

# What has happened to our schools?

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The first instalment of the Soundings Futures analysis of education

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This is the first instalment of an article on education for the Soundings Futures series.<sup>1</sup> Its main focus is on schools (since university education was the subject of a previous instalment). Within this, in the discussion on curricula and assessment in Part II there is a greater focus on primary education, although the developments we discuss have deeply influenced the entire school system in England.<sup>2</sup> This first instalment discusses the changes introduced into the system since the 1980s. Part I of this article looks at the underlying ideas that drove the changes, while Part II looks at the effects of the changes introduced in the various educational reforms that followed on from the major change of direction signalled by the Education Act of 1988. A second instalment, to be published in 2018, will set out how we envisage a progressive reform of the present system, to embody more democratic, egalitarian, and imaginative conceptions of what our schools could and should be.

## **Part I: The neoliberal programme for education**

The first steps in the programme to transform the post-war schools system were in the form of polemic, in the publication of the series of five 'black papers' on education from 1969 to 1977.<sup>3</sup> The authors of the Black Papers put forward a view of the post-war educational system as ruled by collectivist and socialist ideas, which in their view had captured the teaching profession, and what they saw as the

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educational establishment, including many academics and civil servants (exactly the group whom Michael Gove would later term 'the Blob'). They were also critical of the liberalising and anti-authoritarian currents of the 1960s and 1970s. Claiming to represent the cause of equality of opportunity, they argued that educational standards, and the life-chances of working-class children, were being sacrificed to misguided 'progressive' ideas. They viewed the 'child-centred' approach to education which had informed the Plowden Report as a reflection of the attitudes of a left-wing segment of the middle class, which valued free expression and vague notions of personal development, over discipline and achievement.<sup>4</sup> They argued that the emphasis on class differences and inequalities as major determinants of educational outcomes served as an excuse for the failures of schools to meet the needs of their pupils. One current of conservative thinking wanted a return to traditional, 'high cultural' values and curricula. Another gave emphasis to the needs of industry and employment, favouring an emphasis on basic skills such as literacy and maths. This combination of free-market economic liberalism and cultural tradition and hierarchy, even though self-contradictory, was to become a central feature of Thatcherism. The aspirations which had been aroused by the post-war expansion in schooling were now turned by the right into grievances, against the alleged failure of the educational system to deliver on its promises.

The Labour Party leadership felt obliged to respond to the anxieties stirred up by this critique, which was shared by many social conservatives within the party. Prime minister James Callaghan's contribution was a major speech at Ruskin College in 1976, which launched a 'Great Debate' on education. Callaghan took up concerns about 'informal methods of teaching', the complaints of industry about recruits not having 'the basic tools to do the job that is required', and unfilled vacancies in science and engineering subjects in universities when humanities courses were full. While treading cautiously and showing respect to what had been achieved, he referred to concerns about 'basic literacy and numeracy', indicated his sympathy for the idea of a 'basic curriculum with universal standards', and mentioned 'divided opinions' about the 'position and role of the inspectorate'. He denied that his speech was a 'clarion call to Black Paper prejudices', but warned teachers: 'you must satisfy the parents and industry that what you are doing meets their requirements and the needs of our children. For if the public is not convinced then the profession will be laying up trouble for itself in the future'. Labour was voted out of office in 1979, not long after this speech was made, but it had set the tone for many later developments,

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and was an important sign of a shift away from progressive ideas in education within the Labour Party. It was the incoming Thatcher government, however, that instituted the tranche of reforms that have since transformed the school system.

The political project of conservative neoliberalism was to divide the users of education, health and other services from their professional providers. The accusation was that professionals were motivated by their own occupational self-interest, and not by commitment to their pupils. They were represented as arrogant and out of touch with their pupils' needs. A strategy of conservative populism was pursued in relation to all public services, including schooling. Failure needed to be exposed, rigorous standards and targets set and enforced, and users of services set free to choose the best providers available. This was informed by the belief that markets were a form of organisation superior to elected governments, professions and bureaucracies. One underlying purpose of the neoliberal reform programme has therefore been to move the system towards a 'market' model, individualist and competitive in its basic mentalities, and away from forms of collective provision which rely on professional commitment and trust.<sup>5</sup>

In the sphere of education, the implementation of such a programme was immensely complicated. Education has to be provided, up to a certain level at least, for *all* children, and institutions, rules and resources have to be maintained to achieve this. Economy and society alike depend on the capacity of the school system to produce citizens with enough education to enable them to fulfil their roles. Ultimately it is the state's responsibility to ensure that this happens. In commercial markets, failures are normal and inevitable, a price which has to be paid to incentivise capability and effort. But in domains such as health and education, where institutional failure can bring catastrophe for many people, failures cannot be tolerated. This is the contradiction inherent in competitive market models in basic human services. Governments pursuing a neoliberal programme are in the paradoxical position of wishing to remove themselves from providing basic services like education, while having to retain the responsibility for ensuring that they are provided (and in a competitive world are improving) for all citizens.

This explains the paradox of a school system which is now both organisationally fragmented and incoherent and yet also subject to the most centralised form of regulation and control it has seen in its entire history. Before the changes discussed in this article were introduced, the local authority was the tier of democratic

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government most closely concerned with delivering education, but it has now been largely excluded from educational provision, especially at secondary and tertiary (college and university) level. The role of the Local Education Authority (LEA) has been diminished to such an extent - especially under the Gove ministry - that it now has almost no power. This loss of a platform for collaboration between schools, and for oversight of local provision and underperforming schools, creates a dangerous vacuum, and an absence of democratic accountability. It is therefore likely that some kind of 'middle tier' will have to be reinvented before long - academy chains are already constructing such a tier for their own schools, sometimes adopting a corporate model.

