

"Never mind children's cognition, what about mine?" Teachers' perspectives of the enactment of policy: The case of metacognition

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Educational policy in the UK and beyond increasingly focuses on promoting skills that encourage learners to be independent thinkers and to self-manage their own learning. Whilst the educational benefits of metacognition (i.e., thinking about and managing one's own thinking) are widely acknowledged, little attention has been paid to teachers' perspectives about the enactment of such approaches within the educational setting. Thus, this interview study seeks to investigate Scottish primary schools teachers' perspectives about the enactment of policy, using metacognition as an exemplar case. Analysis produced two broad themes that distinguished between 'bottom-up' implementation of metacognitive approaches, and more commonly-described 'top-down' approaches promoted by local or national policy. The perceived 'changing tide' of externally-set top-down initiatives was described as particularly challenging for teachers to negotiate, resulting in a perceived crowding of the curriculum and associated 'tick-boxing' practices. Results are discussed in relation to the process of enactment – arguing that the predominance of top-down policy initiatives acts to restrict teachers' agency by diminishing professionalism and promoting performativity.

Keywords: metacognition; agency; teachers; ecological agency; primary school; policy enactment; interview; impact

Introduction

Metacognition, broadly defined, relates to ways individuals think about and manage their own thinking (or 'cognition about cognition'). Evidence firmly suggests a particular prominence of metacognition in notions of 'what works' in education (Perry, Lundie & Golder, 2018; Wrigley, 2018). A large body of psychological research has demonstrated the beneficial effects of metacognition on performance in the primary school years and beyond (e.g., see Ohtani & Hisasaka, 2018). In terms of pedagogy, wide-scale systematic reviews have identified metacognitive and self-regulatory

approaches as amongst the most beneficial and cost-effective programmes available in the educational setting, and the effect sizes of training are high (Dignath, Buettner & Langfeldt, 2008; Higgins et al., 2016). Moreover, metacognitive approaches are underpinned by curricular frameworks that promote learners taking charge of their own learning, encouraging ‘deep learning’ and ‘transferable cognitive skills’ (see Bloomer & McIlroy, 2012). Despite the stated value of metacognitive approaches within the classroom, very few studies have investigated teachers’ perspectives of policy enactment in the context of metacognition.

Teachers’ perspectives of policy enactment

This study investigates teachers’ perspectives about the enactment of policy, with a particular focus on metacognitive approaches. The term ‘enactment’ is used to capture the idea that policy is not just implemented or delivered, but rather it is interpreted and translated by individuals (Braun, Maguire & Ball, 2010). Of course, as stated by Ball (2015, p1): “Policy gets done and re-done in many places and many ways by many different people”. This paper focuses on key individuals in relation to enacting educational policy (i.e., policy actors) – teachers. Clark and Peterson (1986) define teacher perspectives as “a reflective, socially defined interpretation of experience that serves as a basis for subsequent action [...] a combination of beliefs, intentions, interpretations, and behavior that interact continually” (p287). Such a focus on the perspectives of teachers places emphasis upon professional contexts that can influence the enactment of policy in schools (e.g., teacher values, commitments and/or experiences; Braun et al., 2011).

Despite the stated value of metacognitive approaches within the classroom, very few studies have investigated teachers’ perspectives of the enactment of metacognitive policies. Instead, structured interventions are typically ‘given’ to teachers for

implementation (e.g., see Dignath et al., 2008), with the resulting implication being that policy is something that is merely ‘delivered’ or ‘implemented’ (Maguire, Ball & Braun, 2013; Maguire, Braun & Ball, 2015). Critically, whilst curricular frameworks promote skills such as transfer and deep learning (Bloomer & McIlroy, 2012), it cannot be assumed that the presence of curricular frameworks alone is sufficient for changing practice, with teachers being of clear importance for enacting policy (Braun et al., 2010; Priestley & Philippou, 2018). Indeed, whilst research has considered teachers’ perspectives of the implementation of approaches (e.g., Ayres et al., 1994; Braun et al., 2010; Geijsel et al., 2001), there has been a lack of research that has directly investigated teachers’ perspectives about the enactment of policies relating to metacognition. Thus, investigating teacher perspectives offers a powerful route to explore questions relating to ‘policy-practice’ transitions.

Theoretical context for policy enactment: Agency

As discussed above, exploring teachers’ perspectives of metacognition in the classroom is important for amplifying teachers’ voices about ‘what works’. Beyond this, teachers’ perspectives provide a route to explore the ways that policy is perceived and enacted in classrooms, as well as offering an opportunity to explore how teachers make an active contribution to their teaching practice (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2017).

Guided by the argument that policy-makers often fail to consider the complexities of schools in coping with policy demands and expectations (Ball, 1997), Braun et al. (2010) investigated policy enactment in English secondary schools. Looking specifically at a policy related to personal learning and thinking skills (PLTS), the researchers found that two case study schools interpreted policies in different ways. For instance, one school was characterised by its ‘presentation’ of the PLTS approach, by (for example) displaying clear signs of the policy in wall displays and written

documentation. In another school, the interaction between specific policy actors was highlighted in terms of influencing the enactment process. Therefore, the findings of this study emphasise that policy enactment is a process, influenced by various factors such as the school ethos and relationships between key actors (Braun et al., 2010).

