

The Mismeasurement of Learning

**How tests are damaging children
and primary education**

Reclaiming Schools

The Evidence and the Arguments



In 2016 47% of pupils failed to reach the 'expected standard' in the KS2 tests (Reading, Writing, Mathematics). In effect, due to poorly constructed and impossibly difficult tests, nearly half our 11-year-olds left their primary school carrying a 'failure' notice.

Twice as many August-born children (the youngest in the year) failed the phonics check as September-born (the oldest). The same occurred with KS1 SATs. In other words, many thousands of children were 'failed' because they were not old enough.

Teachers had worked hard to narrow the attainment gap between pupils on free school meals and other pupils in the years up to 2015. The KS1 attainment gap doubled in 2016.

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
When taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.
Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat.
And we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures.

Introduction



The system of assessment imposed on English primary schools is a failure. In 2016, it has produced a situation in which nearly half of all eleven year olds were judged not ready for secondary school. But this counter-intuitive outcome is not its only problem. It has become a notorious example of teaching to the test: it narrows the curriculum; it prioritises the production of test scores above the provision of support for children's learning. In some cases, it damages children's sense of well-being. The burdens it imposes on teachers are unjustifiably heavy. The aspirations of teachers and the capacities of pupils are frustrated by a system that is not fit for purpose.

It is essential that the troubles of primary education are exposed and debated. That is why the National Union of Teachers is pleased to publish this collection of articles. *The Mismeasurement of Learning* explains how primary education got into its present state; it draws from the experiences of teachers and researchers to make a detailed analysis of the way that assessment works; it opens the door to thinking about alternatives.

In 2016, the concerns of teachers, and parents, have reached new heights. In an NUT survey, more than 90% of primary teachers identified fundamental problems with the assessment system. Parents, likewise, made a forceful statement, by withdrawing their children from school in the week before SATs. Working with many other organisations, the NUT intends to make the need to transform the whole system of primary assessment an issue that policy-makers cannot ignore. We hope that *The Mismeasurement of Learning* provokes the discussions and the arguments that are an essential part of this campaign.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kevin Courtney". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Kevin Courtney
General Secretary,
National Union of Teachers

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1. What this publication sets out to do: activists and academics together

Even though some strident voices would have us believe otherwise, there is a place in the busy lives of teachers for theory. There is also a case for looking carefully at evidence. It seems odd that such an obvious point even needs to be re-stated. But teachers, teacher educators and, of course, students and parents, have been faced with a barrage of policy that has been driven by dogma, ideology and good old-fashioned prejudice for over twenty years. This pamphlet, along with its predecessor, *Reclaiming Schools*, attempts to recover some of that lost ground.

Of those voices which have attempted to drown out knowledge, expertise and experience, none has been more important and influential than that of Michael Gove. He claimed in 2011, with absolutely no evidence whatsoever, that student-teachers found university-based teacher education ‘too theoretical’. He dubbed academics who opposed his curriculum plans as ‘the Blob’. This distrust of knowledge later informed his Brexit campaign, when he confidently declared that ‘Britain has had enough of experts’.

This publication gives space to experts. Its aim is to equip teachers with some arguments and research that will help them in their daily arguments with school managers – or even colleagues – who seem to believe that the regime of testing and data collection is inevitable or, worse still, the best way to ‘raise standards’. By

understanding pedagogy and challenging poorly informed opinion, teachers can go about the business of educating the whole child more confidently.

Roger Murphy provides the historical context for the current situation, tracing the way in which testing became conflated with false notions of accountability. This became the basis for a punitive surveillance system which is undermining education. Richard Pring takes up the point by looking at the way in which the managerialist language of target-setting and delivery, adopted from the business world, has distorted teaching and learning. Alpesh Maisuria comments on the inappropriate transfer of methods from the natural sciences into education. He asks the basic question about what the real purpose of our obsession with data collection could be, thereby raising the ultimate, but often ignored idea of what education is for!

Pam Jarvis shows how nursery and kindergarten approaches to young children are being eclipsed and the early years of education are being ‘schoolified’ under pressure from early testing. Impossible targets are resulting in a ‘tsunami of mental health problems’. Guy Roberts-Holmes and Alice Bradbury draw on interviews with nursery and reception class teachers to demonstrate the ‘datafication’ of the early years. They show how inappropriate pressure from Ofsted is wiping out play, and how children are becoming

‘miniature centres of calculation’. Michael Bassey offers a glimpse of the past in the form of case study observations of teachers carried out in the 1970s. He shows real and inspiring alternatives to current methods, to promote the all-round development of every child.

Margaret Clark brings an expert’s eye to the myths about phonics. She points to the lack of evidence behind the Government’s insistence on synthetic phonics as opposed to a judicious combination of methods for teaching reading, and to the deep flaws in the ‘phonics check’.

A focus group discussion with several Teesside primary teachers shows the devastating impact of the new KS2 tests on children in one of England’s poorest areas. This is demoralising pupils and narrowing the curriculum into test preparation. The KS2 reading test is analysed to show how far removed the reading is from these children’s life experience. Gawain Little demonstrates that there are similar problems with Maths: method is prized above conceptual understanding. The question of curriculum narrowing is pursued by Pat Thomson, who points to the virtual disappearance of arts education in many schools, whilst celebrating those schools which still prioritise it. One of the consequences is that children miss out on vital cultural and creative experiences unless their parents can provide it.

David Egan's article on Wales shows that there are other, more productive approaches to curriculum and assessment, beyond the current horizons of English policy-makers. Patrick Yarker introduces the notion of 'learning without limits', which challenges prevailing notions of fixed ability and potential in children. Terry Wrigley looks at the way the testing treadmill dominates our children's lives, from the early years to the end of secondary school. His article points to real alternatives for curriculum and assessment. John Coe debunks some prevailing myths about the necessity and benefits of standardized tests, showing how more productive and reliable feedback can be provided by well-managed and sensitive teacher assessment. He celebrates the parents' actions on 3rd May 2016 as the opening of a new chapter – a demonstration that parents are no longer willing to accept a system which is damaging their children. Finally, Ken Jones reports on a survey of 6000 teachers, which vividly demonstrates their sense that learning has been diminished, and teachers' work degraded, by the current system.

This collection of short articles provides a sharp critique of the current test regime, demonstrating that it is destructive of education and destructive of children. The authors celebrate the deep professionalism of teachers who are finding ways to resist, and sustain a faith in the collective

power of teachers and parents to remove an oppressive system of measurement.

Teachers are not opposed to assessment. We all need to know how children are progressing and, from time to time, testing their knowledge and understanding is the right thing to do. The contributors to the pamphlet, however, all argue that the emphasis on standardised, high-stakes testing is seriously disproportionate. We argue that it has had an adverse effect on the ability of teachers to make autonomous decisions that genuinely enhance learning. What is worse is the time-consuming drudgery that testing and data-collection can generate – time that could be better spent either preparing better lessons or resources or even enjoying the benefits of rest and relaxation, helping teachers to save their energies for the classroom itself.

The academic contributors to this publication are proud to be associated with the National Union of Teachers. It is by bringing together informed opinion with a campaigning organisation that we can continue to show the best way forward for our young people.

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Further readings and references:

Berry, J (2016) *Teachers undefeated: How global education reform has failed to crush the spirit of educators* (Trentham Books)

Hutchings, M (2015) *Exam factories? The impact of accountability measures on children and young people*. www.teachers.org.uk/files/exam-factories.pdf

The www.reclaimingschools.org blog for up-to-date analysis of curriculum and assessment, along with many other campaigning issues. An index of posts concerned with primary testing can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/jd54cv7>

2. How testing took centre stage

Regular national testing of all state school pupils, which has become such a controversial matter in recent years, was not in evidence until the late 1980s. How did it come into being? Two key factors certainly contributed. There was a heightened demand for accountability in all public services, and that was combined with a political move to apply the principles of marketization to school education.

In the 1970s and 1980s several Local Education Authorities introduced a requirement for their schools to take some standardised tests – usually ‘off the shelf’ commercially produced tests of things like ‘cognitive ability’ and ‘general aptitude’. Finally in 1987 the Conservative Party chose to make the introduction of so called ‘benchmark tests’ a central part of its manifesto pledge.

These were of course the ‘Thatcher years’ and Margaret Thatcher undoubtedly played a key role in establishing national standardised tests as part of the educational landscape. The pitch to the electorate was greater accountability of schools through simple and accessible data, and an opening up of an educational market with the promise of more choice for parents and better value for money for taxpayers. The ‘Great Education Reform Act’ of 1988 marked the biggest change for schools since the 1944 Butler Act. This involved a National Curriculum; new opportunities for schools to opt out of Local

Education Authority control involving more ‘freedom’ to develop their own significant features; and the imposition of national testing of all pupils at 7, 11, 14 and 16. It was a simple formula blending the carrot of much more professional freedom for head teachers and schools with the stick of a tightly prescribed curriculum aligned with regular testing for all pupils, to see what progress they were making against centrally prescribed milestones.