The educational professions, which had previously been allotted significant autonomy and agency, have also been weakened. They have been forced to become the disciplined deliverers of prescribed curricula and assessments, and have lost much of their earlier role as authors and designers of what is taught. Schools are now quasi-enterprises, in which the primary tasks of teaching and assessment have to be combined with the business-like functions of resource-management and competitive success. The talents and techniques of 'management' have become as important in this situation as those of professional educators. The enhanced salary levels of head teachers, and steeper differentials of salary between them and the main body of teaching staff, reflect this mutation of roles.

Other tensions complicate this situation. Raymond Williams described three competing objectives of education systems - the production of a labour force which serves the needs of industry, the transmission of a culture (usually traditional and hierarchical), and the enabling of individuals to develop to their full capacities.<sup>6</sup> The neoliberal programme has given priority to the first two of these functions. Insistence on the skills of literacy and numeracy (as seen, for example, in Gove's mantra of 'back to basics') is a response to the complaints of industry about the competencies of recruits to its workforce; and the imposition on teachers of a conservative idea of culture, especially in English and History teaching, is part of a struggle against the democratic and pluralist perspectives of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>7</sup> The scope for the third objective, however - the development of individuals - has been negatively affected by this narrowing of the curriculum and its domination by testing. It has also been greatly reduced by the loss of resources such as playing fields and the provision for teaching subjects such as music and art, now conceived

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as peripheral. One dystopian but imaginable outcome of neoliberal reform would be for state schools to limit themselves to the provision of free instruction only in 'core' subjects.

### *Standards and 'outputs'*

Much of the political debate about education has been driven by concerns over standards - often discussed in the language of 'outputs'. The public justification for education reforms has very often been the need to address allegedly poor levels of achievement, both among children as individuals, and in regard to Britain's international competitive position. As well as a concern with average levels of achievement, there has also been a focus on what is achieved at opposite ends of the achievement scale. The issue of opportunities for the most able students tends to be reflected in allegations of the 'dumbing down' of qualifications, and suggestions that assessment standards are being diluted, so that evidence of year-on-year improvements in outcomes cannot be relied on.<sup>8</sup> Concern about opportunities for students regarded as being of lower ability, on the other hand, tends to focus on the ways in which their teachers and schools allegedly fail these pupils.

The broader picture is that, since the onset of neoliberalism, there has been a large growth in the total volume of education provided, and of qualifications achieved, over a long period - both in the school system and in higher education.<sup>9</sup> The proportions of those achieving five A-C grade passes at GCSE rose from 41.9 per cent in 1988 to 69.4 in 2012.<sup>10</sup> (The pass rates have recently fallen, however, as a consequence of changes in the examination brought about to counter the effects of what are believed to be an undermining of standards of achievement through grade inflation.) But the evidence indicates that the major changes in organisation and curricula since the 1990s have not had much effect on this long-term trend. For example, great claims were made for the performance of schools freed from LEA control - such as academies and free schools. But in spite of some initial research that seemed to show that academy status had brought a degree of improvement, later evidence has revealed that there are no significant differences in performance between academies and LEA-run schools.<sup>11</sup> The long-term increase in staying-on rates (and of qualifications) has been largely a product of wider societal changes, and has occurred across most OECD nations, regardless of school system.

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Meanwhile, the substantial differences in opportunities attributable to social class position, poverty and ethnicity have altered little over this entire period.<sup>12</sup> The chances of a student from a working-class background going to university - still less a leading university - remain markedly less than those of a student from a more privileged family. Children entitled to Free School Meals (an indicator of relative poverty), which includes about 15 per cent of the pupil population, are significantly less likely than the average student to achieve five A-C grade passes at GSCE.<sup>13</sup> (This disparity has lessened a little in recent years, which may be an effect of the Coalition government's Pupil Premium policy.) Regional differences in outcomes also remain substantial. London schools out-perform most other parts of the country, for reasons which have little to do with educational policies. It seems likely that the explanation lies in the greater opportunities available in London, and the encouragement and incentive to invest effort in education that this provides for children, parents and teachers. In areas with poor economic opportunities, such as the de-industrialised northern cities and many seaside towns, there are fewer incentives for such commitment to schooling.

The shift in educational policy-making that began with the onset of neoliberalism rejected the idea - widespread during the post-war period of social-democratic consensus - that outcomes were largely the effects of class differences and class cultures. Instead the new thinking was based on the idea that the primary determinants of outcomes were the qualities of schools and their head teachers. One study, *15000 Hours*, by Michael Rutter and his co-researchers, became very influential: this showed that the way in which schools were managed did make a difference to outcomes, sometimes enough to outweigh the effects of social intakes on performance.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the whole period since 1979 there has been a focus by all governments, regardless of party, on what individual schools could achieve if they were well managed by heads who performed more like social entrepreneurs than traditional head teachers or public servants. Alongside this came the constant emphasis on inspection and measurement. But while it is true that individual schools and their managers and teachers can make a difference, even Rutter's study admitted that the largest determinants of school outcomes remained the social composition of their intakes.

It is clear also that the neoliberal focus on enhanced parental choice, informed as it now is by school league tables, has had the effect of redistributing opportunities,

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rather than increasing them. Since superior schools cannot be expanded at will to replace inferior ones, the choice of better schools by some parents must have the effect of consigning others to schools which are less good. This is why the issue of selection remains so fraught for both parents and schools seeking to function in this quasi-market - and it also accounts for the increasingly numerous means being found to negotiate and manipulate its rules (e.g. through religious criteria, 'specialisms', even the exclusion of less able or difficult children in order to raise a school's average test scores).