In seeking to explore teachers' perspectives about the enactment of metacognition policy, notions of *teacher professionalism* and *agency* are relevant to consider. Professionalism is defined as the autonomous control of work by professionals (Ball, 1997; Friedson, 1994, in Priestley et al., 2015). More widely, agency can be understood as teachers' "active contribution to shaping their work and its conditions" (Biesta et al., 2015, p624). An ecological approach to agency is powerful for highlighting the interplay between temporal and relational influences, taking into account iterational, practical-evaluative and projective dimensions of agency (Biesta & Teddler, 2007; Priestley, Biesta & Robson, 2013). Through the inclusion of the iterational and projective dimensions, it is possible to see how agency is built (or diminished) across *time*. Moreover, the practical-evaluative dimension emphasises factors not only in relation to the individual, but also cultural (including values and beliefs), material (resources in the physical environment) and structural (interpersonal dynamics such as relationships and power) domains (Priestley et al., 2013; Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). With such a view, then, rather than agency being perceived as something that is an inherent characteristic of the individual, it is instead seen as something that is achieved or constrained through interaction with context (Biesta & Teddler, 2007; Leat, Reid & Lofthouse, 2015).

When considering the process of policy enactment (Braun et al., 2010), as well as viewing teacher agency from an ecological perspective, it is relevant to situate the present study within Scotland's educational policy framework, the Curriculum for

Excellence (CfE). As described below, an explicit goal of the CfE is to allow flexibility, with the intention of ‘liberating’ teachers (Swinney, 2016). More specifically, the CfE marked a change in previous curricular frameworks that focused on generating and evidencing specific achievements, thus ‘de-professionalising’ teachers through cultures of performativity, and in doing so, restricting teacher agency (Priestley, 2014; Priestley et al., 2013). Given these stated goals, then, it is clearly important that an investigation of teacher perspectives goes beyond investigating solely teachers’ knowledge and understanding of metacognition, to explore teachers’ perspectives about the process of enactment itself.

The present study

Whilst much previous research investigating policy enactment has been conducted in relation to secondary school education (e.g., Braun et al., 2010; Maguire et al., 2020), the present study explores Scottish Primary School teachers’ perspectives. Primary school education provides a particularly useful basis to explore the case of metacognition, given that the primary school years are a time associated with significant developments in metacognitive skills (Dignath et al., 2008; Whitebread & Basillo, 2012). Moreover, under the CfE, practitioners are encouraged to promote pupil engagement with their own learning from the early years (Scottish Executive, 2007). Such a focus is particularly advantageous in the context of the enactment of metacognitive approaches, as compared to secondary school, primary education in Scotland tends to be more flexible in content and associated with fewer measures of accountability such as summative assessments (Scottish Executive Education Department, 2007; Scottish Government, 2010).

Guided by the broad aim of investigating teachers’ perspectives of policy enactment (using metacognition as a case study), the research question addressed in the

current study is: What are teachers' perspectives about the enactment of curriculum policy in the case of metacognition?

Methods

The present study reports findings from semi-structured interviews with primary school teachers in Scotland from January to March 2018. The present analysis forms part of a wider project that explored the transition of ideas from psychological theory into primary school classrooms with a particular focus on metacognition (as detailed in Branigan, 2019). The initial goal of this interview study was to explore teachers' perspectives about metacognition, including factors that facilitate and/or inhibit metacognitive practices. However, during interviews teachers not only discussed ideas relating to metacognition directly: Instead, teachers described perspectives relating to the *enactment* of approaches. Thus, the present study focuses on teachers' perspectives of the enactment of policy, using metacognition as a case study. The research question addressed in the present study is: What are teachers' perspectives of the enactment of curriculum policy in the case of metacognition? To address this question, semi-structured interviews were selected for their appropriateness in providing a focused structure for interviews, whilst allowing the researcher to understand what is important to participants by following up on topics described (Hugh-Jones, 2010).

The Scottish context

The present study is situated within the Scottish policy context. The curricular framework that guides educational practice in Scotland is the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). The CfE is built around 4 key 'purposes' that outline what every learner should develop: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors (Scottish Executive, 2004). In contrast to increasingly neoliberal

educational policies in English education (Alexander, 2014; Braun & Maguire, 2020), according to the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skill, the Scottish educational policy is intended to promote teacher flexibility: “liberating the teaching profession from unnecessary bureaucracy to enable it to do what it does best – teach” (Swinney, 2016, p1).

