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“Children are more than just a statistic. Education is more than government outlines”: Primary teachers’ perspectives on the standards agenda in England

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Abstract

This paper focuses on qualitative findings from a study that investigated primary teachers’ perspectives on the standards agenda in England. Q-methodology was used to investigate the complexity of their perspectives. The study’s Q-methodology findings are published in *Education 3-13* (Williams-Brown and Jopling, 2021). This paper focuses on qualitative responses from this study that were completed after the Q-methodology card sort. It focuses on teachers’ overall perspectives on the standards agenda and statements from the card sort that were placed by five participants or more in the extreme columns of the distribution grid. Findings from the study evidence that teachers were not opposed to standards and accountability, but they voiced a variety of concerns that did not focus solely on SATs. These include concerns about perceptions of achievement, experiences of assessment and measures taken to hold teachers and schools accountable for their actions. Teachers did also emphasise concerns with SATs and discussed the need for objectives to be inclusive and consider the needs of children with SEND. The paper concludes by questioning whether this is the time to reconsider standards agenda objectives.

Keywords: standards agenda, teachers, primary, education

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What is the standards agenda?

The standards agenda has dominated education policy and rhetoric in England since the late 1970s. The introduction of the Education Act (1980) and, most significantly, the Education Reform Act (1988) by Conservative governments heralded the introduction of a new, more competitive ethos among schools, promoting market-led, public-facing change in the education system based on neoliberal notions of performativity and accountability (Galloway and Edwards, 1991). These acts changed the relationships between the government and schools by removing power from Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and increasing centralized control while, it was argued, at the same time empowering parents to make choices about their children's educational provision. This new 'public managerial state' enabled parents to choose schools and inaugurated a new competitive ethos amongst schools where LEAs had to acknowledge parental choice and schools had to appeal to parents (Galloway *et al.*, 1994; Whitty, 2008).

Continuing emphasis on the standards agenda resulted in the creation of the National Curriculum, Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs), league tables and inspections by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). Curriculum decision-making and assessment processes were centralised as teachers and schools were not seen to be responding to the needs of the consumer (Quicke, 1988). The *Better Schools* White Paper (DfES, 1985) made teachers more accountable for their performance and gave the Government more control of the curriculum on a national scale. These outcomes enabled the Government to control classroom content, whilst continuing 'steering at a distance' (Whitty, 2008, p.166). Teachers' unions and LEAs were also displaced in the process as the Government took over all of these outcomes. As such, the government took more and more control of schools, tightening its centralised power through the increasingly rigorous imposition of the standards agenda.

An unrelenting focus on standards

Subsequent governments continued to focus on the need for standards, accountability and academic success in education. For instance, the first New Labour administration

introduced the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in 1998 and 1999 which changed the curriculum timetable and focused half of all teaching time on literacy and numeracy (DfES, 1998, 1999). These restrictions were later relaxed, but the standards agenda continued to dominate, even with policies promoting a more balanced approach to assessing educational achievement through policies like *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004) and the introduction of contextual value-added (Leckie and Goldstein, 2017), which attempted to take elements of children's circumstances into account in measuring school performance. The latter policies were among the first to be removed by the Coalition Government in 2010 as part of their purported recommitment to standards-based school reform. Its policies included the Education Act (2011) which claimed to help teachers raise standards, improve underperformance and strengthen teachers' accountability. From 2010, Labour's relatively small-scale academies programme was extensively expanded, including the creation of free schools, to develop what was described as a 'self-improving school system'. This was founded on increasing school autonomy and significantly reduced the role of local authorities (Department for Education 2012), a process described by Lubienski (2014) as 'dis-intermediation'.

