

## **Curriculum and Assessment in the Secondary School in England – the Sociology of Musical Status**

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### *Abstract*

This chapter looks at the ways in which hegemony, especially valorisation of musical types, has had a significant impact upon classroom music curriculum and assessment in England. Although this chapter is rooted in the specificity of the English experience, there are lessons for an international audience in these discussions. Despite many changes in music education in England (along with other jurisdictions) in recent years, including the growth of informal learning practices, the widening of curriculum content in primary and secondary schools, the broadening of classroom music teachers' own backgrounds, education, and training – including the entrance of more teachers with popular music backgrounds into the profession – nonetheless issues that have affected the content of school curricula for many years, including the notion of music being considered as being dividable into 'high' and 'low', still persist.

### *Knowledge and its value*

One of the key issues affecting classroom music education in England, as well as many other countries, is that of what knowledge can and should be taught and learned. This is because

...the production and transmission of knowledge is always entangled with a complex set of contending social interests and power relations. (Young 2008, p.31)

It is this entanglement which this chapter will describe and discuss. Specific to music education, we need to bear in mind that

Music education takes place in socio-political systems that institutionalise cultural hegemony and social stratification through perpetuating symbolically violent practices and unconscious assumptions regarding the purpose of music and music education in society. (Powell, Dylan Smith & D'Amore 2017, p.734)

What is important to investigate in the English context are the impacts that Powell *et al*'s 'unconscious assumptions' have when they find their outworking in curriculum and assessment. This raises questions as to *whose* knowledge is considered valuable, whether consciously or unconsciously, the effect this has on curriculum, assessment, and associated pedagogies, and what the effects of Powell *et al*'s invoking Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolically violent practices' are on musical schooling.

In England, government education ministers have been highly influenced by the works of the American E.D. Hirsch, with Hirsch's (1987) work 'Cultural literacy: What every literate American needs to know' being a significant example. A former minister of education, Michael Gove (2009), observed:

The American thinker E.D. Hirsch has highlighted this crucial aspect of educational policy in his work on Cultural Literacy. A society in which there is a widespread understanding of the nation's past, a shared appreciation of cultural reference points, a common stock of knowledge on which all can draw, and trade, is a society in which we all understand each other better

In the same speech Gove went on to say of his forthcoming governmental reforms:

We will completely overhaul the curriculum - to ensure that the acquisition of knowledge within rigorous subject disciplines is properly valued and cherished. (Gove 2009)

A long-serving minister for schools under Gove, as well as subsequent Tory ministers, Nick Gibb, has also expressed his admiration for Hirsch:

No single writer has influenced my thinking on education more than E. D. Hirsch...

The new National Curriculum published in 2013 ... is a programme of study in the spirit of Hirsch. (Gibb 2015)

All this Hirschian influence on music education, which, to be fair, was not the primary focus of ministerial pronouncements, shows how hegemony is exerted by those with power over the curriculum. What we can observe in these utterances, however, is what Young (2008) sees as a fallacious argument:

The internalist fallacy is typical of the ‘conservative neo-traditionalist’ approach...It involves an a-social view that knowledge is given, and something that has to be acquired by anyone who wants to see themselves as ‘educated’. For those identifying with this position, knowledge changes only occur as internal features of the knowledge itself. This enables them to defend existing orderings of knowledge and the social structures they serve. (Young 2008, p.95)

And it is this that makes discussions of valorisation of musical types within a curriculum problematic, as Young’s internalist fallacy makes it seem a reasonable position to adopt. Indeed, it is this which enabled Michael Gove to observe:

...I am unapologetic in arguing that all children have a right to the best. And there is such a thing as the best. Richard Wagner is an artist of sublime genius and his work is incomparably more rewarding - intellectually, sensually and emotionally - than, say, the Arctic Monkeys. (Gove, 2011)

The complexity of different valorisation of musical types which statements like Gove’s espouse, presents music teachers with a problem as they become embroiled in wider social and cultural issues. Although current, these are by no means new issues in music education. Back in the 1970s, Shepherd *et al* (1977) were asking ‘whose music’ mattered to young people in schools. Many years later these questions still reverberate, and questions of what count as knowledge seem to remain as a constant, for example, Alperson (2010, p.173) asked:

To what extent should music education focus on the formal side of music, its expressive or symbolic meanings, or the instrumental purposes that music might serve such as entertainment, the facilitation of religious or other states of mind, the transmission of culture, virtue, or the education of the soul? What

is—or should be—the connection between music education and the education of taste or sensibility (assuming there is such a thing)? To whom should education be addressed?

