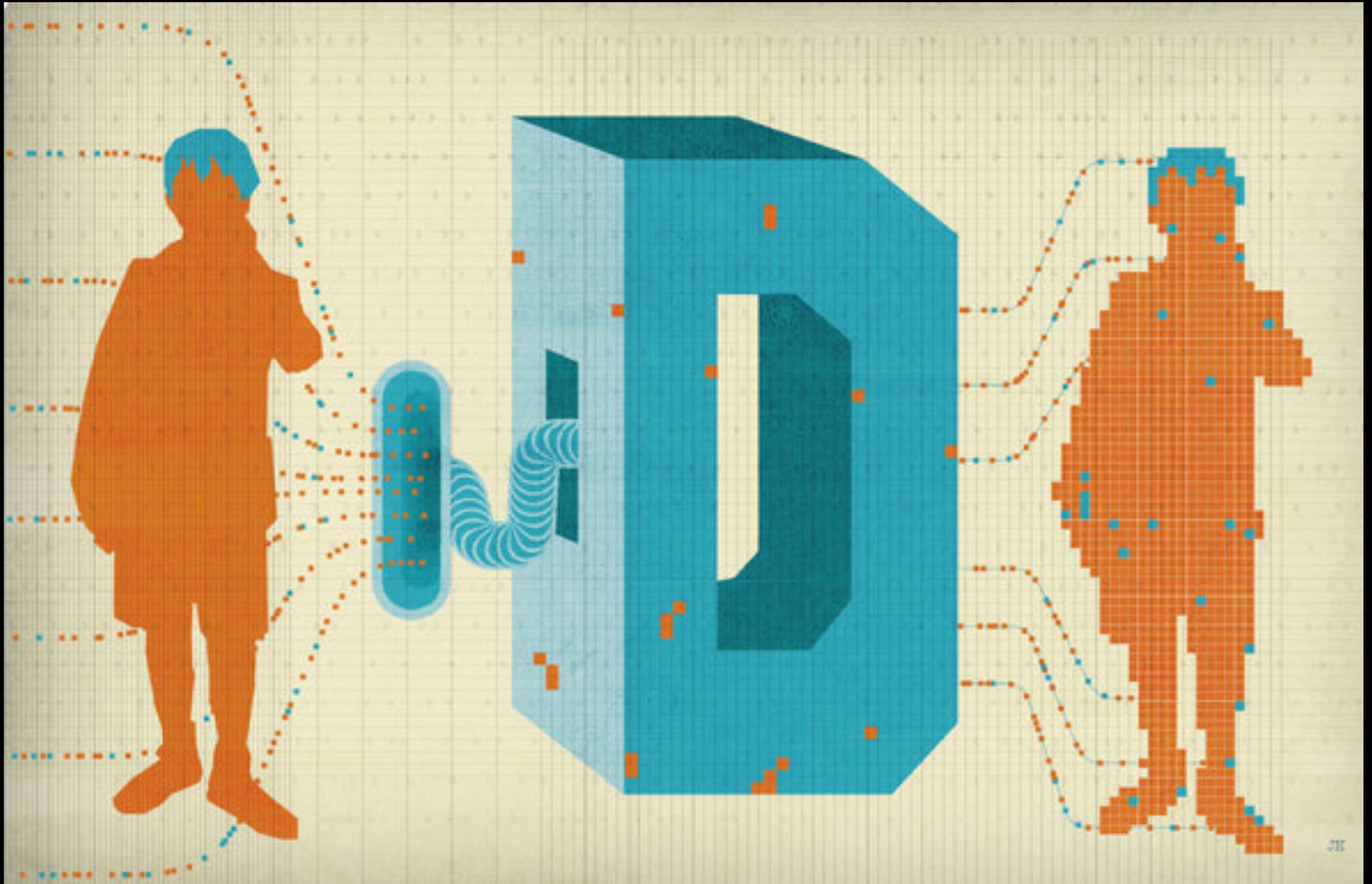
2) a proliferation of data to enable those judgements to take place

Need to be ready to give account at any time - data must always be being produced

