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Policy tug of war: EBacc, Progress 8 and Modern Foreign Languages in England

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Abstract

Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) as a secondary school subject is affected by two policies, namely the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and Progress 8, which contribute to the measurement of performance in exams at age 16 (GCSEs). In this paper, I discuss the concept of performance measurement in schools and the purpose it purportedly serves, before outlining these two policies and considering how they contribute to the culture of performance measurement and a non-neutral discourse around 'standards'. I argue that the two policies act in tension in a game of tug of war with one another in such a way that the net positive effect on the subject of MFL is zero, but that the negative effect on students is substantial. I suggest that the policies act to impose middle-class notions of what it means to be educated on students, with a substantial negative effect on students from low socio-economic status backgrounds both in terms of their interest in the subject and their perceptions of their own value within the education system.

Keywords

Modern Foreign Languages, Secondary education, EBacc, Progress 8, Performance measurement

Introduction

Education is, as many working in the field in any capacity will recognise, political (Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994), acted on by policies designed by those with ideological as well as educational aims, and the subjects taught are part of this political game. This article is concerned with the subject known, in England, as Modern foreign languages (MFL) – the teaching of languages other than English within the curriculum – two policies which directly affect it, namely the English Baccalaureate and Progress 8, and impact of the tension that exists between them on MFL.

As well as education, language teaching is always political too (Pennycook, 1989); as Lanvers notes, it is concerned with questions of 'who has access to opportunities to learn the language, and who does not? How are learning resources distributed?' (2021, p. 278) and is 'not a neutral practice but a highly political one' (Norton, 2000, p.7). Even in schools, there is an imbalance between groups with more and less privileged access to language tuition. Within the independent sector, language learning is often highly valued, as evidenced by the higher proportion of language learners and wider range of languages reported by such schools (Collen, 2022), the level of language learned and the variety of activities and immersion in the language that can be supported (Collen, 2022; School House, 2017). This disconnect between independent and state provision for languages exemplifies the persistent gap in MFL learning between those with higher and lower socio-economic status and social capital (Coffey 2018; Lanvers, 2017a, 2017b; Lanvers, Doughty, and Thompson 2018; Netz and Finger 2016), something which will be explored further in this article. Barakos and Selleck note 'the multiple and sometimes contradictory ways in which multilingualism becomes a

commodifiable object of privilege and prestige, whilst opening a gulf for vulnerability and inequalities in access to eliteness under particular socio-economic conditions and points in time' (2018, p. 363). Modern foreign languages as a subject sits in the difficult position seemingly occupied by all arts & humanities subjects in England in the current prevailing Conservative political climate: simultaneously highly valued within elite education (as enacted in independent, fee-paying schools), and devalued on behalf of state education at a level of government policy which makes the subject optional, although as we shall see in the case of MFL the picture is actually more complex.

Building on previous work around MFL policy (Hagger-Vaughan, 2018; 2020; Lanvers, Doughty, and Thompson 2018) and the socio-economic divide in language learning (Coffey 2018; Lanvers, 2017a, 2017b), this article explores the ways in which policies of performance measurement disadvantage the very students they might be expected to serve, using MFL education as an example. Two policies, namely Progress 8 and the EBacc, have been implemented in the past decade or so which have directly affected MFL education in Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16), which is a critical point in secondary education in England. At this stage of secondary schooling, a range of subjects become optional and can therefore be chosen (during the preceding year, to start at the beginning of Year 10) by students who wish to continue them to examination at age 16 – to GCSE[1]. Part 1 looks at the measurement of school performance via attainment metrics and Part 2 outlines both policies in detail and then uses them to illustrate the problems with this kind of measurement, before turning to the negative impact on students, with a particular focus on the uneven impact on students from differing socio-economic backgrounds, in Part 3.

