

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>