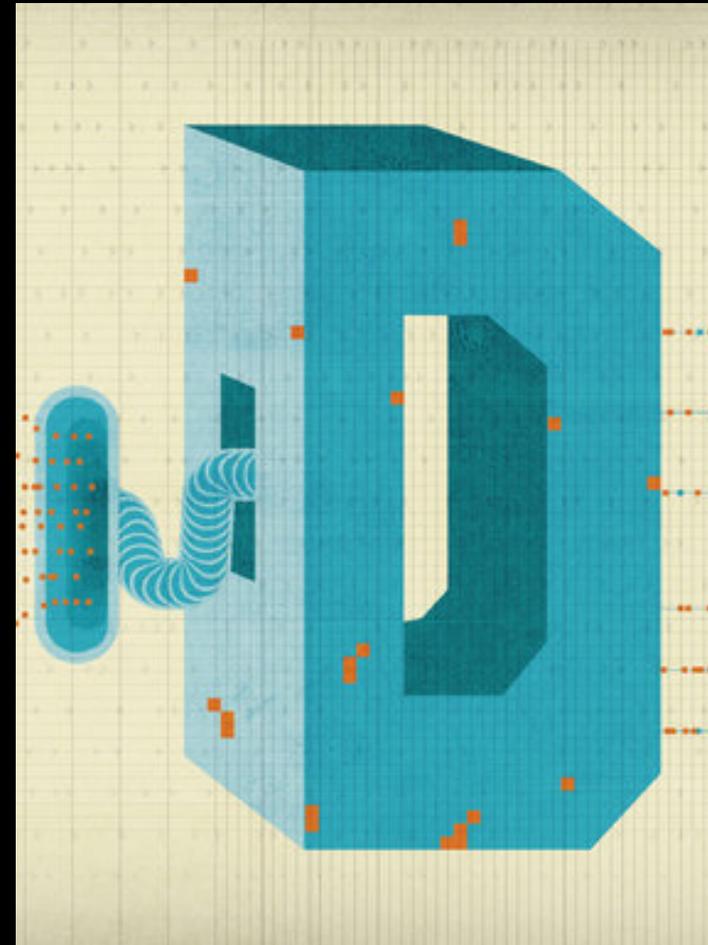
A teacher must “be accountable for pupils’ attainment, progress and outcomes”.



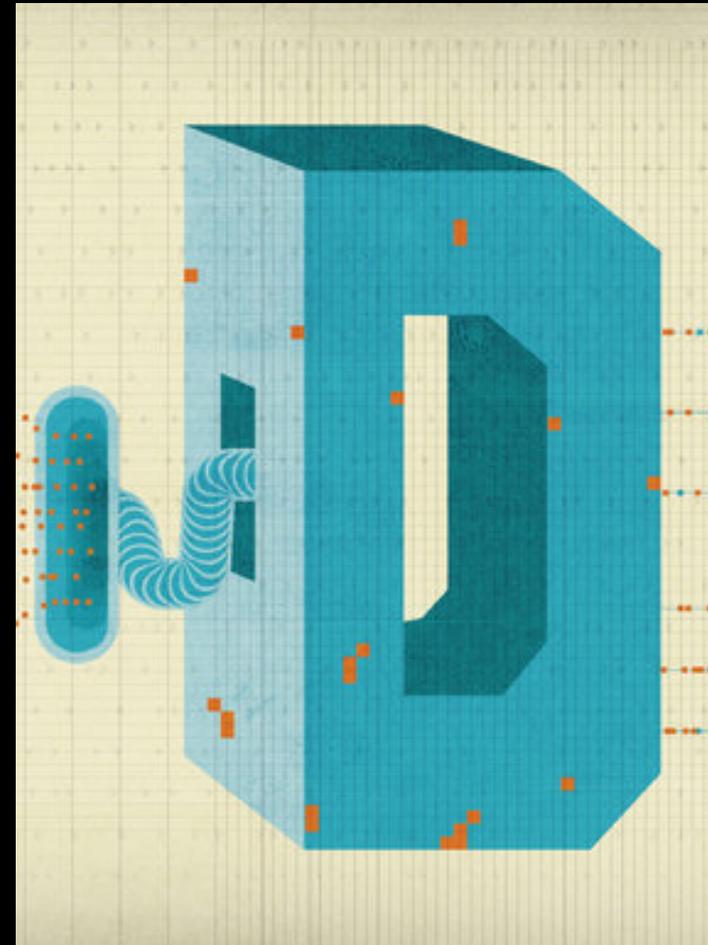
Teachers’ Standards document issued by the Department for Education



