

# Too Much, Much Too Young: the meaning of the school testing obsession

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Across the world, the culture of testing and monitoring the performance of children in school at every level is becoming ubiquitous and deeply entrenched. Pasi Sahlberg (2012) has famously identified such standardized testing as the third pillar of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) that has infected so many school systems. This article seeks to focus on the new frontiers for the calculation of human productivity in its earliest forms, in early years education in Britain; but the general points are applicable across continents and educational age-phases. It will be argued that the English baseline test is just one example of the policing of capital's interests in our classrooms, but a particularly pernicious one for the way it reaches deep into the experience of the youngest children.

As Terry Wrigley (2015) has shown, using school test designers' own data, the baselines tests or their equivalent actually have a predictive capacity no better than an educated guess, probably worse. Indeed, one is reminded of *The Economist* magazine's experiment in which they asked three groups - chairmen of multinational companies, Oxford University graduates and bin-men - to predict the forecasts for the world's economy over ten years. The bin-men were famously the most accurate (Fattal, 2012). In schools though, the experiment is far more iniquitous: teachers are required not only to use the baseline tests in 2016 as predictors of four year old children's achievement in wholly unrelated 2023 Key Stage 2 Standardized Assessment Tests (SATs) at the age of eleven, they are then informed that if they do not base their predictions on this effectively meaningless data, their schools will be punished with a presumption that all children will reach the standard 'floor target' (Standards and Testing Agency & Department for Education, 2015) irrespective of the demographic makeup of the school. That is to say, for those schools in less affluent areas, who often need to push much harder to reach 'floor targets', unrealistic expectations will be locked in place if the new baseline assessments are not implemented.

So, is the rationale for the testing really a predictive one or is something else going on here? What is the function of the baseline assessment and what does it tell us about the testing obsession in schools across the developed world?

### **What is the function of the baseline assessment?**

Quite simply, the capitalist State does not invest in early education out of altruistic concern with the wellbeing of children, despite concessions having been won towards this end by successive waves of social democratic reform. Rather, the State wishes to see a return on its capital. For every £100 invested in the production of labour capacity, £110, or £150, or £200 return: straightforward M-C-ΔM, the driving purpose of which is the production of exchange value.

In the case of capital sunk into the development of the labour capacity of the child, the investment is a long term one, and increase in exchange value is gradual and incremental. It is a value which requires regular checking, and monitoring to ensure a return. This is a far from straightforward process, and the quantitative calculations involved in finding academic proxies for increases in exchange value are both complicated and as has been mentioned already, of highly questionable accuracy.

It seems hard to speak of the labour capacity of a five year old having an exchange value. However, in absolute terms, it makes no sense to delineate an age at which labour capacity may begin to be exchanged. Marx observed in *Capital*, vol. 1 that within capitalist production, "[c]ompulsory work for the capitalist usurped the place, not only of the children's play, but also of independent labour at home, within customary limits, for the family itself." (Marx, 1990, p.517) Marx was referring here to child factory labour, but we might reasonably note that today the majority of compulsory work undertaken by the young child takes the form of teacher-lead schoolwork, and I do not think it a great leap of the imagination to claim that this too, like the factory work of old is indeed first and foremost "compulsory work for the capitalist" insofar as it aims towards the production by the child of their own capacity to labour in a capitalist economy. We note too that Marx recognises the place of the child in both play and traditional home-based labour. This is, he says, 'independent' labour, directed primarily by the child herself; he mentions, for example cooking and sewing in this regard (*ibid.*, p. 518). Stripping away from the family its capacity to encourage such independence results not only in the rapid inculcation of the child into institutionally based capitalist forms of ideology, but also the intergenerational de-skilling of families, forcing them into the "purchase of ready-made articles" (*ibid.*) - ready-made meals, ready-made clothes and so on. Such commodification of

central aspects of domestic life result in an increased cost in the production of the labour capacity of the child which offsets income generated by the wages of the working mother who commits her child to institutional care: if you think the problems of the cost of childcare are new, think again. Marx notes in this regard another problem sometimes misunderstood as a recent phenomenon, an "unnatural estrangement between mother and child" (ibid., p. 521) arising from the demands placed upon the mother to work away from the home. Perhaps there are essentialist assumptions here which might be discussed, but the broad point remains: the capacity of the child to labour has no lower limit in absolute terms, and neither does the calculation of the value of this capacity. This value has, in recent years, come to be measured by standardized testing arrangements in schools, operating as proxies for employability, and accounting for returns on the state's investment.

