

Exploring Education and Childhood: From current certainties to new visions (2015) Edited by [Dominic Wyse](#), [Rosemary Davis](#), [Phil Jones](#) and [Sue Rogers](#)

Chapter 5. High Stakes Assessment, Teachers, and Children (2015)

Guy Roberts-Holmes

An Example of Educational Practice That Illuminates Contemporary Problems:

We've been told by the Head, that the EYFS is no longer a stage in its own right looking holistically at young children ...she says it is merely a precursor to KS1. So 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' in order to ensure children are not being left behind. More formal means more direct teaching of maths and phonics.....The effect of us spending more time on teaching maths and phonics means that we spend less time supporting the children in free-flow child-initiated play.... In my school the EYFS is being pressured into becoming a clone of KS1. The philosophy and values of the EYFS are being eroded.

Nursery Teacher, North London Primary School.

This chapter critically examines the *purpose* of early years education within the rapidly changing educational English policy landscape and seeks out alternative future possibilities and visions. Since 1997, and especially within the last five years there has been an increased emphasis upon short term 'standards' rather than life long learning dispositions. The Government justifies the 'raising

standards' agenda by stating that an 'earlier the better' approach is necessary because of the need to 'win' in a 'global race' which begins in the early years. The 'earlier the better' process has been understood as the 'schoolification' of the early years in which a narrow view of 'school readiness' is central rather than broader understandings of life long learning dispositions, well being and holistic learning. So, for example, children, teachers and schools have been increasingly preoccupied with assessment testing and phonics screening checks, as children, teachers and institutions are increasingly held to account for their 'performance' in national assessments (Bradbury, 2013; Roberts-Holmes, 2014). A danger with this 'performativity' culture (Ball, 2003) is that many of the youngest children in the school system have been assessed as not making the required 'good level of development or 'standard' (Bradbury, 2013). So, within such a short term test driven regime, children aged five are deemed to have 'failed' and be 'deficit' with all the implications of reduced expectations that this implies. For example, in 2013 at the end of Reception year Profile assessments, only 52% of children were deemed to have achieved their 'Good Level of Development' and the figures were worse for summer-born children who were that much younger, with only 30% reaching their Good Level of Development (DFE 2012). This is potentially problematic because the learning experiences that young children have in their early years may have a critical impact upon their confidence, self image and motivations as a learner throughout their school careers ().

Holistic Pedagogy within The Early Years Foundation Stage

Evidence from a range of sources and disciplines including neuroscience (Rushton 2011), developmental psychology (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012) and educational research (EPPE, 2004), suggests that children's long term well being and future academic success in school is supported by fostering and encouraging young children's learning dispositions and characteristics of effective learning rather than short term cognitive goals. For example, one of the central findings of the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project (EPPE,

2004) was that early childhood settings that viewed cognitive and social development as complementary, managed to achieve the best outcomes for children. EPPE 2004 has had a significant impact upon the principles, curriculum and pedagogy of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, 2008) so that the merged concepts of *care and education* became the heart of the EYFS. This holistic approach to learning was reflected in the original Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) (2008) which placed equal emphasis upon emotional and social learning dispositions as upon cognitive development. With recently raised thresholds in maths and literacy (including the Year One Phonics Check), the emphasis for early years assessment has shifted away from an equal focus upon emotional, personal and social learning dispositions combined with numeracy and literacy learning towards more formalized cognitive testing (Roberts-Holmes, 2014). This trend towards more formalized learning, particularly in numeracy and literacy is set to continue, with a concomitantly reduced focus upon personal and emotional learning dispositions. For example, from September 2016, the Government has announced its intention to introduce a Reception Baseline Check which will test four year olds basic numeracy and literacy and track this through to age eleven in Year Six of primary school (DfE 2014). Such a policy shift towards more formalized assessment beginning in the first few weeks of a child's arrival at primary school may have the effect of formalising early years teachers pedagogy.