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[1] General Certificate of Secondary Education

Part 1

The measurement of performance

Before considering the performance measures themselves, it is instructive to consider what purpose measuring performance serves. Maguire et al (2012) argue that performance measures are part of a long-term push to 'raise standards'; a mechanism which creates 'a set of pressures which work 'downwards' through the education system from the Secretary of State to the classroom and into the home to create expectations of performance as 'delivery' (Maguire et al, 2012, pp. 74-75). This measurement process is not new; Gewirtz et al (2021) chart a history of performance measurement going back to the 1840s, and neither is it unique to England, although it represents a further move towards 'deliverology' (see Gewirtz et al, 2021); towards measurement against set standards, resulting in increased pressures to 'deliver'. Ball (2003) has referred to this as 'performativity' – a culture of measurement where performance indicates effectiveness.

Improving standards is seen by the government as a product of improving the measurement of attainment, coupled with accountability (Creese & Isaacs, 2016). Looking outwards, to compare ourselves with other countries, using international metrics such as PISA, is considered to be a crucial part of this. Ryan and Deci (2017) highlight the ways in which such measurement, using high stakes tests, negatively affects both teacher and student motivation, particularly for more disadvantaged students. As noted by Maguire et al (2012), 'the discourse of "standards" works to articulate a particular version and vision of what schooling is and should be – more, higher, better!' (p. 74). They note that:

> the teacher is enrolled into grand political narratives of policy which link their classroom work with students to the processes of globalisation and national economic competitiveness; as UK Coalition government leaders David Cameron and Nick Clegg assert in the … preface to the 2010 Schools' White Paper The Importance of

Teaching – 'What really matters is how we're doing compared with our international competitors' (p. 73).

Indeed Ball et al (2012) report teachers' acknowledgement that their work is centred on standards; what they refer to as 'a new meta-narrative of *schooling as performances'* (original emphasis; p. 515), something in evidence in Hagger-Vaughan's (2020) study of senior and middle leaders in schools who reported tensions between policies, and between policy and views as to the purpose of language learning.

We might argue that a system where students are measured and their personal value is arguably determined by their value to the school when performance is measured ('Put crudely, techniques of monitoring, labelling and selective attention identify those who can be left to succeed on their own, those who can be boosted across the C/D boundary [between pass and fail at examination] with sufficient intervention and support, and the remaining "hopeless cases"' (Maguire et al, 2012, p. 81)), represents a particularly strident form of what Allen (2014) views as an extended network of violence underpinning educational relations in modernity. As the performance culture, or ethos of deliverology, becomes more pervasive, what must be done and what must be measured becomes 'obvious' (Maguire et al, 2012). The policy becomes part of the pervading mythology or understanding of what education, and being educated, 'means'. Indeed, Gunter and Courtney (2023) argue that the measurement of various elements of education is less about improving standards and more about shoring up a narrative of failure in the system – 'a form of policy violence' (p. 354) used to force a politically-motivated agenda of change. We must recognise also that in the neoliberal process of measurement and comparison, although some schools will come out 'on top', others will inevitably be 'the worst' – when measured in the chosen way, they will be deemed to have 'failed'.

Measurement is not a neutral act

As noted by Allen (2014), to view the constant measurement of children and their progress as part of schooling as a neutral act is to deny the power wielded by those doing the measuring. Within this process is the pretence that this measurement is equitable and unbiased; scientific (Allen, 2014). After all, it is in pursuit of that 'motherhood and apple pie' of education, that thing which cannot be objected to – the raising of standards (Maguire et al, 2012).

However, as Freire (1996) argues, we cannot employ the prevailing model of education; what he calls the 'banking' model, where students are empty vessels to be filled with the knowledge held by the teacher, in a neutral way: 'projecting an absolute ignorance onto others [is] a characteristic of the ideology of oppression' (p. 53) and 'with the establishment of a relationship of oppression, violence has already begun' (p. 37). The idea of teacher as expert and student as worthy recipient of their knowledge is increasingly overtly embedded in school culture (see for example David Ross Educational Trust, n.d.).

