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Jarvis, P. (2017) Commentary: Accountability measures: 'the factory farm version of education'. *Psychology of Education Review*, 41(1), 25-29.

## **Commentary: Accountability measures: ‘the factory farm version of education’**

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Hutchings raises many useful points in her article, commenting on her research findings with teachers, headteachers and pupils. The comments that these participants made will surely come as no surprise to those in control of policy for schools in England, given that they have been receiving similar criticism throughout the past decade. The last truly independent review of primary education in England, the Cambridge Review (Alexander 2010) raised similar points to many of those contained in *Exam Factories* and *Accountability Measures*, but the government of the day rejected it outright, particularly the suggestion that children should start school at six, proposing that this ‘flies in the face of international evidence’ (BBC 2009).

However, seven years later, England has made no progress in the PISA comparisons between OECD nations, and the most commonly reported school starting age of nations at the top of the PISA charts is in fact six. Finland, a perennial high performer, has a school starting age of seven and no statutory assessment system at all (Jarvis 2016a). Moreover, as Hutchings comments, the fact that GCSE performance has apparently increased, while, over the same period, PISA performance has remained static is an issue that urgently merits further investigation. Such disparate findings raise many questions about who should be made accountable, and for what.

As Hutchings points out, the notion that schools and teachers should be ‘accountable’ for ‘performance’ against externally-imposed targets has been an obsession for the British government since the advent of mass schooling, resulting in the periodic application of over-simplistic metrics apparently intended to raise the quality of education, but which eventually result in depressing it. Consider, for example, the following:

...the standards themselves were defective because they were based not on an experimental enquiry into what children of a given age actually knew, but on an a priori notion of what they ought to know. They largely ignored the wide range of individual capacity, and the detailed formulations for the several ages were not always precise or appropriate.

Gillard 2011(online)

It might seem that Gillard is discussing the current education system here, but in fact, he is referring to the system initiated by the ‘Revised Code of Conduct’ in 1862. This code and its infamous “payment by results” regime held teachers and pupils in its iron grip for an astonishing thirty years until it was recognised as a failure and abandoned in 1892, following increasing concern about the narrowness of the curriculum brought about by the inevitable teaching to test. Extending the similarity to

the current situation in state education, the inadvisability of such regimes was in fact well known for at least forty years before the 'Revised Code of Conduct' was published. In the early nineteenth century, pioneer educator Robert Owen commented, based on what he had observed in the early factory school system, that he had concluded teaching narrowly to test resulted in children becoming mentally 'cramped and paralysed' which would 'render their moral character depraved and dangerous' to the extent that they could 'never become really useful subjects of the state' (Owen 1991, p.163). Owen also deplored mechanical, skills-based approaches to literacy instruction, pledging that his school would: '...avoid literacy becoming an end in its own right, to ensure that the ability to decode and print text was wedded to the capacity to comprehend and derive satisfaction from the act of reading' (Davis and O'Hagan 2010, p.94). This has also recently re-arisen as a live issue in the light of current government insistence on a statutory phonics test for five year olds, and continues to be hotly debated by literacy experts and policy makers (Clark 2016).

So why do we continue to endlessly circle around accountability issues, generation after generation? As Hutchings comments, the most logical way to move forward from today's fractured and factionalised narrative in state education 'is surely to tackle wider economic inequality in society rather than to blame schools and teachers'. However, in 2016, as in 1862, it is much easier for the government of the day to scapegoat teachers, schools and parents for children's "failure to perform" than it is to engage with powerful echelons which have many vested interests in a national and international economy that depends upon maintaining a grossly unequal society. 'Performance measures' are therefore imposed upon schools as a smokescreen, spitting out a constant stream of highly questionable data (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury 2016) that obscures the devastating effects of economic inequality, blaming parents, teachers and schools for the differential achievements of the nation's children.

Alongside the creation of a range of highly questionable assessment metrics, including the eventually abandoned attempt to impose a so-called 'baseline test' upon the nation's four-and-a-half year olds, which according to the National Union of Teachers cost the nation 'millions [in the pursuit of] establishing a "flawed" system' (Children and Young People Now 2016, online), the Conservative-led coalition government of 2010-2015 additionally introduced the rhetoric of 'troubled families' which underpinned an initiative into which they pumped £400,000,000. In 2016, an evaluation of this project found that its activities had principally been used as "window dressing" to assure the public that "something was being done", but that in fact, the project had no significant impact upon the lives of socio-economically deprived children or their families (DFE 2016).