As extensive education research shows, the aim of improving educational outcomes across the board is best achieved by increasing the total investment of resources in an educational system. And, from the point of view of resources, Labour's substantial additional investment in schools from 1997 to 2010 (and in pre-school care and education) was positive. But additional resources are not enough, on their own, to lessen disparities in outcome due to social background: this is also dependent on improvements in the wider environment of economic opportunities. In Britain, these disparities are further reinforced by the existence of a substantial private sector in education. As Tony Blair noted, 'the uniquely wide gap that exists in Britain between educational achievement at the top and standards in the middle and bottom is partly a result of our comparatively large private sector, educating some 7 per cent of children with roughly double the resources per pupil'.<sup>15</sup> Blair's declared aim was to bring state education up to the standard of private education, and the implication appeared to be that state education should be comparably resourced (for example in regard to class sizes). To those who say this cannot be afforded, one must reply that in a society in which skilled and professional employment is being automated out of existence, the devotion of more human resources to people-related work such as education has become both possible and necessary, even in terms of economic need and benefit. Education, like health care, is both a producer and a consumer of resources. (It should be noted, however, that from the perspective of lessening disparities in employment opportunities between different areas of the UK, Labour in office achieved little.)

The conclusion one draws from reflections on the debate on 'standards' and 'outputs' in schools is that its main function has been diversionary and ideological. The primary purpose and effect of the neoliberal reform programme has been to change mentalities, practices and values, not to enhance real opportunities and standards.

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It has been the means of supporting a conservative, individualised, competitive and instrumental view of life, against the heresies of 'progressivism' - seen as collectivist, egalitarian and culturally pluralist. This has been achieved, it must be noted, with some public support. Many people have been persuaded to accept in recent years the idea that market models of provision are superior to others.<sup>16</sup> It has been much easier to make parents lose trust in the education system (which of course has failed many of them in their earlier years) than in the health service, where government has mostly failed in its efforts to divide patients and the larger public from doctors and nurses. (for example through its battles with the GPs and junior doctors). Many people have come to accept in recent years that market models of provision are only 'common sense', such has been the success of this ideology in normalising the market model. And it has also been possible for the socially resourceful to negotiate opportunities for school choice to their advantage. Thus there has been only limited resistance to the reorganisation of schools that has taken place. Publics have been to a degree convinced by the false promises of improvement for all by means of which this reform programme has been justified, and by the idea that it is schools and teachers that are to be blamed where this is not achieved. There is a discrepancy, however, between parents' mostly positive assessment of their experience of their own children's school and its teachers, and their distrust of the system in general, which is influenced by its denigration by politicians and press.

However, an important precondition of this acquiescence in neoliberal reforms has been government's declared commitment to protect the level of funding for education (and health), even in times of austerity. It is where this promise seems to have been broken (as with the recent proposed cuts in some school budgets, as a result of redistributing resources to 'less well-funded' areas) that public consent is lost. A perception of a crisis in public provision is now becoming current, as it did in the 1990s, and this is changing the terms of debate. We are reaching the point where a Conservative government is becoming once again associated in the public mind with failing public services.

### **Part II The 1988 Education Act and its aftermath**

Many of the fundamental educational changes discussed in this article have their origins in the 1988 Educational Reform Act, introduced by Kenneth Baker,

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Secretary of State for Education from 1986 to 1989. Indeed, this act is widely held to be the most important act of educational legislation since the Education Act of 1944. Its proposals were heavily influenced by Baker's predecessor as Secretary of State, Keith Joseph, who was one of the most influential neoliberal politicians in the Conservative Party. Joseph was a long-term advocate of free market ideas in education, and was the originator of many of the ideas later embodied in the act, but it was only when he was succeeded by Kenneth Baker that the full programme of neoliberal reforms was instituted.

In an interview more than a decade later, Baker was brutally candid about his aims.<sup>17</sup> These had been to break the power of the teacher unions and the local education authorities, and to destroy the comprehensive system, replacing it with a market in schooling. His ultimate preference had been for a system in which parental choice would be effected through the issue of educational vouchers, to be used as a proxy for money. While the voucher system was not in the end politically feasible, a market system of the kind Baker had in mind is in fact quite close to what now exists in practice. A vast increase in central government regulation and control followed, to ensure that standards would be maintained and increased within this devolved and increasingly fragmented structure.

The main feature of the act in terms of new forms of central government control was the setting up of the National Curriculum and national assessment (although the character of these has changed over time). The measures aimed at weakening LEA control were the institution of Local Management of Schools (LMS), which allowed all schools to be taken out of the direct financial control of local authorities and handed financial control to the head teacher and governors of a school; and the creation of City Technology Colleges, which were also freed from the direct financial control of local authorities. There was also a requirement that these City Technology Colleges should have partial private funding. Although only fifteen such schools were set up, they were the forerunners for the later and much larger Academy programme.<sup>18</sup>

An important further development in this neoliberal evolution was the establishment of Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education) in the Education (Schools) Act of 1992. Ofsted's role was to supervise a national scheme of inspections of each state-funded school in the country, publishing its reports for the benefit of schools, parents, and government instead of merely reporting to the

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Secretary of State. It was given substantial powers, and came to acquire a fearsome reputation. Its four classifications of quality became key factors affecting schools' ability to compete for reputation and hence recruitment of students. The 1988 Act's introduction of an element of parental choice meant that a school's reputation could now have a major impact on its ability to attract pupils. Ofsted's role in supervising quality control was illustrative of a deep change in the functions of the state: from being primarily a provider it was becoming mainly a regulator of provision. This is described in the theory of the 'new public management' as a shift from 'government' to 'governance'.<sup>19</sup>

### *The fragmentation of the school system*

The Baker Act offered schools the opportunity to move away from LEA control, both through LMS and the creation of City Technology Colleges. In the Learning and Skills Act of 2001, the Blair government introduced a third development that accelerated this process, through the creation of Academy Schools. These were schools to be operated as self-governing non-profit making charitable trusts, directly funded by the Department of Education, and wholly outside LEA control. These were initially known as City Academies ('City' was dropped in 2002). Initially their role was to serve as a replacement for 'failing' schools; the idea was that the shortcomings of such schools would be remedied through the greater autonomy and stronger leadership of the academies. Academies were not obliged to follow the entire National Curriculum, apart from those elements concerned with literacy and numeracy, but they remained subject to oversight and inspection by Ofsted. Initially they required an element of business sponsorship (another neoliberal pro-market dimension), but when it became clear that not enough businesses were going to come forward, this requirement had to be dropped. New Labour's academies rescued the Tories' unsuccessful City Technology Colleges programme. Only fifteen CTCs were created, but by May 2010 there were 203 academy schools.<sup>20</sup>

Michael Gove, as Secretary of State from 2010 to 2014, brought in measures that further speeded up the shift to academies. By May 2015, 2075 out of 3381 secondary schools were academies (although only 2440 out of 16,766 primary schools had academy status). The Tory government elected in 2015 planned to push the programme even further, initially stating that by 2022 all local authority schools

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must become academies. What had at first been presented as a programme to take in hand and improve 'failing schools' had become the model for all schools.