During the ensuing implementation process several battles were fought over ‘national benchmark testing’. This was a particular shock for primary schools, which since the demise of the Eleven Plus exam had been largely spared the burden of preparing pupils for external tests. Kenneth Baker, who was the Secretary of State for Education at this time, set up a Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT) giving it just three months to develop a practical approach to introducing the national assessments. This group, chaired by Professor Paul Black, was acutely aware of the dangers of crude national tests “which could be remote from teachers, the curriculum, and regular classroom teaching” (Murphy, 1988). TGAT came up with some imaginative proposals including Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs), involving teacher assessments of standard classroom learning tasks (rather than tests). Ironically ‘SATs’ has been retained as a shorthand for the national testing approach that

emerged in opposition to the TGAT recommendations.

Where did it all go wrong? A leaked letter from Margaret Thatcher to Kenneth Baker, a few weeks after he and many others had warmly welcomed the TGAT proposals, was a significant factor. A row between Thatcher and Baker was reported widely in newspaper front page stories in which Thatcher insisted that the TGAT proposals were “too complicated, too costly, and too far removed from the traditional externally devised written tests that she was hoping for” (Murphy, 1988). The rest as they say is history. National Testing in ‘core subjects’ started in 1990 with tests for all 7 year olds and has remained with us with some modifications for the last 27 years.

Some may still believe that national testing in the years from 1990-2016 has been a good thing. However the majority of people working in education have become increasingly concerned about the harsh backwash effects of a test-driven accountability system, which has disrupted the broader aims of the National Curriculum. The system has also proved unwieldy at a practical level (with the US Educational Testing Service dramatically losing its contract for delivering the tests after computer problems in 2008). Moreover the issue of demonstrating comparable assessment results data over time has caused major problems for Secretaries of

State and government quangos over the years. In the last year the Gove reforms have completely realigned the standard of the tests.

So, in a nutshell, the Thatcher government of 1987 gave us national testing and no later government has been minded to abolish it. Few people imagined, however, that national testing or GCSE results would provide the foundation for a punitive and all-embracing surveillance system, involving the publication of results, calculations of 'value added', 'floor targets', Ofsted judgements, naming and shaming, performance reviews and performance pay for teachers, and forced academies.

Many of us would argue that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with occasional classroom-based tests or even, for certain purposes, national testing programmes. However, many would also agree that such tests have limited value, can give a misleading and partial view of educational progress, and, if the scores are given too much value and importance, they can lead to dangerously distorted teaching and learning and seriously poor judgements about pupils, teachers, schools, and localities/local authorities/types of school.

This is how testing took centre stage – surely it is time now to look for an exit.

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Further readings and references:

Murphy, R (1988) *Great Education Reform Bill proposals for testing – a critique* (Local Government Studies, 14 (1), 39-45)



3. Campbell's Law... or how the language of numbers does a disservice to our children

October 2016 marks the 40th anniversary of Prime Minister Callaghan's Ruskin College speech – the first occasion when a Prime Minister had spoken about standards and curriculum within our schools. Prior to that, the Minister of Education, David Eccles, had bemoaned that the curriculum was a 'secret garden' and that the Minister, therefore, was unable to monitor the quality of the educational system and of individual schools within it. The Minister had neither the knowledge of areas of weakness, nor the powers to do anything even if he did have that knowledge. How could the system as a whole and the performance of schools be made more accountable?

The initial answer involved sample assessments. Guidance was taken from the National Assessment of Educational Performance (NAEP) based in Denver Colorado, and the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) was established to provide a comprehensive account of the quality of education in six broad areas of the curriculum, including personal and social development. By adopting a model of light sampling, stratified and randomised, knowledge of standards and of their change over time could be ascertained, without interference in the schools. The assessments of standards could not themselves become the shaper of the curriculum.

That, however, could not satisfy

those in government who were increasingly adopting a much more managerial approach to the control of public services which emerged in the 1980s – including, for example, through the creation of a National Curriculum with its key stage testing. All this was explained in a series of Government White Papers from HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office, starting with *Modern Public Services in Britain: Investing in Reform* (1988).

Such a managerial approach introduced a new language, one of 'targets' and their 'delivery', of 'performance indicators' and their 'audits'. The aim was clarified by the Labour 2008 Government's White Paper, *21st Century Schools: your child, your schools, our future: building a 21st century schools system*. As the Children's Minister declared:

'It is fundamentally a deep cultural change. It is about changing boundaries of professional behaviour and thinking in a completely different way.' (DCSF, 2008)

So, what are the clues to the 'deep cultural change' which create new 'boundaries of professional behaviour'?

This 'deep cultural change', as outlined, said nothing about education, but the language gave the clue. 'Performance' and 'performing' were mentioned 121 times, 'outcomes' 55 times, 'delivery' 57 times. Libraries get no mention in 21st century

schools, and books only one – namely, in the section on Information Technology. The following statement sums it up perfectly:

'It is only the workforce who can deliver our [i.e. the Government's] ambition of improved outcomes.'

Such a language of public management requires targets which are sufficiently precise as to be measurable. Therefore, there has arisen the range of outcomes to which teachers should teach and on which they and their schools will be assessed and judged.

But, as 'Campbell's Law' stipulates

'the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it was intended to monitor.'

The American social scientist and policy analyst Donald Campbell warned us, in a research paper of 1976, of the inevitable problems associated with undue weight and emphasis on a single indicator for monitoring complex social phenomena. In effect he warned us about the high-stakes testing programmes which now dominate our educational system in general and primary schools in particular. It is re-iterated by what economists refer to as Goodhart's Law, namely

'When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to become a good measure.'

Such 'corruption' lies in 'teaching to the test', 'being selective of pupils who are likely to do well in the tests', 'concentrating on subjects in which pupils are to be tested'. Warwick Mansell, in his book *Education By numbers: The Tyranny of Testing* gives an account of the 'games teachers play' and how the results of the test scores can affect parental choice, head teachers' pay, teacher promotion, and indeed closure or forced academisation.

Therefore, in opposing the retrograde influence on primary school practice of widespread testing, it is necessary to be aware of this wider background to the management of public services with its own distinctive language drawn from the business world, and thereby to question its relevance to what it means to teach and to educate.

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Further readings and references:

Mansell, W (2007) *Education by Numbers: the tyranny of testing.* (Routledge).



4. Testing times and the thirst for data: for what?

The emphasis on tests has made teachers and pupils depressed, harm themselves, and even turn suicidal. High-stakes testing and an oppressive data-driven accountability system de-humanise what should be an experience of enrichment, creativity and fun. Schooling is being reconfigured from being a public service to a business, and business demands data through testing.

Bad Science

'Almost half of pupils miss new Sats standard' ran the headline on the BBC July 2016. But is it the children and teachers that are the problem or the SATs and other tests?

The philosophy behind testing in schools is a false application of approaches used in some of the natural sciences. In the natural world, through experimentation, we can observe and uncover the fixed laws of nature. This has allowed scientists to predict with a high level of accuracy the outcome and regularity of what happens in the natural world, for example the combination of two hydrogen atoms with an oxygen atom will always result in water being created. This level of certainty and predictability does not occur in open systems such as weather and climate, nor is it appropriate when describing and explaining children's learning in schools.

A positivistic logic has been misappropriated and thus we mistakenly expect standard and predictable responses in tests

from humans. The idea is that we provide a standardised education for all and expect comparable outcomes.

The problem is that the social world is highly unpredictable. In the context of schooling, tests do not account for the multiplicity of factors that affect engagement and subsequent performance. Tests only give a surface metric, rather than deeper understanding of what has been learnt, why learning has taken place and how. In short, we have a misplaced trust in the accuracy of data from standardised tests.

Standardised tests, high-stakes examinations

The requirement for all students to take the same test and perform against the same benchmarks disregards each pupil's individuality and their particular ways of coming to and working with knowledge. Teachers, supposedly the experts, are equally disempowered and their autonomy is compromised.

The school's management is also negatively affected by the obsession with capturing data by tests. Rather than showing effective leadership and vision by taking creative and considered risks, managers are expected to bean-count, account, measure everything and be as conservative and prudent as possible. The expectation is that they set further targets to be more conservative and prudent than the last time to get more for less

the next time. The insatiable demand for data through testing reduces the schooling experience to a coercive performance that is didactically-led and reduced to 'benchmark knows best'.

Learning through dialogue and discussion becomes difficult in the age of performativity. Child centred pedagogy is incompatible with the need for comparable data. Perhaps the final death knell was Gove's notching up of the high stakes testing regime. Failing to reach a benchmark now means that the child is stigmatised, the teacher penalised, and the school sentenced to forced Academisation.

Imported from the USA, high stakes examinations mean that children in England, who are already among the most frequently tested in Europe, have the added pressure of trying to avoid the label 'failure'. This occurs as early as age 5 (the phonics check) and, if it had not been withdrawn following widespread opposition, was due to occur as early as 4 years old through Baseline testing. Early testing plants seeds of alienation from learning at the most important time in a child's life, when learning through doing things differently should ignite curiosity, creativity and exploration.

The classed-room

Proponents claim that standardisation negates inequality because all pupils have the same experience and

expectations of them. This too constitutes bad science because it disregards the individuality of all children and their position in an unequal society. The test data is supposed to capture learning but the tests cannot account for the crucial impact of the pupils' access to resources of various kinds (for example toys/books, parental nurturing, activities and experiences, private tuition, medicine, healthy diet). Resources can also be cultural; tests are imbued with classed cultural norms that expect pupils to know particular ways of English middle class 'being' (See for example the 2016 KS2 Reading test relating to a garden party). The working class, especially immigrants, are at a systemic disadvantage and tests track working class pupils on a pathway labelled 'failing', despite the fact that many have travelled a long physical and intellectual journey.