Both Freire (1996) and hooks (1994) write that education can be used to oppress those considered 'lesser' in society, and Reay (2006) outlines how the English system has long been one where education has been done *by* the middle and upper classes *to* the lower and working classes. She writes that 'we still have an education system in which working-class education is made to serve middle-class interests' (p. 294) and 'we are still entrusting our state educational system to a group in society who are not prepared to send their own children to the schools the vast majority of children attend' (Reay, 2022, p. 16). Although both the EBacc and Progress 8 have noble intentions, in terms of broadening access to higher-earning jobs and encouraging schools to support a broad curriculum for all, they are still structures imposed by those with power within the education system, and so, in the language of critical pedagogies, are tools of the oppressor. Freire (1996) notes that

revolutionary leaders often fall for the banking line of planning program content from the top down. They approach the peasant or urban masses with projects which may correspond to their own view of the world, but not to that of the people. They forget that their fundamental objective is to fight alongside the people….not to 'win the people over' to their side. Such a phrase [belongs in the vocabulary] of the oppressor (p. 76).

In reading Freire, we might posit that the UK government (although clearly not revolutionary leaders) may have intended, in proposing the EBacc and Progress 8, to create a more equitable and just education system for all, but forgotten that by employing these measures and by shaping the system according to their own classed values, they are nevertheless imposing something from the top down – acting as the oppressor, even as they intend to emancipate. As Part 2 shows, we can see evidence to support this suggestion in the language used around the subjects included in the EBacc, and in the discourse around cultural capital, which is defined by Ofsted (2019), the school inspectorate, a body whose entire raison d'être is to measure and judge schools, as 'the essential knowledge that pupils need to be educated citizens, introducing them to the best that has been thought and said, and helping to engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement' (p. 10). Who exactly determines this and with what authority is not clear, and the tension between measuring schools in part based on their delivery of cultural capital and the ambition for a curriculum focused on an 'academic core' which excludes the arts, is largely unexamined by policy makers. We might also question the extent to which these policies are intended to succeed and genuinely develop this 'appreciation of human creativity and achievement' (Ofsted, 2019, p. 10) and attendant social mobility. Gunter & Courtney (2023) suggest that some policies might be introduced with the objective of failure built in (a phenomenon they call 'policy mortality'), in order to provide ammunition for future criticism, and it is certainly the case that the

measurement of schools can be weaponised (Gunter & Courtney, 2023) against them, moving responsibility for education further away from the state and towards individual schools, as part of a wider neo-conservative approach to education (Bailey & Ball, 2016)

Part 2

MFL and the policy landscape

Before exploring the policies in question, it is instructive to lay out the structure of schooling in the UK, and to understand that we cannot refer to education 'the UK' as if it were a homogenous entity. Education policy is devolved to each of the four nations of the UK: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which all have different national curricula and policies governing them. This paper focuses specifically on England to demonstrate the issues which can be embedded within policies when they are positioned in tension with one another.

The terminology surrounding schools in England is unique, with schools organised by Years and Key Stages. Modern foreign language teaching is compulsory between the ages of 7-14 (Years 3-9, or Key Stages 2 & 3), spanning the latter part of primary and beginning part of secondary school. It is after this, at the end of Key Stage 3, that the landscape becomes particularly complicated, as it is at this stage that optionality is introduced at a level of national policy for certain subjects, including MFL. However, schools have the freedom to implement this optionality in different ways. Some create their own policy of compulsory languages at KS4, whereas others do not. The two policies under discussion here, EBacc and Progress 8, directly impact on schools' decisions, as will be outlined below.

To allow students to choose the subjects that they study in Key Stage 4, schools generally group subjects together to allow students to choose a tailored curriculum. English, maths, science and physical education are compulsory at a national policy level, and schools may

allow the rest of the curriculum to be chosen by students, or may make additional subjects compulsory and offer a more limited range of options.

Although MFL is currently an optional subject beyond the age of 14, between 1997 and 2004, a policy known as 'Languages for All' was in effect, introduced in 1995 (Department for Education, 1995) which made MFL part of the core national curriculum, theoretically making the study of a language compulsory until the age of 16. 2004 marked the end of 'Languages for All', a policy change introduced in a 2002 consultation document which stated:

> Currently all pupils must study modern foreign languages … at Key Stage 4, unless their schools have used the disapplication procedures. We believe this is too constraining. For some students it is demotivating in the short term and has consequences for their eventual achievement of qualifications (Department for Education and Skills, 2002, p. 24).