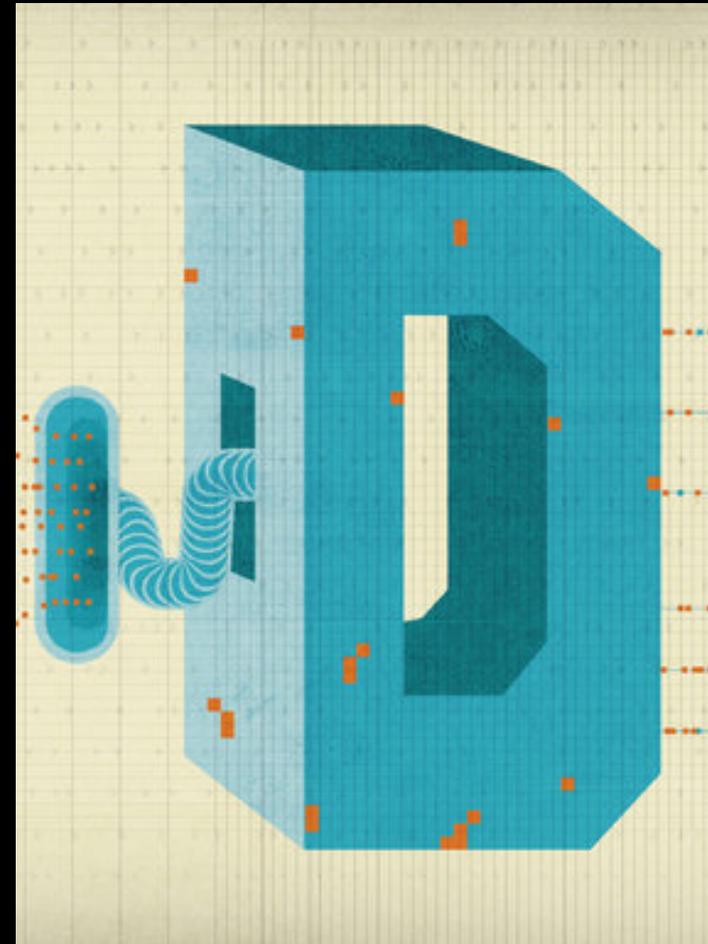
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- data as distraction from reflection and holistic education (Kelly et al., 2010: 36)



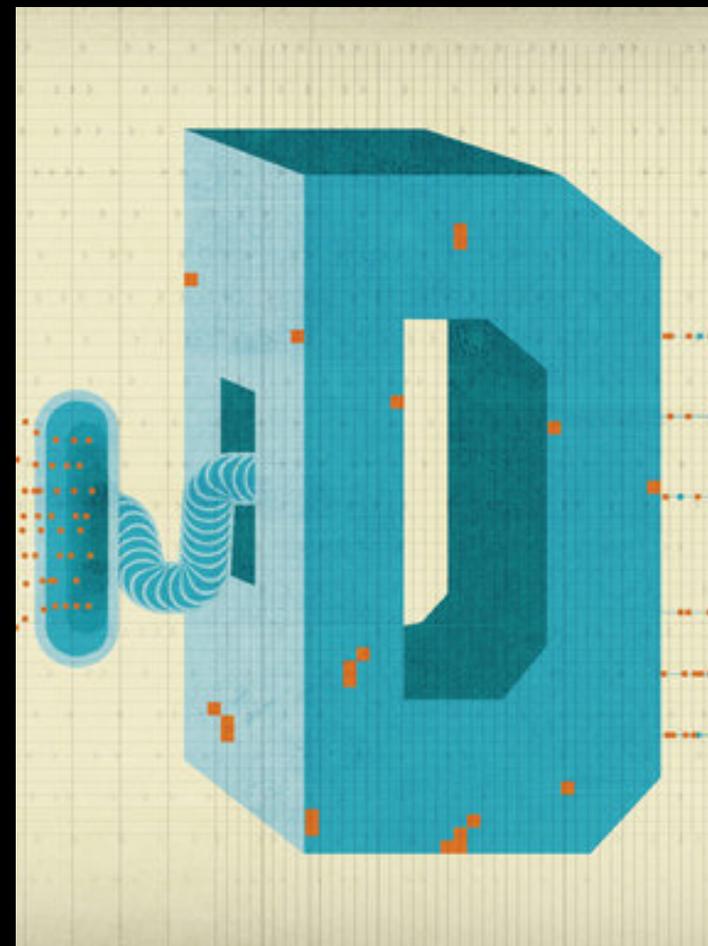
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- data as reprofessionalising (Kelly et al., 2010: 27ff) new roles and new competencies are produced as well as the promise of "objective evidence-based change"



