The 'Datafication' of Early Years Pedagogy: "If the teaching is good, the data should be good and if there's bad teaching, there is bad data".

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http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02680939.2014.924561

Abstract

Following the election of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat UK coalition Government in 2010, there has been an urgent intensification and focus upon early years numeracy and literacy and promoting systematic synthetic phonics (DfE 2010). This paper argues that the current narrowing of early years assessment, along with increased inspection and surveillance, operates as a policy technology leading to an intensification of 'school readiness' pressures upon the earliest stage of education. The paper suggests that this governance has encouraged a functional 'datafication' (Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti 2013, 552) of early years pedagogy so that early years teacher's work is increasingly constrained by performativity demands to produce 'appropriate' data (Bradbury 2013). The article argues that early years high stakes national assessments act as a 'meta-policy', 'steering' early years pedagogy 'from a distance' (Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti 2013, 541) and have the power to challenge, disrupt and constrain early years teacher's deeply held child centred pedagogical values.

Keywords: early years teachers; datafication; pedagogy; neo-liberal; assessment;

Introduction: English early years education policy technologies

This article critically discusses the impact of recent English early years policy regulations and assessment practices that suggest that early years teacher's pedagogy is increasingly being drawn into the wider school performativity culture. Since 2010 there have been rapidly raised assessment performance thresholds for very young children in the earliest stage of their schooling. The Foucauldian analysis suggests that these policy shifts have served to discipline early years children and teachers through public processes of judgment, ranking and classification. The paper suggests that the increased accountability and surveillance of the early years, manifested through a narrowing of assessment targets upon traditional literacy and numeracy has meant that the early years has become an increasingly important site for high stakes testing and associated disciplinary processes. According to early years Government policies, such as More Great Childcare (DFE, 2013), this increased regulation and governance is justified by a global education 'race' which begins in pre-school.

It is suggested that early years teacher's pedagogy is increasingly framed by an intensification upon the 'raising standards' policy context. The evidence in this paper suggests that early years teacher's pedagogy has increasingly narrowed to ensuring that children succeed within specific testing regimes which interpret literacy and numeracy in very particular ways. It is further suggested that the impact of such school based testing regimes has the potential to subvert the early years from being a

unique child centred and play based educational stage in its own right, to that of subserviently preparing children for school (and subsequently employment) (Bradbury 2012, Moss 2012).

The evidence presented suggests that the EY is moving in the direction of more formal schooling, which in some cases challenged, disrupted and undermined early years teacher's passionately held child centred principles in favour of test driven cognitive skills and knowledge. Commentators have noted how such an early emphasis upon very particular cognitive achievement and outcomes is inappropriate for young children who have insufficiently developed social and emotional skills (Whitebread and Bingham 2011). This argument is supported by recent national test data which suggests that many young children 'fail' such tests. Additionally it is suggested that such negative and inappropriate assessment decontextualises and pathologises individual children, teachers and schools (Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti 2013).

The increased emphasis upon school based practices, pedagogy and expectations has been understood as the 'schoolification' of the early years (Moss 2012) and it is suggested that recent assessment changes have led to an intensification of this process. Despite this, the article suggests that some, more experienced teachers, are able to re-interpret 'schoolification', locate 'gaps' and locally 're-enact', interpret and translate policy (Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010).

Increased accountability within the English The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

Government interest in a greater specification for an early years curriculum can be traced to the 1989 introduction of the English Primary National Curriculum. Reception class children aged four and five, the first class of primary school, felt the impact of the Primary National Curriculum and national assessment as primary schools needed to demonstrate the education **'**value added**'** at age seven years (Aubery 2004. Within this neo-liberal 'raising standards' policy context, the English Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfES 2007) was introduced for children aged between birth and five years old in England and for the first time provided the early years with national education and care regulation and standards. The construction of the child within the EYFS (2007) was of a competent co-constructor of knowledge within social contexts within which there was an explicit understanding of child centred, play-based experiential learning. These underlying principles of the EYFS were enthusiastically embraced by all sections of the early years community because such active play-based and child centred learning was deeply embedded in expectations about preschool in the UK and has a long history. Rogers noted how the EYFS provided a 'long-awaited and distinctive educational phase' (2011, 8) separate from the Primary National Curriculum.