Within the four capacities, local authorities (LAs) and schools are provided flexibility about how to implement the CfE, with the role of LAs being to set and communicate local level policy guidance to their schools (Scottish Government, 2015), and head teachers being responsible for the day-to-day implementation, management and organisation of the curriculum. Teachers are also required to undertake 35 hours of professional development annually (Scottish Government, 2001). Such a requirement is reflective of the shift towards more ‘evidence-based teaching’ (Wrigley, 2018). In this context, therefore, Scottish teachers are explicitly encouraged to take responsibility for their own professional learning and development.

With respect to the role of metacognition in Scottish policy frameworks, new curricular approaches place increased emphasis on pupils’ active participation in their own learning. The Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) emphasises pupils taking an active role in planning, directing and assessing their own learning (Education Scotland, 2012). Moreover, by promoting knowledge and management of one’s own thinking, metacognition is embedded throughout the CfE (particularly the capacities ‘successful learners’ and ‘confident individuals’). Within the CfE’s ‘Building the Curriculum’ series, there is particular allusion to metacognition through a description of active learning as learners taking responsibility for instigating, planning and evaluating their own learning (Scottish Executive, 2007). Thus, given the increased curricular

focus, metacognition presents a useful case upon which to investigate teachers' perspective of the enactment of policies in schools.

Participants

Participants were primary school teachers from six Local Authorities in Scotland. In total, 20 teachers took part in this research, over ten interview sessions. Overall, 18 out of the total 20 teachers interviewed were female, and the average experience reported was 13 years (range 0.5 to 29 years). When focusing on teachers as policy actors, it is clear that teachers undertake different positions and have unique professional experiences (Ball et al., 2011; Braun et al., 2010). In the present study, the aim was not to compare and/or contrast different policy actors' perspectives, but instead to investigate in general terms, teachers' perspectives of the enactment of policy. Thus, participating teachers included ten class teachers, three learning support teachers, a supply teacher, two deputy-head and two head teachers. Interviews varied in length from 22 to 65 minutes, with a mean duration of 35 minutes. This study was approved by the General University Ethics Panel at the University of Stirling, and was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics. To ensure anonymity, teachers are referred to by interview number throughout (as detailed in Appendix A).

Data collection

The overall study that this paper draws from sought to gain an understanding of teachers' perspectives of metacognition. For the aim of the present paper, the focus was on participants' perspectives about the enactment of metacognitive approaches, including practices and associated challenges. The procedure (discussion

points/questions) in both the one-to-one interviews and small focus groups was guided by an interview schedule (shown in Appendix B), with interview questions including:

- What do you feel are some of the biggest challenges that you currently face as a teacher?
- In what ways do you support children to think about and manage their own thinking?
- Can you describe any other approaches or current initiatives that encourage children to think about or manage their own thinking?

Interviews were conducted in person and via telephone, with in-person interviews being conducted individually as well as in pairs or small groups (up to five interviewees). Telephone interviews were employed to enable participation from teachers in more remote or logistically problematic areas, and in the present research, such telephone interviews were employed for three out of the ten interview sessions. Half (five) of the face-to-face interview sessions were conducted in small groups of between two and five participants. Group interviews were held at the request of participants. The use of group interviews was particularly appropriate for research in the educational setting, to minimise disruption to the class routine.

Data analysis

In the present study, data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)¹. Indeed, an important aspect of this project was the aim to identify

¹ Whilst inductive thematic analysis was used to generate all of the themes and sub-themes produced in the present analysis, with a flexible, iterative research design in which data collection and analysis occur co-currently, it was naturally impossible for the analysis to be completely devoid of the ‘researchers’ analytic preconceptions’ (Jeffrey, 2008; Menzies & Santoro, 2017). Thus, the goal throughout analysis was to aim to stay grounded in the data, whilst adopting a reflexive approach (as discussed in the methodological reflection below).

themes that closely resembled the data; to *build* understanding about metacognition rather than to formally test theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1991).

Analysis consisted of the following procedures (drawing from the ‘phases of thematic analysis’ by Braun & Clarke, 2006);

- *Familiarisation with the data* – Interview audio-recordings were fully transcribed, and texts were read and re-read multiple times, with codes (i.e., units of meaning), thoughts and ideas being noted.
- *Generation of initial codes and themes* – Open coding of texts systematically for the entire dataset. Codes were revisited several times and grouped into themes (i.e., wider units of analysis).
- *Naming and defining themes* – Codes were grouped into themes with examples (Miles, Huberman & SaldaNa, 2014).
- *Review of themes* – Themes were constantly revisited to determine coherence and ‘fit’ with associated excerpts.
- *Producing report* – Identified codes and themes were written about and summarised in text. Wider literature was reviewed throughout to develop the analysis.

Methodological reflection

With qualitative research it is necessary to be cognizant of the extent to which interviews can provide a fixed view of an objective reality, rather than forming the researcher’s interpretation of what is experienced (Pring, 2000; Miles et al., 2014). Rather than seeking to act as a neutral relayer of teachers’ perspectives, it was explicitly intended that my perspective as a researcher in psychology (with an interest in the practice of metacognition in educational practice) would be brought to analysis. To add ‘confidence’ in the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), codes and themes relating to teacher perspectives were also reviewed by a qualified teacher to support reflexivity and reduce bias (Robson, 2011).

