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## Learning as Mimicry, Teaching as Coerced Compliance: the continuing damage caused by a high-stakes summative testing regime

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**ABSTRACT** The requirement to ready pupils for high-stakes summative testing continues to undermine and baulk teachers as they try to act in line with their pedagogical principles. For some – perhaps many – practitioners this experience is increasingly insupportable and gives rise to profound inner conflict. Test readying promotes in pupils a necessary mimicry. This falsifies the relationship between teachers and pupils on which better kinds of learning depend.

In a recent article exploring what might cause so many teachers to quit the profession within a few years of joining it, Jane Perryman and Graham Calvert discern a ‘discourse of disappointment’ (Perryman & Calvert, 2019, p. 2) among the 1200 teachers who participated in the research. Drawn to teaching by a desire to sow enthusiasm for their subject and to help young people learn, many newly qualified teachers are being driven away by a culture of performativity whose demands deny them the chance of becoming the teachers they want to be (Perryman & Calvert, 2019, pp. 2, 5, 14). These teachers expect to work very long hours planning, preparing and marking. But they find their time increasingly devoted to the requirements of a target-setting and box-ticking regime predicated on a lack of trust in practitioners. This, rather than the long hours in themselves, proves the real burden. The nature of the workload affords no opening for these teachers to exercise creativity or professional judgement. Under such conditions the work of teaching can be experienced as neither art nor craft nor science. It can only be experienced as a form of abuse.

Perryman and Calvert do not put it this way. They frame their findings with all caution. But what they unearth is a looking-glass world in which 'the practices of being a teacher [impede] the ability to be a teacher' (2019, p. 16).

How can this be so? Surely my being as a teacher is revealed in and through my practices? My practices are the expression and extension of myself as a teacher. Yet, according to Perryman and Calvert what is required by way of teacher practices inside today's education system is precisely what prevents those who teach from being the teachers they have it in them to be, and which, upon entry, they assume they will be. The paradox highlights a longstanding conflict at the heart of the professional identity of contemporary teachers.

### **Fabrication**

Perryman and Calvert suggest that this conflict is generated by the mismatch between what entrants to teaching expect to be doing and what in reality they find they have to do. In particular, they identify as detrimental the pressures imposed by 'the reality of working within the accountability–performativity context' (Perryman & Calvert, 2019, p. 17). This context has been constructed on the basis of the 1988 Education Reform Act, which imposed National Curriculum testing and enabled the publication from 1992 onwards of performance tables. As Brian Simon, co-founder of *FORUM*, put it at the time, these keystone curriculum and assessment measures 'fit neatly into an overall package which opens the whole field to the play of market forces, ensures central (state) control at all key points ... [and] reduces the role of teachers ... to that of agents' (Simon, 1992, p. 145).

The effect on those working within the new context, once it had become firmly established, was powerfully delineated by Stephen Ball in a seminal paper:

Performativity requires individual practitioners to organize themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations. To set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation... For some, this is an opportunity to make a success of themselves, for others it portends inner conflicts, inauthenticity and resistance. It is also suggested that performativity produces opacity rather than transparency as individuals and organizations take ever greater care in the construction and maintenance of fabrications. (Ball, 2003, p. 215)

'Fabrications.' Not lies, exactly. Nor yet quite the truth.

Fabrications are versions of an organization (or person) which does not exist – they are not 'outside the truth' but neither do they render simply true or direct accounts – they are produced purposefully in order 'to be accountable'. Truthfulness is not the point – the point is their effectiveness, both in the market or for inspection or appraisal. (Ball, 2003, p. 224)

By licensing and impelling managerial policies in school, the accountability–performativity context directly impinges on what teachers do. It infiltrates and pervades the space of the classroom to shape teachers’ decisions and behaviours with ever-increasing specificity. Teachers have told me they must comply with policies stipulating in detail what they can post on classroom walls, how often they must change their displays, how they must seat and group pupils, who their pupils can and cannot work with, how they must begin and end lessons, how they must respond to written work, how they must plan their lessons, how often they must formally test pupils and in what manner, and so on. In 2015, independent research commissioned by the National Union of Teachers found that:

The strategies that schools adopt in relation to accountability measures include: scrutiny of all aspects of teachers’ work; *requirements for greater uniformity of practice*; collection and use of data to target individual pupils; an increased focus on maths/numeracy and English/literacy (and in secondary schools, on other academic subjects e.g. history, geography, science, languages); and additional teaching of targeted pupils. (Hutchings, 2015, p. 3; my emphases)