In contrast the EYFS (2008, 2012) was centrally concerned with a child centred pedagogy and the holistic process of learning rather than being assessment and content driven. For example the EYFS pedagogical advice encouraged play, participation, meaningful social interaction and co-construction amongst children and their teachers. Not surprisingly the early years community widely embraced the EYFS when it was first introduced since it was in tune with well established holistic child centred approaches to children, care and education. The EYFS principles stated that children were unique, strong and learn in an 'enabling environment' through positive relationships. Theoretically such a position was

underpinned by a Vygotskian socio-cultural and social constructivist developmental model (Vygotsky, 1974) in which the child is constructed as a competent co-constructor of knowledge with other children and adults in child centred *meaningful* activities such as play. Play-based experiential learning was a central pedagogical feature within the EYFS.

‘Play underpins all development and learning for young children. . .and it is through play that they develop intellectually, creatively, physically, socially and emotionally’ (DfES 2007, 7).

Within the EYFS, co-constructive learning is encouraged through a process of ‘sustained shared thinking’ (SST) which occurs between children themselves and/or with an adult (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004). Sustained shared thinking is defined as an ‘interaction where two or more individuals ‘work together’ in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, or extend a narrative’, (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004: 718).

Siraj-Blatchford identified that children’s freely chosen play activities often provided the best opportunities for teachers to extend children’s thinking along with teacher initiated group work. The key to such shared cooperative learning is the sensitivity and responsiveness of the teacher. Neo-Vygotskian’s such as Karpov (2005) suggest that a teacher needs to model the learning and needs to include the child in a process of co-construction. However, Ailwood (2011, 29) challenges any simplistic notions of a co-constructed curriculum arguing that there is a problematic exercise of relational power and participation between adults and children within early years settings where adults have greater access to institutionally sanctioned power than children.

However, Wood has noted that the EYFS ‘has located play within a discourse of educational effectiveness’; whilst Brooker (2011, 7) notes that EPPE is concerned with ‘what works’ and warns against ‘replacing children’s own play

agenda with adult designed learning intentions’.

Key Questions for Reflection

Thinking about the example at the beginning of the chapter, try to summarise the different viewpoints or positions referred to with reference to the commentary offered within the chapter.

What do think arguments advocating the different positions might be?

How do you think the daily experiences of children in early years education might be affected by these different positions?

Learning Dispositions

The learning experiences that young children have in their early years may have a critical impact upon their confidence, self image and motivations as a learner throughout their school careers.

Sylva (2000; 709) noted that the ‘most important impact of early education appears to be on children’s aspirations, motivations and school commitment. These are moulded through experiences in the pre-school classroom which enable children to enter school with a positive outlook and begin a school career of commitment and social responsibility’.

Central to engendering such a ‘positive outlook’ is the development of positive learning dispositions which enable children to have a healthy self image of themselves as good learners. Dweck and Leggett (2000) identified two basic types of learners, masterful learners and helpless learners, both of which were developed in the early years. *Masterful learners* tended to be those children who have a positive self image of themselves as learners and who believe that they can overcome setbacks and obstacles with further effort and they tended to have

high levels of resilience. *Helpless learners*, on the other hand, tended to have a poor self image of themselves as learners and believed that their low level of ability was innate and fixed. The reality is, of course, that such learning beliefs were located on a spectrum and were contextually dependent. In a similar way Carr (2001) understands dispositions as being related to children being *ready, willing and able* to learn and is dependent upon the child seeing themselves as a competent learner and in a sensitive and responsive context where their learning is encourage and supported.