This document proposed that the subject, along with other arts and humanities subjects, would be made an 'entitlement' – schools must make it available 'to any pupil wishing to study [it]' (p. 24) suggesting that this was in response to low demand from students, and indeed only around 75% of students were entered for a GCSE during the 'languages for all' period (Lanvers, 2011). Coleman et al (2007), Macaro (2008) and Coleman (2009) provide a critique of this policy change and its effects, noting that the status of the subject was damaged by its becoming optional, leading to a dramatic and immediate decline in the number of students taking it at GCSE (Coleman et al, 2007; see Figure 1) but it had not previously been popular amongst students or led to particularly meaningful levels of competence (Macaro, 2008). They explore motivation during and after the Languages for All policy and I have written elsewhere about student motivation during the lifetime of the EBacc policy (Parrish & Lanvers, 2019; Parrish, 2020a).

The first policy we will consider is known as the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), a nod to the International Baccalaureate which has been in existence since 1968, and the French *Baccalauréat*, which has existed since 1808. Both are school leaving certificates (taken by students aged 18), the former a staple of international schools but also offered by some schools otherwise following the national curriculum, and the latter the standard qualification in French schools. Both involve taking a predetermined suite of subjects (although with some optionality built in, for example around which foreign languages are studied), and without passing assessments in all subjects, the qualification is not awarded.

Although taking its name from these qualifications, the EBacc has several important differences. Firstly, it is taken at age 16. The English education system has a complex relationship with the idea of school leaving, with leaving certificate-style qualifications available at both 16 (GCSEs) and 18 (A-Levels)[2]. Although some young people do indeed leave school at 16, meaning GCSEs are leaving certificates, many stay on at school or college or undertake vocational study, and since 2015 young people have been required to stay in some form of education or training until they are 18, meaning GCSEs are in effect stepping-stone qualifications to give them access to the next stage of their education or training.

Secondly, although originally conceived as an additional certificate (Long, 2016), and although part of the rationale for the introduction of the EBacc was student-focused, with the government stating that 'The EBacc is made up of the subjects which are considered essential to many degrees and open up lots of doors' and 'The EBacc is a set of subjects at GCSE that keeps young people's options open for further study and future careers' (DfE, 2019a), the EBacc as implemented is not a tangible qualification that students receive. Rather, it is a way

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[2] Advanced-Level

of recognising that students have passed individual exams in the suite of subjects which constitute the EBacc (shown in Table 1).

It is, in fact, of no direct value to the students who achieve it, but does offer something concrete to schools, whose performance is compared according to the percentage of students who are entered for, and pass, the full suite of subjects. The presents something of a quandary for schools, who must balance the needs of their students (who may not benefit from taking the full suite of EBacc subjects) and the school (who will benefit from high rates of EBacc passes).

In recent history, until the introduction of the EBacc the most common measure was numbers of students achieving 5 A*-C passes in any subjects at GCSE, when grades were measured on a scale of A* - G and C was considered the pass mark. The EBacc moved the focus to specific subjects; those which were deemed by the then-education secretary Michael Gove, seemingly without consultation (Pring, 2013) to be 'academic' and 'rigorous' and consequently of value for employability. The EBacc is an ideological project, aligned with the neoconservative values of the coalition government, a performance measure not a qualification, based entirely on political notions of what it means to be 'educated' (Neumann et al, 2020; Wright, 2012). School performance was already measured by the A*-C metric, and indeed, not all countries have any such measurement system, including Finland, for example, one of the countries the UK government considers an example of a successful education system. Finland is 'an example of a nation that lacks school inspection, reliance on externally collected data, standardized curriculum, high-stakes student testing, test-based accountability, and a race-to-the top mentality with regard to educational change' (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 34).

Measuring performance in this way (by attainment) places emphasis on the number of students who pass exams, rather than simply the number who study the subject, and aligns with the then-government's neoliberal agenda. It diminishes the intrinsic value of studying and learning in favour of attaining pre-determined standards and in fact does not impact on attainment (Hout & Elliott, 2011). The narrow range of subjects making up the EBacc, which excludes creative and arts subjects, sits in tension with the requirement to teach a 'broad and balanced' curriculum, which has appeared in some form since the first iteration of the national curriculum, as announced in the Education Reform Act of 1988 (Richards, 2019), and limits students' ability to focus on their interests.