Teacher autonomy was also a focus. A review of the National Curriculum highlighted changes that were supposed to encourage teachers to use it as an outline of core knowledge at the same time as allowing them the autonomy to plan exciting, engaging lessons based on the National Curriculum outline (Department for Education, 2013). However, this rhetoric of autonomy sat uneasily with the constraints of standards agenda objectives which continue to dominate primary education. Pratt (2016, p. 892) described a system in which standards-based constraints dominate:

English teachers teach within a tightly controlled set of parameters, some made explicit in national curricula and national strategies, and others implicit - but no less real for teachers - in the way pupils are regularly tested and the results used to make judgements about both learning and teaching.

A paradox lies at the heart of the reforms to the education system in England since the Education Reform Act (1988). At that time the focus on standards was purported to increase school autonomy through the introduction of local management of schools

(LMS). This reduced local authority oversight at the same time as attempting to maintain standards and traditions through the implementation of a National Curriculum, a national testing system and school inspection services. The movement of (apparent) local autonomy and increased national control was a result of the wider opening of the public sector to marketisation and competition. This emphasises that the standards agenda was at the same time part of a neoliberal reform programme and an attempt to limit some of its consequences (Jopling, 2019).

Mason (2019, p. 67) has captured the centrality of standards and measurement to neoliberalism, describing it as 'a system of performance, a kind of ritualized theatre. Performative behaviour is easy to standardize and measure in market terms'. This masked its simultaneous appeal to rationality, which 'carries the implication that any criticisms of it, or any alternatives put forward, are by definition irrational, and hence not worthy of serious contemplation' (Bargh, 2007, p. 14). However, neoliberal education policy in England in particular (other UK countries, notably Scotland, have been more resistant to it) has attempted to restrict its increasingly market-driven approach by reinstating elements of traditional pedagogy and curriculum, often to counter the extremes associated with a rather vaguely defined progressivism (Chitty, 2014). This has led to the development of hybridised policy which has brought together marketising and traditionalising impulses in a way that is 'both complementary and contradictory' (Whitty and Power, 2002, p.105) and perhaps irrational.

Testing as a means of accountability: Statutory Assessment Tests

In 1991, the Parent's Charter gave parents the right to information about their local schools based upon their performance. This information provided to parents included results from children's assessment and school inspections. Summative assessment results at the end of each key stage, Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs), were used to develop a national form of assessment. For primary schools at this time this meant English, Maths and, initially, Science tasks in Key Stage 1, and SATs in English, Maths and Science in Key Stage 2. In 1992, SATs became a high-stakes form of accountability as the results started to be published in national league tables that compared schools' success, placing them in direct competition with one another. Two decades later (or at least until the intervention of Covid-19), SATs continue to be used

and schools are ranked in league tables according to the proportion of children who achieve the national average (Higgs *et al.*, 1998).

However, this has not been without its controversies. For instance, in 2008 SATs results were delayed and produced inaccurate outcomes that were attributed to administrative failure. This resulted in the Education Testing Service, which was responsible for marking SATs, losing its contract and the resignation of Ken Boston, Chief Executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (*Guardian*, 2008). In response, a quarter of schools across the United Kingdom boycotted the SAT process in the election year of 2010 (BBC, 2010). Teachers and unions collectively stated that SATs were misused to develop league tables that stigmatise children, teachers and schools as successes or failures (*Guardian*, 2010). The subsequent *Importance of Teaching* White Paper (DfE, 2010) took as its starting point the claim that in recent years schools had been subject to a compliance regime of centralised control and argued for greater autonomy. It also called for more transparency in the standardised information provided to parents so they could compare school achievement more effectively, and recommended that schools be held more accountable to parents, their pupils and local communities for their performance (DfE, 2010).