To begin to address the questions that Alperson asked we need to consider both the knowledge involved, and the value which is placed upon it. In order to do that in the English situation, it is first necessary to describe the national policy and practice context.

### *Music Education in England*

In England there is a statutory National Curriculum for music. Although a number of neoliberal reforms to policy in the UK have effectively downgraded the compulsory nature of this, nonetheless it continues to be the benchmark by which Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, England's arms-length from central government inspection regime) report on and evaluate school performance. The first three years of secondary schooling, for pupils from the age of 11, are called Key Stage 3 (KS3). During KS3, music is supposed to be a compulsory subject, taught to all pupils. This requirement is, however, sometimes diluted in practice. After KS3, music becomes an optional subject, taken only by those young people who choose it for further study, and the examination that most pupils take at the end of this stage is a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in music. Music does not have to be offered as a subject in this way, although many schools continue so to do.

The KS3 National Curriculum version of music education can be considered very much as a generalist education in music. It is predicated upon three main musical structures, performing, composing, and listening. The GCSE examination also follows this pattern, with the three areas figuring as assessed components. For an international audience it is important to understand the nature of what is being undertaken under these three headings. At KS3, performing is viewed as a non-instrument specific competence, involving a range of musical instruments, for example, both tuned and untuned classroom percussion, guitars, electronic keyboards, and, increasingly, items of music technology. The children and young people undertake classroom performing activities using these instruments, and in doing so develop their facility on them. Composing is similarly generalist in nature. It does not necessarily involve staff

notation and the creation of melodic phrases (although it might), it entails music composed directly into sound, often using the instrumental resources of the performing component described above. Listening is normally considered as an active process, and can involve recorded or live music, as well as focussed listening to the music produced by the children and young people themselves.

The National Curriculum (NC) for music itself does not specify content. Indeed, the whole NC for these three years of secondary schooling is encompassed in less than 150 words, with the teaching component containing six bullet points:

“Pupils should be taught to:

- play and perform confidently in a range of solo and ensemble contexts using their voice, playing instruments musically, fluently and with accuracy and expression
- improvise and compose; and extend and develop musical ideas by drawing on a range of musical structures, styles, genres and traditions
- use staff and other relevant notations appropriately and accurately in a range of musical styles, genres and traditions
- identify and use the inter-related dimensions of music expressively and with increasing sophistication, including use of tonalities, different types of scales and other musical devices
- listen with increasing discrimination to a wide range of music from great composers and musicians
- develop a deepening understanding of the music that they perform and to which they listen, and its history.” (Department for Education 2013)

An interesting shift in official language has taken place in regard to these statements. In the 2007 iteration of the NC, the component statements were preceded by the phrase “Pupils should be able to...” (QCA 2007). The alteration marks a move from pupil-centered learning to teacher-focused delivery, an intentionality that marks a neoliberal shift from pupil as agentic in learning, to teacher being agentic in instruction, as the teacher is under the control of performativity measures, in ways in which the pupil is not.

### *Music Education in the lower secondary school*

The way the music curriculum for lower secondary schools is normally organised can be considered as being a thematic or topic-based curriculum; for example in a study conducted in London it was found that 94.1% of teachers operationalise their curriculum in this fashion (Fautley 2016). Drilling down into what is actually taught in the topic-based curricula reveals a degree of commonality. Comparing results from London and Birmingham (England's capital and second city) it was found that nine out of ten of the most commonly taught topics are identical, (data from Fautley, Kinsella & Whittaker 2018; Fautley 2016). Table 1 shows the results of this analysis

*Table 1: Top Ten KS3 topics reported by teachers in London and Birmingham*

	London Teachers	London Position	Birmingham Teachers	Birmingham Position
Blues	63	1	16	=1
Film Music	60	2	12	=5
Songwriting	57	3	16	=1
Singing	54	4	15	3
Pop & Rock	50	5	13	4
African Drumming	49	6	12	=5
Musical Futures	44	=7	7	10
Samba	44	=7	11	=7
Form & Structure	29	9	11	=7
Minimalism	24	10	6	11
Gamelan	23	11	9	9

