

In our newly published book, 'Neoliberalism and Early Childhood Education: Markets, Imaginaries and Governance' we argue that English early childhood has internationally been at the forefront of a neoliberal project acting as a 'social laboratory of experimentation and reform.' So, what is neoliberalism? It is been described as a 'thought collective and a political movement combined' that lays claim to understand how human life works and what needs to be done to bring about an ideal future. At the heart of neoliberalism is the 'economisation' of everything, described by Wendy Brown as 'the conversion of non-economic domains, activities and subjects into economic ones extend[ing] market metrics and practices to every dimension of human life; political, cultural, personal, vocational, educational.' Everything becomes economic, so that early childhood education becomes reducible to economic valuation and transactions and where neoliberalism's prime values of competition, individual choice and calculation can work their supposed magic.

In our book we trace the influence of neoliberalism's Human capital theory and the ways it has reduced the purposes of early childhood education to the capacities required for economic success. We explore how neoliberalism has imported private businesses' 'new public management' methods into early childhood education including greater competition and an insistence on explicit standards and measures of performance in the interests of output control. The book demonstrates how New public management principles have led to an ever tighter governing of children, workers and services, in particular through setting explicit and narrow standards and measuring performance with testing regimes. We show how the 'English state has created a "delivery chain" of standards for children from birth to 6-years-old, and accompanying performance measures, a national system of performance management that strongly governs early years education and care... [and that is] forever seeking better measurement and better control, forever pursuing improved surveillance.' This fixation has taken its toll on all concerned, including testing regimes that produce 'a ridiculous simplification of knowledge, and a robbing of meaning from individual histories' and stress for children.

One of the examples in the book that we use to explore the impact of neoliberalism on early childhood education is the Government's third attempt to introduce Reception Baseline Assessment in September 2021. To recap: this 'Reception Baseline Assessment' (RBA) is a national standardised test for 4-year olds of 'attainment in early literacy, communication and language and early mathematics skills', intended to enable the measurement and comparison of progression rates for children through primary schools. It represents a new competitive tool for stronger management and control of these schools. RBA was widely seen as an affront to early childhood education's pedagogic principles of caring respectful

relationships built upon meaningful dialogue and play, and as part of a strategic policy attempt to repurpose early childhood education in the service of primary school performance. If implemented as planned, RBA will routinise and normalise the standardised assessment of 4-year-old children, using a tightly scripted computer-generated maths and literacy test. RBA's reduced and impoverished approach to early childhood education will likely cascade into all early childhood settings, including PVI settings. Many early years professionals have not been prepared to accept this, with its negative consequences for children. For example, the renowned headteacher Dame Alison Peacock, who was also one of the DfE's key advisers, stated bluntly when the RBA test was first introduced that 'we are not doing baseline' (Ward, 2015), and in total nearly 5,000 English primary schools refused to introduce the test. This forced the DfE to retreat, announcing that the RBA would remain voluntary in Autumn 2016 (Department for Education (England), 2016). Subsequently only 4,000 schools applied the RBA in 2016, and the RBA was not funded or recommended by the DfE at all in 2017. Undeterred, however, the DfE returned with a second attempt to introduce RBA in 2019. Once again, this was met with widespread resistance, with over 7,000 schools deciding not to participate in that year's initial optional pilot study (Ward, 2019b). Dame Alison Peacock has gone further in her opposition, arguing that it is teacher's and early childhood professionals' responsibility to advocate for new forms of democratic accountability.

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. (Peacock, 2016, p. 132; original emphasis)

This other way would be very different to RBA, involving teachers and families taking democratic responsibility for the assessment of children's learning rather than relying on 'outside experts' such as OFSTED with their supposedly objective indicators and standardised performance measures. Such a co-operatively democratic accountability is a moral and political process that involves a shared, mutual trust and responsibility from teachers, families, children and local early years' advisors (Fielding and Moss, 2011). In our new book, we argue that critical thinking and understanding of the devastating impacts of neoliberalism upon early childhood education is necessary so that it is 'eminently resistible and eventually replaceable.'