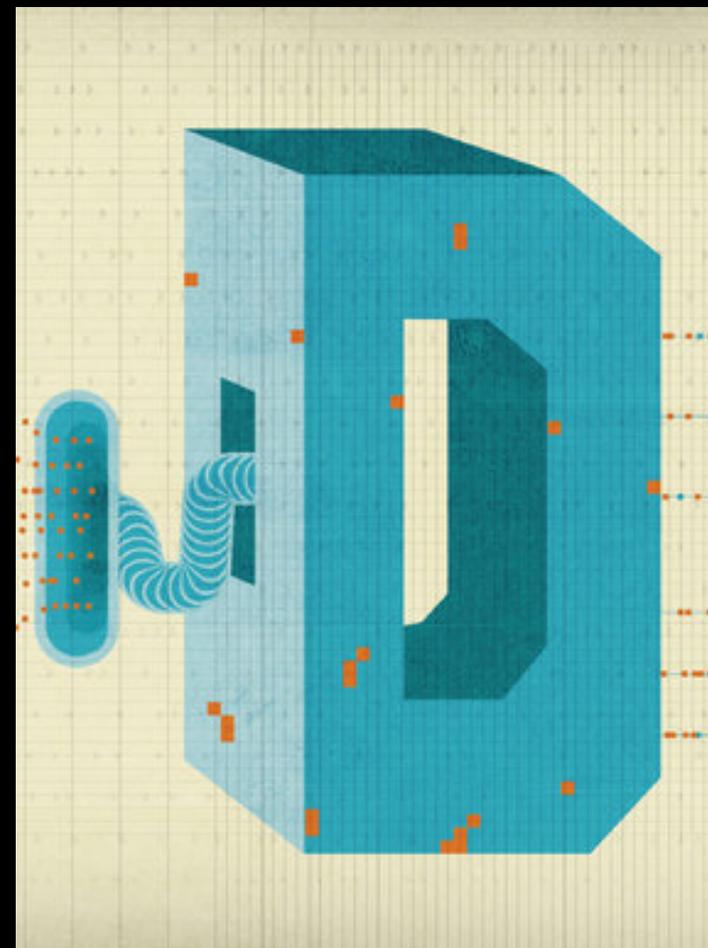
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- Being/becoming data-driven (Kelly et al., 2010: 33)
- data as a means of governance at distance (Grek and Ozga, 2008: 1)



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- An explosion of data (Grek and Ozga, 2008: 1)
- data as a flood (Kelly et al., 2010: 14), being awash with data (Earl and Katz, n.d. p2), drowning in information (Lawn and Ozga, 2009: 1)
- data as monstrous with a 'life of its own' (Lawn and Ozga, 2010)



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- data as a game to play (Kelly et al., 2010: 32)



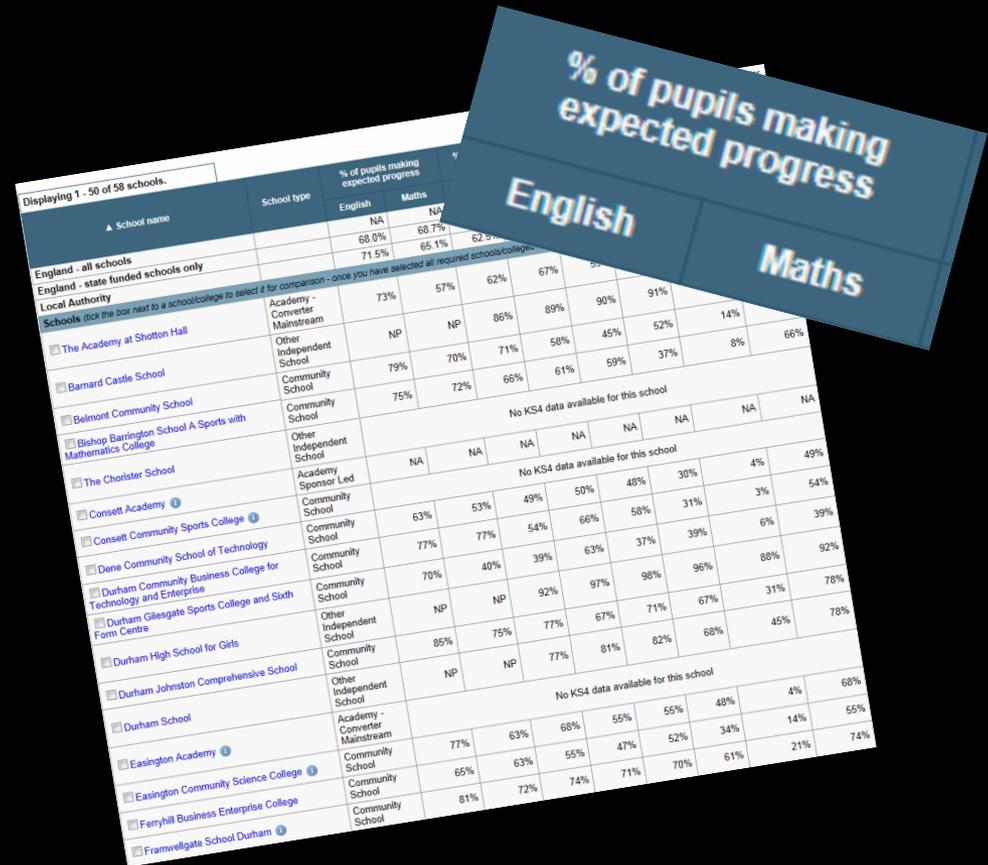
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# Shifting the basis of judgement