The teachers who participated in this study may not be considered representative of the entire Scottish Primary teaching community. Participating teachers volunteered to take part in the research, presumably from an interest in the subject area. Whilst this may not in fact be assumed about all teachers, it does still provide meaningful insight about the practices and perspectives of teachers who are interested in encouraging thinking about thinking in their lessons. Moreover, teacher participants had diverse professional experiences in classroom settings (as noted above). To aid transparency regarding representativeness, Appendix A notes the years of experience for each participating teacher.

As stated above, the present study used three different approaches to investigate teachers' perspectives: One-to-one interviews, individual telephone interviews and group interviews. The advantages of group interviews have been widely discussed: "the group interview has the advantages of being inexpensive, data rich, flexible, stimulating to respondents, recall aiding, and cumulative and elaborative, over and above individual responses" (Fontana & Frey, 1998, p55). It is, however, acknowledged that there are potential limitations to consider, including the potential for particular interviewees to dominate conversation, the possibility of 'group-think' (Fontana & Frey, 1998) or the influence of specific institutional values (Braun et al., 2010). In the present project, the potential biases associated with group interviews were negotiated – in part – through careful use of questioning by the researcher, with follow-up questions being used to encourage elaboration from less vocal participants.

In addition to group and individual face-to-face interviews, data were also collected through telephone interviews. There are potential limitations of telephone interviews to be cognizant of – both interviewer and interviewee cannot access the full means of communication such as body language, which may disrupt interview

dynamics (Bryman, 2012). Despite these potential limitations, previous research comparing face-to-face and telephone interviews found that responses did not differ in quantitative or qualitative content (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Telephone interviews have indeed been used for similar reasons in related research projects, for example those investigating the Learning to Learn project (Thomas et al., 2014). Thus, telephone interviews were identified as an appropriate method – particularly for allowing participants from more remote locations to participate.

Results

Analysis produced two overall themes: (1) ‘bottom-up’ approaches, and (2) ‘top-down’ approaches. As considered in more detail below, the theme ‘top-down’ approaches was particularly prominent in the analysis, and contains two sub-themes: (2a) “top-down” approaches changing over time and (2b) “top-down” approaches restricting teacher agency. That is, the perceived ‘changing tide’ of externally-set top-down initiatives (Theme 2a) was described as challenging for teachers to negotiate – with resultant restrictions on teachers’ perceived agency (Theme 2b) by diminishing professionalism and promoting performativity. In the following analysis, participants are referred to by their participant number, with details about the groupings of participants and years of experience detailed in Appendix A.

‘Bottom-up’ approaches

When discussing specific initiatives relating to metacognition, some teachers described approaches developed from the ‘bottom-up’. Such descriptions saw initiatives as relating to a specific need in a class or group. For example, one teacher described the enactment of metacognitive initiatives based on an identified problem within a class:

I was aware that there was this group of children, who – it was that transferral of skills [...] and I came across about metacognition, and about the teaching, thinking about thinking, kind of thing. (1)

In this particular example, the teacher described a piece of enquiry research conducted, and this was something that was described as revealing in terms of children's cognition:

What came out – a lot of it was about, 'I didn't think about that idea until I listened to somebody else' and it was about this – how it then sparked off different things in the brain and things like that. (1)

Clearly, teacher 1 found this 'bottom-up' approach to be successful, describing demonstrable effects on learning.

In another example, a head teacher described how a 'bottom-up' approach to Growth Mindsets extended beyond a single class:

We had this really worrying class of children for who, resilience was not there. And we'd been kind of wringing our hands about this. So, we really brought it in for that one class. And as we became more comfortable and realised that this was something that we needed to roll out to the whole school (8)

This selective use of approaches for specific purposes was clear throughout interviews, with approaches that drew from teachers' own experiences being identified as having particular success in the classroom.

One teacher described the critical role of educational psychologists at the LA level in facilitating 'bottom-up' initiatives:

We as a school did quite a bit of research with our educational psychologists in relation to self-regulation [...]to try to understand how children think about their learning and to try to encourage them to be able to from a really early age, to have better ownership of their learning. (12)

This excerpt suggests the critical role of cohesion between the school and supporting structures (such as educational psychologists) in the success of initiatives. In this regard, educational psychologists can be considered as key policy actors, aiding in the interpretation and ‘translation’ of policy (Ball et al., 2011).

