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Towards a pluralist and participatory accountability

Guy Roberts-Holmes

The need for transformative change

Most 3- and 4-year-old children in England attend mainstream nursery classes or schools or reception classes in primary schools led by qualified early childhood teachers; 5- and 6-year-olds attend Year 1 classes in primary schools. This chapter will argue that what happens in those schools and classes (referred to here as ‘early years’) is changing, largely due to neoliberalism. Neoliberalism attempts to reduce early years education into a ‘school readiness’ factory that prepares young children for success in primary school tests. Managerial accountability, the government argues, is required to hold early years teachers and the schools they work in, to account through achieving prespecified ‘standards’ and school-readiness performance measures. Tight managerial control of early years teachers is necessary because neoliberalism is distrustful of what it sees as early years teachers’ inefficient and self-seeking professionalism. In short, neoliberalism treats early years teachers with ‘derision’ (Ball 1999) and ‘contempt’ (Giroux 2019, 508) and requires their strict control and governance through the imposition of explicit standards and performance measures.

The chapter begins by exploring this regime of managerial control and governance, critically examining the growing plethora of English national standardised and prescribed early years education ‘outcomes’, ‘tests’ and ‘progress measures’. Performance measures in early years settings are inspected and judged by a national inspection regime, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted), with severe consequences if performance as measured is not judged adequate.
The chapter goes on to consider the unintended consequences of this harsh disciplinary regime.

The government frames its arguments for tight managerial control of all early years settings within a discourse of educational equality of opportunity for all. This is because it is argued that early years teachers and other staff need to identify children’s needs as early as possible so that they can make the necessary interventions to prevent disadvantaged children from falling behind more advantaged groups. This performance management regime of truth redefines the purpose of early years education as one of raising standards to reduce the attainment gap between socio-economic groups so that all young children are school-ready. However, in the process, democratic alternatives to this regime of truth are ignored, as are wider questions about the impact of poverty upon the attainment gap.

The chapter proposes that there is an urgent need for neoliberalism’s managerial accountability to be replaced with a participatory and democratic approach that trusts early years teachers’ professional judgments. Using examples from Italy and New Zealand, pedagogical documentation and learning stories, both based on relational pedagogies, it is argued that there are such alternatives to authoritarian managerial control. Lastly, small-scale political activism within a broader early years resistance movement is explored as a possible route to a more equitable, trusting and democratic practice in England.

Managerial control through standards and performance measures

The English state system of education attempts to ensure that early years teachers and the children attending its schools comply with its centralised requirements through a process of tight managerial control. This is achieved, first, through the setting of explicit national ‘standards’ and measuring performance with an array of tests. Second, managerial control makes those performance measures visible and public through issuing school inspection reports and other information. Early years settings that do not achieve the required performance measures are humiliated through a harsh and public grading system (while those that do well advertise the fact to potential parents, for instance on large banners outside school gates). Third, control is achieved by means of ensuring that nursery and primary school teachers, children and families internalise government standards and performance measures.
Managerial control has led to a formalised and reduced early years curriculum to prepare young children ‘for the rigour of the Year 1 curriculum and achieving improved outcomes in mathematics and literacy’ (Kay 2018, 331). Through this process, early years education is reimagined, reconfigured and repurposed as the first stage in a ‘delivery chain’ (Ball et al. 2012, 514) to prepare and ‘ready’ children for the test-based culture of compulsory schooling. The policy of standards and performance measures steers and governs early years practice towards formalised early numeracy and literacy and away from local professional judgements and child-led play (Wood 2019).

**EYFS, ELGs and the EYFS profile**

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) was first introduced in 2008 and set the standards in England for the development, learning and care of children from birth to 5 years old with childminders (family day care), in preschools (playgroups) and day nurseries, as well as in nursery and reception classes in primary schools. Its standards are organised around three prime areas of learning: personal, social and emotional development; communication and language; and physical development. Within these there are four specific areas of learning: literacy; mathematics; expressive arts and design; and understanding the world (for a fuller discussion of the EYFS, see Chapter 7).