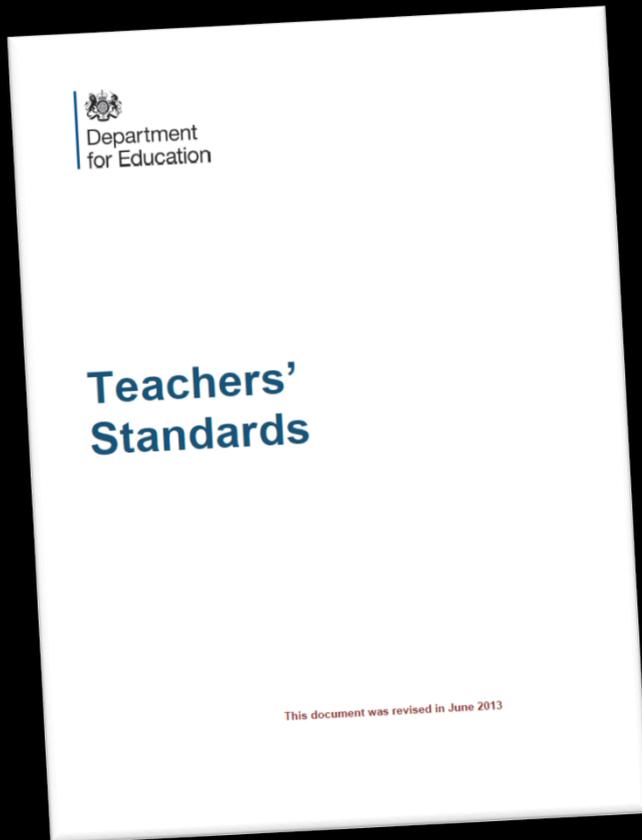
“In New Labour’s first white paper they state that ‘school performance tables will be more useful, showing the rate of progress pupils have made as well as their absolute levels of achievement’ (DfEE, 1997, p. 6). Specifically they will ‘focus more on the progress made between different stages’ (DfEE, 1997, p. 26).”

Llewellyn (2013)



% making expected progress in English					% making expected progress in maths				
all pupils	low attainers	middle attainers	high attainers	Coverage	all pupils	low attainers	middle attainers	high attainers	Coverage

# A teacher must:



- Promote good **progress** and outcomes by pupils
- be accountable for pupils' attainment, **progress** and outcomes
- guide pupils to reflect on the **progress** they have made and their emerging needs

- Make accurate and productive use of assessment
- make use of formative and summative assessment to secure pupils' **progress**
- use relevant data to monitor **progress**, set targets, and plan subsequent lessons

Selected from: Teachers' Standards, Department for Education, July 2013

Although now in 'life beyond levels' progress is still very much with us as 'Progress 8'

# Deliverables – pallets of strawberries

*“I'm actually saying [to my departmental team] these are our deliverables, you know, it feels like I'm at Tesco's. And I'm saying you know we must sell all 30 of 30 pallets of strawberries today because they'll go out of date. That's where I feel I am now and that's just twelve months Matt. Each year I think I've honed me skills a little bit more. I've become more comfortable with what three levels of progress meant, I became more comfortable what nationally we're measured against and that comes with time and experience.”*

Head of department

# Focusing on progress

*“For me the best sheet to be looking at is progress; ultimately as a teacher that’s what you’re judged on.”*

Teacher leading an after-school CPD session on the use of data

# Balancing and taking a hit

*'At the end of the day it's that balancing act of actually the data's the data and Ofsted are Ofsted but there's a child in this and what's best of the child isn't sometimes best for the data. So [child's name] is a classic example where I've made a call where he comes first, not my data. And it's tough and you can see I'm taking a hit there of 1 but I think it's manageable and I think he comes first.'*