A further move towards fragmentation brought in by Gove was the creation of 'free schools', which could operate completely outside of LEA control but would still be in receipt of government funding. These free schools (now about 7 per cent of all schools in the maintained secondary sector) would be set up under the auspices or sponsorship of businesses, universities or other independent entities. They have had generous central government funding. However, little regard has been paid to local need or existing provision in decisions about where they are to be set up.

The school system is now a fragmented hybrid, embodying conflicting principles. It remains free for pupils and their families. Profit-making entities are still excluded from it (unless they are the providers of out-sourced services or educational materials - these have an increasing role in the new educational economy). But it would involve a change of principle, rather than of organisational substance, if there were to be a shift to permit profit-making companies, as well as not-for-profit trusts, to join what is now all but a market in the provision of schooling. At the time of writing, the May government is constrained in its ability to institute radical change in education because of its lack of a majority, but one could predict that if there were a return to power of a strong neoliberal government, this would be the next frontier to be crossed.

It should be noted, however, that throughout the history of this programme of reform there have been many arguments and battles, often between the educators and the politicians. It was not always possible to override the expertise and experience of teachers in matters of curricula and assessment. Parent groups have sometimes resisted changes in governance, and made effective their preference for 'local authority' over 'academy' status for schools. The government recently had to abandon its plan to require all schools to become academies, mainly because of the defence by some Conservative LEAs of their own successful schools. The developmental culture of many schools continues to be sustained through the commitment of teachers to their students, and their inventiveness and creativity. There has also recently been strong opposition to the reduction in some school budgets, especially in cities, as a result of the government's redistribution plans; and Theresa May's retrograde plan to reinstitute grammar schools has been another casualty of her failure in the general election.

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Opposition parties have as yet set out no clear alternative to the fragmented structure of schooling that we now have (local authority primary schools, 'community schools' at secondary level, religious schools, academy schools, free schools, and of course private schools). But the present unstable political situation, in which the government barely has a parliamentary majority, and in which Labour led by Corbyn has challenged neoliberal orthodoxy in several areas, may have the effect of creating space for a new direction.

### *The national curriculum*

Since 1988 governments have assumed control over the content of education, over teachers' pedagogy (the way that content is taught), and over assessment (the way that students' progress is measured). This micro-management of content has seen a progressive shrinking of the curriculum, so that it is now one which is seen by some educationalists as 'depressingly narrow' and 'stuck in the nineteenth century'.<sup>21</sup> In addition, assessment has become increasingly 'high stakes'. Formative assessment - i.e. assessment to inform teaching, in which the main point of assessment is to provide feedback for learners - now has little place in the official system: teachers' assessments are all about mastery of the curriculum. Meanwhile, summative assessment - in the shape of regular national testing - is used not only to report on individual children's performance, but as a major accountability measure for the evaluation of teachers and schools. This use of assessment as a means of measuring the new education 'market', now its prime function, has compromised its ability to assess students' progress.

For nearly twenty years, from when it was set up in 1964, the development of the curriculum was the responsibility of the Schools Council, which undertook research and development in school curricula and examinations, and included a strong representation of teachers. But in 1982 Keith Joseph announced that the Schools Council would be abolished. It was replaced by two separate organisations, one dealing with assessment and one with curriculum matters, both entities having their members nominated by himself. This was the beginning of central government regulation of a field that had hitherto devolved primarily to professional educators.

The first national curriculum was written by government-appointed committees, allowing teachers virtually no say in its construction. It was huge and unmanageable,

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even though teachers' initial responses to its provisions were generally positive. This was partly because curriculum committees, although all their members were government appointees, did include educational experts, and the curriculum documents took account of current thinking in each subject. It was therefore the subject of serious discussion during the consultation period. But the most damaging outcome of the change was that it prevented teachers and schools from being 'curriculum innovators' and demoted them instead to the role of 'curriculum deliverers'.<sup>22</sup>

In the event, the relatively uncontroversial first draft of the National Curriculum was not acceptable to right-wing pressure groups, which had urged greater government control of the curriculum, and there followed a series of battles, leading to its controversial revisions, especially in English. Here the role of Chris Woodhead - as chief executive of the National Curriculum Council and the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (1991-4) and then head of Ofsted 1994-2000 - was critical. Woodhead took a personal hand in revisions to the English curriculum, especially in primary schools, giving a much more prominent place to phonics and grammar teaching.

The Blair government's innovation in the curriculum was to intervene directly in the area of pedagogy, which in the original National Curriculum had been reserved for professionals.<sup>23</sup> In 1998-9 the Blair government set up the National Literacy Strategy and the National Numeracy Strategy, and embarked on a national training programme that specified in detail how curriculum content should be taught. The Literacy Strategy in particular came in for intense criticism and pressure, from both left and right of the educational spectrum.

In particular, the growing 'phonics' lobby, led by the Reading Reform Foundation, rejected the Literacy Strategy's approach to teaching reading, which argued that children learn to read most effectively by using a range of strategies.<sup>24</sup> This range included phonics, but the lobby pressed for phonics as the first and main strategy to be taught in the initial stages of reading. Eventually the Blair government bowed to this pressure, and in 2008 set up the Rose Review of the primary curriculum, which included the teaching of reading, and proposed a national training scheme in synthetic phonics.<sup>25</sup> This apparently 'technical' argument among literacy experts was a proxy for deep differences of educational orientation. What was at stake was the overthrow of an approach to learning based

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on the development of understanding and enjoyment, in favour of a mechanistic and instrumental approach to learning. This was one of the key spaces in which 'progressive' educational ideas were attacked.