At the end of children’s year in the reception class of primary school, when they are around 5 years old, their performance on 17 early learning goals (ELGs) is assessed by teachers through the EYFS profile, ‘to provide a reliable, valid and accurate assessment of individual children at the end of the EYFS’ (DfE 2019a, 9). The teacher must observe and judge each child’s performance against the expected norm for each goal, and rank the child in one of the following three prescribed and enumerated categories:

1. Emerging: The child has not yet reached the normal performance level.
2. Expected: The child meets the normal performance level and is classified as ‘normal’ and therefore ‘school-ready’.
3. Exceeding: The child’s performance is above the normal expected level for this age.

Each of the 17 ELGs is accompanied by its own ‘norm’-based set criteria and materials known as the ‘EYFS profile exemplification for the level of
learning and development expected at the end of the EYFS’ (DfE 2013). For example, to achieve the ‘expected’, ‘normal’ ELG for writing a child has to perform the following: ‘Children use their phonic knowledge to write words in ways which match their spoken sounds. They also write some irregular common words. They write simple sentences which can be read by themselves and others. Some words are spelt correctly and others are phonetically plausible’ (DfE 2013, 1). If a child obtains an ‘expected level of learning and development’ in 12 out of the 17 ELGs, she or he is classified as having obtained the status of a ‘good level of development’ (GLD) and is labelled as a successful ‘school-ready’ child.

Teachers’ and practitioners’ ELG judgements are scrutinised with a business-like ‘quality assurance’ moderation process to ensure an accurate and valid ‘standardised’ score. First, teachers’ judgements are moderated by their colleagues using the ‘exemplification materials’. Second, a sample of each teacher’s EYFS profiles must be submitted to the local authority (LA) EYFS profile ‘moderation manager’ who externally moderates them for accuracy and consistency, demonstrating a lack of trust in the teacher’s judgements. The moderation manager looks across the total percentages of children achieving GLD in local schools and encourages competition by comparing scores:

We ‘name and shame’ by showing all the school names. Some schools didn’t have any children at ‘Exceeding Level’ so you say ‘well your statistical neighbour has this percentage so how come you haven’t?’ And they think ‘I’d better go back and have another look at that … It does challenge them and that’s why we do it (EYFS Profile Moderation Manager). (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury 2016, 607)

The LA profile manager encourages this competition in an attempt to constantly drive up schools’ performance levels year-on-year as the LA itself is then judged against other LAs in a national GLD performance competition. In some schools, early years teachers’ pay increases are directly linked to increases in the number of children obtaining their GLDs, placing further pressure to raise successive ‘pass’ rates. Finally, the EYFS profile assessment for each child must be given to parents and Year 1 teachers in primary school as a written summary of the child’s attainment against the 17 ELGs.

Taken together, the EYFS and its attendant goals and profile capture, normalise and discipline the child (and the teacher), as they are caught within increasingly tight webs and grids of managerial control. All of this means that early years education becomes ‘defined by policy as
one of standards and the need to raise standards, represented in quantitative outcomes and measures’ (Ball et al. 2012, 93, emphasis added). But the process does not end with the EYFS profile, with further performance measures either in place or planned.

The phonics screening check
The phonics screening check (PSC) was introduced in 2011 and is a performance measure taken by 6-year-old children (in Year 1 of primary school). The PSC is a standardised arbitrary pass/fail ‘high stakes test’ in which 6-year-old children decode a mixture of 20 real words and 20 pseudo or ‘nonsense’ words. Those children who ‘fail’ to score a mark of more than 32 must re-take the test.

The PSC, with its associated formal curriculum and pedagogy, has cascaded down through the early years, dramatically steering curriculum and pedagogy into preparing young children for their Year 1 phonics test. The English Department for Education (DfE 2017, 7) states that ‘the core purpose of the reception year’ is to teach systematic synthetic phonics in preparation for the Year 1 PSC, and has threatened the early years sector with inspection checks on the teaching of synthetic phonics. Research has demonstrated that children as young as 3 years old in nursery classes are prepared and trained to be ‘school-ready’ for the phonics test (Bradbury 2018; Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017b).