Given this understanding, the limitations of the current test driven, performativity context of many early years settings is all too apparent. Such contexts have the unfortunate potential to inadvertently classify some children as successful and 'good' learners whilst others are classified as 'poor' and 'deficit' learners. If such ranking, classification and ordering based upon so-called 'ability' becomes internalised by young children (and their families) they will quickly learn to associate themselves with particular learning dispositions, either positively or negatively. So, for example, at the end of their Reception year, children are assessed across a range of indexes and their 'Levels of Development' are graded from one to three, ranked and reported upon. Such a crude and simplistic classification system, with ever higher thresholds and levels of achievement in numeracy and literacy, means that a high proportion of young children are labelled as 'falling behind' (Bradbury 2011, 656). Such negative and inappropriate assessment decontextualises and pathologises individual children, teachers and schools and 'denys the impact of structural inequality and lays all responsibility for performance at the feet of teachers and individual schools' (Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti 2013, 552).

Furthermore, Katz (1985) noted that although teaching knowledge and skills might be effective in the short term for some children, that such pedagogy might have adverse consequences upon learning dispositions. This is because didactic teaching and learning does not mean that the acquired skills and knowledge will

be applied. For example, a child may be successful at learning phonics but that does not necessarily lead to their enjoyment of reading nor a desire to read on their own for fun. Indeed, without pedagogies of meaningful learning, participation and the subsequent generation of positive learning dispositions any short term learning may be subsequently lost. So, long term well-being and success at school are supported by young children acquiring positive learning dispositions in the early years. However, as stated earlier the current trend is away from learning dispositions and towards more formalised cognitive pedagogy and learning.

Early Years ‘School Readiness’ and the ‘Standards’ Agenda

This movement towards more formalized learning is apparent when the early years is considered as the first stage in a ‘delivery chain’ (Ball et al 2012) that connects ‘standards’ from the early years to primary schools to secondary schools to Local Authorities (LAs) to the DfE (Department of Education). So, for example, the continuous chain of assessment begins with the EYFSP (Early Years Foundation Stage Profile) at age 5 (to be replaced in 2016 by the Reception Baseline Check when children are 4); the Phonics Screening Test at aged 6; SATs at age 6 and 11; Key Stage 3 SATS at 14 and GCSE’s at age 16. For both child and teacher this ‘technical matrix’ of ‘malicious minutiae’ (Foucault 1979, 226) produces ‘an indefinite discipline: an interrogation without end, an investigation that would be extended without limit to a meticulous and ever more analytical observation’ (Foucault 1979, 227).

Within the ‘delivery chain’ there is a tendency for initiatives within the school system to hierarchically cascade down into the early years. So, early years testing and the Phonics Screening Check, which are inspected by OFSTED within the context of a primary school’s data, are supposed to ensure the delivery of children who are ready for the rapid skills and knowledge acquisition needed in the primary school. In this way, the early years is increasingly subservient to the

demands of the Primary National Curriculum (Moss, 2013) as school readiness performance 'policy technologies' (Ball, 2013) have a disciplinary effect upon early years teachers' pedagogy and interpretation of the EYFS. In Foucauldian terms, teachers and children's 'visibility' has increased through the use of such assessment policy technologies leading to an increase in the 'objectification of those who are subjected' (Foucault 1979). Through such tests early years children and teachers are statistically objectified, ranked and judged by national tests that they are subjected to.

The early years 'school readiness' assessment discourse is the first stage of a positivistic paradigm which measures children against predetermined, sequential and normative outcomes throughout their schooling career 'without society having to address its underlying structural flaws of inequality, injustice and exploitation' (Dhalberg, Moss and Pence, 2007: vii). In Foucault's terms, developmental normative stages become officially sanctioned 'truths' which discipline, regulate and govern children. Thus early childhood educators use developmental 'truths' such as the EYFS Development Matters monthly milestones of the young child. Within an early years environment there are constant observations and ubiquitous surveillance (the 'malicious minutiae') to normalise, classify, distribute, and regulate children against a barrage of norms and regulatory frameworks such as the Developmental Months, the Early Learning Goals; the Good Levels of Development, the EYFS Profile and the forthcoming Reception Baseline Check and the Phonics Screening Test. This 'swarming of disciplinary mechanisms' (Foucault 1979, 211) creates 'an economy of visibility' and operates as 'highly prescriptive systems of accountability' within EYFS nursery and reception classes (Ball, 2013: 173). Within all this, early years teachers' increasingly struggle to make sense of deeply held pedagogical child centred values and at the same time perform to the requirements of the school readiness discourse.