Reception class teachers make 'observational assessments' throughout the year and in the summer term when the children have turned five years old, grade the children

according to the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) criteria. The Profile is based upon Reception teachers' 'best fit' judgements within prescribed criteria, and the Local Authorities (LA) use a system of moderation to mark the accuracy of the teacher's judgements. Thus the Profile both professionalises teacher's by trusting them to make assessments of children's learning but at the same time deprofessionalises them since the LA can decide if those assessments are correct or not (Bradbury 2011). In the first version of the Profile (2008), Reception teachers assessed children against 117 points which provided an holistic, bureaucratic and overall account of children's development and reflected the EYFS child centred principles. However, following the election of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat UK coalition Government in 2010 there has been an urgent intensification and focus upon the prioritization on 'essential knowledge and concepts' and 'the essentials of, for example, English language and literature, core mathematical processes and science' (DfE 2010). This focus was found within the revised and 'slimmed down' EYFS (2012, 1) which stated that 'The Government believes that a good foundation in mathematics and literacy is crucial for later success, particularly in terms of children's readiness for school.' In turn, the revised Profile (2013) reflected this shift with a much sharper focus upon literacy and maths, with substantially raised thresholds, making them harder to achieve. Within the revised Profile (2013) the Reception class teachers judged whether a child had achieved a score of 1(Emerging), 2 (Expected) or 3 (Exceeding). In order to achieve a 'Good Level of Development' (GLD) a child had to achieve at least a score of 2 in all areas of learning, the hardest to achieve being literacy and maths, where the criteria for success was much more demanding.

Insert Table 1 here.

In 2012, the year prior to the recent Profile revisions, 64% of children achieved a Good Level of Development (GLD) (DFE 2012). However, following the revisions in 2013 this figure dropped to 52% and the figures were worse for summer-born children, with only 30 % reaching the GLD (DFE 2012). Hence a high proportion of young children were labelled as 'falling behind' (Bradbury 2011, 656). Such negative and inappropriate assessment decontextualises and pathologises individual children, teachers and schools and 'denies the impact of structural inequality and lays all responsibility for performance at the feet of teachers and individual schools' (Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti 2013, 552).

This paper analyses early years teachers' understandings of the assessment revisions and the ways in which their pedagogy has been affected. The Government's justification for the assessment changes and increased 'good level of development' thresholds were framed within a competitive neo-liberal global 'race' in which the early years is increasingly being seen as key in policy:

'If we want our children to succeed at school, go on to university or into an apprenticeship and thrive in later life, we must get it right in the early years. More great childcare is vital to ensuring we can compete in the global race, by helping parents back to work and readying children for school and, eventually, employment' (DfE 2013, 5).

It is maintained that the current narrowing of early years assessment, along with 'toughened up' OFSTED inspection arrangements and the Year One Phonics Screening Check together operate as disciplinary technologies leading to an intensification of 'school readiness' pressures upon the earliest stage of education. Moss (2012, 8) critiques such 'readying children for school' discourses as a process of 'schoolification' in which the early years is reduced to that of preparation and delivery of children who are ready for the rapid skills and knowledge acquisition needed in the primary school. Children's, classes and schools Early Years Foundation Stage Profile results were submitted to (Department for Education) DFE national databases and used by Local Authorities to rank local and national schools against each other in 'league tables'. Early years assessment therefore joins other forms of school assessment, such as seven year olds Key Stage One tests and eleven year olds Key Stage Two tests, in becoming a 'very public technology of performance' (Ball et al. 2012, 514). It is argued that in common with other high stakes national testing that the revised early years assessment arrangements act as a 'meta-policy', 'steering' early years pedagogy 'from a distance' (Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti 2013, 541), in the direction of more formal schooling, and that in some cases this destabilised early years teacher's passionately held child centred principles.