Head of department

# If only Mozart and Einstein had target grades...

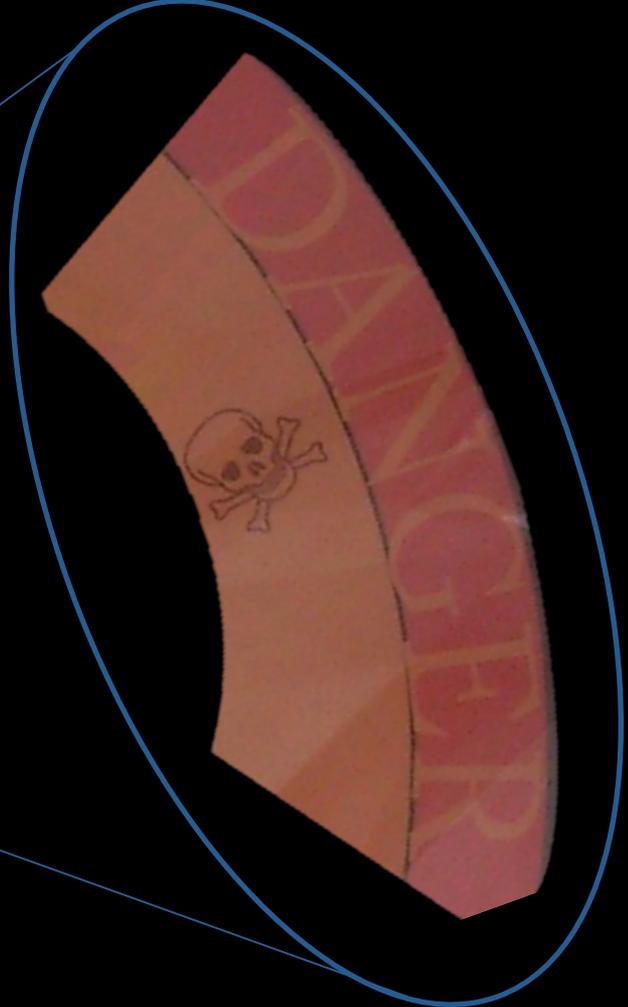
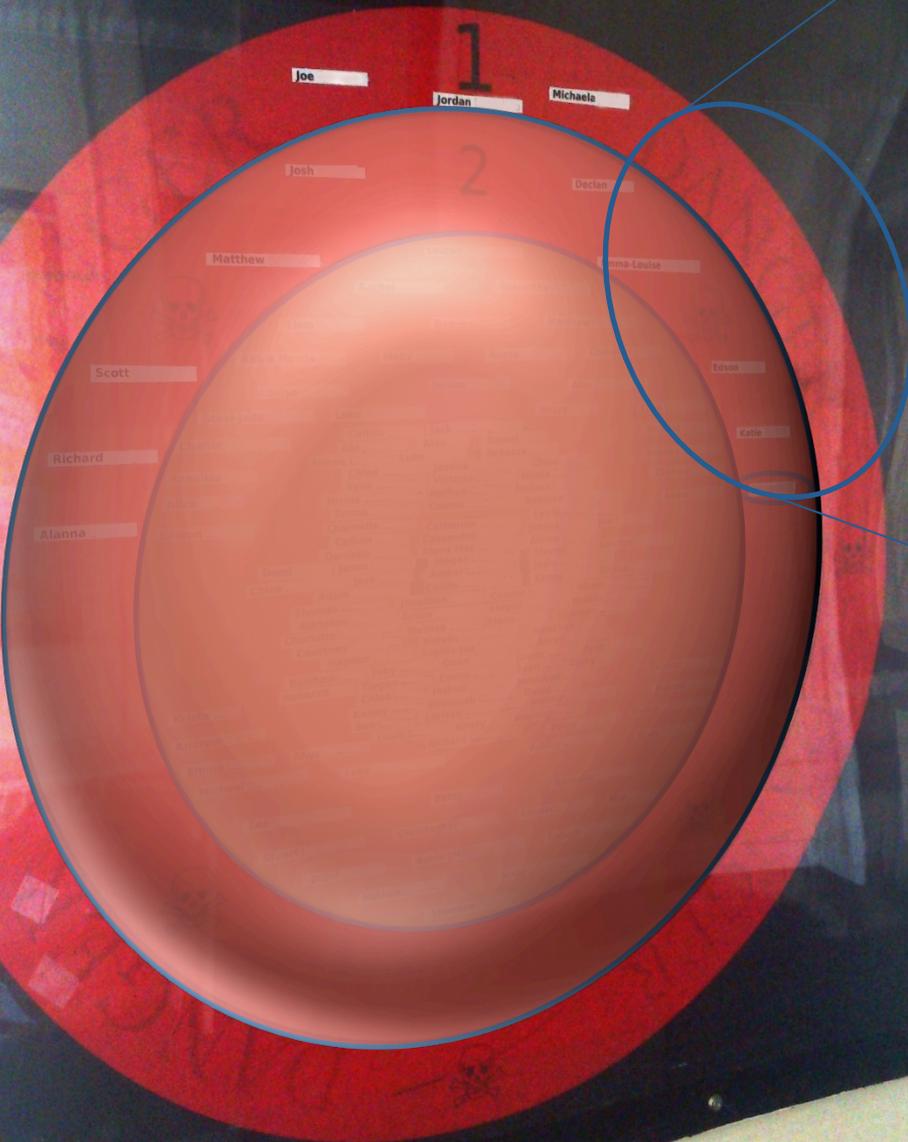
*“Don’t get disheartened as there are 4 years [to go] but you’re in the first term of year 7. You’re not expected to be there yet. Mozart & Einstein probably wouldn’t get their target grades yet.”*

Teacher

# WUU2?

English Level of Progress  
Are You on Target?

October 2012



Levels of progress are calculated as the difference between the result of national testing at the **end of primary school** and a pupils 'on course for' **grade at GCSE**, based on taking past papers.