Reception baseline assessment and the International Early Learning and Well-being Study
As if the above performance measures were not enough, the Department for Education (DfE) in England is developing further digitally based performance measures with which to judge and hold early years teachers and schools to account. The proposed reception baseline assessment (RBA) is to be administered as a tablet-based test for 4-year-olds within the first six weeks of their attending primary school reception class. This digital test is ‘to provide an on-entry assessment of pupil attainment to be used as a starting point from which a cohort-level progress measure to the end of key stage 2 (KS2) [that is, at 11 years old] can be created’ (DfE 2019b, 4).

From 2020, 4-year-olds will be tested in literacy and maths, and seven years later, starting in 2027, they will be tested again to measure their attainment and progress. Children’s progress across their primary schooling will then be compared, ranked and judged based upon these two performance measurements, taken seven years apart. The new assessment will, therefore, effectively tie early years curriculum and pedagogy.
to literacy and maths in primary school. The RBA is being introduced despite extensive research that has demonstrated that it will produce inaccurate and invalid data (Goldstein et al. 2018; Roberts-Holmes et al. 2020): ‘The government’s proposals, which will cost upward of £10 million, are flawed, unjustified, and wholly unfit for purpose’ (Goldstein et al. 2018, 30).

In 2018, the DfE trialled, in 300 reception classes, another standardised performance measure of early years education, the International Early Learning and Well-being Study (IELS). The IELS is an international large-scale assessment of 5-year-olds organised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Roberts-Holmes 2019b). The aim is to measure and compare performance between countries on four early learning ‘domains’: emerging literacy; numeracy; self-regulation; and empathy and trust. Each is assessed using a tablet-based process lasting around 20 minutes.

For the first round of this new international assessment, the OECD managed to recruit only three countries: Estonia, the United States – and England. It will hope to recruit more for a second round, which will follow the publication in March 2020 of reports on the initial study. Moss and Urban (2017, 256) state that ‘our overriding concern, therefore, remains that the IELS will end up, in the words of Loris Malaguzzi, as “a ridiculous simplification of knowledge, and a robbing of meaning from individual histories” (cited in Cagliari et al. 2016: 378)’. The potential danger with both the English RBA and the international IELS is that they both reduce the rich diversity and complexity of early years education to a common outcome and measure. As a headteacher commented in research on the pilot of the RBA (Roberts-Holmes et al. 2020):

When it’s used like TripAdvisor by parents or by the government and Ofsted, that’s not alright because they don’t take any context into account. And then when you compare us to other schools round here, which is what parents do, they’re going to go ‘oh look, their results aren’t very good’ because they’ve got no context, none whatsoever.

Inspection

Using performance data, observations and parents’ feedback, Ofsted grades early years settings as being ‘Outstanding’, ‘Good’, ‘Requires Improvement’ or ‘Inadequate’. Ofsted notes that early years settings must
have an ‘extremely sharp focus’ on communication and language to be graded as ‘Outstanding’ (Ofsted 2018, 37) and praises those settings that have based their literacy and maths upon Year 1 primary school national curriculum expectations (DfE 2017, 7).

So, from the early years to the end of primary school, the performance data must show progress particularly in literacy and numeracy. Because the stakes are so high for schools, Ofsted inspections effectively manage and control early years education towards a narrow focus on prescribed early literacy and numeracy school readiness performance measures. The threat of Ofsted’s public humiliation if early years performance measures are not met makes schools and teachers compliant because Ofsted operates as ‘a pistol loaded with blame to be fired at the heads of those who cannot answer charges’ (Inglis 2017, 20). Within Ofsted’s punitive and disciplinary context, the only early years professionalism that counts is that which produces the government’s prescribed performance outcomes.

Datafication and managerial control

Managerial and disciplinary control has become considerably more powerful and intense with the recent rise in the datafication of early years education (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017a). Datafication has facilitated hyper-active managerial control of early years performance measures through its ability to create vast amounts of comparable digital data that are used to fuel competition and choice. Datafication reduces the complexity of early years education into a crude set of numbers on a spreadsheet that can be publicly tracked, ranked and compared with other nursery and primary schools. At the same time, the datafication of early years performance measures has enabled a heightened surveillance and tracking of digital data in a process known as dataveillance, that is ‘the proactive surveillance of what effectively become suspect populations, using new technologies to identify “risky groups”’ (Amoore and De Goede 2005, 151). Dataveillance of individual children’s performance in tests enables risk management via targeted governance.