What this means in the lives of teachers is fleshed out when teachers talk to researchers. Last year Barbara Skinner, Gerard Leavey and Despina Rothi interviewed 39 teachers and 6 school leaders about the ways in which target setting, increased workload and accountability, and changes in the curriculum played out in their lives (Skinner et al, 2018). The results should shock:

Teachers aren’t allowed to be the professionals that they’ve been trained to be and they wanted to be, in that they constantly have to account for what their actions are and what’s occurring in their schools. (Skinner et al 2018, p. 8)

I don’t like to say I attempted suicide but I just attempted to get myself out of the situation in a drastic way because it felt like the only way out at the time. It felt like there’s no help, there’s nowhere to go, there’s no point. I’m useless. I’ll never achieve what they want me to achieve. I must be a rubbish teacher. All that sort of thing. (p. 9)

But that’s just the way that schools are. It’s results-led, target-led. So no, you don’t feel as though you have as much control as you would like... But then, you’re worried to have that control because you don’t want ... to feel as though it’s you that’s failed the children – even though you won’t have done, but that’s how you’d be made to feel. (p. 11)

You start to doubt whether you are any use at all, in your normal life you would doubt yourself on whether you could do something like getting the tube. That's how much it affected me. (p. 12)

You get annoyed with what's happening to your colleagues, to students and your inability to do anything about it! (p. 12)

The recurring tropes here are of loss of control, loss of agency, lack of permission, deep and enduring self-doubt, the constant need to account for oneself before another's authority. These utterances express acute consciousness of being prevented, denied and balked. Were this the language someone used to describe their relationship with another person, that relationship would be rightly termed an abusive one.

### **Integrity**

Reading what these teachers said, and trying to hear the feeling as well as the meaning their words convey, I was reminded of interviews I conducted with teachers of English a dozen years ago. I asked whether the requirement to ready students for National Curriculum testing at Key Stage 3 (since abolished) posed a challenge to the pedagogic principles these teachers espoused. For some, the tensions generated did seem to cause, albeit less intensely, distress akin to that expressed in the recent interviews conducted by Skinner and her colleagues:

I bite my tongue... I don't say stuff... I think when you internalise it and you stop putting your hands up in the meeting, that's when you feel bad about yourself. And I guess that's to do with morals isn't it? That's to do with you feeling that you're not acting now the way you ought to. (Yarker, 2008, p. 189)

I don't think that you do feel absolutely happy with [test-preparation work] because obviously the values are compromised. (p. 203)

If teaching is your life and something you love ... something like [National Curriculum testing] is really disheartening because you can never teach the way you want to. (p. 204)

It's really important to keep thinking 'am I doing the right thing?' all the time... One teaches them technical skills but morally am I putting a strain on a child's mental health? (p. 206)

I can't stand [test-preparation] If I'm quite honest I cannot stand it. I hate it. (p. 126)

It's the accountability culture. It's the fear. If you didn't [do test-preparation] action would be taken against you in the school.  
(p. 140)

I don't generally talk about it too much outside [school] because it gets me down. (p. 149)

In the light of such comments, perhaps the definition of Ball's 'fabrications' as 'versions of [a person] which does not exist' can be updated. Perhaps the fabricated person, in this case the made-to-be-accountable teacher, does indeed unhappily exist, brought to life by the accountability–performativity context, but in conflict always with another teacher, the one who is prevented from manifesting herself or himself because of this fabrication. The teacher enjoined by accountability and performativity to 'set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation' (Ball, 2003, p. 215) finds this to be an increasingly insupportable task. Personal beliefs and commitments are just what can't be set aside. In trying to do so, integrity finds itself riven.

Skinner and her colleagues characterise this inner rift as arising between an 'old' version of teaching and a 'new' one; that is, between 'commitment, service to the school and pupils' learning, ownership of expertise and knowledge – and ... accountability, performativity, meeting standards, and stepping up to the presentation of the school in a new corporate world' (Skinner et al, 2018, p. 15). The opposition here between aspects of 'service' and features of the 'corporate' seems especially salient. Service involves putting oneself into service, offering for the good of the wider community one's capacities and inner orientation or will. This is not the same as merely doing what one is told by others. Service and servitude are not synonymous. The impulses and convictions that continue to bring recruits into teaching – to help make learning happen, to inspire love of subject, to make a beneficial difference for young people – are all redolent of a desire to serve. They are rapidly thwarted because, being predicated on personal initiative, judgement, and imagination, such impulses and convictions can only manifest themselves when scope is afforded them to do so. More and more, the practices required of teachers today prevent such scope from being afforded.