Research for many years has highlighted a variety of concerns with this form of assessment, including forcing teachers to 'teach to the test' and 'prep' their children; focusing exclusively on academic achievement (Fieldings *et al.*, 1999; Wyse and Torrance, 2009); and the time-consuming nature of the SAT process (West *et al.* 1999). It has also emphasised the inaccessibility of the assessment for some children; the difficulties children with SEND can experience with the assessment (Brown, 2013); and the negative impact of 'failing' SATs for children, teachers and schools (Williams-Brown and Jopling, 2020). The assessment itself is based on the normal distribution of results in relation to the national average. This means that some children will inevitably be unable to achieve this average and be considered as failing the assessment. This flies in the face of standards agenda objectives of promoting excellence for all children: 'there are, of course, winners and losers ... [promoting] belief in the myth, or at least acquiescence to the rhetoric, of excellence for all - everyone's a winner' (Gamarnikow and Green, 2003, p.209).

The standards agenda has existed for over thirty years. Its core curriculum, assessment and inspection objectives have not changed considerably in this time, at least until the recent changes made in response to disruption in schools caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This includes suspension of Key Stage 1 tests in 2021, and Key Stage 2 tests not being published in performance tables (Standards and Testing agency, 2021a and 2021b). Key stage 1 tests are also being replaced by reception baseline assessment by 2022/23, in the words of Minister Nick Gibb, to 'give a better understanding of a child's starting point when they arrive at school and reduce the number of assessments in primary schools overall' (Gov.UK, 2021). However, SATs will still be administered in Key Stage 2 and used again, following the suspension of national league tables. It is therefore imperative that we continue to investigate teachers' perspectives on the standards agenda and the practical implementation of its objectives.

The study's methodological design

In 2019, the study sought to investigate the views of teachers about the standards and inclusion agendas. It was carried out almost a decade after one of the author's doctoral research which also explored these agendas. This paper focuses on the study's first objective, which had the following research questions:

- What are practitioners' perspectives on the standards agenda?
- Is it effective according to teachers' perspectives and does it support the achievement of all learners?
- Have teachers' perspectives changed in almost a decade?

The study investigated 32 teachers' positions on the standards agenda in five mainstream primary schools in three different local authorities in the West Midlands. The sample included one Church of England school in an affluent location and four academies located in relatively deprived areas. Most of the schools involved were academies. Access difficulties meant that the sample contained less variety in terms of school type and socio-economic location than hoped. Teachers in this study varied

in the year groups they taught and the length of their teaching experience. This form of purposive sampling was not intended to produce a comparative study, but was directed at involving a wide selection of mainstream primary schools and teachers.

The interpretivist focus of the study was on the participants' positions, acknowledging that their positions and actions alter over time and are dependent on their situational circumstances. Findings can then be compared and contrasted between different periods of time or between different places (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). The study used Q-methodology as a means of gathering quantifiable data from highly subjective viewpoints (Brown, 1997). It involves participants sorting a set of statements on to a distribution grid, shaped as a reversed pyramid. Participants sort these cards based on whether they agree or disagree with each statement. As such, participants compare and contrast the statements – there is no right or wrong response in the card sort (Brown, 1991/1992). Q-methodology findings produce groups of participants that have commonalities in their perspectives. Teachers sorted 48 statements covering the standards agenda outcomes alongside the ideological need to include all mainstream children in activities. The agendas were deliberately not explicitly referred to in the statements to avoid influencing their placement. Teachers were asked to place the statements on the distribution grid twice, once to reflect their perspective on the standards agenda and again in relation to the inclusion agenda. These statements were compiled from a wide spectrum of personal and professional positions in relevant literature. They were then reviewed by two academics who are specialist in this area before data collection commenced. Examples of the statements are as follows:

- I feel that the government's legislation provides me with good guidelines for this agenda.
- I believe that there is a continuing reduction in children who are excluded from obtaining the objectives of this agenda.
- I believe that all children are considered within this agenda
- Children with mild SEND find it easier to be included within this agenda than those with more severe SEND.
- I feel pressure to try and fulfil this agenda.