The revisions to the Profile are set within a wider context of assessment and inspection changes occurring within the Early Years and Primary Education sector. For example, the Phonics Screening 'Check' in Year One was initiated in 2012 and its impact has cascaded down into Reception and Nursery Classes where children are increasingly

drilled in phonics in preparation for the Year One test. As part of the phonics 'test' children are expected to decode 'nonsense' words and some children, particularly more able readers, attempt to bring meaning to these 'nonsense' words. However, this learning strategy, that words carry meaning, is not recognised by the phonics test and partly as a consequence, 48% of children 'failed' the test in 2012. UKLA (2012, 45) noted that the phonics screening check for six-year-olds was 'costly, time-consuming and unnecessary', and undermined the assurance of more fluent readers by labelling them as failures.

The Study

The research was concerned with early years teachers' understandings of the revised EYFS Profile (2012) and the effect of this assessment upon their pedagogy. The data was collected over the period of one academic year (2012- 2013) initially with a convenience sample of twenty Reception teachers studying for their Early Years Education Master's Degrees in a nearby local University. Serendipitously, one of the students was a Local Authority (LA) early years advisor who enabled me to observe an Early Years Co-ordinators' meeting of nine teachers to discuss the new Profile. The twenty teachers' opinions were sought using email correspondence, telephone interviews and focus group and individual interviews. A total of forty-seven email responses generated approximately three and a half thousand words. The teachers were subsequently invited to participate in interviews which resulted in fifteen focus group and eight individual face to face interviews over eight months. I was joined by

a colleague for two of the focus group interviews and one of the individual interviews. During one of the focus group interviews, the teachers became variously angry and emotionally upset as they struggled to make sense of their deeply held child centred principles as espoused by the EYFS when compared to the divisive, competitive and crude assessment policy. The group interviews created a therapeutic space in which they could express their collective frustrations, anxieties and abilities to make sense of the increasing accountability policy shifts.

Following the interviews, observations were made of two of the teachers' early years classes. One was a Reception class for four and five year olds and one was a Nursery class for three and four year olds. The Reception class was in Northside primary school and the Nursery class in Eastside primary school and they were located in two different Local Authorities within a large city in Southern England. Both schools had high levels of poverty, free school meal percentages and high ethnic minority populations. Each of the two early years' classes was visited for a half day once a month over the school year. Detailed field notes and observations of pedagogy were made, particularly focusing upon the time teachers spent on maths and phonics and way in which the class was organised to facilitate this. The data was reduced to meaningful codes and names were assigned to each code leading to recurring and prevalent themes (Creswell 2007).

The Findings

Data Driven Pedagogy

The majority of the sample stated that were now under pressure to produce data for Ofsted inspections (Office for Standards in Education). This is partly because the early years within a primary school used to be inspected as a separate and distinct stage in its own right but since 2011 the early years has been included within whole primary school inspections.

We're totally data driven. If the data is good Ofsted leave us alone but if the data is poor they drill right down into everything. We'll be punished if we have poor data, so obviously it's a huge huge pressure to get the data looking good. Ofsted take the data from Year 6 and work back and see where they were in Year 2 and Reception. So it has really influenced thinking. (Eastside Deputy Head)

'You're only as good as your last year's results across the whole school. Get the data right and you buy five years of freedom' (Northside Head)

The coalescing of the early years and the primary school data enabled OFSTED to read the data sets in a direct line from Year 6 back to Reception. Such a simplistic, and crude reading of data, with harsh disciplinary consequences if targets were not met, served to ensure the head teachers focused their efforts on producing the expected data from the youngest children in the school. If they were able to orchestrate such a feat, they bought their 'freedom' from surveillance for a particular time. Cottle and

Alexander (2012) have noted how early years teachers attempted not to be driven by externally imposed targets but to adhere to holistic child centred principles. Similarly, Osgood (2006) has noted how early years teachers had an 'ethic of care' which was in opposition to performative discourses. Teachers and schools 'enact' policy in different ways through variously 'translating and interpreting' policy in local contexts (Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010, 547). Thus whilst Northside's head teacher had told her early years staff to be more formal in their teaching approaches, Eastside head teacher tried 'to protect' the EYFS early years holistic pedagogy. So within Eastside school, the nursery teacher confidently stated that he 'did the phonics, but then tucked it away to get on with the real business of being with the children' and thereby exercised his professional autonomy. However, given the increasing demands from Ofsted, and in turn some school's Senior Management, the early years teachers in the following interviews felt obliged to 'cynically comply' (Bradbury 2013, 124) with the data demands placed upon them.