Underperforming in tests means that life chances are restricted and schooling reproduces inequalities rather than corrects them. Schooling in this sense becomes a function of the neoliberal state to filter workers for a particular position and level in the economy. Test results teach children to 'know their place', as the Victorians would have said.

Gaming and markets

As part of the neoliberalisation of schooling, a *markets rule* rationality has entrenched the way that schools are governed. Since testing data is used to

stratify schools as 'good' and 'bad', 'gaming' has penetrated school governance. Teachers and 'school leaders' are forced to choose between what will reap the best advantages in league tables. Teachers and 'school leaders' are forced to choose between offering a broad and balanced curriculum involving creative and critical learning, and squeezing the curriculum to focus on a narrow band of learning that will gain the highest scores.

Some creative accounting, admitting fewer working class pupils, immigrants and an increase in managed exclusions might also take place, which have become more evident since the introduction of academies. It seems no coincidence that academies, with their business-leaning competitive approach to governance, exclude five times as many pupils, 70% of them registered with additional needs. Relentless testing is linked to market positioning rather than the value of learning, or a learning resource useful for children.

We need to fight for less testing, especially high stakes exams, which should be abolished altogether for younger children. The ultimate struggle is to maintain the reality of a public school that serves the purpose of the common good and correcting inequality. These are testing times.

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Further readings and references:

Au, W (2009) *Unequal by design: High-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality* (Routledge)

Cole-Malott, D-M and Malott, C (2016) *Testing and social studies in capitalist schooling* (Monthly Review)

<http://tinyurl.com/js2my32>

5. Developmentally informed teaching: challenging premature targets in early learning

Compulsory mass state schooling was enshrined in legislation in 1880 to meet the requirements of the industrial revolution. The starting age of five was arbitrarily fixed by the government of the time, even though many experts in education and psychology then and since argued that the 'nursery' or 'kindergarten' stage should extend to the age of seven. Young children learn most effectively through a range of discovery and independent play-based activities in which they interact with others, learning about ways in which they can manipulate the physical world, share and collaborate. This prepares them cognitively, socially and emotionally for more formal education in the later stages of development.

In the early twentieth century, Maria Montessori created a developmental model that proposed 'planes' of development in which children's abilities to learn and theorise become progressively more sophisticated, while Jean Piaget specified four distinct stages, involving gradual development towards more abstract thought. Contemporary cognitive psychologist Professor Alison Gopnik presents copious empirical data to support her view that formal instruction in early childhood *'leads children to narrow in, and to consider just the specific information a teacher provides. Without a teacher present children look for a much wider range of information and consider a*

greater range of options'. Stage-based theories of human cognition have also received support through neuropsychology.

Despite a century of empirical and theoretical advances however, the state education system has never become sufficiently informed about the human developmental process. Additionally, the school starting age has effectively become earlier since children are now expected to enter school at the *beginning* of the school year when they become 5, meaning that inevitably some are only just turned 4. Children are also immediately subject to statutory assessment, which means that formal teaching, particularly in literacy and numeracy, often begins during the pre-school period. The Early Years Foundation Stage (from birth to five) has 17 goals against which a summative assessment must be made at five; while the phonics check creates severe downward pressure.

The unremitting schedule of tests puts children and teachers under considerable stress, since data from these tests forms the basis for evaluation of schools and potentially for them to be forcibly turned into academies.

So how has this happened? Since the early 1990s, the Secretary of State for Education has exerted far-reaching powers and successive postholders, regardless of political orientation, have refused to engage in productive discussion

with teachers or child development experts. The ongoing strategy of the Department for Education has been a simplistic insistence that the earlier children enter education and the faster they are expected to learn, the better the outcome will be.

In effect, education is viewed as a 'data dump', based on an analogy which sees teachers as memory sticks and children as computers; there is no attempt to understand the psychology and biology of human development and learning. Indeed, former journalist Michael Gove (2010- 2014) announced his entrenched opinion: that the nation 'had had enough of experts'. This philosophy underpinned his four years at the helm of English education. For example, he commented in 2013 that those who opposed his 'reforms' were simply making excuses for 'not teaching poor children to add up'. His successor, corporate lawyer Nicky Morgan, respected professional knowledge so little that she proposed to scrap Qualified Teacher Status altogether.

So what has the effect of such mismanagement been upon the process of education and upon the children themselves? England's ongoing education policy has created a situation between teachers and pupils which can most accurately be described as one of mutually assured destruction; impossible targets are set with teachers' and

head teachers' future employment prospects and salary depending upon pupils' performance against these. Teachers are therefore put into a position where they feel compelled to drive children through a 'too much, too soon' curriculum, inevitably based largely in highly pressurised rote learning, or quit the profession. Not surprisingly, many take the latter option in order to protect their own mental health and integrity.

Children, however, cannot escape. The result is a tsunami of mental health problems: a doubling of juvenile depression between the 1980s and 2000s, and an explosion of self-harmers, an increasing number of whom have to be hospitalised. Self-harming is a reaction to being placed under impossible mental pressure, as physical injury releases endorphins that counteract the stress response. A growing number of young people develop eating disorders and suicidal thoughts, with a doubling of numbers presenting to Accident and Emergency departments with psychiatric problems. Two successive UNICEF reports on children's well-being in 2007 and 2013 indicated that English children have a very low sense of well-being.

In conclusion, the 'too much, too soon' approach and exposure to overwhelming competition puts children at severe risk of psychological harm. The entire system must be radically

reconsidered, including nursery education to age 7, firmly based upon independent and collaborative discovery, to provide a strong foundation for later, more formal modes of learning and for mental health within a society that functions for the good of all.

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Further readings and references:

For a fully referenced version of this article, please see Reclaiming Schools, Oct 2016
<http://tinyurl.com/z7ycrl5>

Gray, P (2013) *Free to learn* (Basic Books)

Jarvis, P, Newman, S and Swiniarski, L (2014) *On 'becoming social': the importance of collaborative free play in childhood* (International Journal of Play)
<http://tinyurl.com/h87pfjx>

Robinson, K (2011) *School kills creativity*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1yl0MFYzXc>

6. 'Datafication' in the early years

The nursery and reception teachers we interviewed explained how they were increasingly subjected to the demands of data production. They were aware of the pitfalls, cynical about the purposes of data, and yet they found their working lives constrained by exhaustive demands for the production and analysis of data.

"The collection and analysing of data is just too overwhelming. It makes you constantly think of how to improve it and what to do with this group and how to plug this hole and that one." (Reception teacher, primary school).

"We have constant meetings looking at the data. It has become very clinical and children have just become numbers..." (Reception teacher)

Interviews with teachers show the exaggerated emphasis placed on literacy and numeracy, rather than the broader foundations that children need. The constant need to show progress involved the production of ever more complex grids, charts, graphs and tables with acronyms related to a colour-coded, age-based system of points the children can attain.

Teachers contrast high stakes 'compliance' data with the more useful data in the form of narrative and formative assessments based on teachers' observations.

'The school's outstanding status must be maintained'

The interviews showed how heads came under pressure, and how this can distort good practice.

"I should be in classrooms supporting colleagues but I spend far too much time looking at assessment data and it is for proving to OFSTED that we are great. But actually I would be far more effective if I were in class and the children would benefit more." (Primary school deputy).

The consequences of not producing the 'right' data for Ofsted are severe, so that the data driven 'regimes of truth' such as 'tracking progress', 'reducing the gap' and 'value added' took precedence over her time.

Even enlightened forms of assessment are subverted and distorted by this environment. The school's own 'in-house' holistic baseline, which measures children's progress against Development Matters in the Autumn term, is sent to the Local Authority who data mine it and predict where the children could be for their summative Good Levels of Development (GLD) at the end of Reception.

Data production, exchange, mining and prediction had become central within the relationship between the LA and the school. Data packs were used to compare and rank, locally and nationally, with the intention of 'naming and shaming'.

"We 'name and shame' by showing all the school names. Some schools didn't have any children at 'working above the expected level' so you say 'well your statistical neighbour has this % so how come you haven't?'" (Local Authority advisor).

This is driving formal learning earlier and earlier, with a narrowing of learning to literacy and numeracy.

The impact on teachers, teaching and children

Two responses were noticed among headteachers. Thus whilst one head told her early years staff to be more formal in their teaching, another tried 'to protect' the holistic early years pedagogy. In this latter school, the nursery teacher confidently stated that he 'did the phonics, but then tucked it away to get on with the real business of being with the children'. However, other early years teachers felt obliged to cynically comply.

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

Ofsted, in its role in the policy transmission process, involved criticising the nursery school because there was 'not enough teaching to emphasise the sounds that letters make and to extend children's understanding of number and mathematical language' in the early years (a direct quotation from the school's inspection report). The inspector's report, which included observations of three year old children who had been in school *for just two weeks*, mentioned 'phonics' and 'teaching letter sounds' seven times. This was given as the reason for grading the school 'good' (the most common grade) rather than 'outstanding', which, for private providers, can have serious financial consequences.