To enhance the qualitative data collection during the card sort, participants were asked to describe on a report sheet their overall position on each agenda and why they had placed statements in the most extreme columns of the distribution grid. The Q-

methodology findings from this study have been published in *Education 3-13*. This paper compares these findings to an original study that took place a decade earlier (Williams-Brown and Jopling, 2020). This paper uses thematic analysis to focus on the qualitative responses provided by participants in their report sheets. There was a wealth of information provided in the participants' report sheets that explained their overall position on standards in current practice and why particular statements were important to their perspectives. It also focuses on statements from the card sort that were placed by five participants or more in the extreme columns of the distribution grid. Our focus in this paper is evidencing these perspectives and considering what it means for the standards agenda in today's education system.

Validity and ethical considerations

Brown (1980, pp.174-175) concludes that for Q-methodology 'the concept of validity has very little status since there is no outside criterion for a person's own point of view'. Q-methodology can be used in a variety of research that may focus on quantitative, mixed methods, or qualitative data collection and analysis. Therefore, in this research validity considerations for qualitative research were taken into account. Cohen and colleagues (2011) believe that qualitative researchers should describe validity in terms of how far their research is able to detail participants' positions. Considering qualitative research in its entirety, validity is improved in four different ways – with the use of a pilot study, self-description, peer debriefing and triangulation.

Flick (2006, p.44) claims that, in many fields, research has become 'an issue of ethics', with ethical considerations dominating every part of the research process. This applies to all research, including the use of Q-methodology. Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1992) express this major issue as a cost/benefit ratio. They believe that there is a conflict between the right to conduct effective research and the rights of participants. Cohen and colleagues (2011) conclude that there are no right or wrong answers to the balance of these two imperatives and researchers should adhere as closely as possible to their ethical committees' guidelines. The British Education Research Association's (BERA) (2018) ethical guidelines were followed in this study. These indicate that researchers need to disclose all relevant information regarding their research, prior to it being conducted. This study ensured that participants signed

a written consent form that detailed all relevant research information, prior to their participation in the research. Additionally, in order to ensure confidentiality, no information was disclosed that could readily identify the participants. To ensure their anonymity, participants have not been identified by name.

Findings

Overall perspectives on the standards agenda

These findings explore the responses provided to build a picture of the participants' overall perspectives on the standards agenda. It is important to note that participants received no prompts and were provided with a blank space to freely write what mattered to them on the report sheet. The majority of participants' responses resonated with one of the themes outlined below. These themes represent commonalities of perspective in each of the four groups that were generated from the Q-methodology factor analysis process:

- The standards agenda provides accountability and guidance.
- There is a lot of pressure to achieve standards objectives, especially in testing children.
- The standards agenda's focus is too narrow and doesn't acknowledge all successes.
- The standards agenda, especially SATs, are not inclusive. It does not fully consider the needs of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

The following section evidences the participants' perspectives and relates this to relevant literature.

The standards agenda provides accountability and guidance

Ten of the teachers emphasised their agreement that the standards agenda provides accountability and guidance. Their responses tended to relate standards to their own sense of professionalism, emphasising the need to maintain quality teaching, as the following example illustrates:

Teachers are accountable as in every job. Standards are there for a reason. It is to ensure the job is completed to the highest possible standard by the individual. (Year 4 teacher with 4 years' experience)

They also associated developing and maintaining high levels of knowledge and skills with helping children to achieve:

That all professionals engaging with children need to provide the best education and support to allow them to progress. (Year 3-4 teacher with 5 years' experience)

Research on the standards agenda has predominately focused on the conformity and constraints of its outcomes, emphasising its detrimental effects on children, teachers and schools. This is particularly the case in the limited research investigating teachers' perspectives on this agenda (Fieldings *et al.*, 1999; Wyse and Torrance, 2009; Glazzard, 2014).