Precisely because of its restricted subject curriculum, schools have not always prioritised the EBacc over the 5 A*-C measure (Greevy et al, 2012), which is one reason for the former's slow growth. Nevertheless, the government's 'ambition' for the EBacc was for 75% of students to be studying the full suite of subjects by 2022 and 90% by 2025 (DfE, 2019a). By 2022, the figure was not much more than half the target figure, at 38.7% (FFTDatalab, 2022). Nevertheless, in late 2022 the government reiterated its ambition for 90% take-up by 2025 (Gibb, 2022).

As a consequence of this newly prescribed subject-specific performance measure, in many cases schools introduced a 'pathway' system to replace their previous 'option' system. This in effect meant creating two options systems; one more restricted pathway geared towards the EBacc and one which was more flexible. Students were often assigned to a pathway according to the school's perception of their likelihood of achieving passes in all of the EBacc subjects (Armitage & Lau, 2018; Parrish & Lanvers, 2019; Robertson, 2016). For those considered likely to achieve this, an EBacc pathway would typically mean choosing between history and geography, choosing between languages if more than one was on offer, and choosing a further two subjects. Other students not assigned to the EBacc pathway might

be given a freer choice, or might find themselves on a pathway which precluded studying the

EBacc subjects (Armitage & Lau, 2020; Greevy et al, 2012), despite the government's

designation of MFL as an 'entitlement' (Department for Education and Skills, 2002).

[Table 1 here]

Progress 8

The Progress 8 measure was introduced in 2016 to measure student progress since leaving primary school against peers with the same prior attainment in English and maths, intended to show how much 'value' has been added by the school. Although it is a standalone measure, it is related to the EBacc through its system of subject 'buckets', one of which must contain three EBacc subjects, as shown in Table 2. English and maths grades are double weighted.

[Table 2 here]

As the EBacc subjects could include anywhere up to three languages (in theory, although in practice this is extremely unlikely given other curricular restrictions and pressures), it allows more flexibility in subject choice than the EBacc, but less than the previous focus on any five A*-C grades. It does not specifically prioritise languages, and may not include a language at all – a clear tension when viewed from the perspective of MFL, which is now simultaneously both highly valued, and deprioritised. The focus on progress between the end of primary school and GCSE, rather than attainment, encourages schools to value the achievements of all students, which the focus on A*-C grades[3], including within the EBacc, previously diminished at a policy level. The greater variety of subjects which can be included allows students who may be less inclined towards the 'academic core' of the EBacc to be provided for, making it more inclusive, given the recognised variation in subjects taken according to socio-economic status, gender and ethnic background (Henderson et al, 2018). Nevertheless, the foregrounding of GCSE, rather than vocational, qualifications means that in practice, not all students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds are, in fact, empowered by this measure, as discussed in Part 1. By developing a policy which fails to recognise the socio-economic contexts in which it is enacted, the government provides a means by which

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[3] Beginning in 2017, letter grades have been replaced with numerical grades 9-1. These do not map exactly on to one another; grades 9-4 are considered pass grades in the new system.

standards of education can be judged, disconnected from the needs of those being educated (Bailey & Ball, 2016), 'requiring it to improve and be judged effective as if that context did not exist' (Gunter & Courtney, 2023, p. 358).

As a more flexible measure, Progress 8 does enable schools to be less prescriptive in their curriculum (Hagger-Vaughan, 2020). Because the EBacc slots can be filled by subjects such as science, which is compulsory within the National Curriculum but not mandated elsewhere within Progress 8, or one or more of the humanities subjects, or a language, schools can provide a curriculum which supports eligibility for inclusion in the Progress 8 measure (for the benefit of the school) whilst also supporting students having a wider choice of optional subjects (beneficial for the student). In addition, because Progress 8 looks specifically at progress and not attainment, it discourages the damaging pathway model which the EBacc produced and encourages schools to focus on the attainment of all (Francis et al, 2017; Gewirtz et al, 2021).