Datafication is central to making visible school performance measures to stimulate competition between schools. For example, datafication enables progression data from the early years to Year 2 and Year 6 of primary school to be made visible through websites such as the DfE’s (2019c) ‘Find and compare schools in England’. This allows for an
easy, and simplistic, comparison and judgement of nursery and primary schools, creating a market place of competing schools for calculating and savvy parents to choose the ‘best’ performers. Such comparability enables decontextualised judgements to be made about ‘best’ and ‘worst’ performing nursery and primary schools, acting as a form of educational Darwinism in the market place of choice and competition. Nursery and primary schools are incited to use calculating strategies and practices to stay ahead of the competition and become winners in this high-stakes competitive environment. All this, it is claimed, produces efficient and transparent schools.

The combination of RBA at the beginning of the reception year and the EYFS profile and the IELS at the end of reception year suggests that the early years are being framed as an intensely data-led governed space and as a ‘social laboratory of experimentation’. For example, data-led calculation and algorithmic prediction of progress from 4-year-olds’ RBA test scores will enable primary schools to foresee potential data performance risks and threats. These managerial tools enable an algorithmic digital governance that offers the seductive prospect of responsible forward planning by identifying individual children at ever-earlier ages who pose a risk and threat to the future performance security of the school. This creates an ever-more precise ‘data-led watchful politics’ (Amoore and De Goede 2005, 230, in Roberts-Holmes 2019c) of ‘anticipation, precaution and pre-emption’ (Lentzos and Rose 2009, 235) within the uncertainties of a risk society (Beck 1992).

Consequences of tight managerial control

This harsh competitive environment leads to pedagogically inappropriate early years strategies, such as ‘ability’ grouping. In a national survey of nursery and reception classes in primary schools, ability grouping from the age of 3 years was found to be common in phonics (76 per cent), maths (62 per cent), reading (57 per cent) and literacy (54 per cent), hardly surprising given the performance management focus upon these areas (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017b). ‘Ability grouping’ works as a biopolitical strategy to classify, sort and categorise children according to their so-called cognitive abilities (Bradbury 2018). It makes spurious predictive claims about young children’s current and future potential and hence limits and constrains possibilities. Campbell’s (2013) research into early years ability grouping practices found that summer-born children tended to be more often placed in the lowest-ability groups while autumn-born
children, who were relatively older, were placed in the highest-ability groups. Such arbitrary use of ability grouping based upon chance events such as whether a child is summer or autumn born is problematic, especially given that the overwhelming majority of young children placed into particular ability sets or streams will stay in their assigned ability groups throughout their schooling journey (Roberts-Holmes 2019a).

The effects of early years ability grouping can be profoundly damaging and long lasting. Judging, labelling and placing young children into ability groups from the moment they first walk through the reception door at age 4, or at an even earlier age, serves as a form of ‘evil’ (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017b, 1). Practitioners in Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes’ (2017b) national survey stated that system demands were changing the character of education. For example, one pointed to a loss of play time: ‘Grouping in a data driven world seems to be becoming the norm. This sadly takes away from child led play time as we are forced into writing and reading.’ Two others noted that streaming by ability was forced on them: ‘The constant fixation on data results means that grouping becomes necessary’ and ‘They are streamed by ability for phonics because of the phonics test.’

From the perspective of managerial control, early years ability grouping for early literacy, phonics and numeracy is seen as a necessary strategy to achieve the required ELG and PSC outcomes and to stay ahead of the competition. However, Jarvis (2016, 15) notes that for many early years children, especially boys, the relentless pressure to perform in early numeracy and literacy at such a young age is developmentally inappropriate and has resulted in ‘a tsunami of mental health problems’, and insists that ‘the entire system must be radically reconsidered, including a proposal for nursery education to age 7, firmly based upon independent and collaborative discovery’.

Excessive early years managerial control also has detrimental impacts upon early years practitioners’ well-being and mental health, as noted in Chapter 5. Early years workers, respondents in research into the pilot of the RBA (Roberts-Holmes et al. 2020), spoke of the stress such testing regimes induced:

Get rid of it [the RBA] and for once look after the staff and their well-being. We do far too much paperwork as it is.