It's all based on data. Ofsted are saying that if the teaching is good the data should be good and if there's bad teaching there is bad data'. So the data is driving the pedagogy. (London LA Early Years Advisor).

We have constant meetings looking at the data. It has become very clinical and children have just become numbers….In this game, you gotta play the game. If you're being judged on a score – teach to it – you're a fool if you don't. You must teach to the test – that's the agenda.' (Northside Reception Teacher).

Hence as with the head teachers, the production of 'correct data' was a central and pressing concern. Similarly Bradbury (2011, 663) noted how the Profile scores were produced, managed and changed to be 'acceptable' to the local authority. Data itself had come to partly represent the teacher's pedagogical focus and a means by which to measure their competence and ability and the constant collection, production and delivery of data had become 'an enacted fantasy' in which 'their investment in the fabrication is immense' (Bradbury, 2011, 2013). Booher-Jennings (2005, 239) reported that following the implementation of the Texas Accountability System (TAS) for seven year olds in the US, that data-driven decision making had become a valued end in itself and 'a new marker of legitimacy'. Despite early years teacher's attempts to maintain a child centred philosophy, the teachers recognized that increasingly their pedagogy was data driven. Nevertheless, the holistic aspects still retained within the revised EYFS Profile, such as the Personal, Social and Emotional aspects were valued by some teachers who saw this as enabling them to retain a focus upon the holistic child.

The reductive focus upon Maths and Literacy

Two specific areas within the Profile were of particular concern for the early years teachers, namely literacy and maths. An increase in the difficulty of achieving a Good Level of Development in literacy and maths was mentioned by 16 out of the 20 teachers. Once again it can be seen in the following quotes that a utilitarian and

managerial decision, based upon the need to produce correct data, helped to form the teacher's pedagogical decision to focus upon maths and english.

Yes children have been targeted and put into differentiated groups for maths and phonics. Most children in primary schools are ability grouped so why wouldn't this pedagogy find its way into the EY? (Reception Teacher 6)

Formal learning is now coming down from Year 1, through Reception and into the Nursery class with the three year olds that I teach…. We were explicitly asked by our headteacher to make nursery 'more formal' which means more direct teaching of maths and phonics….. The philosophy and values of the EYFS are being eroded. (Northside Nursery Teacher 1).

The assessment shift towards formal maths and phonics resulted in concomitant pedagogical shifts towards the replication of primary school performance culture. During observations at Northside Reception classes it was clear that the teacher's were primarily engaged with teaching maths and phonics in both whole class and ability groups in the mornings and afternoons. The increased use of ability grouping and differentiated learning in Reception and even Nursery classes, provided evidence of how the powerful discourses of compulsory primary school education bear down upon early childhood education so that 'results are prioritized over processes, numbers over experiences, procedures over ideas, productivity over creativity' (Ball 2013, 91). This was starkly manifested by the Northside Head teacher who stated that the children

who failed their Year One Phonics test, approximately half of the year group, were required to sit the phonics test again in Year Two. In order to satisfy Ofsted's enquiries as to how these children were to be given extended phonics support and to ensure that the children passed the second time around, these children had been excluded from arts based lessons to receive intensive phonics booster classes. Thus early years testing policy shifts have had a 'reductive effect on the provision and experiences of schooling…as curriculum width is reduced to ensure the enhancement of test scores' (Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti 2013, 553). Withdrawing children from arts based lessons in order to ensure they passed the phonics test and that the school avoided further punitive surveillance, questioned whether all children were receiving the same curriculum entitlement.

Northside had recently experienced (September 2013) the new Ofsted 'toughened up' inspections, in which according to guidance, it was necessary for the early years to have an 'extremely sharp focus' on communication and language if it was to be granted the coveted 'outstanding' label (Ofsted 2013a, 9). The school received a 'good' grading ('good' is the new expected minimum) and not 'outstanding' because there was 'not enough teaching to emphasise the sounds that letters make and to extend children's understanding of number and mathematical language' (Northside Ofsted Report 2013, 8). The inspector's report, which included observations of three year old children who had been in school for just two weeks, mentioned 'phonics' and 'teaching letter sounds' seven times. Not being able to include 'outstanding' status on a nursery's website and publicity, can potentially, for private providers, have serious

financial consequences in the market based early years sector in which nurseries compete with each other for sufficient numbers of children to remain in profit.