The other major way in which the Blair government impacted on education was in its reliance on targets as a way of managing the education system. The Blair government introduced targets across every government department and in every area of public life in order to 'transform the way public services operate'. In June 2000 Charles Kennedy reported that the government had set up a total of 4585 targets for schools, colleges and LEAs. These targets in turn were broken down into 306,480,472 separate measures to be monitored.

In 2009 the National Curriculum was due to be reviewed, partly in response to a report by the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, which warned that SATs tests were distorting the education of millions of children, because schools focused on getting them through the tests rather than improving their knowledge and understanding.<sup>26</sup> A second 2009 report was published by the Cambridge Primary Review, which took a broadly developmental view.<sup>27</sup> And this was also the year the Rose review reported, and it too addressed concerns that the National Curriculum was too prescriptive and content-heavy.<sup>28</sup> It seemed as if the tide was turning. But before the lessons of these different reviews could have effect, the 2010 election returned a Coalition government, and Michael Gove was appointed as Secretary of State.

Gove scrapped the proposed 'Rose' curriculum and instituted his own review. He also closed down the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Authority, the main agency for testing and for the curriculum. In September 2010 he appointed an 'expert' panel made up of four educationalists to advise him in the shaping of a new National Curriculum. Two of the experts attempted to resign in October 2011 because of the direction the changes were taking, but they were persuaded to remain until December. When the proposed changes were revealed in summer 2012, three members of the panel went public about their dismay at the proposed curricula for maths, science and English.<sup>29</sup> They dissociated themselves from the new curriculum, saying that their advice had been ignored. Andrew Pollard criticised the overly prescriptive nature of the Gove curriculum and its lack of curricular breadth, and drew attention to the influence of American neoliberals on the Gove curriculum: 'the voice that has really counted from

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beginning to the end has been that of an American educator, E.D. Hirsch'.<sup>30</sup>

Gove's curriculum struck at the intended diversity and pluralism of earlier models, which aimed to identify and measure different kinds and levels of capability. It overloaded some subject areas - those deemed to be crucial - with minute requirements, and dismissed others in a few sentences. The aim was to impose a single, one-dimensional model of achievement (or non-achievement), and to downgrade more complex and individualised views of development. He retained SATs tests at 7 and 11 - the main standardising measure - but although teachers would have to show evidence of pupils' progress, there was no guidance about how they should record children's development. For this, schools were told to develop their own systems (or to buy a commercial assessment scheme). The implication was that differentiated measures of progress were no longer of interest to the Secretary of State.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear that under the Gove revisions (which are still in force), the curriculum itself has *become* the assessment system. This is a 'mastery' model: teachers are required to teach the statutory content and through their teacher assessment to keep records of how far individual pupils have mastered it. The new curriculum is focused on knowledge, with very little emphasis on understanding or skills. Because of the minute detail in which the statutory content is sometimes specified (for example in the sections on spelling and grammar in English), the curriculum to be assessed has grown vastly from any previous version of the National Curriculum. Children could be tested on any of these points as part of the SATs, and Ofsted inspectors were also required to see how far this content was being taught and assessed.

This is also a punitive curriculum, for both children and teachers. It over-insists on the inculcation of a few fields of knowledge. These include Phonics, Spelling and Grammar in English, the slow slog through British History, the times-table test, and an emphasis on abstract content - e.g. multiplication - rather than concrete and visual mathematics. It seems that these areas have been privileged in part because of the symbolic importance they have come to have in political debates on education and its purposes. Many have condemned the curriculum's emphasis on 'rote learning rather than understanding'.<sup>32</sup>

The Gove curriculum sets out a year-on-year sequence of knowledge to be acquired. We have space here to look at only two, History and Primary English and Literacy.

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The history curriculum is notable for its cultural conservatism. It begins with the statement that all pupils should: 'know and understand the history of these islands as a coherent chronological narrative (Our Island Story) ... and how Britain has influenced and been influenced by the wider world'. This history begins with 'changes in Britain from the Stone Age to the Iron Age', and in the primary school does not go beyond Edward the Confessor. However there are occasional references to world history ('pupils should be taught about the achievements of the earliest civilisations'). Gove took a personal interest in this curriculum. It has been described as a 'Whiggish trip through great individuals, events and achievements'.<sup>33</sup> It takes little account of the contributions made by people of African and Asian heritage to British history. As the Runnymede Trust asked, 'Who constitutes "the nation" in the national curriculum?' - an important question in a multi-cultural society.<sup>34</sup>

The English curriculum gets special treatment - in the curriculum framework document it takes up 94 of the 260 pages. (Mathematics gets 60, History 6 and Art and Design 2). Of these 94 pages, 22 are devoted to spelling, and 6 to vocabulary, grammar and punctuation (and there is also a 20-page glossary of the technical grammatical terms that appear in the programmes of study). Apart from the glossary, most of these pages are made up of statutory content, and all of this content must be taught, from subordination and coordination (Year 2) to synonyms and antonyms, adverbials and ellipsis (Year 6). There is an overwhelming emphasis on teaching synthetic phonics in the Key Stage 1 reading section.

In the Schools White Paper Gove had promised a 'slim, clear and authoritative' revised curriculum. But the promise to slim down content was carried out where it was least needed. Programmes of study which were already short have been cut down further. (Art has only two pages.) Others, like English, have been padded out with a mass of technical terminology and a proliferation of sub-skills, of significance mainly to grammatical pedants. Even the Conservative-led Select Committee on Education have said that the tests focus too much on the technical aspects of writing and has called for them to be scrapped.<sup>35</sup>

In the Gove curriculum phonics is a fixture - it is presented as the main route into reading at Key Stage 1. The government has mandated 'systematic synthetic phonics' as the method which should be used by all schools. (This is an approach to teaching reading whose preferred route is the learning of phoneme-grapheme correspondences and phonic decoding.) It has given schools money for training and

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materials for this, at a cost of £46 million over two years.<sup>36</sup> These materials must be chosen from government approved lists.