Policy tug of war

As is clear from the outline of the two policies given above, from the perspective of MFL, these policies sit in tension with one another. If a school prioritises EBacc, then MFL is likely to be a priority subject. However, if they prioritise Progress 8, it is less likely to be emphasised. This is in essence a game of tug of war, where the two policies pull in different directions on a rope marked with a flag in the middle representing MFL policy. The flag shifts slightly as the policies' relative strengths wax and wane, but so far, no policy has enough relative strength to overpower the other.

The decisions around which policy to prioritise, or give strength to, are dependent on the values and culture of a school and whether schools leaders opt for something which will fit in with or disrupt the status quo (Maguire et al, 2012). Often, this is Progress 8, as it is more

flexible, meaning that more students are likely to take a 'qualifying' combination of subjects, and provides fewer challenges to schools (Hagger-Vaughan, 2020). By prioritising this measure, schools focus on improving overall attainment to increase the 'value added'; by prioritising EBacc the focus is more subject-orientated and so involves more structural work in ensuring students follow pathways leading to a qualifying set of subjects.

It is the language element of the EBacc which has proved the most challenging (Plaister, 2022), and the lack of substantial, sustained effect of the policy on MFL exam entries is a consequence of this. When the EBacc was first introduced, and before the introduction of Progress 8, there was an 'EBacc effect' on language GCSE, with absolute numbers of entries peaking at 362,943 in 2013. The effect has since stalled, as shown in Figure 1 (Collen, 2022; Thomson & Nye, 2019).

It could be argued that those schools which implemented a pathway system developed a performative response to the policy, one which allowed them to demonstrate a degree of intent to comply, without necessarily undertaking wholesale change (Maguire et al, 2012). For example, in 2021, 38.7% of students took all five elements. Of those who did not, 87.6% of students took the humanities element of the EBacc but not MFL, whereas only 12.7% took the MFL element without a humanities subject (Hallahan, 2021) and similar figures have been reported in previous years (Armitage & Lau, 2018; Hagger-Vaughan, 2020). It is thus clear that the EBacc is not supporting a good level of take-up of languages. By contrast, on average in 2016, 2.7 of the three EBacc slots were filled in the Progress 8 measure (DfE, 2017), as the flexibility provided by this measure means it is easier for schools to enter students for eight suitable qualifications.

[Figure 1 here]

The EBacc, and its associated target for MFL, was almost universally unpopular with headteachers. After the introduction of Progress 8, a survey of secondary headteachers conducted by the trade union NAHT, revealed that 93% of respondents believed that the measure should not be compulsory and 86% opposed the 90% target (NAHT, 2017).

Staffing as a stumbling block

Headteachers responding to the NAHT survey raised concerns relating both to the way that students were compelled to take certain subjects, and the recruitment of suitable teachers (NAHT, 2017).

The argument about compulsion is an interesting one, given that maths, science and English have always been compulsory within the national curriculum and MFL was compulsory until 2004. Compulsory subjects tend to be perceived as being of higher value than those which are optional (Coleman et al, 2007; Fisher 2011) but require greater staffing to cater for the higher number of classes. Staffing has long been a concern for MFL; around a third of teachers of the subject have historically come from the EU (APPG MFL, 2016) which presents a problem for post-Brexit teacher supply (Koglbauer, 2018) and, in contrast to some other subjects, being a teacher of MFL does not necessarily automatically mean that a teachers' skills match what is needed by the school. Although overwhelmingly schools teach one or more of French, Spanish and German, not all teachers can teach all three, and although they have often had two languages, as languages provision in schools is narrowed, the skills of incoming trainee teachers is narrowed in turn. This creates an additional level of complication for teacher recruitment, and where languages other than French, Spanish or German are taught, staffing is more precarious given the low numbers studying them (see Figure 1). A school may only have one teacher of that language, and the pool from which to recruit is severely limited; they generally cannot be replaced, even short-term, in-house, and so if a teacher is unavailable for any reason, classes may not be covered. Staffing has been shown to

be a major concern for headteachers when considering MFL provision (Parrish, 2020b) and it has been estimated that more than 3,000 additional MFL teachers would be needed to enable 75% of students to take a language as part of the EBacc (Allen, 2016).