One primary school Reception teacher wanted the children to play with maths construction equipment but the Head teacher wanted more 'formal maths input because sacrifices had to be made to ensure that the school's outstanding status be maintained.' Here the wealth of research demonstrating the value of play based approaches to learning was 'sacrificed' at the altar of 'outstanding' grading. In another Reception class, following pressure from the head, the main activity during both mornings and afternoons was teaching maths and phonics in both whole class and ability groups.

Failure and children's identities

Williamson (2014, p12) argues that databases reinvent teachers and children 'into data that can be measured, compared, assessed and acted upon' and suggests that children become reconfigured as 'miniature centres of calculation'. There is a sense of young children being reduced to the school's statistical 'raw materials' that are mined and exploited for their maximum productivity gains.

Even very young children are being labeled as 'failing', and indeed headteachers are required to notify parents whether their child has passed or failed the Year 1 phonics test. One Reception teacher mentioned that some of the lower attainers were labelled Special Educational Needs (SEN) so as not to harm the teacher's performance data (Roberts-Holmes, 2015).

The detrimental effects upon children's well-being were demonstrated by one teacher's comments:

"I am now pushing information into three-year-olds rather than developing meaningful relationships. Even in the nursery I now feel that pressure. If a child doesn't recognize a number or a letter I go 'agggghh' and hold my breath. I have to remind myself the child is three and not yet ready for it." (Reception teacher, primary school).

Teachers are struggling to make sense of their deeply held child-centred values espoused by the EYFS principles, curriculum and pedagogies and at the same time perform to the datafication requirements of the school readiness assessment regime.

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7. An old and professional alternative to the present system

Today's political discussions of education assume that imposing a fact-heavy national curriculum and rigorous testing will raise the standard of education. Those of us who were active in primary schools before the 1988 Education Act should speak out and demonstrate that there were excellent teachers guided by their professionalism long before the politicians made their forays.

As a young tutor at Trent Polytechnic, Nottingham, in what we then called 'teacher education' (not 'training'), coupled with a research brief, I set out to encapsulate good practice in local primary schools. The resulting report *Nine Hundred Primary School Teachers* (1978) described the results of a massive study of classrooms carried out with a team of 30 research assistants. Lady Plowden, in her Foreword, wrote:

'This most comprehensive report on the practices of primary education in Nottinghamshire gives a great deal of information about the day by day work of a large number of teachers. ... There does not seem to be any danger of the schools in Nottinghamshire moving into the so-called 'progressive methods' in which 'children do as they please'. ... I believe that a national survey would similarly show that throughout the country teachers are in general responsibly structuring children's experience in the classroom.'

I also made several detailed case studies of different classroom routines, three of them republished in *Case Study Research in Educational Settings* (1999). These case studies illustrate:

'that before the Education Reform Act of 1988 and the subsequent and continuing interference of the state in classrooms, there were dedicated and competent teachers fully committed to the needs of the children in their care who were quite able to work effectively without official monitoring and state harassment.'

Extracts from one study illustrate why I was, and still am, polemical about the 'state harassment' of primary schools. The class teacher, Mrs W, aged 29, had been teaching for 8 years. There were 30 children aged 5 to 6 in her class. She worked to 'the integrated day'. It was Monday 3rd February 1975.

By 9.15 the children had arrived in class, taken coats off, some chatted briefly with Mrs W, others looked at the plants which had grown from seeds sown last week, all answered to the register, paid their dinner money and sat quietly on the carpet. Mrs W sat on her rocking chair by the carpet, the children turned towards her and for ten minutes they discussed what had come from the seeds.

Gerbil and budgie food had produced long green shoots like thick grass, but the tomato, apple and orange pips had

produced nothing. A potato kept in the dark was examined; beans in jam jars had made some shoots and two onions had produced long roots and the water smelt strongly.

A couple of minutes were spent revising work on the calendar and then, at 9.29, Mrs W stood and within three minutes had organised the children's work for the morning. Four children would work on *Our Book of Faces*; another four would start making shapes with clay; the 'big children' had special work books and Michelle got hers that day.

"I want to hear the boys read today. So, Mark and Simon get your books out first and sit in the corner. Just sit down until everybody else is busy. Now don't forget, everybody. You've got some writing to do and you've got some number work to do. Best thing is not to leave it all till the afternoon. Plan your day and decide when you are going to do it. Right, everybody busy please."

The children moved quickly. There was a rush for the Wendy corner, but only four stayed – they knew the rule of how many. For 45 minutes the children were all busy, individually or in groups. In the Wendy corner they were playing co-operatively in response to what looked like giant's feet coming through the ceiling. Four were cutting faces out of magazines, pasting them into the book and discussing it. Of the clay children one made a coiled pot, one a 'footballer' from rolled pieces laid flat, the

other two made patterns. Ten children sat at the 'writing tables', some writing about dinosaurs, others about the plants growing from their seeds (at various levels from tracing letters to writing using their own word books), others were responding to number work cards (made by Mrs W) like "You have 6 sweets and you eat 3. How many are left?" Another four were building something with bricks, and two were in the reading corner. I missed what the others were doing – but I'm sure Mrs W knew! During this time she:

'heard boys read, responded to children who queued for help with writing or to show completed writing or number work (entered in her 'tick' book) and moved around the room to help here, encouraged there, resolved a quarrel, etc.'

There is not space to describe the rest of the day nor how Mrs W organised number work, writing and reading. But this is evidence that her concern was for the 'whole' child, and that this was appropriately assessed:

'Each half-term Mrs W makes notes on each child's emotional and social development and puts in their record scrapbook a sample of their written work and number work. She also keeps in diary form the major events of the half-term: the interests that arose, how they developed and what they led to.'

Rather than destroy all this, the political task should have been to find ways of bringing all teachers to this high level of professional excellence. This required a recognition that, beyond the traditional 3 Rs, there should be, as Mrs W knew, concern for the emotional, social, creative and physical all-round development of every child.

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8. Flawed arguments for phonics

Even in a class where no child can yet read, there will be wide differences in their understanding of the critical features of print. A few children entering school can already read silently and with understanding, but most still need support to master written language in this new *disembedded* medium.

Many current discussions in England around learning to read appear simplistic, failing to take account of the complexity of English orthography. The English language does not have a one-to-one visual representation of all the sounds we speak, making it a difficult code for young children to break. Many words are easy to represent in writing, but some of the commonest words are not phonically regular. Evidence suggests that the teaching of both reading and writing is most effective when the teaching is systematic, taking into account the linguistic probabilities of the English language and the child's needs. There is an important place for assessment, provided it is diagnostic and leads to monitoring of progress and appropriate action.

A hundred key words account for about half the total words in written English, and many of them are phonically irregular. Children need to recognise the whole word in a variety of meaningful contexts, yet this has a low profile in current policy. It is also essential to be able to decode speedily the words that appear much less frequently, accounting for over 90 per cent of the *different* words in written English. It is

with these words that a grasp of phonics will assist. However, the evidence is that this is better practised in context, not in isolation. Time spent in some schools on practising pseudo words for the phonics check could surely be better spent studying other features of real written English, especially as many children are learning to read in a language that is not their mother tongue.

The powerful place of commercial interests in determining government policies, the materials recommended, and even the supplementary funding for the teaching of reading is disturbing. Since 2010 the government and Ofsted have insisted that *the* method of teaching reading should be synthetic phonics, claiming this is backed by research. In fact, systematic reviews of existing evidence support only the following claims:

- There is benefit from the inclusion of phonics within the early instruction in learning to read in English, within a broad programme.
- There is not evidence to support phonics in isolation as the one best method.
- There is not evidence for synthetic phonics rather than analytic or a mixture of approaches.

Synthetic phonics teaches the sound-symbol relationships in isolation, rather than inferring these from sets of words or real texts. Since June 2012 a phonics check of 40 words (20

pseudo words and 20 real words) has been administered to all Year 1 children in state schools in England. The claim was that this would 'identify pupils with below expected progress in phonic decoding'. Those pupils who failed to achieve the pass mark of 32 were to receive intervention, and retake the test the following year. DfE made available a large sum of money for matched funding from which schools could purchase only synthetic phonics materials and training from a recommended list of providers.

The DfE has ignored two key issues:

- i) The large difference in pass rate each year between the oldest and youngest children's results. Indeed twice as many August-born children (i.e. the youngest) as September-born children (the oldest) are labelled failures early in their school career, particularly boys.
- ii) Starting the test with 12 pseudo words confuses many children. Children who can already read attempt to make these into real words. There are children, including some autism spectrum conditions children, who refuse to attempt pseudo words, but read all the real words correctly, thus failing the check. Some teachers, obeying ambiguous instructions, stop the test without giving children the opportunity to try the real words.

The dictates from DfE and Ofsted, and the pressure on schools for a high and increasing pass rate, are having a major impact on practice in schools as well as impacting on teacher training. This has removed the professional freedom for teachers to adopt the approaches they think appropriate for individual children.

The phonics check costs around £260,000 a year to administer (printing, distribution, collation of results), not to mention teachers' time, and substantial payments to commercial organisations such as Ruth Miskin Training for promoting a particular teaching method. According to the government's own evaluation (nfer.ac.uk/publications/YOPC02) the phonics check has brought no benefits:

'There were no improvements in attainment or in progress that could be clearly attributed to the introduction of the check, nor any identifiable impact on pupil progress in literacy for learners with different levels of prior attainment.' (p. 67)

Despite this, the Government is even considering making children who fail the phonics check in Years 1 and 2 retake it in Year 3. The assumption that the needs of those who fail to reach the arbitrary pass mark on this test may still be met by a continuing focus on synthetic phonics as the solution to their problems seems naive.