### **The free zone**

Carving out and defending the space for the young child to engage in un-alienated free labour - 'play' is the more familiar term - is a struggle against the expansive grip of the neoliberal state, a struggle against the enclosure of childhood within the totalising ideology of capitalist accountability and audit. At various times, the school classroom has offered an opportunity to create a free zone, a spatial and conceptual zone relatively autonomous from the penetration of capital. Such a space is one where interactions between student and teacher do not centre upon an estranged relation, but rather one uncorrupted by the necessity to work for extrinsic reward. Whilst such spaces have all but disappeared from state primary schools in England since the advent of high stakes Standardised Assessments Tests a quarter of a century ago, early years classrooms had until now retained their relative autonomy. This can be accounted for by the deliberate lack of an easily transferable currency from the Early Years Foundation Stage's early learning goals to the national curriculum's levels, which have until recently served as those all-important proxies for employability outcomes (Boxley, 2003). This degree of separation had been won by representatives of early years workers in the writing of the Early Years Foundation Stage, and provided an important safeguard against the down-thrust of curricular pressure.

The capacity of a four or five year old to undertake the work of self-production, production of their own labour capacity, might appear an unexpected way of looking at the activity of those starting school, but actually represents a cornerstone of the schooling system. I want to adapt Marx's distinction (Small, 2014, pp. 64-7) between, on the one hand 'education', and on the other 'training' as that part of education necessary to the production of labour capacity, into a distinction between 'education' and 'schooling'. I think this is helpful in the early years context where the process of so called 'schoolification' (Charlton et al, 2012, p.8) and 'adultification'

(Scott and House, 2011) underway at present across the 'sector' equates in practical terms to a turn towards early years 'training' in Marx's terms; that is, learning to be productive workers. Now, interestingly, Marx himself had no objection to training – on the contrary, he promoted polytechnical education and the development of labour capacity as central to the development of the full human, but Marx is only really concerned with children from the age of nine upwards (Marx, 1985).

We now better understand that to retain or reclaim the un-alienated space of the early years for creative expression of our children's humanity represents a victory over the enclosure of childhood for the advantage of capital. Whereas Marx understood the necessity for the worker to sell her labour capacity within a capitalist economy (from the age of nine onwards in Britain in the 1860s), he perhaps failed to appreciate or forgot the implication of his early humanism for childhood, that free labour – the labour of love – is not an adornment to our formative years, but its very essence.

If, as I claim, early years 'schooling' is intended to begin to add value to the labour capacity of the child, there might appear to be a long term interest to capital in accelerating the process of labour capacity production, for example by starting school earlier, increasing the length of school days, shortening holidays. And indeed all of these have been features of neoliberal education policy as exemplified by the Gove-lead department of education in Britain (2010-14)<sup>1</sup>. Obviously, the parallels with the labour struggles over the working day (Marx, 1990, pp.660-664), holiday entitlement and so on are clear and the two features of the production and use of variable capital inextricably linked.

### **Testing policy**

In the UK, ministers such as Michael Gove, Liz Truss, Nick Gibb and others have of recent years been pursuing an agenda of 'schoolifying' early education. In an attempt to gain hegemony in a field traditionally dominated by broadly progressive and child-centred thinking, they have attempted to shape the context of the debate on early education with criticism of preschools children's rowdiness and aimlessness in play, in contrast with a preferred model of ever-increasing discipline and 'school readiness'. Of two to four year olds in nurseries Truss said, there are "too many chaotic settings, where children are running around. There's no sense of

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<sup>1</sup> The slightly more favourable balance of class forces in social democratic economies like Finland's or post-2008 Iceland allowed significant concessions to be won by unions on socialising aspects of early schooling.