# The school's logic

*'I'm not bothered what people think about me, to be fair and whatever I've got, that what's I've got. Fair enough. At that target thing, it's just to show who's the brainiest and who's not I reckon. I'm not a big fan of it because I'm always at that end instead that end (he indicates with his hand in the air an outer circle, the edge, rather than near the middle).'*

I ask him why he thinks that they use these boards.

*'Just to show people where they're at so they know if they need to stick in more or they can relax a bit and that's why I think, I'm not sure. I could never understand the school's logic.'*

*Dave (chosen pseudonym)*

# Motivation

*“It's nice to see they've given, like, that's what you should be aiming for, so like try and get this. It does give you more, uh, ... what's the word, ... motivation, to get that but to get that level. Instead of just sitting back, oh, cos if they give you, like, a low level you just think, what's the point, no point in doing this?”*

*Dave*

# Pushing myself | Being pushed

“I always like, I always try to push, see what I can actually do.”



[http://www.deviantart.com/morelikethis/artists/138692819?view\\_mode=2#/art/Push-Myself-208183823?\\_sid=dc08e93](http://www.deviantart.com/morelikethis/artists/138692819?view_mode=2#/art/Push-Myself-208183823?_sid=dc08e93)

“There is some downsides when you just like cannot be bothered and you're like, just they're pushin' you, pushin' you and you're just like, “I cannot”. You cannot keep up and that and you're just tired, but you get over it.”

Dave

# Push

“I’d say that [the school] does help yuh, cos it does push yuh to get the best grade you can so then when you come to the decision to go to college or to sixth form or apprenticeship or whatever, then you can make that decision freely. So you got the grade you needed and then you can just do what you want.”

Jeff

“Yeah because, like, they’ll notice if you’re doing well . . . The new teacher realised how well I was doing and how easy I found the work and I actually got pushed up to a higher class, so I wasn’t just sitting there doing easy work. I can actually now do harder work to challenge myself.”

Elena

Nikki

**Data** in schools have made the creation and maintenance of **'atmospheres of progress'** a key technique of governance

Pupils' narrated this as 'being pushed' and 'pushing myself'.

Atmospheres of progress as data-based 'pockets' of shared senses of effortful movement and improvement that results in individual and collective good feeling.

## Two key ideas:

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*you are -> we are -> we are*



“I think it's just that they can prepare us for the best so that they can get the best grades that we can and then they can, we can just decide what we want to do and that we can do it. So instead of wanting to go to college for not having the best grades so you cannot do that, they give us the best grades we can. Then we can basically choose what we want to do.”

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*“It depends on what job role you're playing at the time as to what caring for the students and looking for them actually means. It's the same with heads of department, theirs will be, the majority of the time, academic in getting them through the tests and getting them the data and looking after their students or caring for them is getting them the best that they can possibly get...”*

*“...they [the pupil's] will realise that it's for their benefit, you know, and they do understand the reason they're doing it, so it's not that we're pushing them for the reputation of the school or for our grade. We're pushing them because they need their college places, and they need to do well and be a*

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*“You know, the data says  
I should get a B  
but what happens if  
[pupil’s name] can't get a B?”*

*Maths teacher and head of department*

Agency

Alignments

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Normative  
Expectations

*Maths teacher and head of department*

Exposure to  
students as 'risky'

*“You know, the data says  
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*“You know, the data says  
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Misalignments

*Maths teacher and head of department*

“One of my predicted grades is a C in English and I've no idea how I'm going to get that cos I'm not very good at English. I've just got to try really hard to get to it to prove that I can actually do this and I just want to make a point. But it's gonna be quite tricky.” Dave

“Yeah, I'm supposed to get an A\* in physics and I don't understand any of it. That's really bad. (laughs)”

Brian (Y10 female pupil)

Llewellyn: I was let down when I found out I was meant to get an A and an A\* and tried me hardest in a science exam and I literally just got bottom, the bottom of low C and they said it wasn't good enough because I'm expected like an A\*. That just put us down completely - how am I meant to get that from a C?

Jose: They even told you though, didn't they, they were like, 'you're workin' at an A\*' and all this in lessons, 'you'll definitely get it', weren't they?

Llewellyn: It's daft 'cos you know that you're not.

Jose: Then to me, 'ah you'll definitely get a C or higher, definitely'. Come out the exam, 'ah, you got an E'.

Llewellyn: Then it was just a let-down because they said you'd definitely get it, so it makes you think: don't even try.