In order to hammer home this policy, six-year-olds in England now undergo a 'phonics screening check', in which young children are asked to sound out forty words which are all phonically regular. Children need to read at least 32 words out of 40 correctly in order to pass the check. The first 12 words that they encounter are 'non-words' - words that can be 'sounded out' but have no meaning. In the first year of the use of this test 58 per cent of Year 1 children passed. By the third year, 74 per cent of children passed. It is likely that this improvement in the pass rate reflects a greater focus on phonics teaching and the familiarisation of children with 'non-words', rather than enhanced competence in actual reading. The disavowal of the importance of meaning at the very outset of the learning of literacy seems extraordinary, if not symptomatic of a disorder in educational thinking.

## *The evolution of assessment*

The original national curriculum and its assessment system were serious attempts to meet the challenge of constructing a broad and balanced curriculum. The system was a sophisticated one, designed as far as possible to limit the impact of assessment on practice. Some of its statements were reassuring. The often quoted 'assessment should be the servant, not the master, of the curriculum' showed that the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT) were aware of the risks of assessment becoming too dominant. A ten-level scale for assessment was recommended, with one level of progression being achieved every two years. It was on this basis that the curriculum working parties went on to develop Attainment Targets and statements of attainment in each subject.

TGAT specifically recommended that, up to Key Stage 4 (age 16), 'the main purpose of assessment should be formative' (see above) and not summative, thus putting as much emphasis on internal (teacher) assessment as on external assessment. They recommended a system of Standard Assessment Tasks (not tests), which involved teachers assessing children in real learning contexts. They suggested that results of SATs should not be reported in league tables of scores, but only in reports by individual schools in the context of their work as a whole.

The TGAT scheme was well received by assessment experts and by the teaching

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profession, and appeared to offer an innovative assessment system that seemed to meet the needs of professionals for a system based on teachers' judgements and diagnostic assessments, as well as the needs of government for a system providing accountability. But it was not universally admired. Margaret Thatcher saw the TGAT Report as 'a weighty, jargon filled document in my overnight box with a deadline for publication the following day':

The fact that it was then welcomed by the Labour party, The National Union of Teachers and the Times Educational Supplement was enough to confirm for me that its approach was suspect. It proposed an elaborate and complex system of assessment - teacher dominated and uncosted.<sup>37</sup>

In a climate where politicians were looking impatiently for ways of measuring educational outputs, TGAT's strictures were forgotten, and the original vision was compromised and ignored. Tasks have become Tests. Assessment has now come to dominate the English educational system

Particularly at Year 6 (the last year of primary school), there is intense pressure on teachers to coach the children hard in order to get them to the desired level. SATs practice is routine:

All our planning [in Year 6] is based on what we think the children need to do, where their gaps are, to try and get them to that level ... It is teaching them to take a test which I know every school does.<sup>38</sup>

Children also feel these pressures. In an investigation of into pupils' SAT-related anxiety in a London primary school one Year 6 pupil said:

... you have to get a level like a level 4 or a level 5 and if you're not good at spellings and times tables you don't get those and so you're a nothing.<sup>39</sup>

National Curriculum tests have now become the main means of measuring the system and of judging schools. As we have seen, the mantra of successive

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governments has been the need to 'raise standards', and an 'education market' has been created in which schools' performance is measured by test scores, a system which creates intense pressure on schools. Because of these changes in the overall structure of education, teachers in England have been operating within increasingly tight parameters and with a highly competitive context.

SATs have many purposes in this assessment- and measurement-driven system. They are used for reporting to parents; for providing information for the national monitoring of standards; as an accountability measure - reporting school performance to public audiences, including government; as a way of helping parents choose their child's school; as a tool for raising standards, in order to support economic growth; as an accountability measure *within* schools, enabling managers to judge (a) the progress of cohorts and (b) teacher effectiveness; as a progress measure of the success of particular initiatives (now an established indicator in educational research); and as a way of demonstrating the progress of individual pupils and cohorts for Ofsted inspectors. This unremitting focus on measurement has resulted in a huge pressure to boost children's scores by teaching to the tests and practising for the tests.

To have made SATs an all-purpose measure in this way involves a substantial over-simplification and narrowing of the goals of the school system, in the service of a model of education which is both competitive and authoritarian.

The risk in this situation is that improvement in children's performance in tests is at the expense of their broader learning, since so much of their attention is compelled to be focused on what is being tested. There is generally thought to be a trade-off in assessment between reliability and validity. That is, the attempt to arrive at more reliable assessments leads to a tendency to prioritise narrower competences, since these are more easily scored. This has been an effect of the priority given to external assessment over teacher assessment, though the original TGAT model assigned them equal status. Whereas external assessments have tended, in the search of standardisation and thus reliability, to test a narrow range of knowledge and understanding, teacher assessments can sample children's learning in a range of contexts and occasions, thus achieving greater validity.

Ofsted has been crucial to the operation of the school system since it was set up in 1992. (After 2001, when its powers were extended to include daycare and childminding - taking these powers away from local authorities - it was officially

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renamed the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills). This formidable engine of governmental authority has the responsibility for regulating standards in schools, which it does through its inspections, and through its published evaluations. Schools are placed in one of four categories - Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement and Inadequate. Requires Improvement, of course, means that schools in this category are subject to closer scrutiny and greater pressure, while placement in the fourth category (or circle of hell) generally means that a school is placed in 'special measures'.