In relation to facilitating the enactment of approaches, teachers clearly described the importance of coherence between stakeholders at multiple successive levels in education. For example, when describing educational aims one teacher stated:

We have our school quality improvement plan that our own school development is built around too [...] So, you have the cluster², then you’ve got the school, then you’ve got your personal [aims], all hopefully working together (9)

Such cohesion could also be seen where teachers described communities of shared practice:

and sometimes you say, ‘oh I’ve got this situation, and I’ve tried this, this and this’ and then someone goes ‘oh, have you tried that’ and you think, no, and that solves the problem. (10)

Teachers also described that success in initiatives was possible when they aligned with teachers’ professional understandings and existing practices:

some things are, you can think ‘no I’m actually not doing that’, so you can see how the children will benefit, and there’s other ones where you think, ‘actually no I am doing this’. (13)

This example demonstrates that bottom-up initiatives were perceived as particularly useful when they aligned with teachers’ own perspectives about the subject area.

² A cluster is a group of schools within a LA, often linked geographically.

In sum, instances of successful enactment of educational initiatives around metacognition tended to be described as ‘bottom-up’. Such ‘bottom-up’ approaches were identified as achieving cohesion between levels of education, and were supported by the positions and experiences of policy actors (Braun et al., 2010).

‘Top down’ approaches

In discussing enactment of metacognitive initiatives in the educational setting, teachers described forces at the local and national policy levels, with change over time also being a clear characteristic of the educational context. The prominence of ‘top down’ initiatives could be seen in the language used by teachers when describing approaches used in the classroom – for instance the use of terms such as *push*: “skills is a big one, a big push for the past 4 years or something like that” (17) and *told to*: “if we were told that it’s on the agenda, we would do it” (16). Teachers also commonly talked about approaches drawing heavily from terminologies from the Scottish curriculum: “getting them to come up with their own *success criteria*, so what can they do to make sure that they’re successful with that task, looking at the *learning intention*” (15, emphasis added). Such language, therefore, is indicative of a clear influence of policy in descriptions of teachers’ practice.

In relation to local policy, teachers referred to initiatives at the Local Authority (LA) level as well as cluster level. For example, two teachers described a greater focus on Growth Mindsets than metacognitive approaches *per se*:

- (1): in terms of as an authority and things like that, there’s not a focus [on metacognition], but it is part of IDL [Interdisciplinary Learning], and how it’s meant to embed into everything.
- (2): I think about Growth Mindsets and fixed, there’s been a big, big push..

As this excerpt demonstrates, local level initiatives were described as having a substantial impact on the initiatives supported by particular teachers in particular schools.

Moving away from local level policy, one of the largest contributors to teaching practice described by teachers was national level policy. For example, one interviewee described the increased focus upon student choice and awareness of learning:

with the standards in education just now, the standards for teaching, and head teaching, and the whole leadership and these sorts of things that came out of the GTC [General Teaching Council], there is [sic] very structured and identified tasks if you like, for teachers to be able to engage children in their learning, as well as, Curriculum for Excellence has a huge big push on children having choice. [...] So, I think just a whole shift in the whole way that we look at education and the way that we engage children in their learning (12)

In this excerpt, teacher 12 clearly described external influences from several different national policy organisations, suggesting that national-level policy has a direct impact upon what happens in schools. Interestingly, this teacher talked about influences directly in relation to a shift, inferring change over *time* (a recurring sub-theme that will be discussed in more detail below).

In relation to teachers' perspectives of 'top-down' policy initiatives, it is pertinent to note that the external focus on specific approaches was described by some as a negative, for example:

I think unfortunately sometimes in education there's always something that becomes something that we've got to focus on. So, for a while there was quite a focus on thinking skills, and it has gone down. And I'm quite an advocate of it. (1)

Later in the discussion, this teacher described the shift in emphasis from a policy level: "other things have become – in some views more of a priority" (1). Therefore, findings

suggest that approaches were commonly perceived as being imposed on teachers, with teachers interviewed often describing external initiatives in unfavourable terms.

One of the directly negative influences described in relation to external policy being implemented in schools was the extreme workload placed on teachers: “it can be difficult for teachers to keep up with the resources that they need to produce” (11). ... One of the factors described by teachers as a barrier to metacognitive approaches within the classroom was the over-crowding of the curriculum, set externally by those out-with the educational setting. One teacher described the negative consequences of the over-crowding of the curriculum as leading to a level of “tick boxing”, adding:

I think the expectations of Government, or whoever sets these goals of ‘this is what children have to do and achieve’ is actually, can put a box on children’s creativity and thinking. (14)

Cumulatively, then, the above excerpts provide striking examples of a perception of external initiatives being bound within a framework of *performativity*, a mode of regulation where teachers are compelled to generate specific achievements (Ball 2003; Priestley, 2014; as considered in more detail in the discussion). Here, the teacher clearly felt a need to perform, through ticking boxes and evidencing student work. This was described in clearly negative terms, in direct contrast with what the activities *should* be about. As such, the need to ‘perform’ (based on externally-set policies and expectations) had a restrictive force upon this teacher’s practices in relation to metacognition.