However, the findings which highlight the negative consequences of focusing too narrowly on academic achievement and concerns about the enduring use of SATs assessment are comparable with earlier research by one of the authors (Williams-Brown, 2013; Williams-Brown, 2015). What is particularly interesting in these findings is that the majority of qualitative responses included a caveat that indicated that the participants felt conflicted about this form of accountability and guidance. For example, one very experienced teacher felt that standards have focused too narrowly on achievement in English and Maths:

It is important that schools realise their core business is to educate, is that all children reach their full potential. However, over the last few years it has been too focused on English and Maths not the broad, balanced curriculum. (Teacher of all years with 33 years' experience)

Another highlighted the importance of standards being both achievable and more flexible:

There need to be standards for teachers to follow of course, but it needs to be more flexible to allow for inclusion and a sense of achievement for all. (Year 2 teacher with 10 years' experience)

Concerns were also raised about SATs' fitness for purpose:

I agree that the Government need 'standards; across the country in order for teaching and learning to be adequate. However, are statutory assessments the best method for this? (Year 3 teacher with 5 years' experience)

While teachers accepted the need to have standards, one stated that they '*should not be used as a political tool*'. Another highlighted both the amount of pressure that standards impose on teachers and the complexities involved in implementing standards-focused change:

It is needed to regulate education although it is a lot of pressure and not always easy to implement. (Year 5 teacher with 1 year's experience)

Thus, each of these participants' agreement that the standards agenda provides accountability and guidance was heavily caveated. A variety of concerns were expressed that include disagreement with the perceived impact of standards agenda objectives and a call for greater flexibility to ensure objectives are inclusive for all. Many of these concerns relate to core objectives of the standards agenda that have existed for decades (Higgs *et al.*, 1998). It is clear from these findings that these teachers agree with some element of standards and accountability, but there were a variety of concerns around perceptions of achievement, experiences of assessment, and the measures that continue to be used to hold teachers and schools accountable.

The standards agenda's focus is too narrow and doesn't acknowledge all successes

Nine of the teachers focused on their discontent with standards objectives, especially the use of SATs and league tables. As we have already indicated, several teachers focused their discontent on the narrow focus of standards agenda objectives. They called for a number of changes, including prioritising children's learning:

I feel resilience of activities and progress should be focused upon and the kids need to come first but ultimately do they? (Teacher of all years with 11 years' experience)

The restrictive focus on league tables was another common concern, not least because it crowds out other concerns, such as other aspects of children's development and their broader experience of learning:

Too much emphasis is put on league tables. A child can grow and develop hugely. (Year 2 teacher with 26 years' experience).

A challenge for improvement – which is laudable, delivered in a drive for 'numbers' over the whole educational experience. (Teacher of all years with 15 years' experience)

This was linked by another teacher focused to the need to acknowledge and celebrate different forms of success:

I feel that a much larger focus should be put on progress rather than attainment and also children's development in other areas e.g. socially and personally to enable all children to achieve. (Year 1 and 2 teacher with 12 years' experience)

Thus, teachers who regarded standards as too narrowly-focused thought that many children were excluded as a result:

The agenda does not allow for children's individual needs, approaches to learning and unfair testing. Thus falling so many children with the education system. (Year 4 teacher with 10 years' experience)

This sense of exclusion was echoed by another teacher, who felt that the academic focus of the standards agenda devalued the vocational:

Standards play their part in education in terms of local, national and global comparisons. However, linking to inclusion more vocational courses are required to cater for pupils who may have skills in non-academic areas. (Year 6 teacher with 10 years' experience)

These teachers emphasised their frustration about the narrow parameters of success that are tested in SATs, the restricted curriculum, and the limited focus of the standards agenda. We have previously offered evidence from this research of teachers choosing to measure children's success in different ways to those promoted by the standards agenda (Williams-Brown, 2020). Policy changes such as Curriculum 2000 have been

intended to restore an obligation for all primary schools to teach the full range of subjects detailed in the curriculum, without emphasising the importance of literacy and numeracy (Harnett and Vinney, 2008), but it has proved difficult to move the emphasis away from the core subjects. Criticisms of the standards agenda are often focused on accountability measures such as the SAT process and use of league tables (Wyse and Torrance, 2009). However, these findings suggest that these teachers feel that the standards agenda more generally and its curriculum are also too narrow and restrict children from experiencing a broad range of subjects, and to celebrate a broad range of successes.