### **Divergence**

Room for manoeuvre on the part of the teacher, scope to 'be a teacher' in one's own way, is especially curtailed in relation to the event of high-stakes summative testing. Teachers are required to give more and more time to get pupils ready for these tests, not only during a timetabled day but also after school, at weekends and in the holidays. The adverse effects of so interventionist a strategy have been noted by the Conservative-led House of Commons Select Committee on Education. The Committee's 2017 Report into Primary Assessment accepted that high-stakes summative testing can 'negatively

impact teaching and learning, leading to narrowing of the curriculum and “teaching to the test”, as well as affecting teacher and pupil wellbeing’ (House of Commons, 2017, p. 3).

Nevertheless, the high-stakes summative testing regime continues. Arguments exposing the educational harm it does have been made for decades. The current poisoned situation persists, against reason and evidence, because such a regime is politically expedient and ideologically coherent. It suits an ascendant educational project suffused with the perspectives of education as a business and couched in a language to suit: a language of efficient delivery, competition to spur performance, and the datafication and ‘ability’ labelling of pupils.

I was confronted with such language recently after sending to the Department for Education (DfE) a statement in support of the National Education Union’s call for a boycott of all high-stakes summative testing in primary schools. One hundred and five colleagues from across the country, almost all involved in initial teacher education and/or educational research, had signed the statement. I received a six-paragraph response from the ministry defending high-stakes summative testing on all-too-predictable grounds. The tests supposedly ‘enable parents and teachers to identify where additional support is needed’. They enable a school to be held to account for how well it supports pupils ‘to reach their full potential [and] master the fundamentals of English and mathematics’. The tests ‘are not meant to cause stress and anxiety to pupils’. The test data ‘should only be a starting-point for conversations about school improvement.’ (All quotations from DfE [2019] personal communication.)

One sentence in the response stood out for its particularly cavalier way with truth:

Boycotting the tests could both risk returning us to a position where it is impossible to hold schools to account effectively for the education they provide and jeopardise the improvements we have seen in our schools in recent years. (DfE, 2019, personal communication)

Were schools then held to account only ineffectively prior to the establishment of National Curriculum testing in 1992? For all the efforts of school governing bodies, local authority education departments, and Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (inaugurated in 1837), was it nonetheless impossible for ministers to know what was going on in classrooms until SATs came to the rescue?

But another sentence in the response encapsulated the divergence between a currently dominant conception of education’s purpose, taking in the nature of teaching and assessment and how young people are to be regarded, and its nemesis. It was this:

Substituting other approaches in place of tests would risk producing less valid and reliable outcomes, and could increase teacher workload. (DfE, 2019, personal communication)

High-stakes summative test scores appear to lend authoritative exactitude to the process of assessing young people's learning. The network of correlations between test scores and grouped categories of pupils justify policy. But if each individual pupil is not to be lost sight of, if he or she is always more than the score generated via the test, don't 'validity and reliability' prove false friends? The test score is always valid as an index of how the pupil performed in the test, and always potentially invalid as an index of a pupil's knowledge and understanding in the subject-area tested. The test score occludes many of the immediate shaping realities which attend someone's trying to answer National Curriculum test questions under test conditions; realities such as the effects of the way questions are framed and worded, their unconscious biases, the impact of the prevailing test conditions and, above all, the difference the life being lived by each candidate makes to the response he or she gives. Here's George, confronted by a high-stakes test question which asks whether rabbits eat lettuce or dog food or sandwiches. He raises his hand and tells his teacher: 'Rabbits have to eat carrots or their teeth will get too long and stick into them'. His teacher 'nodded and smiled, but she put her finger to her lips. George carefully drew in a carrot so the test-people would know' (Cohen, 1980/2006, n.p.).

### **Black Hole**

As George is finding out, the context and nature of the test shapes the learning it makes visible. The context of the test is artificial – if not alienating – in comparison to the context typically experienced in the classroom. The test requires a time-limited and silent set of responses, produced in isolation and as a one-off, without hope of formative feedback, in respect of non-negotiable questions posed in language which may be unfamiliar, by someone unknown whom the pupil has never and will never meet. How far may what is produced in such a context be taken as a reliable proxy for the pupil's learning more generally? A test performance is evidence of itself. It is not straightforwardly evidence of some larger entity we might call 'learning about X', still less 'learning' in the abstract or 'potential for learning', or 'ability'. And yet the test score will stand and be read as evidence of how far the pupil has come at a given kind of learning: reading or writing or maths, and so how 'good' he or she is at it. The score will profoundly determine how the pupil is viewed in school. George helpfully draws his carrot, unaware that by doing so he will be confirmed as someone who knows less, because the test has failed to enable him to show the more that he knows.