“Top down” approaches changing over time

As mentioned previously, time was a sub-theme of ‘top-down’ approaches. That is, teachers described changing ‘fashions’ in education, through the changing emphasis placed on different top-down initiatives at local and national policy levels. For instance,

teachers commonly compared current approaches to the past, “I feel like it's surprising that they have to teach it [thinking skills approaches] so much now and they didn't have to teach it so much 25 years ago” (6). Change was described by one teacher as “dramatic” (10). Change over time is also exemplified in the following excerpt:

Things change within education as well though, and they put more of an emphasis on this sort of skill, and then on this sort of skill (13)

One teacher described that there has been a degree of stability in approach following change: “I think the way it is now, I'd say that it's [metacognition] probably embedded now, within the school” (18). Teacher 12 discussed the change of focus in relation to encouraging metacognition:

Our teaching has actually had to shift to teach children how to learn. It's not the content any more, it's the process of learning (12)

In the above excerpt, Teacher 12 described a shift in not only the content of teaching, but actually what it means to teach. Thus, change over time was described at a wider scale as well as more day-to-day changing of initiatives.

In addition to changing content, change over time was also described in terms of changing expectations put on teachers in terms of paperwork and/or supporting children's needs:

(4): I think all the paperwork they had to do. All the extra add-ons other than just delivering the lessons [...]

(7): Class sizes as well I think large classes and making sure that, all the children's needs are supported

(3): I think it's really hard to... in terms of inclusion it can be really hard to include... everybody within their class and the diverse range of needs

One aspect of change that was identified as beneficial was a change in training provided to teachers, as exemplified by Teacher 20:

I think we are more trained now to think Growth Mindset, asking questions, and hierarchy of learning, which I didn't have at the start of my career, and I think I'm a better teacher for it, because we have been thinking lots more. (20)

Whilst teacher 20 clearly described improved teaching practice as a result of changes in the content of training, the changing nature of national-level policy initiatives coming into classrooms was described most commonly as challenging for teachers. For instance, teachers talked of implementing metacognitive approaches in schools, one teacher stated "I just think there's so much going on" (5). In the same group, others mentioned:

(7): I mean obviously time is of you know an issue when teaching and if you're doing a big focus on Growth Mindset then to be doing this alongside I think you would probably struggle to squeeze it all in on a regular basis [...]

(4): I think as teachers we're finding sort of the Curriculum for Excellence is really jam packed

Teacher 13 also described the challenge of implementing new approaches in the classroom:

it can be quite challenging when there are quite a few new things [...] you've got all these different things that are kind of coming in, and they're coming in from different directions, and sometimes you feel a bit like 'wow, never mind children's cognition, what about mine?' [laughs]. (13)

This challenge was elaborated upon by teacher 13 when she described the difficulty of inferring the extent to which new initiatives are in fact new, or whether they are the same or similar to existing approaches:

I think the challenge is getting these targets set by external body [...] Because even though we know that you are still teaching them basically the same stuff, but there is a different slant being put on it, and you are looking at that new slant thinking, well am I actually teaching them the same skill, or am I teaching them the same skill, but it's being wrapped up in something different? (13)

This teacher was particularly prominent in her description of the impact of change in policy, describing the external policy as coming in from all sides and changing constantly.

“Top-down” approaches restricting teacher agency

Interview data suggested that a ‘top-down’ influence of educational practice led to a restriction of teachers’ perceived ability to make an ‘active contribution’ within the classroom – that is, teachers described a sense of restricted *agency* (Biesta et al., 2015). Teacher agency became a clear sub-theme throughout analysis. In several interviews, teachers commented that initiatives were brought into the school without any input from teachers. For example:

we’re now doing rote learning of tables, which has not been considered good in education for a long time, but our gut feeling has always been that they need to know them (19)

This excerpt demonstrates a tension between what is perceived to be the ‘right’ thing in mathematics, and teachers’ intuitive understandings (constituting, in this case, a ‘gut feeling’ of a teacher with 20 years of experience). The temporal dimension of agency is also emphasised in this excerpt and was prevalent throughout teachers’ experiences, suggesting that change over time has direct influences upon teacher agency, by constraining and constantly changing what are deemed ‘good’ practices (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley et al., 2015).

Another teacher made a striking comment demonstrating her perceived lack of agency when describing initiatives brought into the school:

there are these schemes, where they are kind of inflicted upon us, and we are expected to go along with it, and it's like we're putting all this effort in, and the children are putting all this effort in, and I really aren't sure [sic] that we are getting enough from it to see that it's making a difference. (13)

Teacher 13 expressed a particular lack of agency. She talked at length about having a restricted level of choice over the approaches she implemented in classrooms and that there was a lack of understanding about the content or purpose of initiatives. As such, this excerpt demonstrates a restriction in *material resources* for agency through the perceived lacking knowledge of the rationale behind particular educational approaches implemented (Priestley et al., 2013, 2015).