There is a lot of pressure to achieve standards objectives, especially in testing children

Four of the teachers specifically mentioned the pressure that both they and children feel in trying to implement standards objectives. One we have already quoted. A second emphasised that pressurising children can be counter-productive:

I feel that children should be encouraged to strive to achieve, however we should not push them to achieve before they are ready just to improve data.
(Nursery teacher with 3 years' experience)

One teacher specifically identified the anxiety that target-setting and assessment inculcate in children:

I believe highly unrealistic targets are set for children and that they undergo undue stress and anxiety to achieve them. This stress and pressure is also relayed to staff and it is NOT healthy or fair. I believe that there are other ways to assess and monitor both schools and children without the level of stress, pressurised expectations. (Year 4 teacher with 2 years' experience)

The fourth teacher also felt that the pressure was felt at least as much by teachers as by children:

Government puts a lot of pressure on academic achievement, which puts on a lot of pressure to teachers etc. to achieve these. (Year 1 teacher in first year of teaching)

Five teachers were concerned specifically about testing young children. While most expressed general misgivings about using testing to measure, rather than support, children's learning, one relatively inexperienced teacher highlighted the need to take children's individualism more into account:

Statutory tests do not account for every child. Assessment is the same for all abilities. (Year 4 teacher with 1 years' experience)

A SENCO took this further, regarding the assessment system as being expressly designed to exclude and fail children:

The standards agenda dominates the school system. It is grounded in a bell curve system that is designed to fail a significant minority of children (usually the most vulnerable sections of our society) and elevate an equally significant number of children - the privileged. (SENDCO, experience not declared)

These participants focus on the pressure they feel is placed on teachers to implement standards agenda objectives and on children as they experience the objectives. The latter quotes strongly state that for these teachers SATs are an ineffective form of assessment for children. Many concerns have been raised in previous research about the continued use of SATs assessment (Fieldings *et al.*, 1999; Wyse and Torrance, 2009). SATs and league tables were put in place to influence 'consumers' and in turn increase pressure on the 'producers' to conform (Adnett and Davies, 2005). Barker (2008, p.672) described this approach as a 'coercive, top-down compliance driven system'. It means that teachers have to conform to these objectives whether they agree or not. In our research we have found that over the last decade teachers have continued to emphasise concerns about this form of assessment, but in more recent research they have been more focused on the specific ways in which assessment has a negative impact on children (Williams-Brown and Manktelow, 2015; Williams-Brown and Jopling, 2020). Examples included emotional and mental health difficulties and children being regarded as, or feeling like failures (Williams-Brown and Jopling, 2020).

The standards agenda, especially SATs, is not inclusive. It does not fully consider the needs of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

SEND was a significant issue. Eight of the teachers felt that the standards objectives did not fully consider children with SEND and therefore worked against inclusion. Some stated that standards objectives generally do not fully consider children with SEND:

We need standards for everyone to know and understand what is good in schools (as parents and staff). However, it does not necessarily take into account the inclusion and SEN. (Year 3/4 teacher with 2 years' experience)

This was related (negatively) to fairness and equity:

It is unfair to test children who the Government have said they understand are different in one way. The two agendas seem to contradict. (Year 3 teacher with 1 years' experience)

and to the Government's perceived preference for standards over inclusion and accessibility (as we have already seen):

This is clearly the Government's agenda. League tables, Ofsted etc. all put much more emphasis and place more importance on this agenda. This agenda is in no way 'accessible for all'. (Year 3 teacher with 6 years' experience)

Some teachers disagreed explicitly with the use of SATS for children with SEND:

Children with specific needs should not have to sit statutory assessments. Assessment does not meet the needs of all children. (Year 2 teacher with 12 years' experience)

They also highlighted that the adaptations made to tests to apply them to SEN children were ineffective and inappropriate:

Even if we give SEN children an 'easier' testing paper, it still does not measure their ability. (Year 4 teacher with 2 years' experience)

Instead, some teachers expressed frustration that the inflexibility of the standards agenda militates against recognition that children with SEND succeed in other ways that are not easily measured by assessments like SATs:

As a school with a high number of pupils with SEND, we do get frustrated at times as they are judged against their peers in standardised tests. Many of our

SEND shine in other areas and make huge progress emotionally and socially. This is harder to judge and demonstrate progress quantitatively as data is more qualitative. (Year 6 teacher with 17 years' experience)

Again, it was felt that this results in children being regarded unfairly as failures.

The way that children are tested does not suit all children, especially SEND. It does not measure the small achievements that children make and labels them as 'failures' too early. (Year 5 teacher with 20 years' experience)

These participants are considering standards agenda objectives and inclusion agenda objectives at the same time. In doing so, they believe that standards agenda objectives are not fully inclusive of all children, especially children with SEND. These findings suggest that SATs particularly are not accessible and inclusive for all. Inclusion in its broadest sense aims to include all children fully in every aspect of the schooling experience (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan and Shaw, 2000). These findings are comparable with one of the author's research that considers whether these agendas can be implemented simultaneously. When teachers consider these agendas in tandem, their responses are associated to whether children with SEND should, or should not be included in SATs (Brown, 2013, Williams-Brown and Hodkinson, 2020). These participants' perspectives are mostly also focused on SATs, but there are again here some reflections on the broader effects of the standards agenda.

Commonalities of extreme statement placement

The findings collected here explore the statements that were placed by participants in the two most extreme columns of the Q-methodology distribution grid. Table 1 brings together the statements that were placed by five or more participants in the two 'most disagreed' columns of the distribution grid.

Table 1. Most disagreed statements

Statements	Number of participants
Statutory assessments are worthwhile for every child	17

I believe that if all my class do not achieve the 'national average' they are failing in their education	10
I should focus more attention on the children who could achieve the 'national average'	8
In my opinion to be a 'good teacher' the most important aspect of my job is achieving in the league tables	7
There is enough funding within the school to implement this agenda	6

The majority of these statements focus on disagreements with SATs, especially in its focus on all children needing to achieve a national average and a rejection by some teachers that to be a 'good teacher' the most important aspect of their job is achieving in the league tables. This again shows criticisms of the SAT process that are comparable to research that has been published in the last two decades (Fieldings *et al.*, 1999; Brown, 2013; West *et al.*, 1999; Wyse and Torrance, 2009). These findings do, however, show that more of the sample of teachers in this research had criticisms of this form of assessment that were not necessarily evident in their qualitative comments.

Table 2 collates the statements that were placed by five or more participants in the two 'most agreed' columns of the distribution grid were as follows:

Table 2. Most agreed statements

Statements	Number of participants
In the government's opinion to be a 'good teacher' is to achieve in the league tables	10
More emphasis is placed upon the statutory assessment tests than any other objective	9
I feel a moral obligation to fulfil objectives of this agenda	7
There is a lack of support from the local authority to implement this agenda	6
I feel solely responsible for my classes successes and failures	5
My position on this agenda has changed through practical experience	5

Again, the two statements agreed with most relate to on teachers' perceptions that more emphasis is placed on SATs than any other objective and the Government's association of being a 'good teacher' with achieving in league tables. The placement of these statements show that these teachers believe the standards agenda is more important than all other agendas and objectives. This certainly appears to be true in education, where the standards agenda has dominated educational policy and discourse since the 1970s (Chitty, 1989), particularly in England. The other most agreed statements mostly focus on the way teachers feel about implementing standards objectives. What is interesting here is that these statements focus not on negative experiences with standards objectives, but on teachers' perceived moral obligation to fulfil the agenda's objectives. They also feel responsible for their pupils' successes and failures and that their practical experience has influenced their position. The findings of this study suggest clearly that these teachers are not against standards or being held accountable *per se*, but that many current standards objectives are not fit for purpose.