Mental health and well-being of pupils and staff need this funding not additional assessments.
The education system is completely out of hand. Teachers are not happy and the stress level is high.
Invest in teachers and reduce workload!! So many good teachers are leaving due lack of support, workload, stress and pressure!

A survey of 2,000 childcare workers by the Pre-school Learning Alliance reported ‘out of control’ workload pressures, driven by the paperwork and administration generated by excessive accountability. Respondents in the survey commented that:

The paperwork and EYFS goals are ridiculous. I do not agree with the way the UK [sic] government perceives children as robots reaching milestones at set points in their lives.

Early years has become about making children fit a criteria [sic] – no consideration is given to the speed the children learn at the moment … Everything is now about ticking the right box. (Pre-school Learning Alliance 2018, 7)

A quarter of the respondents in the survey were considering quitting the sector as a result of stress and mental health difficulties. This teacher, in the study of the pilot RBA, had gone beyond considering to actually quitting:

I handed in my resignation earlier in the academic year. One of my concerns was the Baseline testing and the constant pressures put upon EYFS to produce the appropriate data. When there was talk that the Baseline was returning, I knew it was time for me to leave teaching.

Given the above deeply problematic consequences of the English government’s tightly controlled and managerial approach to accountability in early years education, I would argue it should be scrapped and replaced by a more participatory and democratic approach based on professional judgements. Trusting early years professional judgements is an essential step in moving early years education away from its current ‘dead zone of the imagination’ (Giroux 2014, 503) and towards democratic child-led possibilities, diversity and difference. The chapter now turns its attention towards such democratic alternatives and possibilities.
Towards transformative change

From managerial control to democratic assessment and accountability

A socio-cultural approach to learning respects and values the complexity of teachers and children’s relationships and so offers a democratic, participatory and meaningful approach to assessment and accountability. The defining features of such an approach to assessment and accountability are premised upon the respectful and democratic image of a ‘rich’ child (and ‘rich’ teachers) with their myriad potentialities and possibilities and who are collaborative actors in their own learning. A ‘rich’ child is:

- a child born with great potential that can be expressed in a hundred languages; an active learner, seeking the meaning of the world from birth, a co-creator of knowledge, identity, culture and values;
- a child that can live, learn, listen and communicate, but always in relation with others; the whole child, the child with body, mind, emotions, creativity, history and social identity; an individual, whose individuality and autonomy depend upon interdependence … and a citizen and a subject of rights. (Moss 2014, 88)

A democratic assessment is one concerned with the participation of young children in meaningful and authentic contexts, in collaboration with other children and adults, and one which is embedded in tasks that children see as significant, meaningful and worthwhile. This approach to assessment and accountability values early years teachers’ professional judgements to observe and listen to children in their everyday authentic experiences and contexts such as play. Through an engagement with a discourse of meaning-making rather than a functional and utilitarian discourse of standards, performance measures and outcomes, early years teachers can reclaim the idea of professional judgement.

Informal assessments, carried out as children engage in experiences they see as relevant and meaningful, such as play, are likely to produce the best and most comprehensive rich picture of early learning and development. Unlike positivist norm-based accountability, which seeks to govern and control through simplistic categories, numbers and linear outcomes, democratic assessment focuses upon the learning process itself. It embraces a participatory and democratic co-construction of knowledge between children and adults that is driven by children’s questions and curiosity.
Examples of a democratic socio-cultural approach to assessment and accountability include learning stories (Carr and Lee 2012), originally from New Zealand, and pedagogical documentation (Moss 2014), originally from Reggio Emilia in northern Italy. Both have already appeared in this book; see in particular Chapter 8 for a discussion of learning stories and pedagogical documentation. Learning stories and pedagogical documentation are democratic because they trust early years teachers to make their own contextualised professional judgements as members of teams working collaboratively and having deep knowledge of the life circumstances of the children in their care. These democratic assessment approaches embrace diversity, uncertainty, contingency and unpredictability of processes and outcomes. Indeed, according to the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, young children ‘need to learn how to learn … [to] support lifelong learning’ (Ministry of Education 2017, 7). Both approaches document learning that is chosen and led by the children themselves, with the educator participating as a facilitator, enabler and co-constructor who is open to the unexpected and the unpredictable. They use a narrative assessment approach that respectfully documents, interprets and reflects upon a rich and complex picture of children and teachers as co-constructors of meaning and knowledge. They emphasise and focus upon the importance of making a wide range of children’s early learning visible and evident to the children themselves, families and teachers so that all can democratically participate and reflect upon the learning that children can do.