Another teacher described a perceived tension between teacher *professionalism* and external initiatives, stating:

That's where your professionalism comes into it actually, it's trusting your teacher to make a judgement in that situation, you know? [...] Because there isn't a teaching package you can say 'this is how it's going to work in this classroom'. As I've said, one size does not fit all. (14)

This excerpt well captures a tension that was highlighted repeatedly in interviews between teachers' perspectives and the culture and systems of education more widely. Through describing the importance of giving back a level of professionalism to teachers (enabling them to feel empowered to use situated knowledge and change the content of lessons in accordance), teacher 14 highlights the desire for increased autonomy in classrooms (Ball, 1997). Thus, despite the CfE aiming to 're-professionalise' teachers (Priestley et al., 2013), evidence suggests that there continues to be a perception, by teachers within Scottish education, of a restriction on professionalism.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate teachers' perspectives about the enactment of metacognition, as part of a wider project that sought to explore the practice of metacognition in primary schools (see Branigan, 2019 for detail). When asked about facilitating metacognition in the classroom, teachers described influences that extended well beyond the interactions between teacher and student(s) – and into consideration of the policy environment at local and national governance levels. That is, teachers discussed the *process of enacting* metacognitive approaches in schools. Specifically, whereas teachers described instances of successful enactment of policies, particularly from the 'bottom-up' (Theme 1), a prominent theme in the analysis was a predominance of 'top-down' approaches (Theme 2) - participants described tensions between teachers' perspectives and external policies that were often perceived as 'inflicted' upon them. In the discussion that follows, findings are considered in relation to wider literature around enactment, context and agency.

Professionalism and performativity

A key finding in the present research is a description, by teachers, of a tension between teacher perspectives and 'top-down' policy initiatives. Such a finding brings to the fore, notions of performativity and professionalism. Ball (2003, p216) describes performativity as “a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change - based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)”. According to Ball (2003) it is the performance of individuals that constitute a measure of output and/or quality.

Teachers in this research described a sense of performativity, a need to 'tick boxes' and do certain things, whether that constitutes completing a learning log,

implementing a Growth Mindset approach, include more active learning in lessons, and so on. Critically, such a need to ‘perform’ acted to restrict teachers’ professionalism, that is, the autonomous control of work by professionals (Ball, 1997; Friedson, 1994, in Priestley et al., 2015). The idea of professionalism was apparent throughout the present analysis (and indeed, the term was described by Teacher 14 herself). Ball (1997) considers professionalism within a wider discussion about educational policy reform, discussing that “professionalism is replaced by accountability” (p261). Thus, the ‘top-down’ initiatives described by teachers are interpreted here as diminishing teachers’ agency by impacting professionalism and promoting performativity. That is, teachers described a clear sense of power-dynamics in relation to local and national policy structures, with initiatives being ‘inflicted’ upon teachers and resulting in both performativity through ‘tick-boxing’ as well as a lack of knowledge about the rationale for initiatives.

With the introduction of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, a stated aim was to provide an increased flexibility for teachers. By promoting autonomy, such a policy change should be related to an increased sense of professionalism by teachers (Ball, 1997), and associated impacts upon teacher agency, “Curriculum for Excellence can be seen as an example of modern curricular reform in which teachers are explicitly positioned as agents of change” (Biesta et al., 2015, p625). However, the present findings provide stark evidence to the contrary, suggesting that teachers still experience a clear need to perform, to evidence, to ‘tick boxes’, and to move with the changing tide of educational resources. These findings are again reminiscent of the work of Ball (1997, 2003), who argues that educational reforms that appear to de-regulate, can instead ‘re-regulate’ teachers – placing more emphasis on the onus of teachers themselves self-regulating their practice and ultimately, resulting in a reduction of

'professionalism' and a rise in performativity. From this perspective, the change in policy brought on by the CfE (and its focus on approaches associated with metacognition in particular) may be argued to change the expectations of teachers rather than to reduce expectations. In some cases, teachers were left feeling so overwhelmed, that they described not knowing why they were doing what they were doing, or if it was indeed, the 'right' thing for them to do for their class. Ball (2003, p220) refers to this as being "ontologically insecure", and is exemplified by Teacher 13's comment: "Never mind children's cognition, what about mine?".

Contexts and agency

In the present study, local and national level policies were identified by teachers as heavily influencing metacognitive practices in schools. Whereas some teachers described external initiatives positively (often those that aligned with their perspectives), others noted a clear reticence to external policy initiatives, perceiving them as faddy and criticising them for not allowing space for teacher perspectives.

Taken together, findings suggested that one of the most fundamental barriers to the enactment of metacognition related to *context*. Braun et al. (2011) consider the role of context in influencing the enactment of policy in schools. They describe four dimensions of context: Situated (e.g., school histories), professional (e.g., teacher values, commitments and/or experiences), material (e.g., infrastructure, budgets) and external (e.g., local and national policy frameworks). In relation to the present analysis, whilst the focus upon teachers' perspectives of the enactment of metacognitive policies aligns closely with the professional dimension of context, the *external* dimension of context was in fact particularly apparent the analysis. That is, teachers clearly described a predominating 'top-down' push of policy initiatives, highlighting a clear sense of pressure and expectation (Ball et al., 2011). Moreover, investigation of external contexts

also highlights aspects of context that were described of facilitative of policy enactment, for instance cohesion with the aims of Local Authorities, and support provided by Educational Psychologists in the ‘bottom-up’ implementation of approaches.

