

Programming robots for factories; The impacts of baseline assessment measures upon young children.

Guy Roberts-Holmes, UCL IoE, Department of Learning and Leadership.

g.roberts-holmes@ucl.ac.uk

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Merryn Hutchings Exam Factory research and article raises extremely important questions regarding the DfE's current obsession with accountability data and its negative impacts upon schools, families and children. What was particularly fascinating and disturbing at the same time was that Hutchings' conclusions regarding a narrowing of the curriculum, teacher and pupil anxiety, teaching to the test, various forms of cheating and a tacit exclusion of SEN children were all reflected in Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes' (2016) research with four and five year old children in Primary school Reception classes. In an extraordinary linkage between the two studies, the teachers description of accountability turning schools into 'exam factories' in Hutchings' study was remarkably similar to the Reception teachers stating that children had become reduced to 'robots' because of Baseline Assessment. It could be argued that there has been a reconfiguration of children as robots who are being prepared for exam factories. Early years accountability measures such as the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) and the Baseline Assessment have increasingly been narrowed, leading to an intensification of 'school readiness' pressures and constrained by performativity demands to produce 'appropriate' data, particularly for narrowly defined literacy and maths.

This school readiness agenda (or turning young children into efficient exam producing robots for international sales in factories) in the early years was further exacerbated by the introduction of Baseline Assessment in 2015 (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2016). Baseline Assessment would have resulted in *a single numerical score* for each child; when they reach Year 6, each child in the cohort would have been measured against their Baseline Assessment score in order to judge the progress they had made while attending primary school. Baseline thus attempted to reduce children's learning to a single numerical score; in effect generating a 'data shadow' to govern the child. Baseline Assessment thus represented a major shift in approaches to accountability in primary education which involved the early years phase more than ever before. Reception Baseline Assessment was part of the Government's policy document 'Reforming assessment and accountability for primary schools' (2014). The rationale for this policy was predicated upon an assumption that Primary schools, including Reception classes were underperforming in formal accountability measures and that 'current expectations for primary schools are set too low' and the policy described in detail the spurious linkage between primary school 'results' and GCSE 'results'. Given BA's evident inaccuracy to measure young children in any meaningful way, it was not surprising that the DfE withdraw BA in February 2016. Despite the entire early years community rejecting BA as inappropriate for young children there are indications at the time of writing (January 2017) that the DfE may try to re-introduce BA in some form.

Within BA learning and pedagogy are reduced to a numerical representation so that a single number can be compared and ranked with other children, classes and schools in an (international) competitive race to achieve higher results. Working within this hyper scientific and positivist paradigm, assessment, accountability and therefore pedagogy, all too easily becomes reduced to governing children (and teachers) by numbers. Early years teachers were equally reduced to data collectors and 'grey technicians' whose professional

judgements were ‘hollowed out’ whilst private companies did the data analysis, sending this information back to teachers to implement. Indeed, within BA teachers’ professionalism is stripped away as they were reduced by policy discourse to ‘scorers’ (DfE, 2014). The notion of a teacher being a scorer again resonates deeply with the exam factory metaphor.

Baseline Assessment data was to form a key part primary school accountability. That such an invalid number was subsequently expected to be used to predict children’s scores across seven years, was problematic. DfE guidance for the BA stated that ‘each assessment item must require a single, objective, binary decision to be made by the scorer’ (DfE, 2014:1). As such BA policy was ‘part of a broader drive to position policymaking as a technocratic exercise, to be undertaken by an elite band of experts who are immune to the influence of politics and ideology’ (Morris, 2016, 226). For the ‘band of experts’ who devised the BA, the notion that everything about four year old children could be rendered to a *single objective* number located BA firmly within the hyper-positivist scientific paradigm in which ‘reductionism is the name of the game’ (Alexander, 2010, 812). BA was particularly problematic because of the inaccuracy of BA’s binary judgements; the negation of English as Additional Language (EAL) children’s competencies in their first language; further curriculum narrowing upon literacy and maths and BA’s negation of diverse individual children’s lived experiences and chronological age differences. Moreover, the reductionist production of a single number for each child inevitably led some schools to use BA scores for prediction and ability grouping in the Reception classroom.

To attempt to reduce young children’s complex learning, competencies and abilities to a single number largely based on maths and literacy is deeply disrespectful of young children’s competent learning through sociable play. Socio-cultural research has demonstrated that children learn through sets of social relationships (Broadhead and Burt 2012; Fleer 2010). Authentic, holistic, and developmentally appropriate assessment, based upon teachers’ observations over time in a range of contexts, makes visible what young children are capable of learning in supportive and collaborative relationships. A particularly useful time to engage in such observations and respectful listening to children is when they are participating in rich and meaningful play activities (Fleer and Richardson 2009) and can be used to build up a ‘learning journey’ (Carr and Lee 2012). Such formative and summative assessment practices aim to make children’s learning ever more stimulating, rich and successful. A child’s wellbeing and the characteristics of effective learning, such as resilience, perseverance and self-regulation learnt in the context of meaningful play are seen to be more reliable predictors of later academic achievement (Bodrova and Leong 2007; Whitebread and Bingham 2012) rather than ‘short-term academic results’ which may not last.

Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2016) reported that baseline assessment ignored the messy and inaccurate production of a single score with four year olds in their first six weeks of school. Such a reductionist score also negated the fact that many primary school children experience significant changes and challenges in their lives effecting any simplistic linear rising profile. Reception Baseline assessment was certainly not about children and their learning but rather was an attempt to further regulate early education. Baseline attempts to construct a linear relationship for progress from age four to age eleven, even though the content of the assessments are different; this was seen as a major flaw in the system.

I don’t think you should [use it to measure progress], I don’t think you can, because they are children and they are not robots, not machines, they are children. You don’t know what influences they have got from outside, what is going to happen in those seven years, so I think

it is ridiculous.

The variation between children and their rates of progress meant that any reductionist and simple correlation between Reception and Key Stage 2 was impossible:

Children's progress is going to be judged against how far they have gone in seven years. Now to my mind that is an almost impossible thing to do because you can't test children at 11 about the same things you were testing them at four. It just doesn't make sense.

The reductionist nature of baseline accountability lent itself to so-called 'ability' grouping at ever earlier ages. The Cambridge Primary Review (2013) were very clear that 'notions of fixed ability would be exacerbated by a baseline test in reception that claimed to reliably predict future attainment'.

'BA helps us to group the children in differentiated maths and phonics groups'

'There is no time given to these poor little children to settle in before they are assessed and in our school they are put into ability groups based on these results!'

Such pedagogical differentiation can potentially constrain and limit a child's educational possibilities at ages four and five. Allocating differential resources according to a baseline, serves to make up and produce social inequality and later justify educational inequality of outcome. For example, if some children are constructed as a low 'one' whilst others are constructed as a high 'five', the 'ones' will not be expected to leave primary school performing at the level of 'five'. This is where algorithmic predictive profiling at age four becomes a potentially dangerous and malicious form of control. The potential for grouping and labelling children on Baseline Assessment accountability data is a worrying development especially given that many respondents queried the accuracy of the Baseline Assessment. Hutchings exam factory analysis referring to Victorian and early nineteenth century inspectors' reports is entirely justified as the Victorian residue of fixed notions of four and five year olds 'ability' re-asserted itself through baseline assessment.

English children are already the most tested in the world and the associated stress of BA may further contribute to the low levels of well-being shown by children in the UK in international comparisons (UNICEF, 2011). Hutchings' findings on the damaging consequences of accountability upon children's well being and mental health was again reflected in teachers' comments on baseline assessment.

I feel that the Baseline Assessment has to be completed too early in the year and means that teachers are madly trying to collect evidence, rather than concentrating on the welfare of their new pupils and helping to create a calm and relaxing environment which is vital for a positive start to their school life.

This is ironic because the development of young children's well-being and learning dispositions are more important and reliable predictors of later academic achievement than early gains in the narrow skills involved in literacy and maths (Whitebread and Bingham, 2013). Children whose experience in the early years has instead supported emotional well-being, cognitive development and self-regulation during play may score less well on early academic tests, but evidence indicates that these children show higher achievement benefits in the longer term (Goswami and Bryant, 2007). Children in Finland, for example, begin

formal schooling up to three years later than in England, following active, play-based provision in their early years; they go on to out-perform British children in later attainment (Bodrova, *et al.* 2007) as this headteacher noted

I think doing any sort of reputable assessment of very young children is dodgy because the children are so young. You know if those children were in Denmark they wouldn't have had to pick up a pencil yet.

Trying to assess children who had not yet sufficiently developed emotionally led to a deficit model of assessment showing what they can't do as opposed to what they can do. This means that the assessment itself provided a negative, inaccurate and detrimental measure: BA focused on what the children could not do as opposed to what they could do.

It's ridiculous. It's not a fair representation of children. Many young children are not yet confident enough to show their new teacher what they can do when put on the spot.

Unfortunately, however, the strict DfE regulations meant that BA had to be carried out within six weeks of the children starting school regardless of whether or not the children had 'settled' in.

I did have children that were crying and I just couldn't get anything out of them at all because they were too upset to do anything, even when I left it later on. Some children just refused or just weren't ready and I know they said you only assess them when they are ready, but some children, well, you got to the point where you had to assess them because it had to be done whether they were ready or not. And obviously then it is not accurate because they weren't at a stage when they wanted to say things.

This leads not only to inaccurate data being generated but was ethically inappropriate and potentially damaging for children's developing self confidence, self esteem and learner identity.

Some children looked at me and said "I can't read" when asked to read parts of the assessment. It was heartbreaking to see their reaction to it and I spent a lot of time reassuring children.

Here BA had the effect of demotivating and undermining young children's confidence in their reading abilities. Once again the approach of BA accountability was that 'everything can be reduced to a common outcome, standard and measure. What it cannot do is accommodate, let alone, welcome, diversity – of paradigm or theory, pedagogy or provision, childhood or culture' (Moss, 2016, 348). So, BA negated young children's competencies, abilities and creativity as they were tested on a narrow band of academic skills.

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