Jose: It got an E and they started shouting at us. Beforehand, 'ah, you're doing well, you're getting your homework in, in time, you try hard in class. After that, 'you're not trying enough, you don't do enough homework, you

*“You know, the data says  
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Exposure to  
students as ‘risky’

*but what happens if*

Misalignments

*[pupil’s name] can't get a B?”*

*Maths teacher and head of department*

“He said,

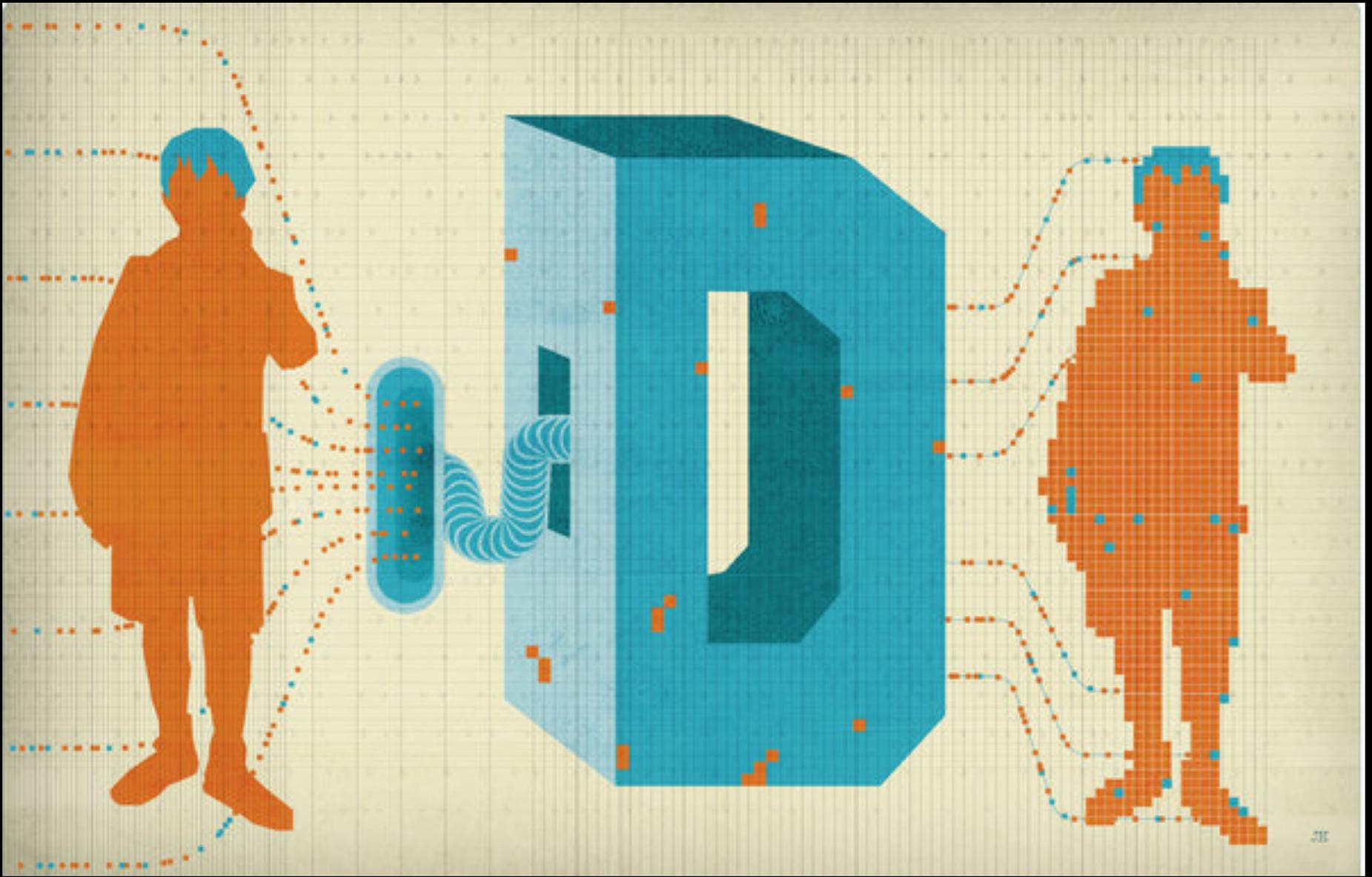
‘Don’t care what I get,  
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That’s nice [for him] but what about *me*?”

Teachers' and pupils' futures are **forged together** as they become responsible for securing each other's futures through the co-production of learning **data**. But this **breaks down** with diverging visions of the future

There's a '**shifting grammar of agency**' where the language they use to describe this exposes the indeterminacy of who or what is held to act.

There are **slippages** between pupils as they perceive themselves, as they are known by teachers through personal interaction and through their data - the 'pupil multiple'.



# Conclusions / provocations

How can we think about data in schools?

- Atmospheres of progress
- Pushing myself and being pushed
- Forging futures
- Shifting grammar of agency
- Data and care-work
- Proposals

# Thank you

Dr Matt Finn | @MattMattFinn



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