purpose... We want children to learn to listen to a teacher, learn to respect an instruction, so that they are ready for school.” (Truss, in Chapman and Chorley, 2013) Truss' discourse of developing 'school-readiness' rather strongly suggests a 'hidden curriculum' of compliance and processes of 'breaking-in' feral toddlers for the work of self-production. There has been a strong sense on the part of campaigners (Edgington et al, 2011) and parents (Laing, 2011) that the experience of early childhood is diminished, or even 'stolen' (House and Boxley, 2014) by this obsession with 'school readiness'. Marxists should not be surprised by the desire of the state to embrace an earlier and earlier start to the production of variable capital. Whilst we do not, in general, find any hard and fast lines between childhood and adulthood, Marxists know that any age-phase can be the terrain for a struggle against the 'distortion' (Marx, 1985, p.188) and corruption of human life-activity wrought by capital.

An important feature of the attempt to reshape early education and enclose its productive capacity for the state is the establishment of an academic benchmark early in the child's life. This is the moment of initial investment, represented by the attainment level against which added value in labour capacity is to be measured. So, in Britain, we are faced with the re-introduction in 2016 of the baseline test for children on school entry. This reinserts the start point for the calculation of school-based added value abolished in 2002<sup>2</sup>, and brings a year earlier the assessment calculation currently represented by the end-of-key-stage Early Years Foundation Stage Profile at the age of five. The important difference is that the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, by virtue of its breadth and complexity, was not perceived to be up to the task of acting a 'baseline' for comparative purposes of the value of learners' attainment.

The position of the UK Department for Education is that “As part of the changes we are making to improve the way we hold primary schools to account, we are introducing an assessment at the start of reception year.” (DfE, 2015)

“The purpose of the reception baseline is to support the accountability framework and help assess school effectiveness by providing a score for each child at the start of reception which reflects their attainment against a pre-determined content domain and

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<sup>2</sup> A statutory baseline assessment scheme was introduced for four year olds from September 1998, though many authorities had run their own baseline assessments for several years before that. Like its recent reincarnation, the baselines which operated from 1998-2002 were based on the idea of a market in accredited test schemas rather than a single uniform national programme (Schagen, et al, 1999).

which will be used as the basis for an accountability measure of the relative progress of a cohort of children through primary school.” (STA, 2014, p.1)

No claim is made of any benefit to the child. The imperative is accountability and its concomitant, accountancy: capital in, measurably increased exchange value out, the increasing value of the stock to be monitored regularly and checked off against a pre-determined ‘content domain’.

In order for the four year old tests to provide the quantitative data necessary of economic indicators, the regime must be strict, linear, and unquestionable, leaving no space for judgment or uncertainty in the case of children’s achievement: the Standards and Testing Agency of the UK State, “[e]ach assessment item must require a single, objective, binary decision to be made by the scorer.” (STA 2014, p.2) The absurdity of such clumsiness amidst the fluid and seemingly contradictory world of early childhood developmental ebbs and flows, the reader may wonder at. However, on the surface, the logic is impeccable – any room for ambiguity would deprive the calculation of 'added (exchange) value' of its market credibility. The investor-state requires accounts of 'progress' which the hard and fast baseline figures enable. In practice, the facade of unambiguous data in a marketised system comes at a high cost. In addition, for testing and accountability purposes, the reductive focus on core skills and knowledge lends these calculations a credibility which would be harder to maintain were attempts to quantify the essential creative, personal or social components of the early years curriculum to be included. Hence, “[t]he clear majority of the content domain must be clearly linked to the learning and development requirements of the communication and language, literacy and mathematics areas of learning from the EYFS” (Standards and Testing Agency, 2014, p.1) This criterion betrays a reductive approach to the rich and integrated understandings of early childhood, but speaks volumes about the extent to which the requirements of capital demand endless quantification of the unquantifiable in education. Marcuse identified this process as “[t]he progressive mathematization of knowledge and experience, starting with the natural sciences and developing to include many aspects of life – it’s universal quantification” (Marcuse, 1988, p.204), focusing with increasing relentlessness upon the ‘training’ demands of the market for exchangeable skills, even at the age of four.