So far there is only anecdotal evidence of the effect on young children's experiences of and attitudes towards literacy. How will this greater emphasis on synthetic phonics in the early stages, the disconnected nature of much of the tuition, the new emphasis on pseudo words and preparing for the test, influence children's understanding of the nature of literacy and their attitude to reading? How does it influence parents' ideas on how to help their young children? We need evidence from the children, including those who passed the check, those who could read but failed the check, and those required to re-sit the following year.

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Phonics fanatics: politicians who think they know best
<http://wp.me/p5izk8-jp>

The phonics check: what does it prove? <http://wp.me/p5izk8-il>

9. A focus group discussion with Teesside primary teachers

The benefit of focus groups over individual interviews is that participants can build on one another's experience and understandings to form a coherent picture. Here an NUT organiser and a Reclaiming Schools researcher meet with three primary teachers in Teesside.

What has been the impact of this year's tests on your children?

T1: It was Easter, just before the testing, and I saw a Year 2 boy crying, very bright little boy, but he was in the playground crying. I teach year 6, but I went to see what the problem was. He said he was going to fail his tests because he couldn't read the words. He was an absolutely fantastic reader, he could tell you all about what had gone on, but he was going to fail his tests because they were too hard, and he was just sat rocking and crying in the corner of the playground. That's what the tests are doing to our children.

T2: On a personal level, my son's taking his SATs next year. He's currently in Year 5 and he's already said to me "I'm going to fail my SATs." He's in Year 5, he hasn't even hit Year 6 yet, and he's already thinking about his SATs and how he's going to fail them.

T3: I'm in Year 5, teaching lower ability, and we follow a particular system the school uses to assess children. They're trying to teach the spelling rules you need to know in Year 5, but

actually some of the words I've never even come across... like there was tolerance, tolerant, and tolerancy. I've never heard of *tolerancy*. And these are children who can't spell always and also. I think the demands of the new curriculum, certainly on my Year 5s, who came to me at a very low level, who have got child protection issues, who have been in and out of care, who have had extreme trauma in their lives... it's difficult to get them to come into the classroom and sit down and be ready to learn in the first place. I think Year 6 SATs for them is going to be absolutely horrendous. I've had children in tears.

How have the new tests affected the children's curriculum?

T1: In the lead up to SATs the curriculum became so narrow. I had children absolutely beside themselves. Our school has got 70% free school meals, it's a very poor area, and these children have to come in and offload what's happened to them the night before they can even start to learn, so they're already at a disadvantage mentally. We get them ready so they go into maths. At 11 o'clock, they've had their break but they'd already had guided reading first. They'd go into English lesson, and they'd have their lunch and they come back and they do an hour's grammar lesson, and then if they're really lucky they'd get to do their science rehearsals for the science assessment, otherwise

it'd be more English. They would have one topic lesson per week, one hour per week, because the rest of the time it was just drilling, drilling, drilling.

The mental strain on those children! They were producing fabulous writing before that. It had composition and effect, high level punctuation, it was amazing what they were writing, the stories were really really good. However because we've got to get parenthesis in, coordinating conjunctions, and all the rest, all their composition effect went out the window because we were trying to shoehorn extra words from the spelling lists that they wouldn't normally use, we were shoehorning all these extra subordinating conjunctions, so we'd get them in but it didn't flow. So yes we'd tick the boxes to say they'd got this, this, this and this, but their creativity had gone, and it was just socially demoralising.

T3: And you know we're doing practice assessments every half term, and there are two reading comprehension papers, a spelling test, a grammar test, then they're doing a maths paper, an assessed big write, and because my children struggle with the grammar features at Year 5 they're getting really poor results. None of my children are reaching national expectations in anything except one or two in PE. The curriculum is setting our children up to fail. Only the very brightest children are going to be able to succeed.

T2: Particularly the creativity... every child has the right to reach their full potential, and they're not getting that right.

Is there any one particular test you found that you had an issue with?

T1: The KS2 reading test was aimed far too high. The majority of them did not complete it. We are set in our school. We have a three-class intake, so we've got a high, a middle and a low, and then we've got other children who are given extra time. This was the high group that I'm talking about now.

I felt they were being tripped up with some of the questions. I don't think the questions were fair. The text, it's more wordy than they've ever had before. The language that was used was way, way beyond a level 4A.

The children felt demoralised when they'd finished it, especially because that was the very first test of the SATs week. So when they got that, they were in a panic about what the next lot of tests were going to be about.

[The group look at the question paper.]

T2: The very first words: *'Maria and Oliver are attending a party in the garden of a house that used to belong to Maria's family.'* A party in the garden of a house? *'They sneak away to explore the grounds.'*

None of our children are likely to have their own home, and if they do, it's not likely to be anything like that. A lot of our

children live on council estates, their parents are on very low incomes, they don't the space to go and explore like it says in there. *'Going away to explore'* sounds like it's a park or somewhere like that. They don't have the opportunity, so already that first paragraph is turning them off the whole passage.

T3: And children in a boat, the picture, that's quite antiquated isn't it? Swallows and Amazons, isn't it? How many children have the chance to get into a boat and row to an island?

T1: *'Maria explained there was a secret monument on the island of her ancestors.'* I just don't think that represents their lives at all. Everything in that paper is not something that they would have experienced.

T2: I taught year 3 last year, and I pulled up a picture book about a polar bear, and one of my lads – both parents dependent, been in and out of care – called out *"It's a sheep!"* Absolutely no concept. And we went on a school trip and we were looking out the windows, and he was absolutely astonished to see cows. And now our school has cut free school trips for our kids. We used to use the fund. If we don't give the experiences, they don't get them, do they?

T3: Looking at the third passage now, the dodo, it doesn't look as if there's anything that the children can relate to. *'Discovery is helping to rehabilitate the image of this much ridiculed bird.'* That question really threw the children.

T: The question, 'What does *rehabilitate the image of the dodo* mean?' And they're given four options: restore a painting of the dodo, rebuild the reputation of the dodo, repair a model of the dodo or review accounts of the dodo. That's way beyond their experience and their range of expression.

Who do you hold responsible?

T2: The Government.

T3: Yeah, I think they're using our children as guinea pigs and they're trying all these new things out, and they're not working. They're not benefitting our children at all.

T1: They're using us as political pawns. I think they want us to fail. They want the children to fail so they can academise our schools.

10. Mathematics: conceptual understanding or counting by the rules?

'A high-quality mathematics education [should provide] a foundation for understanding the world, the ability to reason mathematically, an appreciation of the beauty and power of mathematics, and a sense of enjoyment and curiosity about the subject.'

These laudable aims appear in the preamble to the Maths programme of study of the 2014 primary curriculum. It goes on to emphasize the importance of solving problems and the development of conceptual understanding (DfE 2014).

Sadly none of this is carried through into the main document. Where the preamble talks about *'a highly interconnected discipline'*, the main body of the document is a list of disparate skills and knowledge. Each is preceded by *'pupils should be taught to'*, with few links drawn across different areas of mathematics and no emphasis on exploration or understanding. Significantly, the word *'understand'* appears only twice in the whole document.

This fragmentation of Mathematics is reinforced by the regime of high-stakes testing. Indeed, according to OFSTED (2012), *'too much teaching concentrates on the acquisition of disparate skills that enable pupils to pass tests and examinations but do not equip them for the next stage of education, work and life.'* Whilst we might have reason to mistrust OFSTED's judgements, teachers themselves report the

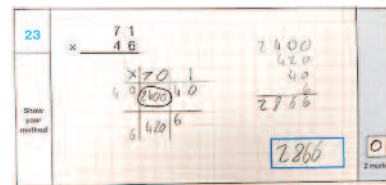
same thing (Hutchings 2015).

Not only does this test-driven approach leave little time for enjoyment, curiosity or appreciating the beauty and power of mathematics, it undermines the building of conceptual understanding which depends on interconnections and using number flexibly.

If we fail to emphasise these interconnections, we are at risk of our children becoming *'so focused on remembering their different methods, and stacking one new method on top of the next, that they [are] not thinking about the bigger concepts and compressing the mathematics they [are] learning'*. (Boaler 2009).

The emphasis on set procedures is heavily reinforced by the design of the new KS2 test, including the replacement of the mental maths assessment with a written arithmetic paper. There is a renewed focus on 'standard' formal written procedures, with marks only given for working if 'standard' methods have been used (DfE 2014).

For example, if a pupil used a standard 'long multiplication' method but made a mistake in the calculation (4×7 should equal 28, not 24) and arrived at the wrong answer, they would get one mark out of two. However, the following calculation, making the same calculation error, would receive no marks because a non-standard method has been used.



This latter method, no longer taught in many classrooms because of the emphasis on 'standard' methods, is more intuitive and provides an ideal pictorial representation of the mental process, helping children to develop stronger mental calculation skills. It also provides a basis for investigation to develop conceptual understanding of the multiplication process.