Key Questions for Reflection

What do you think are the effects of the 'delivery chain' on the relationship between child and early years professional?

The discussion refers to a 'struggle' between 'pedagogical child centred values' and 'the school readiness discourse'. Why do you think a teacher might experience this as a struggle? What do you think this suggestion of a struggle says about early educator professional autonomy?

The following Reception teacher's quote, from a qualitative research study that involved twenty early years' teachers understandings of recent assessment changes, was typical of the frustrations felt by the teachers:

'We are trying to keep the 'wolf of schoolification' at bay, we stand guard at the threshold but it is very tiring defending your stance all the time'. (Reception Teacher, Central London).

In the research, the teachers firmly believed that children learn through play and experiential learning but they felt an increasing pressure to adapt their pedagogy to ensure the children's 'success' in formalised assessment. So, as in the quote above, the teachers spoke of their weariness, frustration and anger at trying to make sense of the contradictory pedagogical approaches within their early years classrooms. The 'wolf of schoolification' was an apt metaphor for the anxiety, stress, and tiredness felt by the sample of early years teachers.

A nursery teacher in the research noted that he did phonics with the three year olds but then *'tucked this away and got on with the real business of working with the children'*. So here this teacher 'cynically complied' (Bradbury, 2013) to the school's performance demands noting that teaching phonics to three year olds wasn't 'particularly useful' and he only did so because he was obliged to.

Interestingly he was aware of the potentially damaging effects of such assessment and strove to ensure that the children were 'not harmed'. This experienced Nursery teacher was 'policy literate' and a confident articulator of pedagogical knowledge and was able to both accommodate and resist the

assessment regime into his teaching. He was able to articulate his utilitarian performance in the teaching of phonics and at the same time was confidently able to state his early years pedagogy.

OFSTED's gaze up and down the whole school's performance data from Reception class to Year 6 brings the early years under the disciplinary and punitive power of simplistic statistical interpretation and analysis. Complex early years principles, curriculum and pedagogy becomes reduced to crude data; literacy and numeracy figures couched within the misleading scientific notion of 'Good Levels of Development'. Within this corrective and penalising assessment regime the subtlety and sensitivity of sustained shared thinking (SST) and the co-construction of knowledge espoused by the EYFS (2008) and associated DCSF guidance is reduced to numbers. Stobart, (2008, in Bradbury, 2013) notes that such 'tests are no longer simply a judge of an individual pupil's attainment, but simultaneously a judge of a teacher's performance'. In this way early years teachers pedagogy is judged by the data as either being 'good' or 'bad'. By focusing upon early years data and crudely associating this with good and bad teaching, ensures that early years teachers' pedagogy and their interpretation of curriculum is 'done' according to the assessment regimes' requirements and disciplined and corrected as necessary. Bradbury (2012: 178), notes 'the power of neo-liberal technologies to 'remake' teachers as different types of professionals, to discipline the parameters of their understandings of what being a 'good' teacher can be'. Early Years teachers are thus caught between the imperatives of prescription (EYFS, 2012) and the disciplines of performativity (EYFSP and GLD's) potentially leading to a 'schizophrenia of values and purposes' (Ball, 2003: 223). This is exacerbated by the constant and relentless change in policy and assessment emphasis experienced by early years teachers.

'The emphasis is now on literacy and maths. The pressure is now to get them all to the expected levels for literacy and maths, when actually the early years framework doesn't lend itself to that at all! It's confusing and unrealistic. It's a

nightmare! (T. Early Years Foundation Stage Co-Ordinator, North London Primary School).