Learning that may be made visible with learning stories and pedagogical documentation includes, for example, learning dispositions, a range of cognitive abilities, emotional well-being and sociability (Dunphy 2008). This rich and democratic approach to assessment and making learning visible is formative, because it can be used to promote further learning with children and families. Learning stories and pedagogical documentation take listening to young children seriously, as children seek to communicate through multi-modal expressions of meaning-making, their hundred languages. Over time, early years teachers carefully and sensitively use the methods of observation, communication, documentation and reflection to write narrative assessments compiled from a variety of sources including observations, conversations, photographs, drawings, art work and notes. A particularly useful time to engage in such observations and listening to children is when they are participating in meaningful play activities (Dunphy 2008). Indeed a child’s well-being and the characteristics of effective learning, such as resilience, perseverance and self-regulation learned in the context of meaningful play, are
seen to be more reliable predictors of later academic achievement, rather than ‘short-term academic results’, which may not last (Whitebread and Bingham 2012).

Pedagogical documentation (such as drawings, artefacts and photographs), along with storytelling and dialogue with teachers, allows teachers to democratically respect young children’s competence and ability to have a say in and recognise their own learning journeys, enabling children to construct positive ‘possible learner selves’ (Carr and Lee 2012). These positive alternatives and possibilities of the self are situated within the school and home and ascribe an agency to the young learner that enables her or him to take on an ‘authoring role’ in the construction of themselves. Here, educational outcomes become ‘the appropriation of a repertoire of learner identities and possible selves’ (Carr and Lee 2012, 32), which can help to remedy children’s negative self-perceptions.

An excellent example of pedagogical documentation is the Crow Project (Moss 2014), undertaken in a Swedish preschool. The documentation consisted of children’s (and teachers’) drawings, paintings, photographs from the woods, research notes, plaster and papier-mâché models of crows, made over the course of a year. Ongoing democratic discussion with the children about their artefacts made visible the social-learning processes to the children and teachers. The Crow Project had a strong emphasis upon open-ended project work, listening to children and ‘a strong belief in the unlimited potentiality of children’ (Carr and Lee 2012, 139), and focused upon the learning processes of participation, dialogue and imagination. Within the Crow Project, learning in its myriad of forms and contexts was locally generated, owned and used by the children, teachers and families for their own democratically decided purposes.

However, Dunphy (2008) has noted the challenges for the implementation of such an approach. First, there is a need for professional preparation and understanding of how authentic participatory assessments can be carried out. Second, narrative formative assessments and their collaborative interpretation take considerable time – a scarce commodity for early years teachers already straining under immense workloads. Third, there are structural issues, such as adult to child ratios, that militate against a complex narrative approach to assessment and accountability.

The democratic assessment and accountability approach outlined above involves professional teams and families taking responsibility for the assessment of children’s learning rather than relying on ‘outside experts’ with their supposedly objective indicators and performance...
measures. Taking local, shared responsibility involves decision-making from a position of mutual understanding. Such a cooperatively democratic accountability is a moral and political process because it involves a shared, mutual trust and responsibility (Fielding and Moss 2011) from teachers, families, children and local early years’ advisors. For example, Alison Peacock (2016, 132), the headteacher of an English primary school, advocates a shared responsibility approach to accountability based on socio-cultural pedagogy:

What we need next is to lead the way in finding a means to improve our accountability systems, informed and inspired by dispositions of trust, openness, generosity and professional courage … As teachers we have the opportunity (and responsibility) to make a difference for those within our own learning sphere today. We can make the decision to listen, to trust, to work collaboratively and most importantly, to believe that there is another way.