Ofsted and its inspections are greatly feared. In one study, when interviewees were asked which forms of accountability concerned them the most, the vast majority pointed to Ofsted. It was described as 'punitive', 'random', 'a spectre' and 'the thing that keeps me awake at night'. Interviewees talked of their fear 'of them coming in and saying that you are no good'. Coffield and Williamson argue that fear related to accountability measures has become the key force for educational change in England.<sup>40</sup>

The notion that Ofsted is punitive is related to the potential real consequences of doing badly. As a primary head explained:

Ofsted can destroy a school ... If you're put into an 'RI' [Requires Improvement] category then all sorts of things can happen. It dissolves the schools. The morale goes, the parent body morale drops, anything that you've tried to achieve ... If Ofsted say no, then a school can fall apart. Then you've got academies coming in.

It has for some time been clear that inspections are a means for enforcing a move to academy status.<sup>41</sup>

One crucial question is therefore whether the grading by Ofsted of school performances serves to incentivise improvements, as its advocates believe, or whether, rather, it causes more damage than benefit through the impacts of anxiety and shame.

Whilst the goal of ensuring that standards in education are met, and that problems are identified, is a vital one, there are other desirable roles for an inspection system which Ofsted does not fulfil. It does not involve stakeholders in

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the process of improvement. Nor is it about facilitating learning, innovation and the encouragement of diversity, or the diffusion of good practice between schools. It is essentially an instrument of discipline and grading, and a means of enforcing competition between schools. In the second instalment of this contribution, we will explore how far a reformed inspection system could continue to serve the purpose of monitoring and enforcing standards, while also functioning in a more enabling and democratic way that assists improvement in schools.

Finally, competitiveness is by no means restricted to the national arena. A significant factor in the development of the regime of testing and assessment in Britain has been the idea that school systems should be judged by their comparative international performance. Influential here has been PISA, the OECD's Programme for International Assessment. Evidence of poor comparative performance according to PISA measures has been driving the further regulation and disciplining of national systems. As educational experts from many countries have recently pointed out, the measures of educational achievement involved in such international comparison and league tables have standardising and homogenising effects on curricula and assessment.<sup>42</sup>

## **Conclusion: neoliberal ideology in education**

Over the last forty years the school system has been subjected to a deep transformation, both in its institutional structures and mechanisms of regulation and control, and in its vision (or lack of it) of educational purpose. Its preferred organisational model is a competitive market, or as near as can be approximated to it while maintaining the free provision of education for all children and young people. Competition is believed by neoliberals to be the most effective mechanism for enforcing and improving standards, and thus schools are placed in an organisational environment where they are forced to compete to survive. Children are increasingly at risk of being perceived as the means of pursuing this competition - this sometimes seems to be a more important end than their education itself. This is because one of the main measures of whether schools succeed or fail is the performance of their students, in terms of aggregates and averages: perverse incentives are thus built into the system, including the excess of testing and assessment which has been imposed on schools, and the more-or-less covert resort to excuses to remove from a school's

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assessment population any children who might bring down average scores. In a market, 'consumers' (in the case of schools, these are mainly parents) need to be able to assess quality, in order to make 'rational choices'. Test and exam scores have now become a convenient indicator of what the 'quality' of a school may be. The standardisation and regulation of teaching and assessment then becomes essential, in order for these scores to be seen as reliable. In a market which is still not a true market (since schools are not yet profit-making enterprises), proxies for profit and loss have had to be constructed. Test and exam results, and the graded outcome of inspections and league tables, have this function.

A related neoliberal idea underpins this ideology: the view that the most important function of the school system is to serve the economy. What matters above all are the capacities of the future labour force, and the skills and attitudes of mind that future employees are going to need. The emphasis on 'basics', and the narrow and instrumental way in which this defined, follows from this utilitarian focus - although it is doubtful that any good, even in these terms, can be served by such a restrictive conception of education. The economy of the future is likely to need developed human beings - developed in their emotional and social capacities, their imagination and creativity, and their capacity for spontaneity and initiative. Yet, rather than cultivating abilities which differentiate human beings from machines, the forms of pedagogy and assessment which are now being imposed on children seem designed to starve them, and to produce compliant followers of instructions rather than creative and inquiring minds. A long-standing antithesis between 'mechanistic' and 'organic' or imaginative conceptions of the mind and human nature lies in the background of these debates about the function and nature of schooling, and there is no doubt that it is the mechanistic that has recently been in the ascendancy.<sup>43</sup> This is not only the case in education. In public services more broadly, the measurement and regulation of every possible kind of performance has proliferated to the extent that the 'primary tasks' of many organisations (for example, to work with clients or patients) are being impeded by these devices. What is lost in such instrumentalised systems is the recognition that capability depends on latent areas of understanding that cannot be measured and routinised, and which need an environment of shared commitment and trust if they are to be exercised well.

In the second part of this contribution, we will propose alternative lines of development. We will explore different models of structure and democratic

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accountability; the nature of a balanced curriculum; different concepts of standards and achievements and how these can be assessed; and methods of audit and inspection. For this we will draw on the evidence of good practice as it has continued to develop, often against the grain of the dominant programme. It is not our intention to propose a comprehensive re-design for the entire system. What is needed, rather, is to restore a model of policy-making in education which respects the contributions of its different participants and stakeholders, and which takes account of their knowledge and experience. We need an end, in other words, to the rule of one-dimensional neoliberalism in our schools.

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## Notes

1. The aim of the *Soundings Futures* series is to set out programmatic alternatives to the neoliberal orthodoxy which has for many years dominated British politics and policy making. This is all the more important now that there is a strong possibility of an election that will see the return of a Labour-led government.
2. There are now substantial differences from this overall picture in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. As Ken Jones remarks in his summary of developments in education in the UK: 'if there is one thing that the other territories of the United Kingdom have demonstrated to England, it is that the notion of "no alternatives" is wrong'.
3. C.B. Cox and A.E Dyson, *Black Papers on Education 1-5* (originally published in *Critical Quarterly* from 1969), Harper Collins 1971. Fuller accounts of these developments and the controversies that have surrounded them are to be found

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in C. Chitty, *Towards a new education system: the victory of the new right?* Falmer Press 1989; S.J. Ball, *The Education Debate (2nd edition)*, Policy Press 2008; and M. Benn, *School Wars*, Verso 2012.