This teacher found such constant policy shifts confusing and difficult to manage. Bauman (2007:1) states that attempting to work with such constant change is akin to 'liquid life'. 'Liquid life' is a kind of life that tends to be lived in a liquid modern society. 'Liquid modern' is a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines'. This 'liquid life' of uncertainty and instability has emotional consequences upon early years teachers:

'All these changes are killing me!.... I'm constantly stressed out and feel like I'm fighting against myself sometimes. I want the children to do well but I feel like I don't know what I'm doing now! I know how young children learn at this age but people further up the school are constantly saying "oh why haven't you done this" and its all the pressures and you start questioning yourself (T. Early Years Foundation Stage Co-Ordinator, North London Primary School).

A decade ago Ball, (2003: 220) noted the emotional impacts of the performativity regime upon secondary school teachers: 'within all this, the contentments of stability are increasingly elusive, purposes are made contradictory, motivations become blurred and self worth is uncertain. We are unsure what aspects of work are valued and how to prioritize efforts'.

These professional crises are currently experienced by early years professionals as they try to make sense of the contradictory tensions between the child centred Early Years Foundation Stage and the current data driven performativity regime in the early years. Early years teachers experience these tensions, contradictions and pressures in their professional lives and find the constant changes exhausting, destabilising and undermining of their professional values

and ethics. Within a context of performativity, children's learning and teachers pedagogy is disciplined and punished to produce acceptable data.

Key Questions for Reflection

Think about the term 'acceptable data' used in the previous paragraph.

What do you think 'acceptable data' means here? In considering your answer, consider some of the following:

- 'acceptable' for whom?
- what are the strengths and limitations of creating and using data in the way this chapter has discussed?
- how are children conceived of within this 'regime' and its production of data?

School Readiness as Economic Necessity and as the *only possibility*

Ball (2013: 14, 61) notes that 'within policy, education is now regarded primarily from an economic point of view' and that education policy has become 'subordinate to the necessities of international competition'. So, within in all this, getting children 'ready for school' becomes a non-negotiable economic necessity. Within such economist education policy making, some would argue that there are few spaces available for the purposes of early childhood education beyond that of serving the needs of the economy with flexible life long learners and workers (Bradbury, 2012; 2013; Moss 2013). So, for example, in More Great Childcare (DfE, 2013) 'getting early years children ready for school' was justified by 'our' competition in an economic 'global race':

'If we want our children to succeed at school, go on to university or into an apprenticeship and thrive in later life, we must get it right in the early years. More great childcare is vital to ensuring we can compete in the global race, by helping parents back to work and readying children for school and, eventually,

employment' (More Great Childcare, Executive Summary, page 6).

So according to the Government, the early years is simplistically reduced to the first stage on a conveyor belt that seamlessly moves children through primary and secondary school and into university, apprenticeships and the world of work. This functional, rational and reductionist view of education is normalised as a hegemonic 'regime of truth' that needs no justification, legitimation or explanation. This is because the neo-liberal economic function of education, from the early years to university, has become normalized, legitimate and hegemonic and any alternatives to this dominant regime are excluded. Moss (2013) has termed the ascendancy of such educational economism as DONA or the Discourse of No Alternative in which all other discourses, resistances and alternatives are silenced. Thus education, including the early years is increasingly captured by a reductionist hegemonic and functional economist discourse. Similarly, Ball notes that the social purposes of education are 'increasingly side-lined' to economics (2013:14). So, within this discourse early years has become the first necessary condition for survival in this 'global race' (Moss 2013: 9). Within this normalised and taken for granted 'global race' the process of getting children 'ready for school' must therefore begin as early as possible.

Future Visions

The arguments presented in this chapter critique the current English Government's 'earlier the better' approach, suggesting that high stakes testing does not necessarily lead to long term improved outcomes for children. Indeed, for the many children, who are unsuccessful in their attempts to make the required thresholds, the testing regime may have negative short and long term consequences as these young children experience 'failure' and understand learning and themselves as 'helpless learners' (Whitebread and Bingham, 2013). In order that early years children's learning experiences are such that they

develop positive life long learning dispositions, it is necessary for the Government to listen to and trust early years teachers' professional judgements and considerable knowledge regarding democratic, participatory and child centred assessment practices. Pedagogical documentation, commonly found within the social pedagogy tradition of Scandinavian countries, is an alternative form of assessment that eschews the hierarchical, crude and simplistic testing critiqued in this chapter. It involves young children and teachers in a process of dialogue and narrative documenting learning processes and dispositions through a variety of means including, notes, digital recordings and children's artefacts and is not bound by any fixed notion of expectations and norms (Moss et al, 2013).