The accountability approach I am advocating, of democratic participation and shared responsibility engaging with meaningful learning, is quite different from an accountability approach of managerial control, where children and teachers have little shared social responsibility for assessment beyond a functional and instrumental requirement to provide performance ‘evidence’. This is because neoliberalism ‘attempts to undermine all forms of solidarity capable of challenging market-driven values and social relations, promoting the virtues of an unbridled individualism almost pathological in its disdain for community, social responsibility, public values and the public good’ (Giroux 2014, 2). However, as Peacock and her comments quoted above exemplify, there are many courageous teachers involved in a resistance movement to neoliberalism, managerial accountability and their damaging effects upon early years education: it is heartening to note that the neoliberal accountability reforms outlined in this chapter are challenged and contested.

There are other examples. On a local scale, Archer (2019) has identified early years professionals’ and teachers’ ‘stories of activism’ made in response to political decisions. These micro ‘stories of activism’ included lobbying, social media activity, petitions and meetings, which had the effect of developing a critical literacy among teachers. This critical literacy enabled teachers to ‘recognise the power of dominant narratives and how these shape policy trajectories’. On a larger scale, there are a range of early years organisations engaged in an urgent advocacy for children’s voices to be heard and teachers’ professionalism to be respected.
For example, the Early Years Coalition is a campaigning coalition made up of different early years sector organisations working together to represent the sector’s views to the Department for Education, particularly around proposed new ELGs (Pascal et al. 2019).

Additionally, primary school teacher unions such as the National Education Union have led successful campaigns against the introduction of the RBA. For example, in 2016, nearly 5,000 primary schools refused to implement the English government’s first attempt to introduce the RBA in England, and this contributed to the government withdrawing, albeit returning later with a second attempt at introducing this new testing regime. Alison Peacock was one of the thousands of headteachers and early years teachers who refused baseline testing. She noted that:

understanding children’s thinking and developing their ideas through building and sustaining dialogue as an expert form of teaching, enables high challenge within a richly supportive environment. This is the beauty and the art of early years teaching that cannot be reduced to scores on a page, or to boxes on a tracking screen … we need to put assessment back in its box; thereby refusing temptation to place labels on children or their teachers. (Peacock 2016, 36)

Early years teachers’ activism in 2016 demonstrated that an apparently dominant, totalising and monolithic accountability regime was in fact, contestable. Moreover, in 2019 over 7,000 schools refused to pilot the government’s latest RBA (Nursery World 2019). One of the headteachers who decided not to participate commented that if:

the government really wanted to make a difference to education what you do is, you massively, massively invest in early years education, as in nursery schools and pre-schools and you get all of that community stuff going again such as Sure Start and libraries and health visitors.

This political struggle is important because, as Giroux (2019, 508) states, ‘market-driven educational reforms, with their obsession with standardisation, high-stakes testing, and punitive policies … exhibit contempt for teachers and distrust of parents, repress creative teaching, destroy challenging and imaginative programs of study, and treat children as mere inputs on an assembly line’. By contesting the English government’s commitment to managerial control, early years activism at both the micro and macro scale can demonstrate a critical disposition and literacy towards
market-driven educational reforms. Such activism provides hope to contest neoliberal reforms and advocate for local democratic, participatory and authentic assessment that respects and values both children and teachers.

**Further reading**

*Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood* by Peter Moss (Routledge, 2019) is an important book that gives the reader an accessible entry into what neoliberalism means and its impacts upon early years education. It also provides an excellent introduction to the importance of telling alternative narratives, which contest the ‘dictatorship of no alternative’ that is currently prevalent in English early years education.

Guy Roberts-Holmes’s article ‘School readiness, governance and early years ability grouping’ (*Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 2019), available at doi.org/10.1177/1463949119863128, presents research evidence from a national project that suggests that performance measures, such as the early learning goals and the phonics screening check, govern and steer early years teachers towards inappropriate ability-grouping practices to obtain required outputs and results.

Finally, the website for More Than A Score, at morethanascore.org.uk, carries videos, stories and blogs that demonstrate how the early years should be a time for self-discovery, building confidence and nourishing potential. It argues that young children in England are being let down by a system that cares more about measurement than their education, imagination and possibilities.

**Note**

1. On 25 June 2020, the English Department for Education (DfE, 2020, n.p.) announced that ‘the statutory introduction of the Reception Baseline Assessment will be delayed for a year because of the issues brought about by the Covid 19 pandemic.’

**References**


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*, 30 (3), 302–15.