Along with the scrapping of the calculator paper and the proposed introduction of a times tables test, this change sends a very clear signal to children that mathematics is about memorising facts and using 'standard' written methods, with pencil and paper, for computation and not about conceptual understanding, mathematical reasoning or solving problems.

The problem is that the recall of facts so beloved of the Right is itself a function of conceptual understanding. *'Once you really understand [a process or idea] and have the mental perspective to see it as a whole... you can file it away, recall it quickly and completely when you need it, and use it as just one step in some other mental process'* (Thurston 1990).

Similarly, the focus on problem solving and mathematical reasoning in the preamble goes

almost completely unrealised in the curriculum itself. Whilst there are several references to problem solving, these seem to have been added almost as an afterthought, with phrases such as 'solve problems that involve all of the above' dropped in at the end of each section.

In the test, the problems tend to be over-simplified and require numerical answers only. Questions are generally limited to one, or at most two, domains only, and only one question (1 mark out of 110) on the 2016 paper required an explanation in response.

For example, contrast the two problems below. The first is taken from the 2016 test.

4 Each shape stands for a number.

Work out the value of each shape.

△ = _____ 1 mark

○ = _____ 1 mark

The second uses questioning to encourage the learner to reflect on the structure of the problem.

Each shape stands for a number.

●	■	◆	= 12
▲	▲	▲	= 15
▲	⬠	▲	= 13

= = =
 14 10 16

● =
 ■ =
 ◆ =
 ▲ =
 ⬠ =

Which value could be found first, next and last, and why?
Which value cannot be found second and why?

Both relate to the same area of maths, but the second contains far more cognitive challenge, makes the transferable nature of the skills employed more explicit, and elicits far more information about a child's understanding of the process. The difficulty is that this problem would be more suited to an on-going discussion rather than a written test. This opens up a real question about how we assess Mathematics. If assessment is really about learning and understanding, not about ranking teachers and schools, surely we would be better off using a combination of coursework or controlled assessment with on-going teacher assessment.

This is not to suggest that developing deep conceptual understanding, mathematical reasoning and problem solving is impossible under the current arrangements: simply that it is made more difficult. My own school spent two years developing and implementing a curriculum based on these principles, yet implementation was hardest in year 2 and years 5/6. In the words of one colleague,

'I know this is a better way to teach and, as a professional, it is what I want to do. It's just that I know they will be assessed at the end of the year on how they can apply that narrow range of skills, not on their conceptual understanding, and I will be held accountable for those result.'

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11. Primary arts are in trouble

The national curriculum guidelines affirm the value of cultural education for all children. The arts – including art and design, music, dance, drama and media arts, design and technology – are an integral part of the national curriculum up to age 14. The guidelines for art, craft and design for example begin by stating that these subjects *‘embody some of the highest forms of human creativity’* and that a *‘high-quality art and design education should engage, inspire and challenge pupils, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to experiment, invent and create their own works of art, craft and design’*.

The four domains of cultural education – knowledge, the development of analytic and critical skills, skills based in particular arts forms, and the development of personal creativity – are to be fostered through a formal school programme, as well as informal opportunities. Influential arts advocates John Sorrell, Paul Roberts and Darren Henley (2014) argue that a commitment to cultural education also means that all children should, for instance, engage with artists, visit a wide range of cultural institutions, enjoy extra-curricular arts activities and experience the pleasures of being audience, participant and producer.

There is research which shows that cultural education offers even more than subject-based learning. The arts support children to build a wide range of

communication skills, to exercise responsible leadership, to learn and practice team work and to take initiative (Thomson et al. 2014). Research also suggests that primary schools with robust cultural education programmes have improved attendance and established a more positive school ethos; teachers and students alike have a greater sense of well-being.

There seems every reason for primary schools to embrace the arts enthusiastically. Cultural education is part of what they are meant to do, and has well evidenced positive benefits. Yet a comprehensive primary cultural education offer is not the reality.

The regime of national tests, with their overwhelming emphasis on particular types of literacy acquisition, makes it very difficult for schools and teachers to offer the broad and balanced cultural learning experiences envisaged in the national curriculum and by cultural education advocates. The most recent survey by the National Society for Art and Design Education (2016) for example showed that

‘89% of primary teacher respondents in all state schools indicated that in the last five years, and in the two terms before key stage 2 National curriculum tests (year 6), the time allocated for art and design had reduced.’

In KS2 nearly a third of state primary schools devote only an hour a week to art and design.

This is an alarming picture. It suggests that in many schools across the country children are missing out on foundational cultural learning experiences. This places the onus on parents. But research shows that lower income parents struggle to provide extra-curricular arts activities for their children (Sutton Trust 2014), and that parents with higher qualifications are much more likely to ensure that their children spend more than three hours a week engaged in cultural activities outside of school (SQW Consulting 2013). This is clearly an unacceptable situation – leaving engagement in cultural education to parent’s capacity to pay is a recipe for a geography of cultural inequity. Parents with lower income depend on their children’s school to ensure the entitlement to arts education as described in the national curriculum.

Some primary schools of course have not reduced their emphasis on cultural education. They make sure that time for the arts is not eroded by test preparation. They employ a primary arts specialist as part of their core staff complement. They use Arts Mark as a framework to manage time spent on creative and cultural education, commissioning artists and arts organisations to work in partnership with them. They might employ arts specialists to provide programmes which then release teachers for planning time. They use their pupil premium funding to ensure that children from low

income homes are able to participate in extra-curricular activities and excursions. They are in regions or cities where there is additional support for cultural and creative education, perhaps one of the 50 Cultural Education Partnerships recently established by Arts Council England.

But cultural education should not be left to accidents of geography or the commitment of individual schools, governors and teachers, any more than it should be the gift of parents who can afford it. Education policy-makers in England must do better and do more to ensure that all children, regardless of their situation, are able to *'participate fully in cultural and artistic life'*. This means, as Article 31 of the UN Convention on the of the Child puts it, that government must take deliberate steps to *'encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity'*.

The national curriculum is supposed to express the learning that is important for the next generation. It is intended to spell out the kinds of learnings that are fundamental to our society and are an entitlement for all children. Policy-makers must do more than set out guidelines – they must make the outcomes achievable. Testing regimes and careless policy are currently pushing schools away from ensuring that cultural and creative education is available to everyone. This is both inequitable and unacceptable.

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For a fully referenced version of this article, please see Reclaiming Schools, Oct 2016
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12. Assessment and testing in Wales

Devolution of power to the Welsh Assembly in 1999 has enabled Wales to set its own educational direction. In the main this has been a distinctive and highly progressive journey. We have eschewed the marketization of education; we don't have any grammar schools, academies or free schools; we do have a tiny private sector but a very large comprehensive one, including many bilingual schools.

The Learning Country published by the Welsh Government in 2001 signalled that schools and teachers would be at the heart of education policy and this continued to be the case for the next decade. In relation to testing and assessment this saw an increasing move towards respecting teacher professionalism through relying upon teacher assessment. National testing for 7 year olds was ended in 2000 and for 11 and 14 year olds in 2004/05.

In 2010, however, some disappointing PISA results for Wales led the relatively new education Minister to turn his back on this approach. Eventually a Literacy and Numeracy Framework was introduced accompanied by national tests each year in reading and numeracy for pupils from Year 2 to Year 9. This was part of a heightened accountability agenda including Estyn inspections and regular 'challenge' processes for schools from their local authorities.

The combined effect of this change in policy has undoubtedly contributed negatively to extremely worrying levels of mental health issues among young people, low morale and poor recruitment and retention of teachers.

The impact of this on the development of our highly progressive early years programme for 3 to 7 year olds, the Foundation Phase, has been particularly concerning. Teachers and those evaluating the programme have noticed how the creative approaches to learning and pedagogy in place for 3-5 year olds are being replaced by more formal approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy introduced in Years 1 and 2, because of the fear of the national tests at age seven. This has affected the quality of outcomes as well as undermined teacher professionalism in introducing the new curriculum.

In 2015 Graham Donaldson published his innovative report on the curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales. In it he noted that the curriculum in primary schools had become increasingly subverted by national testing and in secondary schools by national examinations. This was one of the reasons why he designated the curriculum as not being '*fit for purpose*'. In relation to assessment arrangements he described the bewildering use of scores, levels and grades being used, such that there was a lack of coherence and consistency.

The work now being done in developing the new curriculum – led by a group of schools designated Pioneer Schools – is based on the greater use of teacher assessment where again testing can be the servant not the master of student and teacher experience of the curriculum. He has called for external standardised testing to be kept to a minimum, for more innovation in assessment and for Assessment for Learning (formative assessment) to be at the heart of the assessment system.

These developments offer hope for the future and along with other changes currently taking place they mark a return to respecting the professionalism of teachers and their wellbeing. As ever the 'proof of the pudding will be in the eating'. We know from the experience of Scotland, which is a strong influence on developments in Wales, that these changes take time to bring about and if they are to be done properly require considerable investment in teacher professional learning and development.

In the meantime, we will soon have the results of the next PISA tests. Like all assessment information they will need to be looked at with interest and respect. It is to be hoped, that the Welsh Government will not over-react to these tests as they did in 2010. We know that increasingly the tests are challenged in relation to their reliability and that too often they are used as part of the

international movement to increase accountability and control over schools.