### **The neoliberal testing model**

A State Capitalist system of education, with its monolithic control imperatives is able to rule a calibration of children's attainment within schooling along a single measure from single state-implemented tests at point *a* to single state-implemented tests as point *b*. The same roughly

applies to more heavily regulated social democratic systems. For the neoliberal state, the situation is more complicated. Because of the requirements of investors in such a state to open up markets *within* education systems themselves, governments are impelled to tender for test designs and, as in the case of the English baseline test, allow the testing companies to fight it out in a far more lightly regulated market.

In this regard, the English Baseline test is a model for the neoliberal Conservative government of David Cameron of how to go about developing assessment policy. When tenders were put out for the test, six providers were approved for trial in the market. Schools bought their testing package, just like any other commercial product, in basic, or deluxe 'inspection-ready' forms (CEM, 2015). Only those which won more than 10% market share were then to receive final approval by the Department for Education. Three baseline assessments achieved this benchmark and were duly awarded the contract. Researchers will continue to investigate the basis upon which schools purchased, but anecdotal reports suggest that some bought those assessment packages which they felt would deliver the lowest scores, in order best to demonstrate the 'progress' that the school had achieved in terms of 'added value', whilst others selected those tests which they felt were the most pedagogically appropriate. In an open market, such diverse consumer intentions are equally valid, but the consequences of exercising this consumer choice necessarily call into question the parity of assessment types or their outcomes. Thus when the 2023 data is compared with that from 2016 baselines, children taking identical tests at the age of eleven will have their scores compared with data which may have been drawn from a twenty minute on-screen test (CEM), from two weeks of observations (Early Excellence) or from a set of practical tasks (NFER). Marxists such as Vygotsky, Leontiev and Luria were at the forefront of establishing that the relationship between understanding and activity are complex and intricate: whilst we have no research on the proposed baselines as yet, it would not be unreasonable to expect that these very different forms of 'assessment' might yield results which would reveal divergent aspects of children's complex, shifting, knowledge-in-practice.

Even on its own logic of accounting for 'pupil progress' by way of monitoring the returns on the initial investment, the neoliberal state's insistence upon an internal market in testing results in an incoherence of approach which compounds the statistical invalidity demonstrated by Wrigley. It should come as no surprise then to understand that a contradiction lies at the heart of the assessment process which runs through schooling, a contradiction which mirrors that in broader social relations.

### **The contradictions of the neoliberal testing regime**

On one hand, the introduction of the baseline test into English schools is simply another sell-off, the privatization of an aspect of school assessment which had previously been managed in a (somewhat) more comprehensive, broader, more progressive and holistic manner by State schools themselves under the auspices of the Early Years Foundation Stage early learning goals. The most popular assessment package, purchased by 11,000 UK schools (Ward, 2015) draws upon the best practice in existing state provision, enables it to be truncated and reduced to a set of binary scores, rebrands it and sells it back to practitioners, and in doing so successfully diverts formerly public funds to the 'senior team' of Early Excellence. This allows the accumulation of capital by enclosing the processes once freely practiced, releasing them into the hands of edubusiness.

On the other hand, the inconsistencies in the fundamental features of the commercial assessment packages mean that this represents a deregulation in the monitoring of investments, opening the door to speculation on the returns over the longer term. This might even allow for the 'rigging' or manipulation of rates of progress, or inflation of margins for the short term gain of individual schools or teachers. The opening up of the assessment market in schools, coupled with capital's continuing requirement for proxies for labour-capacity at the end of schooling has the potential to render the whole educational field a terrain of ongoing competition and speculative hedging, as primary schools fall over themselves in an effort to 'mathematically' evidence the value added to their investments.

Whilst the focus of the neoliberal State remains on accountability for its investment in young people's labour capacity, the contradictions and confusions generated by assessment markets within education can only result in an ongoing process of design and redesign of ever more 'accurate' testing products for sale to hard-pressed schools, and concomitant pressure on education workers to maximize returns. This might seem a gloomy picture, but this article has only highlighted one side of the story. The other side – and one for another article – is the global resistance to the 'GERM' of privatized testing, from teacher boycotts, through strikes, to mass withdrawals of children. As always, in the contradictions of capital, hope can be found.



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