Early Years 'Educational Triage'

The data driven pedagogical approach to early years classroom organization was legitimated and justified by the LA (Local Authority) Early Years advisor who explained,

It's about who's going to achieve the GLD. So we say "they're easily gonna make it, thank you very much". And we say "they're never going to make it so go over there and have a nice time" and we look at the middle group. We target these children because they are the ones who may make it. It's the same as Year 6 SATs. So you put all your effort and intervention into those that are just below and it's a very unfair system. (London LA Early Years Advisor).

The LA advisor described the '*very unfair'* process of organising three crude groups of children based upon a statistical analysis of their current and likely performance in achieving the GLD. Firstly, he noted the group who will achieve the necessary GLD; secondly, the group that are judged 'doomed to fail' and can therefore be ignored and a third group, which with careful intervention, can be targeted to obtain their GLD. This functional allocation of children into three crude groups based upon predicted pupil progress data was similar to Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) secondary schools

'A-to-C economy' which they described as 'educational triage'. Within the context of the early years, 'educational triage' identified a high achieving group who were left to succeed on their own; a middle group whose 1's could be boosted to 2's with sufficient intervention and support and a low achieving group of 'hopeless cases'. Gillborn and Youdell (2000) maintained that a focus on some children led to a neglect of others with uneven access to teacher resources. Similarly, the LA advisor above reiterated the triage mechanistic process when he stated that those children labelled as 1's can 'go over there and have a nice time'. According to one of the Reception class teachers it was necessary to further classify some of the children with 1's as 'SEN' (Special Educational Needs) otherwise these 1's might be considered as a 'liability' to the teacher's performance data. The teacher stated that by labeling these children as SEN meant that other professionals became involved with the children and thus the teacher was not solely responsible for their poor performance. In this instance, datafication encouraged a constraining of the teacher's expectations and created functional sets of relations between the teacher, other professionals and the child, in which poor performance could be appropriately classified, managed and reported without the teacher suffering disciplinary consequences. However, not all teachers subscribed to such strategising as demonstrated in Table 2 in which one child (B) labeled as 'SEN' was targeted to achieve their Good Levels of Development.

The process of 'educational triage' was facilitated by the Profile's simplistic classification of 1s, 2s and 3s which inadvertently served to legitimate and naturalise the three crude groupings outlined above by the LA advisor. Table Two illustrates the

way in which one of the Reception teacher's used a process of educational triage.

Insert Table 2 here.

The teacher explained that the Local Authority expected 60% of the children to achieve their GLD and that such an expectation meant that he had to make careful and calculated decisions to reach the imposed target. By looking across each child's 12 columns he calculated what was the likely percentage of children who would achieve the necessary the GLD so that he could focus upon these particular children with targeted input. Thus Child J had a score of all 2's and hence had already got his GLD. Child X, on the other hand, had a score of nearly all 1's and was very unlikely to get a GLD. The nine children in the Target column were identified by the teacher as having predominately 2's with a few 1's. For example, Child A had all 2's except for 1's in Writing and Reading. In this manner the teacher had made a calculated decision to place Child A (and 8 similar children) into a special Target Group whom he had calculated as borderline GLD passes. It was anticipated that by focusing teacher resources and input into these particular children would raise their 1's up to 2's and thus ensure that the teacher and the school achieved its expected GLD percentage. This calculation was noted at the bottom of the Table Two. In the above example, the teacher made a rational management decision to target particular identified children who were just below the GLD threshold. This allocation of a teacher's resources was not viewed as an ethical or principled decision but rather a functional and utilitarian approach in order to produce the required data. Concerning such data sets Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti (2013, 542) noted 'the disciplining effects that these codes and grids of visibility' have upon teachers and children. This article argues that such a Foucauldian disciplinary analysis is applicable to early years teacher's pedagogical strategizing in their attempts to generate the 'correct'

data required by the school and the Local Authority.