The figures shown in table 1 represent the responses from teachers (London  $n=84$ , Birmingham  $n=16$ ) expressed in the form of ordering based on London teachers, of the numbers of respondents saying they taught that particular topic. Amongst the many interesting things this data shows is that there are qualitative differences between the topics, e.g. musical futures being notably different in both form and content from the others. What is also revealing about this data is that there is no

official mandate that music should be taught according to a topic basis, nor that there should be commonality of topics between schools. What seems to have happened is that a sort of ‘folk curriculum’ has emerged, similar in many ways to Bruner’s (1996) notion of a ‘folk pedagogy’, in other words where teachers’ implicit understandings are privileged over policy requirements. Indeed, it is important to note that these curricula are written and operationalised by teachers, often with little or no external validation. What this means is that teachers are the architects of their own curriculum, a structure which they then inhabit.

A ramification of this is that teachers’ values of what should be taught and learned become apparent in their curricula constructions, especially in the use of topics chosen.

### *Curriculum Values*

There are two ways of thinking about curriculum values arising from the data discussed. The first involves assessment backwash, where what is to be taught is derived from what is to be examined; and the second is teachers’ own values of the sorts of things that they believe ought to be taught and learned.

In England, only about 7% of young people go on to further study in music aged 14+. Teachers therefore need to construct KS3 courses that act both as a preparation for the 7% who will do music, and are also complete in themselves for the remaining 93%. As Rata observes,

... the absence of specified content knowledge [means] that what is actually taught is left to the vagaries of school choice, or to a teacher’s arbitrary knowledge... (Rata 2012, p.131)

This certainly seems to be the case in the English music education context. In the research from two English cities cited above, moving beyond the ‘top ten’ already reported upon, there were in total 76 different topics listed by London teachers and 38 in Birmingham. This represents a broad range of content for curriculum construction. What makes such approaches even more fragmentary is where there are topics only taught by one or two schools in each area, of which there were 51 cases in London,

and 27 in Birmingham. Anecdotal evidence would tend to suggest that the findings from these two cities are not unusual for those of the nation as a whole.

Drilling down a little more into what is taught provides some interesting data concerning what these teachers value in their curriculum. Using a very rough-and-ready categorisation of the topics taught, it becomes possible to place them into one of six discrete categories:

1. Classical – where the topic is broadly in the Western Classical tradition, e.g. Viennese Waltz, minimalism
2. Pop and Rock – e.g. Axis of awesome, Hip Hop
3. Jazz – there was only one of these in each category, just called “Jazz”
4. World – e.g. Gamelan, Samba
5. Tech – where the topic involves the use of some form of music technology as its central feature, e.g. Using Cubase, podcasting
6. Other – where the topic could fall into a number of the above, e.g. Singing, Elements of music

These codings are obtained from the topic titles alone, with the caveat that a title may not adequately convey the content of the programme of study. Using this rough-and-ready coding, table 2 shows the percentage of teachers from London and Birmingham who responded saying they taught those topics.

*Table 2: Thematic Analysis of KS3 topics taught*

	London	Birmingham
Classical	25.0%	34.2%
World	18.4%	18.4%
Pop and Rock	15.8%	7.9%
Tech	10.5%	7.9%
Jazz	1.3%	2.6%
Other	28.9%	28.9%



Whilst the 'other' category is clearly significant, what is interesting to note here is the weighted preponderance of topics labelled 'Classical'. This itself requires some further unpicking. We know from Kokotsaki's (2010) work on the degree backgrounds of students undertaking a pre-service teacher preparation course, that many come from a Western Classical background, in her case, some 80%. It is highly likely that for a number of classroom music teachers, the most obvious thing for them to do is revert back to the sorts of music education which worked for them during their formative years, as Benedict observes:

What kinds of questions...to ask when most, if not all of us, are certain of the curricular and pedagogical path we wish to take. If it worked for us in the past, why not replicate what we know to have been successful? Why not, indeed. Because, for one reason, this world does not stand still and to desire stability is to desire a stasis that cannot exist. (Benedict 2010, p.144)