According to ecological models, agency is not something inherently owned by an individual, but rather something that an individual enacts through interactions with their environments, which include, but are not limited to, structural influences from curriculum and temporal shifts associated with policies that change over time (Biesta et al., 2015; Biesta & Teddler, 2007). Thus, an ecological framework supports understanding of both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ initiatives through considering the influences beyond the individual in isolation, towards the interaction between the individual and context (Biesta et al., 2015). That is, instances of successful implementation of educational initiatives tended to involve coherence between different levels of the educational system (e.g., cohesion between the identified needs of the particular classroom and the initiatives promoted in external contexts at local or national levels), whereas ‘top-down’ external dimensions of context had negative implications for agency through teachers’ perspectives of pressure and expectation (Ball et al., 2011).

Implications and future directions

The present findings have clear implications in relation to teacher agency. Indeed, by understanding teacher agency as something that an individual enacts through interactions with their environments (Biesta et al., 2015; Biesta & Teddler, 2007), agency is not seen as a fixed entity, and is expected to change in different contexts. Such a view of agency provides clear opportunities for change; to influence agency by improving the teachers’ sense that they have the ability to make change and take action in their professional lives (i.e., to draw on their professionalism to enact policies; Ball, 1997; Leat et al., 2015).

More teacher involvement with research in schools is one approach to facilitate teacher agency. For example, projects such as 'Improving the Quality of Education for All' (IQEA) and Learning to Learn in schools (L2L) both move away from seeking to implement initiatives, towards being a continual process, owned by teachers rather than being imposed upon them by external forces (Hopkins, 2000; Hall et al., 2006). Critically, however, it is important to consider the inherent tension between promoting greater teacher involvement with research, whilst taking account of the perception of teachers being often tired and overloaded (Ball et al., 2011). Given the fundamental role of the teacher, then, it is important that curriculum is supportive of teachers agency, being careful not to over-burden teachers with demands: "For schools to become ecologically supportive of teacher agency, in order to foster deep engagement in research, requires a shift away from insistent policy imperatives which demand so much of the time, energy and souls of classroom teachers" (Leat et al., 2015, p283). Importantly, these demands not only include specific approaches (metacognition being just one), but also wider demands in relation to (for example) professional enquiry.

As stated above, the findings presented in this paper were unexpected and contrary to the original aims of the wider project. Whilst it is important to present these findings given their implications for understandings about teacher perspectives of metacognitive approaches, it is also important to be cognizant of the areas that were not investigated in the interviews and that indeed, would be a beneficial area for future study. For instance, whilst the present study sought to explore the perspectives of several different 'policy actors' within schools, the present study did not investigate the relationships between these different roles, and the potential importance this might make for insights relating to enactment. For instance, Ball (2003) highlights the importance of hierarchies and accountability upon teachers' perspectives of

performativity in the light of policy change – topics that were not an explicit focus of the present study. Future research, therefore, should continue to explore the process of policy enactment by considering the interaction between policy actors, and with sensitivity towards the ‘inextricably interwoven’ contexts of policy enactment (Maguire et al., 2020, p503).

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore teachers’ perspectives about the enactment of policy, with a particular focus on metacognition. A main finding was a described tension between teacher perspectives and ‘top-down’ educational approaches. That is, the findings of the present study suggest that despite the goals of the Scottish CfE being to encourage flexibility for teachers, the participating teachers still described school initiatives as a changing tide of ‘top-down’, prescriptive initiatives. Such ‘top-down’ approaches to implementation of educational initiatives were associated with a restriction upon teacher agency and in conflict with their professionalism. Findings, therefore, highlight that to truly understand the impact of metacognition in education, it is necessary to move beyond ‘top-down’ notions of ‘what works’ into understanding the layered influences upon children’s educational experiences.

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Appendix A: List of Participating Teachers (participant number referred to in text)

Participant number	Interview number	Years' Experience
1	1	>10
2	1	>10
3	2	3.5
4	2	25
5	2	25
6	2	0.5
7	2	9
8	3	>10
9	4	10
10	4	13
11	5	14
12	6	29
13	7	10
14	8	16
15	9	5
16	9	3
17	9	10
18	9	7-8
19	10	20
20	10	20

Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview Schedule

- What do you feel are some of the biggest challenges that you currently face as a teacher?
- In what ways do you support children to think about and manage their own thinking?
- What knowledge/awareness do you have about the term metacognition?
- How would you define metacognition?
- What do you think metacognition looks like in the classroom?
- Do you encourage metacognition in the classroom, and if so, how?
- Can you describe any other approaches or current initiatives that encourage children to think about or manage their own thinking?
- How do you feel initiatives such as metacognition or [any stated] link to statutory requirements such as the curriculum?
- What kind of resource is most useful within the classroom?
- Is there any other information or support that you feel would be useful?