So the Wales devolution journey has been a mixed one. We have used the opportunity to strengthen our public education system and to develop progressive policies such as the Foundation Phase and the Welsh Bac. On the other hand, we have also fallen under the neoliberal-inspired juggernaut that uses testing and accountability in an attempt to improve 'scores on the doors', with scant respect for the quality of education experienced by students and the professionalism of teachers. Watch this space!

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Further readings and references:

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<http://tinyurl.com/zlwak4s>

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13. Everyone's educational future is always in the making: Learning without Limits

'Learning without limits' is an emergent movement to challenge the ways in which assumptions are often made that children have a fixed amount of 'ability' or 'potential'. It rejects the placement of young children in 'ability groups' which can so easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy by placing a ceiling on children's opportunities to learn. Early testing tends to encourage such assumptions that 'ability' and 'potential' are measurable and fixed.

A child is more than a level, grade or score. So obvious a truth should not need stating. The need to keep re-stating it reveals how far the policies which intensify high-stakes testing and penalise schools for not meeting imposed exam targets have reconstructed our education system. Education has been shifted away from concern with the child as a whole person towards a disproportionate focus on attainment in particular public tests.

Teachers, whatever their reservations, are constrained by the system to acknowledge the child's test-score (from phonics and SATs through to GCSEs) as a proxy for the child's learning. The given level or grade, a reductive abstraction, comes to stand in for the dynamic multi-faceted reality of the learner.

The testing system is built on untenable assumptions of smooth and evenly calibrated linear progress. This does not

reflect real learning, and is statistically unreliable. It leads to flawed statements about 'expected progress' and school effectiveness.

The score also works to encourage fixed ability thinking about pupils. The view of the child as having a given amount of 'ability' has practical consequences. Children are routinely grouped by 'ability' in classrooms, and then presented with differentiated curricula or 'levels of challenge', response to which tends to re-confirm the given 'ability' label. Designation by 'ability' can affect the ways teachers respond to individuals or groups of children, and give rise to inequitable treatment. Designation by 'ability' is also likely to reproduce structural inequalities of social class, gender and ethnicity.

How the teacher thinks of the learner significantly affects how the learner learns. Thinking of the child as of a fixed 'ability' impels what has been called 'prophetic pedagogy'.

Prophetic pedagogy knows everything beforehand and would banish uncertainty. It speaks the language of target grades, predicted grades, and next steps. It purports not only to know the proper future for each child, but to ensure that just such a future comes into being. Sometimes it even claims to do this in the name of social justice.

What animates fixed ability thinking, and the prophetic pedagogy associated with it, is

the belief that children come in kinds. Each child can, and must, be categorised as soon as possible into the bright, the average, and the less-able, or (as with the renewed clamour for grammar schools) segregated into 'academic' and 'non-academic'. It is asserted that different kinds of children require different kinds of curriculum, supposedly tailored to their essentially-different needs. Scores play a vital part in this sorting and sifting, for they enable crude comparisons and ranking of children. The radical difference which is enshrined in the name of each child is trumped by the equivalence implied in a system of numbers. Rosa and Rajiv both attain at level 3, so they are comparable, of a kind.

But children do not come in kinds. Each child is unique: an *other* utterly different from all others.

A more educationally productive way of thinking about the learner would not only recognise the learner as unique, but would see him or her as always capable of remaking (and not merely receiving) knowledge and culture provided conditions are right. It would acknowledge that everyone's educational future remains unwritten, unpredictable, open to change, and that the teacher has power to affect that future for the better by actions and decisions undertaken here and now.

It is from this basis that Learning without Limits operates.

It is based on respect for the complexity and unpredictability of the classroom, and the multi-faceted nature of the teacher's role. It acknowledges the power of the teacher to change patterns of response and achievement. Fixed ability thinking sees each pupil as limited to a greater or lesser degree, and so sets limits on the teacher's efficacy too. The best that may be hoped under a fixed ability regime is that the teacher helps the pupil reach his or her 'full potential'. But the pupil doesn't *have* potential – some innate, given, unsurpassable entity. The pupil *is* potential: undetermined power, a continuing possibility. Seen this way, the role of the teacher in enabling learning takes on a different cast.

Learning without Limits approaches offer a pedagogy of principle, not of pragmatics and compliance, for it is principles that inform and inspire teachers' work. Teachers opposed to a determinist or prophetic pedagogy, and to fixed ability thinking, might wish to base their practice on three inter-related principles that characterise Learning without Limits approaches. These are:

- trust in everybody's capacity to learn;
- co-agency, or harnessing the power of the teacher to young people's power as learners;

- the ethic of 'everybody', which requires that choices are made in the interests of everybody, and not just of some people.

Fixed ability thinking has become naturalised in our education system. It appears as professional 'common sense' rather than as domestication by an ideology. It endures even when learners perform in ways which give the lie to their designated ability label. Alternatives to fixed ability thinking must go beyond 'mixed ability' grouping (which still assumes an individual's fixed innate ability) to encompass a re-consideration of pedagogic principles, renewed understanding of the power of the teacher to affect the educational future of every child, and a recuperated view of the child as a learner untrammelled by fixed innate limits.

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14. Speeding up the treadmill: primary tests and secondary exams

Schools in England and Wales are dominated by tests and exams to an extraordinary degree. In one sense this isn't new: the upper years of secondary school have been devoted to exam preparation for a century, though for most of that time without the anxieties generated by Ofsted and league tables.

Hardly any other European country beyond the British Isles shares this obsession. Most have school leaving certificates based on coursework, or only use external exams in one or two subjects to moderate teacher judgements. Time is not wasted practising past papers, second-guessing potential exam questions or memorising content *"in case it comes up"*.

There are many forms of assessment which distort learning far less than exams, and which are more authentic and indeed more challenging. Consider for instance *Rich Tasks*, a form of authentic assessment developed in Queensland, Australia: challenges carried out for a genuine purpose, presented to a real audience, and drawing on knowledge and skills from different subjects. Two examples:

- *Improving Health and Wellbeing*: students investigate the local situation through books, statistics and interviews, acquiring medical and scientific knowledge before presenting practical recommendations.

- *National Identity*: planning, filming and presenting a documentary based on research and interviews with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Even in Britain, beyond the world of schools, professional qualifications have a balance between exams, portfolios and practical tasks. The final challenge for doctors qualifying for General Practice is a simulation in which actors present their 'symptoms' for diagnosis. Would education ministers dare to suggest this is 'dumbing down'?

Gove's reforms, however, attempted to make GCSEs as artificial as possible, reflecting his prejudice against coursework and practical tests and his desire to notch up levels of difficulty. Indeed, much of the new grading and scoring system seems to be built on the premise of larger numbers of students getting low grades or failing.

The unrealistic pressures now placed on children and young people are undermining the quality of engagement and relationship that real education depends on. We can only speculate what the full impact of the new primary tests will be as children get older.

The purpose is always expressed in terms of economic competitiveness. Even the expansion of nursery education is spuriously justified by a 'global race' for educational supremacy. As Gove expressed it when speaking of his changes to secondary school exams:

'By making GCSEs more demanding, more fulfilling, and more stretching we can give our young people the broad, deep and balanced education which will equip them to win in the global race.' (11 June 2013)

It is unclear how 'more stretching' equates with 'more fulfilling', or who exactly will win in this 'global race'. The rhetoric assumes a benefit to all young people, but in reality only a small elite are likely to take the prizes. The assumption is that educational supremacy will somehow lead to economic supremacy, a tenuous neoliberal proposition.

Every stage of schooling is seen in terms of readying pupils for the next stage, with no regard to what is appropriate at a particular age. The irony is that speeding up the treadmill in primary school is likely to undermine the real foundations of later development.

Firstly, many pupils are experiencing a very narrow curriculum, with little beyond maths and a distorted version of English. Children in more disadvantaged areas suffer even more from this reduced experience, due to the greater pressure placed on their schools.

Secondly, an increasing number of young children will experience the stigmatising impact of failure. This kicks in as early as the phonics test in Year 1, when parents are told whether their child has passed or failed. The elaborate nonsense of the KS2 grammar

test represents a final blow: a signal that children are incompetent in their own language because they cannot label the parts!

The 2014 National Curriculum was designed (if we can use that word) by aggregating targets from the top-scoring countries in the PISA international tests and pushing them down the years. English seven-year-olds are now expected to acquire the maths and science of nine-year-olds in Singapore or Finland. The resulting frustration could do lasting intellectual and emotional damage.

Finally, as 100 academics argued in their open letter Too Much Too Young, the expected acceleration of learning in primary schools pressures teachers to drill children through the required knowledge. Experience is bleached out, leaving empty verbiage. Instead of going through experiences which, in conjunction with key ideas, will establish a secure framework of understanding, children are struggling to memorise a miscellany of inert facts.

'The proposed curriculum consists of endless lists of spellings, facts and rules. This mountain of data will not develop children's ability to think, including problem-solving, critical understanding and creativity... The learner is largely ignored. Little account is taken of children's potential interests and capacities, or that young children need to relate abstract

ideas to their experience, lives and activity.' (Open letter, 19 March 2013)

We should return to the Charter for Primary Education as a compass to re-orientate us towards a meaningful, sustainable education through secondary school and into adult life.