Discussion

In Booher-Jennings' (2005) study in the US with seven year old children's literacy test, a similar process of educational triage was seen to operate. If a child scored above 70% in a literacy test he or she was referred to as a *passer*; between 60% and 69%, the child was labelled a *bubble kid* because her or his score leaves them on the *bubble* below the passing score. Whereas, if a child scored below 60%, she was labelled a *foundation kid* or a *remedial kid*. During an observation of the Local Authority Foundation Stage Co-ordinators meeting, each school co-ordinator had to publicly read out their current and expected Good Level of Development percentages. Such competitive and public ranking of results between schools and individuals, supposedly in a collegiate atmosphere, encouraged competition between schools and individuals and practices such as educational triage. The evidence presented in this paper suggests that early years teachers have been drawn into 'calculated technologies of performance' Ball et al. (2012, 518) in which the focus became the GLD %, rather than young children's holistic learning and development. Similarly, Booher-Jennings (2005, 24) noted that the teachers met to calculate the percentage of passing students and set a benchmark for the next test. This target was calculated by assuming that the '*bubble kids* will become *passers'* and there was an allocation of resources to support this strategy. More recently in England, Marks (2012) has noted educational triage occurring with Year 6 children and suggested that ability-grouping practises in secondary mathematics were mirrored in primary

mathematics. Thus data production strategies for older aged children have 'cascaded down' (Moss 2012) into the early years and provide a stark example of early years schoolification, legitimated and naturalised by the necessity to produce 'good' data. Bradbury (2013) has suggested that the performativity culture within some early years settings is so intense that the teachers are encouraged to manipulate data to produce 'appropriate' results.

Within an increasingly constrained context, there was evidence that some of the early years teachers questioned, challenged and resisted the performativity culture and retained, where they could, their child centred focus. However, the intensification of early years governance has resulted in the 'datafication' of early years teachers and children in which the public and constant hierarchical ranking, ordering and classification of children, teachers and schools constrained such democratic pedagogical spaces, visions and possibilities. The evidence presented in this paper suggests that the early years is increasingly subservient to the demands of the Primary National Curriculum as the strictures of datafication limits some early years teachers' pedagogical interpretations of the EYFS. The teachers struggled to make sense of their deeply held child centred values espoused by the EYFS principles, curriculum and pedagogies and at the same time perform to the datafication requirements of the school readiness assessment regime.

Such policy intensification has pulled the early years ever more tightly into the state's regulatory and disciplinary 'gaze' (Osgood 2006) so that teachers and children's 'visibility' has increased through the public displays of data. The 'swarm of disciplinary mechanisms' (Foucault 1979, 211) steering early years policy to meet assessment targets

encouraged some teachers to adopt a pedagogy that prepared children to 'pass' tests. Within this discourse the production of 'good' data became a mark of legitimacy, worth and value. Early years teacher's 'values are challenged and displaced by the 'terrors' of performativity' (Ball 2003) which uses crude statistical measures and calculative apparatus and which increasingly frames their pedagogy. Complex holistic child centred principles, sensitive pedagogies and assessments were in danger of being marginalised as early years teachers were 'burdened with the responsibility to perform' and submit to a 'new' moral system' (Ball & Olmedo, 2013:88) that has the potential to reduce the rich competent child (and teacher) to a 'measureable teaching subject' (Ball & Olmedo 2013, 92). The 'datafication' of the early years suggests that it is in the process of becoming the first stage in a 'delivery chain' (Ball et al. 2012), passing 'appropriate' numeracy and literacy data higher up the data chain and into the primary and secondary school system. This data 'delivery chain' may well start earlier and become stronger from September 2016 when the English Government plans to impose a Baseline Check on four year old children in Reception class. The proposed Baseline Check, will replace the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, and is likely to further emphasise a reductionist focus on numeracy and literacy skills that will be tracked from Reception through to Year 6 in the Primary school (DfE 2014). Through an intensified focus upon very specific data in a child's first few weeks in the schooling system, the proposed new 'policy technology' will operate to further govern early years teacher's pedagogy and children's learning.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Peter Moss for his encouragement and critique of earlier versions of this

article. Thanks to Dominic Wyse for initiating this research and to Alice Bradbury, Sue Rogers and Phil Jones for their confirmation of the analysis. Thanks also to the anonymous referees of this journal for their very helpful suggestions.

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