Conclusion

The three key findings evidenced in this paper are:

- Teachers in this study were not opposed to standards and accountability as such, but expressed a variety of concerns that focused beyond SATs. These included issues around limited perceptions of achievement, negative experiences of assessment, and the inappropriateness of the measures that are taken to hold teachers and schools accountable for their actions.
- Throughout the findings teachers emphasised concerns about SATs and the effects they have on children and teachers, notably increasing the pressure on and the anxiety levels of both groups.
- Children with SEND were a concern of many of the teachers. They want objectives to be more flexible and inclusive and are concerned about the negative effects of children with SEND having to take SATs.

One of the significant difficulties we have with the standards agenda is it has not radically changed to accommodate other educational agendas and objectives. For instance, the inclusion agenda has been increasingly important in education since the late 1990s, but has not significantly changed standards agenda objectives. Government statements make it clear that policies of inclusion operate within a regime of accountability (Allan, 2003). This means that standards and inclusion effectively 'work in opposition' to each other as completely separate agendas (Glazzard, 2013; Williams-Brown, 2019). Evidence from academic literature suggests that schools who attempt to be more inclusive often then decline in academic standards and face numerous challenges because the standards agenda continues to focus on narrow parameters of achievement (Glazzard, 2014).

Limitations of this study include its small sample size and the fact that data collection preceded the Covid-19 pandemic. Since then children have experienced time out of school, uncertainty and social isolation, which can only lead to more challenges in implementing standards objectives. Eyles *et al.* (2020, p.2) have found that 'evidence from unexpected temporary school closures and reduced instruction time suggests school closures will reduce educational achievement, both in the short and long term'. They also claim that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to have been

affected more than their peers, as they have 'with fewer family resources and less access to online learning resources to offset lost instruction time'.

Findings in this study are, however, comparable to other research in this field. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic there has been a greater call to change standards objectives, especially SATs. Moss and colleagues (2020, pp. 3-4) surveyed 1,653 primary school teachers in England and found that head teachers and teachers are concerned about 'children's mental and physical health, and the importance of school as a safe space for children who have suffered during lockdown'. They found that SATs are 'not fit for purpose' and teachers repeatedly said that one positive outcome would be the end of statutory testing, especially Key Stage 2 SATs. Moss and colleagues (2020) suggest that the assessment and accountability system need to be urgently reviewed to provide a fairer system that is fit for these 'challenging times'. Partly as a result, the British Education Research Association (BERA) Expert Panel on Assessment has developed a proposal to reform testing and accountability in primary education. The panel states that 'our proposal would improve understanding of a broader range of factors that impact on pupils' attainment and wellbeing, and system equity, while continuing to inform the general public and policymakers about the strengths and limitations of the education system as a whole'. The proposal includes collecting richer information from a smaller number of pupils and replacing SATs with a national sample of assessments (BERA, 2021, p.5). Research into school leaders' views after the initial lockdown experiences also found that they would prefer more flexible and trust-based approaches to accountability (Jopling and Harness, 2021).

It seems vital from this and previous research into the standards agenda that this approach is reconsidered at this crucial time and that consideration is properly paid to the following areas:

- Acknowledging the experiences children have endured during the pandemic.
- Providing a broad, balanced and more flexible curriculum that focuses on developing each child spiritually, morally, culturally, mentally and physically.
- Using trust-based assessment that considers children's varied achievements and successes.

- Promoting inclusion and inclusive practice and supporting all children to achieve.

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