This Northern European pedagogical documentation is similar to New Zealand's Te Whariki curriculum in which 'children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things' (1996, 43). Central to the Te Whariki curriculum are co-constructed 'learning journeys' or 'learning stories' between the child and teacher. A child's *learning story* makes explicit to the child and their family aspects of the child's learning and in particular their developing positive learning dispositions. Conversations about the children's learning journeys can highlight to the children the ways in which their 'intelligence' is malleable. Young children's self awareness that their learning is contextually specific, dynamic, and variable helps them to understand their own learning processes. This is empowering because it challenges fixed notions of being either a masterful 'successful' learner or a helpless 'failing' learner. Such an ability to use learning stories in this way demands educated early years teachers who are capable of developing opportunities and strategies for listening to and reflecting with children about their ideas (Carr, 2013). This process of reflection upon learning is also encouraged in the EYFS through the process of sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford, 2002), in which children and teachers articulate their ideas together.

In both pedagogical documentation and learning stories, the child is encouraged to articulate and reflect upon their positive learning dispositions, abilities and competencies. This form of assessment is in stark contrast to the current English performativity regime in which certain groups of children are deemed as 'successful' learners whilst many others experience disenchantment, disappointment and frustration. The hierarchical ranking, grouping and classification of young children by so-called 'ability' determined by numeracy and literacy tests is located in a different paradigm to pedagogical documentation and learning stories. Regarding teacher's professional identities, Moss (2013) argues that pedagogical documentation is one way in which to 'unmask' the supposedly 'neutral and independent' early years testing and accountability regimes that are akin to 'political violence' (Foucault, 1974: 171 in Moss et al 2013: 152). Pedagogical documentation can allow early teachers to be critically self-reflexive and raise their awareness of the ways in which they are 'governed by disciplinary power' and thus potentially to engage in a process of 'care of the self' through locating new spaces, alternative discourses and resistances.

Teacher Education/Training Task

Think about the diversity of positions on early years education:

1. The chapter argues that there are fundamental tensions affecting how early years provision is conceived of and conducted. Try and summarise these positions and discuss why you think they are present in the way they are at the moment.
2. The chapter, especially in its last section, offers alternative visions about early years. Consider the possibilities and limitations of these different visions.

Further Reading

Moss, P. (2014) The dictatorship of no alternative: the emergent global model of early childhood education. In Moss, P. (2014) *Transformative Change and Real Utopias in Early Childhood Education: A story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality* London, Routledge. (Chapter 1 pages 12-36).

This chapter offers a powerful critique of neo-liberalism and its effects upon early childhood education.

Brooker, L. (2011) Developing learning dispositions for life. In Waller, T. Whitmarsh, J. and Clark, K. (2011) *Making sense of theory and practice in early childhood : the power of ideas* Maidenhead, Open University Press. (Chapter 6 pages 83-98).

Learning dispositions are central to effective learning and this chapter clearly demonstrates this important relationship.

Carr, M., and W. Lee. (2012) *Learning Stories: Constructing Learner Identities in Early Education*. London, Sage.

A user-friendly and optimistic account of child centred approaches to recording young children's learning journeys.

Roberts-Holmes, G. (2014): The 'datafication' of early years pedagogy: 'if the teaching is good, the data should be good and if there's bad teaching, there is bad data', *Journal of Education Policy*, DOI: 10.1080/02680939.2014.924561

An empirically based critical analysis of the ways in which early childhood education is increasingly determined by the collection and presentation of government required data.

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