4. Central Advisory Council for Education, *Children and their Primary Schools (The Plowden Report)*, HMSO 1967. The Report was notable for its advocacy of a child-centred approach to Primary Education.

5. Theoretical support for this critique was given by Julian Le Grand, in his book *Motivation, Agency and Public Policy: Of Knights and Knaves, Pawns and Queens* (OUP 2003), which questioned the assumption of professional altruism.

6. R. Williams, 'Education and British Society', in *The Long Revolution*, Chatto and Windus 1961.

7. The entire programme of the New Right was in part a reaction against the libertarian and democratic and libertarian currents of the 1960s and 1970s.

8. Thus cold water is poured by conservatives on announcements of improved results at GCE and A levels.

9. For higher education figures see [www.timeshighereducation.com/features/participation-rates-now-we-are-50/2005873.article](http://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/participation-rates-now-we-are-50/2005873.article).

10. See [www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/sep/17/gcse-exams-replaced-ebacc-history-pass-rates](http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/sep/17/gcse-exams-replaced-ebacc-history-pass-rates).

11. Full Fact, 'Academies and maintained schools: what do we know?' (2017): <https://fullfact.org/education/academies-and-maintained-schools-what-do-we-know/>

12. E. Perry and B. Francis, *The social class gap for educational achievement: a review of the literature*, Royal Society of Arts 2010.

13. Department of Education 2013.

14. M. Rutter et al, *Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and their Effects on Children*, Harvard University Press 1979.

15. Tony Blair, speech at Ruskin College, 1996.

16. See D. Massey, 'Vocabularies of the economy', and S. Hall and A. O'Shea, 'Common-sense neoliberalism', both in *After Neoliberalism*.

17. Nick Davies, 'Political coup bred educational disaster: Interview with Kenneth Baker', *Guardian*, 16.9.99.

18. The most extreme attack on an LEA was the act's abolition of the Inner

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London Education Authority and the reassignments of its powers to the London boroughs, who were also soon to lose most of their powers. The effect of this was to dismantle one of the most capable and high-spending educational administrations in the country, and to remove from the scene one of the leading advocates of comprehensive and progressive education.

19. See J.E. Newman and J. Clarke, *Publics, Politics and Power: Remaking the Public in Public Services*, Sage 2009.

20. New Labour's educational programme did, however, have positive elements. These included the SureStart programme, one of whose purposes was to remedy educational disadvantage at the pre-school stage, and the substantial injection of resources already discussed. There was also a substantial school-building programme, but because of the pro-business neoliberal element in the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) that was used to fund much of it, this was at a substantial long-term cost.

21. D. Priestland and M. Reynolds, 'Michael Gove's new curriculum: what the experts say', *Guardian*, 12.2.13.

22. D. Gillard, 'Short and Fraught: the history of primary education in England', *Forum* 51(2), 2009; and *Education in England: a Brief History*: [www.educationengland.org.uk/history/](http://www.educationengland.org.uk/history/) 2011.

23. Nick Davies (see note 17) suggested that the expansion of regulation, much of which took place when David Blunkett was Secretary of State, was Labour's attempt to limit the inegalitarian effects of the 1988 Act's organisational changes, which it felt unable to challenge.

24. <http://rrf.org.uk>.

25. On Sir Jim Rose and his role in curriculum reform, see [http://cprtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/080805\\_Guardian-Wilby\\_Jimm\\_ll\\_fix\\_it.pdf](http://cprtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/080805_Guardian-Wilby_Jimm_ll_fix_it.pdf).

26. See <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmchilsch/344/344i.pdf> on it. SATs stands for standardised assessment tasks.

27. R.J. Alexander (ed), *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Routledge 2009.

28. J. Rose, *Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum* 2009: [www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2009-IRPC-final-report.pdf](http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2009-IRPC-final-report.pdf).

29. See: [www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/jun/17/michael-gove-national-curriculum](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/jun/17/michael-gove-national-curriculum).

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30. Connections with thinking and practice in the United States pervaded the entire neoliberal project in Britain, and have not been confined to the sphere of education.
31. Subsequently, teachers were issued with a system for assessing children's work.
32. [www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/100-academics-savage-education-secretary-michael-gove-for-conveyor-belt-curriculum-for-schools-8541262.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/100-academics-savage-education-secretary-michael-gove-for-conveyor-belt-curriculum-for-schools-8541262.html).
33. Ibid.
34. Runnymede Trust, *Consultation Response to the Proposed Changes to the National Curriculum in England: History Key Stages 1-4*, 2013: [http://www.rota.org.uk/sites/default/files/webfm/runnymede\\_response\\_to\\_the\\_national\\_curriculum.pdf](http://www.rota.org.uk/sites/default/files/webfm/runnymede_response_to_the_national_curriculum.pdf).
35. Reported in *The Guardian*, 9.5.17.
36. According to Margaret Clark, in 'The phonics check three years on', *Education Journal* 15, 2014.
37. Quoted in C. Whetton, 'A brief history of a testing time: national curriculum assessment in England 1989-2008', *Educational Research* Vol. 51, 2009.
38. Teacher quoted in M. Hutchings, *The impact of accountability measures on children and young people*, National Union of Teachers 2009: [www.teachers.org.uk/files/exam-factories.pdf](http://www.teachers.org.uk/files/exam-factories.pdf).
39. Quoted in D. Reay and D. Willam, "'I'll be a nothing": structure, agency and the construction of identity through assessment [1]', *British Education Research Journal*, 25 (3), 1999.
40. F. Coffield and B. Williamson, *From Exam Factories to Communities of Discovery: The democratic route*, Institute of Education 2011.
41. Hutchings, *The impact of accountability measures*.
42. [www.theguardian.com/education/2014/may/06/oecd-pisa-tests-damaging-education-academics](http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/may/06/oecd-pisa-tests-damaging-education-academics).
43. See M. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, Oxford University Press 1953; R. Williams, *Culture and Society* 1958.