Teaching-to-the-test is so pervasive now that even the head of Ofsted, accountability's shock-troop, has had to come out against it (Spielman 2017). But such anti-educational work persists and intensifies because National Curriculum test results are high stakes for each school, and because the relationship between what is produced in the test and in the everyday classroom (not to speak of outside it) is inherently unstable. Uncoached, pupils can't be relied on to replicate in the test context what they may ordinarily do in the

course of things as classwork. So they must be explicitly test readied. The artificiality of the test context must be rendered more normal, the format of the test made familiar, and the processes of the test rehearsed, in order to adapt pupils to the experience of being summatively tested. This involves learning, but of the wrong kind. The occasional advice about 'exam technique' given in a less performative era has metamorphosed to become, in Harry Torrance's black hole of a phrase, 'assessment as learning' (Torrance, 2007).

Because test conditions are normalised in classrooms for longer periods, they promote in pupils a necessary mimicry. The artificial and isolating context of the summative test generates a degree of pressure. In face of it, and to meet the questions, pupils must mimic themselves as the learners they ordinarily are. And they must also mimic, as best they can, the optimal performance of themselves-in-the-test, a role whose lineaments they have been made conscious of through the process of sustained test readying. To be successful, the performance they create in the test must be a re-creation rather than an original expression of self. In the test, the pupil produces not an example of her learning but rather a simulation of it. A fabrication, perhaps.

Perversely, the felt requirement to mimic themselves in the test emphasises the distance between each pupil's everyday self and his or her tested persona. A successful act of mimicry requires the suppression of whatever gets in the way of compliance with the predetermined range of responses which will be rewarded by the test's assessment criteria. What doesn't contribute to the test performance becomes of no account. Indeed, it is unwelcome. One consequence is the negation of the knowledge children have in spite of test readying, and which, in the course of normal schooling, or 'old-schooling', might have been useable. George's teacher smiles and nods, 'but she put her finger to her lips'. George's own knowledge doesn't count now. Or it counts against him.

### **The Good Teacher**

Pressure to meet targets and raise attainment in high-stakes summative tests tends to make teachers whittle down their pedagogical practices. The fabrication rather than the facilitation of learning requires that lessons become much more teacher-led and instruction-oriented. Pupils are given less choice in how they can tackle activities. Pair and group work, and the scope for creative or spontaneously-arrived-at approaches to tasks, or for independent trial and error, are squeezed out. Teacher imposition replaces co-agency and shared control. This damages the engagement and motivation of pupils (Harlen & Crick, 2003; Harlen, 2012).

It also damages teachers. They, after all, are the people who must actively narrow the curriculum and straitjacket their teaching repertoire. They must consent to work against their pedagogical principles, and then actually do that work in class with pupils. In such moments, repositioned as functionaries of the testing system rather than as agents of another sort of learning they know to be better, teachers may experience a profound assault:



[For] violence does not consist so much in injuring or annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognise themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance.  
(Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 21)

This violent reshaping of the teacher in his or her role, which the culture of accountability and performativity engenders, is no unfortunate and regrettable by-product of the regime. It is the whole point. This is what it means to be a 'good' teacher in an era when teaching as a moral practice is being superseded.

Or, as the DfE official might say, is being set aside in the interests of higher test scores. The regime built on high-stakes summative testing continues to force teachers to fabricate themselves in Stephen Ball's sense. So teachers find themselves unexpectedly in the looking-glass world where what they do as teachers hinders their hopes of being a teacher. In such a world, under such a regime, the language of service and commitment cuts no ice. How can it, instinct as it is with Good? But neither can it be set aside, for it comes naturally as breathing:

But sometimes when your breath plumes in the frost  
it takes the roaming shape of Diogenes  
with his lantern, seeking one just man;  
so you end up scrutinized from behind the haw  
he holds up at eye-level on its twig,  
and you flinch before its bonded pith and stone,  
its blood-prick that you wish would test and clear you,  
its pecked-at ripeness that scans you, then moves on.  
(Seamus Heaney, 1987, 'The Haw Lantern')

And so arises in teachers *the fear, the doubt, the sense of failure ... all that sort of thing.*

This has gone on too long. We must replace high-stakes summative testing and the educational regime it upholds.

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