Part 3

Who loses the tug of war?

We have seen that in this game of tug of war, no policy has yet come out on top. We might then ask: who loses?

Like all policies, EBacc and Progress 8 do not exist in a vacuum – as we have seen, they are a product of the climate and context in which they were developed, and are enacted, or 'done' (Maguire et al, 2012) in ways which reflect the context of this enactment and the beliefs of those 'doing' the policy. EBacc and Progress 8 have both been 'done' differently in different schools, with differing effects on MFL provision and uptake. Policy work, whether formation or enactment, is 'permeated by relations of power' (Maguire et al, 2012, p. 9) and this applies to the EBacc particularly. The suite of subjects within it, and the implications for both the included and excluded subjects, are products of the power held by those who made the policy – 'paternalist expressions of longing for a more cultured and engaged school population' (Beadle, 2020, p. 13). This is evident too in the languages taught – although a comparatively wide range is available, as Table 1 shows, most are infrequently taught (see Parrish, in prep) and only standard varieties of major European languages are available to most students. Much is made in contemporary British politics of social mobility, cultural capital (Ofsted, 2019) and 'levelling up' (see https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom), and it is amid this rhetoric, a 'decidedly Conservative narrative of moral atrophy and social malaise' (Bailey & Ball, 2016, p. 132) that the EBacc was developed. The EBacc pulls MFL policy in the direction of social mobility, or attempts to, but does this

starting from the idea that the government knows what subjects are best for employability and for students' futures. By couching the policy in social justice terms, it becomes something which cannot be objected to (Neumann et al, 2012).

Part of the way that MFL is pulled by the EBacc is by its characterisation as 'academic' rather than 'vocational' (Hagger-Vaughan, 2016), despite the fact that the ultimate purpose of learning a language is to be able to communicate, making the enterprise an applied, skills-based one. Subsequently, school language policy seemingly fails to recognise the skills needed for effective language learning and use, or the value of students' own languages, perhaps due to the skills being 'diffuse', linked to status, rather than 'technical', linked to employment (Hopper, 1981), and the discourse around 'knowledge rich' curricula (see for example Gibb, 2021). Vocational and applied subjects are more commonly taken by students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and with lower attainment profiles than 'academic' subjects (Fisher & Simmons, 2012; Reay 2020) – from the perspective of policy makers, such subjects are 'something best suited to "other people's children"' (Richardson, 2007, p. 411). This means that MFL, an academic subject, is made the preserve of students of higher socio-economic status (see Coffey, 2018; Lanvers, 2017a; 2017b; Tinsley & Board, 2017a) – not necessarily something for those students who already have language skills by virtue of a multilingual background, for example, unless that background happens to align with the languages on offer. In making this designation through policy decisions, there is a failure to recognise that communicating is not something which is, or ever should be, the preserve of a particular social group, and that in other national contexts, people at all levels of society are commonly multilingual. This is a critical failure of understanding and arguably is at the root of the systemic problems facing the subject. Indeed, in a study exploring language teaching and SES, Lanvers (2018) found that students, regardless of socio-economic background, were interested in language learning and its benefits, but not necessarily in the school subject. It

has also been shown that students are interested in a much wider range of languages than is currently on offer in schools (Lanvers, 2018; Parrish & Lanvers, 2019), suggesting that it is not language learning that is the problem, but the school subject of Modern Foreign Languages.

If the EBacc pulls in the direction of social mobility, resulting in a sense of failure or 'not for us' felt by students who lack the requisite cultural capital, in a Bourdieusian sense, to be able to translate language learning into economic capital, or 'more subtly into fields of symbolic value as personal qualities that characterize a good citizen in relation to transnational, neo-liberal circuits of resource distribution' (Coffey, 2018, p.477), Progress 8 pulls in another direction with much the same outcome. The severe grading which has long been a feature of the subject means it is harder to get any particular grade in a language at GCSE than it is in other subjects (Coe, 2008; Ofqual 2015; Thomson 2019), meaning that students – both higher and lower attaining – are put off taking the subject where it is optional (Hagger-Vaughan 2018). Because of the measurement of school performance, schools are similarly disincentivised to enter students for MFL for fear of lower grades in the subject affecting overall outcomes.