### *Washback*

The issue of washback has already been raised in this chapter, and is another key factor in thinking about how teachers valorise curriculum activities. In England a relentless performativity agenda over many years has generated, in Ball's (2003 p.215) words, a battle for "the teacher's soul", when the need for measurement and data wrestles with subject pedagogy. Washback from GCSE affects music teachers significantly, even if they do not always give voice to this as a direct influence. We have known for many years that the GCSE music examination is not necessarily suitable for all children and young people. An earlier iteration of it was described by Wright:

Despite the attempts of the education establishment to devise a syllabus which presents music as a subject for all, it is in fact serving few. It is perceived by many pupils as being elitist and by others as being insufficiently academically challenging. This leads to the question of whether GCSE serves pupils from all musical backgrounds. The answer would appear to be that it does not. A large number of pupils considered that the course was too classically based and did not include sufficient study of popular music. Pupils also perceived themselves to be at a disadvantage if they did not read notation fluently, as

many instrumentalists from a rock, pop or jazz background do not. (Wright, 2002, p.240)

This has remained the case for many years. A few years later Wright observed that,

...many aspects of the programmes of study... could only be taught through examples drawn from it [Western Classical Music]. The terminology of the official curriculum, therefore, e.g. the musical elements, immediately marks out music as pedagogic discourse [different] from music as we relate to it outside school. (Wright 2008, p.398)

This was a problem for teachers who wanted to develop classroom courses involving popular music in their school. This links to Spruce and Matthews (2012, p.119) argument that,

...despite the introduction into the music curriculum of music from a much broader range of musical traditions and cultures than hitherto (including musical traditions and cultures from within our own society) the musical values inherent in western art music continue to be promoted as self-evidently defining 'good' music and consequently 'high status' musical knowledge, resulting in the alienation of many pupils from the formal curriculum ... despite the introduction into the curriculum of music from other traditions and cultures to try to address such alienation – the way in which these musics are typically presented sustains and reinforces rather than counters the western art music rooted conception of high status music knowledge.

This gets to the very heart of the matter, it is 'high status musical knowledge' which is at the centre of the music curriculum. This has been a long-running issue in English music education, and shows no signs of abating. Examples relating to earlier incarnations of the National Curriculum in music can be found, with one instance among many being this:

Who would have guessed that, more than 30 years after the Beatles took the world by storm, our opinion-formers would still be trapped in a stultifying

debate about high and low culture? Yet this week, Britain's unelected cultural commissar Dr Nicholas Tate, chief executive of the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, called for “educators” to impress on children that “high” culture is good, profound and moral, whereas “low” culture is base and worthless.

Dr Tate is convinced that the threat posed by Blur to Schubert is so serious that unless we return to basics (in culture as well as morals) the core values on which Western civilisation was based will crumble away for good. (Wilkinson 1996)

This can be seen to lie squarely with the views of Hirsch and Gove as outlined above. In order to see what the implications of this are for classroom music teachers, it is to this which we now turn our attention.

#### *What is there to learn in classroom music?*

KS3 music teachers in England consider themselves fortunate if their classes are allotted an hour a week. Despite there being a National Curriculum in operation, there is no concomitant recommendation for the amount of time that should be given for its delivery. This means that individual schools can choose the available time-slot, resulting in a variety of complex arrangements, include fortnightly lessons, and complex rotations, where music, art, and drama swap round at intervals, meaning that children and young people have fragmentary experiences. It stands to reason that there is far more music which can be experienced than there is time available in the curriculum in which to experience it.

An average English school works 39 weeks a year, and so given an hour a week, there are about 39 hours of teaching and learning time available annually. This goes some way towards explaining the thematic curriculum approach outlined earlier in this chapter, as teachers try and squeeze as much breadth into the learning time as they can. But the nature of what there is to learn in classroom music at KS3 is problematic. This is because the *knowledge* of what is required itself is not straightforward, as we have been seeing. Indeed, it could be argued that it is *knowledge* itself that lies at the root of many of the problems and issues that exist in music education. Philpott (2016),

drawing on the work of Reid, described three types of knowledge for music in education:

- Knowledge about music: This might be referred to as factual knowledge, that is, factual knowledge about composers, about style, about theory, about musical concepts.
- Knowledge how: This involves, say, knowing how to play an instrument, how to distinguish between sounds, perceptual know-how (e.g. to recognize a drone), knowing how to present a piece to an audience, knowing how to read and write music, knowing how to make music sound in a particular way.
- Knowledge of music: This is knowing pieces of music by direct acquaintance. (after Philpott, 2016)

These three types of knowledge may seem logical, and possibly innocuous enough, but they are central to many contemporary problems in how music education is viewed from outside the classroom. We have seen how the work of Hirsch has been highly influential in English political circles, it mostly involves *knowledge about*, whereas in music education many music teachers are keen to develop an active modality, where children and young people play musical instruments, teachers want to develop *knowing how*. This is an important distinction, and one that can cause problems as some schools, keen to jump on a passing bandwagon, identify themselves as having a “knowledge-rich” curriculum. In some of the poorly thought-through versions, what this means is that factual knowledge is privileged, with a downplaying of ‘skills’, which come, in this world-view, a poor second to knowledge. Indeed, despite politicians’ speeches to the contrary, it can be argued that it is a reductive and impoverished notion of knowledge which figures in the English music NC:

...the resulting definition of ‘knowledge’ featuring in the National Curriculum has become remarkably narrow. Knowledge is referred to as abstract knowledge: as if it were an entity in itself, defined objectively and independently of the knower... It is presented as socially decontextualized and abstracted from real life, to be passed from teacher to pupil in an action of

preservation rather than in a dialectical negotiation which recognises the active role of both parties in its construction (Bate 2018, p.1)

Music lessons have long been viewed in England as involving activity, with young people participating in music-making, creating, composing, performing, playing instruments, and singing together. This tradition dates back to at least the work of Paynter and Aston (1970), and continues through the NC. Reducing music solely to *knowing about* music could mark a return to the “musical appreciation” lessons that were abandoned as being untenable during the last century.

### *The place of assessment*

The place and role of assessment in music education follows from the ways in which curriculum has been constructed. One of the purposes of assessment should be to get at ways of finding out about the learning of the young people. However, in a performativity-focussed culture, as is the case in England, a circularity of teaching and assessment exists where the purpose of teaching seems to have become concerned mainly with the data production; the ‘datafication’ of teaching,

...whereby the educational process is increasingly transformed into numbers that allow measurement, comparison, and the functioning of high-stakes accountability systems linked to rewards and sanctions. Although there is no question that being able to use student assessment data to support learning has an important place in teachers' repertoire of skills, “datafication” refers to the use of data in a way that has become increasingly detached from supporting learning and is much more concerned with the management of teacher performance as an end in itself. (Stevenson 2017, p.537)

Music classes in England are no strangers to this. Production of data has reached such a level in some schools that it interferes with teaching, learning, and music-making. Whilst we have known for some time that “what is assessed becomes what is valued, which becomes what is taught” (McEwen 1995, p.42), this creates problems for classroom music, namely what is being valued, and by whom? In the case of datafication, teachers are receiving conflicting messages. One teacher reported that their principal asked them to spend less time on music making, especially in extra-

curricular activities, these being the ways in which bands, orchestras, and choirs operate in the English context, and to use that time for filling in assessment data spreadsheets.

Assessment in music is also problematic in valuing what *should* be taught.

Assessment justifications for what can be considered to be applicable for teaching and learning in music need to do two disparate and dissociative activities:

1. Prepare children and young people for an assessment regime which will both certificate achievement, and provide routes into further study and/or jobs.
2. Take account of the interests and enthusiasms of these young people, as they exist in the here-and-now, and to develop them as rounded human beings.

One reason these can be in contradiction is that popular music is not always welcomed in the academy. Problems associated with the notion of high culture run through this chapter like an *idée fixe*, but it is not necessarily clear what this is. High culture contains within itself aspects which can make some feel uncomfortable, for example, this from Swanwick:

The idea of the arts as a cultural heritage in which children have to be initiated is not necessarily pernicious but it does need watching. The Third Reich in Germany was in many ways rooted in European high culture and its leaders were certainly very conscious of the importance of the concept of heritage. (Swanwick 1994 p.169)

Whereas for other it is straightforward:

It is only by making discriminations within the realm of popular music that we can encourage young people to recognize the difference between genuine musical sentiment and kitsch, between beauty and ugliness, between the life-affirming and the life-denying, the inspired and the routine — in short between The Beatles and U2. And once judgement begins it will amplify its bounds until those who have known nothing but current pop music will be led

by critical inquiry to the bright uplands of classical music, from where they will be able to look down on their earlier tastes...(Scruton 2016, p.221)

This seeming simplicity is anything but in practice! Not least of the problems associated with it is the inherent difficulty of presenting to teenagers what appear to be value judgements concerning the music with which they may strongly identify. Back in 1988, Lucy Green noted that

...music delineates, along with its other meanings, diverse and often mutually exclusive social groups of listeners, their social class or their status. These listeners become associated with types of music so integrally as to make it almost impossible to hear certain music without being aware of them. Every member of society, furthermore, is given plenty of good reasons for believing in music's class delineations. (Green 1988, p.30)

To lead children and young people who self-identify with very different types of music to Scruton's 'bright uplands of classical music', is to hold the belief, as Hirsch and Gove would, that that classical music is a good thing in and of itself. But, as Wayne Bowman reminds us, this is not necessarily the case:

The value of music and of music study and of musical experience (and on and on) are not simply 'given' or inherent, the inevitable outcomes of having engaged in things musical. They are good only to the extent they contribute to human, or, in music education's case, educational ends. No value (no, not even musical value) is ultimate, unconditional, good without regard for situational particulars or ends served. If and when music is good, that goodness is always a function of its contribution to ends beyond itself. The same is true of music education. (Bowman 2013, p.4)

There is no intrinsic 'good' about music, or, to take Bowman's argument a stage further, there is nothing intrinsically good about specific styles and genres.

It could be argued that 'good' and 'valued' are being confused here, but it is more complex than that. Music education does not happen in a hegemonic vacuum. As we

have seen, the values of assessment have significant backwash on curriculum. But, not only that, the values of western classical music continue to dominate teaching, learning, and assessment in classroom music in England:

...the main problem with contemporary musical assessment is that it continues to articulate the musical values and beliefs of Western art music. In doing so, it creates a potentially unresolvable tension between a curriculum that is philosophically multi-stylistic and a way of assessing which is monotheistic. This frequently results in assessment predicated upon inappropriate criteria and consequently unfair to those whose musical skills are not rooted in Western art music. (Spruce 2001, p.126-7)

All of which leads us to ask ourselves some uncomfortable questions. One of the tenets of music education has always been to introduce children and young people to new experiences in music. In today's fast-paced on-line world, virtually every piece of music ever recorded is available at the touch of a few cellphone keys. But does this mean that we should create for ourselves a system in which the children and young people continue to live solely inside their current habitus? Might music education also mean taking them beyond it somehow? It is here that discomfort creeps in. We might want to take them to Scruton's 'bright uplands of classical music', or we might wish them to develop their understanding of songwriting, or their skills at dubstep. But, whatever it is, we want them to develop. Sometimes the English National Curriculum has been accused of mistaking breadth for depth; indeed, Ofsted themselves have observed that it is a good thing for teachers to "do more of less" (Ofsted 2009). This means that getting better at something is not simply about covering more 'stuff', but really thinking through what *quality* involves in teaching and learning musically. This can mean taking the young person to somewhere they have not visited yet, as well as exploring the music that they already know. What makes this singularly difficult for music educators is that tacit knowledge is so varied between the young people in our schools. They may come from similar backgrounds, but their musical experiences will vary hugely. A challenge for the music teacher lies in taking all of this into account, and, at the same time, planning and delivering a coherent programme of study that develops all the youngsters in each class, and take them on musical journeys which



are both worthwhile and meaningful, whilst dealing with political strictures and requirements.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has argued that hegemony is important in considering the ways in which different types, forms, and instantiations of musical knowledge find their outworking in the day-to-day curricula of secondary schools in England. For an international audience, the ways in which the sociology of musical knowledge has been argued over in very public spheres is informative for the ways in which political influence on curriculum can have significant ramifications for how music is both taught and learned in schools.

### *Reflective Questions*

1. In what ways does political influence on curriculum have ramifications for how music is taught, learned and assessed in your context?
2. What kinds of conflicts, if any, have you experienced between taking youngsters on musical learning journeys that are both worthwhile and meaningful, and dealing with assessment requirements in your context?

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