While the parents and teachers of the mid-nineteenth century did not have the psychological vocabulary to fully discuss the unhappiness that existed in their schools with policy-makers (although writers like Charles Dickens and Charlotte Bronte described this vividly in novels such as 'Hard Times', 'Nicholas Nickleby' and 'Jane Eyre'), this aspect of childhood is of growing concern in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. There has been a doubling of juvenile depression between the 1980s and 2000s (Young Minds 2016a) and a huge rise in self harming, with increasing numbers of

children and young people needing hospitalisation (The Guardian 2014). Self-harming is a reaction to being placed under unbearable mental pressure, as physical injury releases endorphins that counteract the stress response (Students Against Depression 2016). There are also a growing number of young people developing eating disorders and suicidal thoughts (Young Minds 2015), a statistic which has risen rapidly since 2009, with a doubling of numbers presenting psychiatric problems to Accident and Emergency departments (Young Minds 2016b). Two successive UNICEF reports on children's well-being in rich nations undertaken in 2007 and 2013 (UNICEF 2007; UNICEF 2013) have additionally indicated that English children have a very low sense of well-being.

As Hutchings points out, quoting one of her participants 'you can't be counselling them for what you are putting them through at school', and it is becoming increasingly clear, as she also comments 'the target-driven school system is a factor in young people's mental health problems'. This comes down harder on young people whose lives are already blighted by poverty which continues to worsen within the current austerity economy (Child Poverty Action Group 2016), feeding into a spiral of failure, as Hutchings documents: 'teachers who reported most pressure on pupils and uniform (boring) lessons, came from schools that had low attainment and poor inspection grades... there is a strong correlation between these two factors and proportion of disadvantaged pupils in the school.'

Many of the issues Hutchings raises relate to policy makers' lack of understanding of 'human' and developmental issues, a point that I have raised continually in my own research (for e.g., Jarvis et al 2014; Jarvis 2015 and Jarvis 2016). Hutchings' examples include complex and non-linear reasons for parental selection of schools for their children, the impossible pressure upon teachers and head teachers that turns schools into socio-emotional pressure cookers, damaging the mental health and well being of both adults and children within them, the removal of professional decision making from teachers, resulting in their inability to address children's individual needs including developmental difficulties and delays, and a narrow definition of 'failure', particularly with respect to an over-reliance on "pencil and paper" skills. As Hutchings comments, 'even if young people have other skills and attributes that could be useful in a job, they are likely to be rejected'.

Overall then, I am in complete agreement with Hutchings' thesis that there 'is substantial evidence that accountability measures have had a great many negative impacts on teachers, children and young people, and on the quality of education in England'. Throughout her text, Hutchings vividly demonstrates how the current regime of English state education wastes human talent, deskilling both teachers and pupils and creating vicious circles of disadvantage. The historical data indicates that she is also correct in her proposal that 'there is evidence that the same negative impacts have been experienced whenever high stakes testing has been imposed'.

There are however some points in the article that would have benefitted from slightly greater clarity. For example, the relationship between English and Maths and Literacy/ Numeracy skills where the discussion of 'learning more things that were practically useful' arises, and the role of enjoyment, imagination and narrative in reading. As a psychologist who specialises in developmental issues, I would also

dispute that 'guided play' is the 'most effective strategy' for supporting young children's learning, and would instead suggest that free, spontaneous interaction amongst adults and peers is the most appropriate learning environment for children between birth and seven, where the adult follows the child's lead rather than vice versa (Jarvis et al 2014; Jarvis 2015). The narrative of the article would have been enriched by reference to the highest quality early years practice, which is based in freely chosen activity on the child's part and sustained shared thinking on the adult's (Siraj- Blatchford 2009), with particular reference to the fact that it is impossible to embed such a process in a regime where both teachers and children are judged on their abilities to address narrow, pre-defined targets.

Recent damning evidence has emerged to further illustrate Hutchings' thesis that performance targets in education spawn a dysfunctional system that discriminates against the most vulnerable. In November 2016, the outgoing OFSTED Chief Inspector, Michael Wilshaw reported that young people with special needs that make them unlikely to achieve government targets are at risk of being excluded from school and channelled into so called 'alternative provision', some of which operates illegally, under the direction of untrained staff. He reported a dramatic rise in the number of excluded pupils being schooled in 'unsafe and unhygienic premises by staff who have not been properly checked' (The Guardian 2016).

This then, is the final irony: the imposition of 'standards' apparently created to protect and enhance children's rights to education, which ultimately result in the complete exclusion from the system of those in the greatest need, because they are not good quality commodities in terms of bolstering the school's standing in the national league tables. Instead of being safe at school, such children are instead constructed as "damaged goods" to be siphoned off into 'potentially dangerous places' (The Guardian 2016). In the light of such a dystopian nightmare, I emphatically support Hutchings' call for 'a comprehensive review of accountability strategies with a view to radically changing them'- indeed, our children, who have now become pawns in a cynical socio-political game, deserve nothing less. Like our ancestors in 1892, we must finally recognise that the accountability emperor is utterly naked, and move on from the deeply dysfunctional culture that currently dominates state education. As responsible adults, we must now act to protect both children currently in state education in England, and those yet to come. We must construct a new framework for state education which is rooted in 'policies... grounded on the best available evidence of what human beings are *like*' (Singer, 1999, p. 61). A starting point for this conversation has already been waiting in the wings for the past seven years, encapsulated in the Cambridge Primary Review. Professionals and academics in education and child development await the government's call.

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