'Successful learning and development takes time. Good primary teachers... pay heed to children's existing knowledge and understanding and cultural backgrounds. Learning never takes place in a vacuum. Learning in symbolic forms (abstract language, mathematical symbols, scientific rules etc.) should build upon and work with the child's experience, use of the senses, and creative and experimental activity... Children have the right to a broad and balanced curriculum that allows them to develop their talents in all areas.'

Assessment needs to reflect this.

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Further readings and references:

<https://primarycharter.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/primary-charter.pdf>

Further analysis of curriculum and assessment can be found at <https://reclaimingschools.org/curriculum/> with frequent updates in the blog.

15. Three assessment myths

On the 3rd May 2016 a new chapter was opened in the story of state education. On that day, up and down the country, thousands of parents and carers kept their children out of school. They had not been prompted by teachers, it was entirely spontaneous and needed no more than a Facebook page to generate action. The message sent loud and clear to the government was enough is enough, stop the incessant testing which is hurting our children and find another way of assessing their progress.

Beyond question the education of our children will never be the same again because in a democracy governments have to listen to such strong expressions of concern. It will also strengthen teachers' resolve to resist and end this system. The Secretary of State for Education will never admit it but it was not simply a coincidence that within weeks of the parents' strike the next test lined up for imposition on the schools, this time of multiplication tables, was quietly adjourned.

As we join parents in attacking the testing blight upon children's learning we have to expose the three myths about assessment assiduously promoted by government. These are so frequently advanced as truths that even Guardian readers are persuaded – and perhaps too many teachers as well.

Harder tests raise standards of achievement. Not so: the absolute reverse is true. When

you pitch the level of difficulty so far above the heads of the children that half of them fail, you separate assessment from the act of learning itself. In this way you distort school life and reduce it to mere preparation for the next test. True standards of achievement are lowered by such testing. Hard pressed teachers, fearful of the future of their schools and perhaps their own jobs, ditch their initial training and their professional knowledge of what is best for their pupils and coach them to meet the demands of the tests.

This coaching is not good teaching because the techniques are quickly forgotten once the test is over. No wonder secondary schools don't trust SAT's results!

In fact this myth is a cover for the political intention to narrow down the work of primary schools so that only elementary teaching is provided. This is why national testing is confined to English and mathematics: the concern is merely to prepare children with the 'basics' in readiness for secondary education. It diminishes primary education, and turns the clock back to Victorian times.

Test results are accurate as a measure of progress through primary school. This is largely nonsense. In good schools children learn so much beyond the core skills and we need to judge progress over the whole field of children's development. For too many schools coaching for improved test performance provides results which indicate

only that there is progress in dealing with tests. Furthermore the results are expressed in figures, a score, and figures imply a level of accuracy which is spurious since assessment can only be approximate.

A test is only a snapshot of performance at a particular moment, and the snapshot is of what is inherently *measurable*. Testing reveals only limited aspects of human development because performance in a test cannot show how far knowledge and skill are embedded in the individual and drawn upon in real activity. For a more accurate measure of educational progress, we must turn away from the performance snapshot and trust the judgements of those closest to the children – teachers working in partnership with parents.

Teacher assessments can't be trusted. This particular myth reflects the more general lack of trust in the profession evidenced by politicians as they use children's test results as a means of holding schools accountable. In fact we can trust teacher assessments a good deal more than we can trust the scores achieved in 'one shot' tests of children coached to perform and then, inevitably, forget.

Of course we have to be cautious in one important respect. The closer we are to the children – and that closeness is one of the strengths of primary teaching – the greater the danger that our assessment of progress will be

coloured by the relationship we have with them. We must guard against bias which might well be unconscious on our part. We have two effective ways of dealing with this professionally. Our assessments can be reinforced and evidenced by portfolios of children's work begun in the early years and carried forward with the children through the primary years. As you turn the pages of the portfolio you can see real and incontrovertible evidence of progress laid out before you. Secondly, we must share and if necessary review our assessments with colleagues who can discuss the child and the evidence of their growth and learning with greater objectivity.

In conclusion, from now on we must work with parents and carers as they recoil from the damage done to their children's lives by the current testing regime. With them we will find a better way, kinder and more accurate as we judge children's progress. We do not share the arrogance of politicians and will always be aware of the impossibility of absolute accuracy when we assess and be appropriately modest and respectful of the young lives we judge. We choose to teach young children and are fortunate in receiving all the human rewards which such work brings, yet when we assess we have to reach into the mind of the child and see him or her more dispassionately. It is indeed a formidable professional challenge and we will not fail.

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Further readings and references:

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Sahlberg, P (2015) *Finnish Lessons* (Teachers' College Press)

16. ‘Since Christmas, I have only taught Literacy and Numeracy’: what the 2016 SATs taught us

It’s by now a 25-year story: teachers’ work has become more intense. Their autonomy has diminished. Pedagogy, curriculum and assessment are determined centrally, and underpinned by a system of accountability that is increasingly precise and demanding.

In 2016 the introduction of a new primary assessment system has meant that all these tendencies have taken a sharp upward turn, and schools have been pushed towards what many teachers see as a breaking point. In May, at the end of the SATs week for Key Stage 2 pupils, the NUT asked its members in primary schools to complete a survey on their experience of primary assessment. The results were immediate and striking. In just a few days, more than 6000 teachers replied, including nearly a thousand who identified themselves as heads and senior leaders. As well as answers to tick-box questions, they supplied more than 5000 write-in comments – a vast and passionate spreadsheet of experience.

The survey scores indicated a high level of agreement about key features of the new system and the manner of its introduction. 97% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that primary assessment arrangements have been well managed by the DfE. Their ‘write-in’ comments were strongly worded. “Shambles” or “shambolic” were used more

than 100 times. “Chaos”, “fiasco”, “farce” and “disgrace” were frequently employed terms. Ever-changing and contradictory guidelines, late communications, leaked test papers, and very high demands on teacher workload were all repeatedly mentioned.

Teachers’ concerns went beyond the question of management. 97% of them agreed or strongly agreed that preparation for the SATs had had a negative impact on children’s access to a broad and balanced curriculum. Respondents report a situation in which the time taken to prepare children for tests in Maths and English, or to provide work for teacher assessment in these subjects, has squeezed out other subjects and activities. “*Since Christmas, I have only taught literacy and numeracy,*” wrote one teacher. Another wrote, “*When asked their favourite subject [my pupils] say English or Maths because they don’t know anything else.*”

91% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the ‘Expected Standard’ stipulated by the DfE in its guidance to schools was beyond the reach of the majority of students – a view that was confirmed on 5th July, when the DfE published figures showing that 47% of pupils had not met the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. In these conditions, teachers feared their pupils would become further demotivated: “*Even bright kids*

feel like they’re failures”, and children with SEN were being “*cut adrift as they are bombarded with SATs preparation. Self-confidence; demoralising; self-esteem; what future?*”

On the back of these judgments, it is not surprising that 90% thought that the new system was having a negative impact on children’s school experience. As one teacher wrote, ‘many of the children who previously enjoyed school now detest education. This is a crime and a shame because, in its incompetence, the Government is willingly and knowingly making children hate learning with a passion, rather than harbour an environment of lifelong learning.’

As for teachers, the pressures of a performance-driven system were felt almost everywhere. 86% agreed or strongly agreed that changes to primary assessment had led to a significant increase in their workload. Some reported a working week of over 70 hours; others said that “*working beyond midnight*” was considered the norm. Behind this driven state of being lay a fear of failure: “*I am worried that my results will not be good enough and will trigger an Ofsted. It will be another way to place blame on the teachers and try to convert more school into academies.*”

The depth of teachers’ concern is unmistakable. Along with their pupils, they are paying the

price of policies which in the name of raising standards, actually decrease the quality of education, and degrade the educational environment. Ministers, and members of think-tanks and working groups, like to think of reform as a process that is now 'owned' by schools which are ready to innovate and self-improve to deliver a better education. In reality, schools are constrained, and damaged, by an assessment system which is ever more demanding, and ever more unjustifiable.

The problems of the system were foretold in the 1990s; few could have imagined they would reach such an acute and critical state. If the Government are incapable of untangling the mess, only concerted action from parents and teachers will stop further damage to children and their education.

A version of this article was published on the website of the British Educational Research Association, August 2016.

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- Jones, K. (2015) *Education in Britain* (Polity)
- Lawn, M. (1996) *Modern Times: work, professionalism and citizenship in teaching* (Routledge)

Useful links contained in the articles

Artsmark framework:

<http://www.artsmark.org.uk/media/585>

Charter for Primary Education:

<https://primarycharter.wordpress.com/>

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publication-pdfs/UNCRC_PRESS200910web.pdf

Arts Council England Cultural Education Challenge:

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/children-and-young-people/cultural-education-challenge>

Learning without Limits:

<http://learningwithoutlimits.educ.cam.ac.uk/>

Rich Tasks assessment (Queensland, Australia):

<http://www.fairtest.org/queensland-australia-rich-tasks-assessment-program>

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This pamphlet is the work of *Reclaiming Schools*, a network of academics and researchers supporting the NUT's campaigns. Their website www.reclaimingschools.org provides further evidence and regular analysis.

Resources and news about the NUT's primary assessment campaign are available at www.teachers.org.uk/campaigns/primary-assessment

Expert View

www.teachers.org.uk/expertview



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