Returning to the question of 'who loses?', I suggest that by making MFL the preserve of the middle classes, the school system enacted by the EBacc and Progress 8 policies is not only acting as an oppressor, it is committing violence against those who do not have what is perceived to be the requisite socio-cultural capital. Reay (2006) notes that policies of measurement, and those which may be deliberately focused on social mobility, or in other words developing middle class qualities in students from all backgrounds, 'have powerful emotional consequences, of anxiety and discomfort, for all children' (p. 299; see also Thomson & Hall, 2022). Her work paints a stark picture of working class children afraid of the consequences of failure (Reay 2006; 2017), at times feeling 'the hidden injuries of class'

(Sennett & Cobb, 1977) – a sense that they are responsible for their own inability to meet standards imposed on them by 'the oppressor'. Comments gathered for Bailey et al (2023) suggest that students may feel this way about MFL.

In all of this, it must not go unrecognised that individual teachers and school leaders value language skills. Lanvers (2018) attributes the gap between school leaders' 'progressive and comprehensive visions for the teaching of M[F]L' (p. 141) and the day-to-day reality of teaching to the exam to the pressure of performance measurement. She notes that in her study 'in no school was the gap between aspiration and practice greater than in the under-performing school, which had many students from lower SES' (p. 141). Even where individual school environments are supportive, the school system leads to lower SES students suffering as a consequence of this tug of war.

If this is the outcome for students, what of the policy outcomes? The tug of war described here is what leads to schools implementing the 'two tier' pathways system outlined in Part 2, as schools choose not to encourage students perceived as lower-attaining to take the subject (FFT Education Datalab 2015; Harris and Burn 2011; Lanvers 2017b; Titcombe 2008). As well as disproportionately affects students of lower socio-economic status (DfE, 2019b; Henderson et al, 2018; see also Ryan & Deci, 2017), this means that the very purpose of the EBacc policy – to increase numbers of students passing exams in the subjects deemed worthy – is not attained. This returns us to the notion of policy mortality – was there ever any belief that the EBacc would achieve its stated aims? And if not, then at whose door will blame be laid?

Conclusion

I have attempted to argue here that the two significant policies acting on MFL as a school subject in Key Stage 4 in England sit in tension with one another in a game of tug of war in

which there are no winners. There are, however, losers in this game, namely students, overwhelmingly those from low SES backgrounds, who find themselves subjected to a top-down system of performance measurement which forces schools to act in damaging ways.

Through the construction of the system of performance measurement of which EBacc and Progress 8 are a part, there is a sense in which the government have made students who do not, or cannot, meet the expected standards and pass the number and type of exams considered necessary by the deliverological system invisible. They are not counted or measured by the system; their achievements do not count. They become 'a failure, an academic non-person' (Reay, 2020, p. 136). The implications of this reach both forward and back from the exams themselves, causing hidden injuries (Sennett & Cobb, 1977) to the students. This is not inevitable, it is the product of a policy environment whereby the measurement and (presumed) associated raising of standards trump all other concerns. Top down policy, developed by those with socio-economic and socio-cultural power in their own image without due consideration for those upon whom it is to be imposed, acts on and injures students, particularly those furthest in background from the policy makers themselves. In England, the misunderstanding of the purpose and value of language learning means that the subject becomes one which can never meet the needs of, or appeal to, a broad range of students, and the imposition of paternalist middle-class values onto the subject through its inclusion in a policy which is advertised as benevolent but which act as a tool of the oppressor means that working class students lose the game. It does not have to be this way; if policy makers were to listen to students from a range of backgrounds and work to understand and balance both the needs of the school system and of those who inhabit it, to understand language learning in a meaningful way that goes beyond its contribution to cultural capital and recognises its social and human value, they might be able to design a more successful curriculum policy. It is time for a radical rethink.

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