

The Commodification of Children in UK Secondary Schools: Impact on Pupils with SEND

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'In January 2017, 14.4 per cent of all school pupils in England (1,244,255) were said to have special educational needs or disabilities (SEND)' (Alderson, 2018: 175), of these pupils only 2.8 percent had a SEN statement or an education, health and care plan. SEND pupils, therefore, have less access to good quality education, as they are seven times more likely to be excluded from schools than their peers (Alderson, 2018: 177). Dimitrellou & Male (2020) explored the views of the pupils themselves in understanding their needs and views of their school, as such pupils' views are often overlooked.

Overall, the pupils were dissatisfied with their school; they suggested that they needed more enhancement of inclusive practices (Dimitrellou & Male, 2020: 95). However, within a system that values results instead of more investment into inclusive practices, teaching assistants often become the primary educators for the pupils in most need, placing SEND pupils at a disadvantage in gaining the increasingly important qualifications (Ver Loren Van Themaat, 2019: 295). An education system that is supposedly inclusive actually repositions these vulnerable young people as responsible and accountable for their own success, whilst stripping them of what they need in order to be 'successful'.

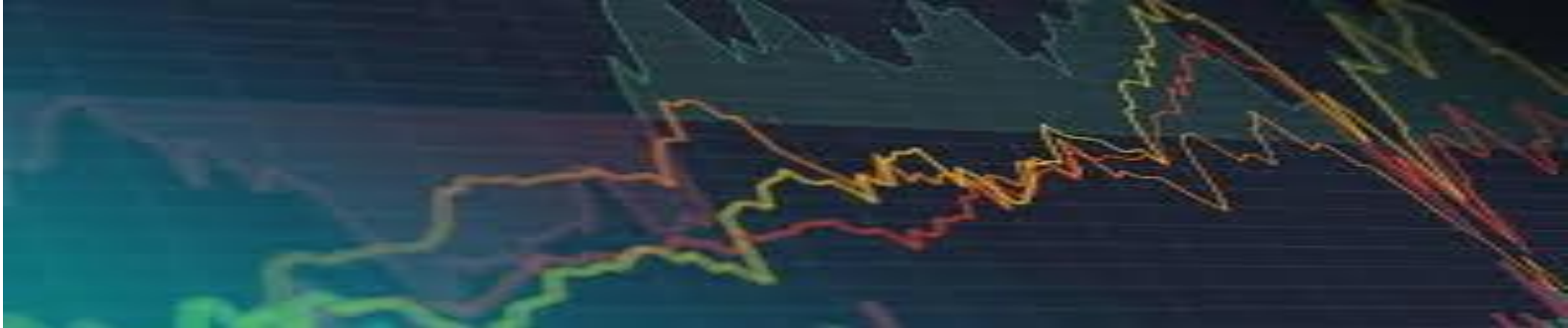
Increasingly, young people, including pupils with SEND, have become responsible for their own potential and educational success. This is due to

the expansion of neoliberalism. Harvey suggests that neoliberalism 'proposes that human wellbeing can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade' (2005: 2). The state intervenes less and only does when creating new markets if necessary.

Thus, this means individuals become responsible and accountable for their own actions and well-being. Due to the possibility of bankruptcy within UK secondary schools, introduced by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, ethical concerns have been created as education also shifted from a public to a private good (Savage, 2017: 146). No longer is education concerned with creating liberally educated young people, where their well-being is considered just as important as learning, but calculability, thus competition between schools for resources becomes the primary concern.



Teachers and students are therefore reduced to what can be measured through for example examinations, reviews, audits and Ofsted reports (Ball, 2016: 1053). Apple highlights how this shift towards the removal of state intervention, individualisation, the neoconservative agenda of restoring "lost" tradition and authority, privatisation, marketisation and entrepreneurialism has created a system where the preference is personal gain or selfishness (Apple, 2006: 24). Wilkins (2012: 128) goes further,



suggesting that the neoliberal education system insists that children are self-determining and self-authoring agents. Such individualistic neoliberal discourse frames students' failure and success as a matter of free will or choice (Keddie, 2016: 110).

Due to the cuts made by the government and teachers and students being reduced to what can be measured, teachers are the ones who have become responsible and thus reconfigured as "highly individualized, responsabilized subjects" (Davies & Bansel, 2007: 248). This idea, therefore, links to Foucault and the panopticon. The metaphor of the panopticon refers to a circle of prison cells where a central guard tower sits in the middle, the prisoners, however, are not aware when the tower is occupied by a guard (Page, 2017: 992). The idea is that this surveillance would discipline prisoners by regulating their own behaviours, thus creating 'docile bodies' (Page, 2017: 992).



Foucault (1991) argues that the metaphor of the panopticon is a central metaphor for the surveillance of individuals in modern society. Surveillance can also be seen within schools. Page (2017: 992) argues that surveillance of teachers are operating as three overlapping types: vertical surveillance such as Ofsted, Learning walks, and students' voice and video recordings on phones. Horizontal surveillance is through peer observations, parental surveillance and intrapersonal surveillance and reflective practices (Page, 2017: 992).

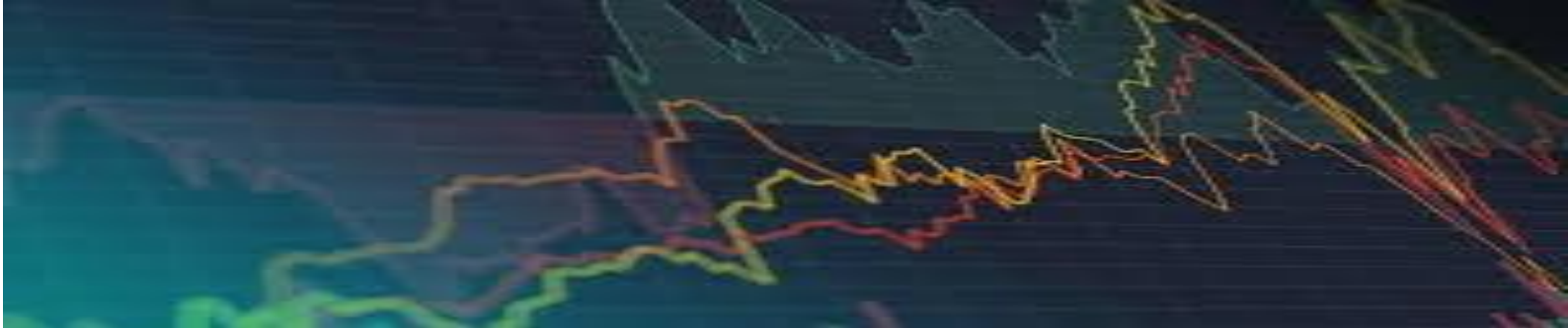
Similarly to surveillance categorising the terrorist from the citizen in wider society, schools sort teachers into categories of 'good', 'outstanding', 'requiring improvement' and 'unsatisfactory'.

Those who are 'requiring improvement' and 'unsatisfactory' are teachers who through surveillance are a risk towards the results of Ofsted inspections and examination results, thus impacting where the schools sit within the league tables (Page, 2017: 994). This is justified by being framed as important in ensuring "standards" are raised (Angus, 2017: 339).

Bauman and Lyon (2013) highlight how surveillance goes beyond being watched, where individuals recreate themselves as commodities to attract reward; teachers and pupils engage with their own surveillance in order to fit within good categories rather than bad. They commodify themselves as surveillance allows teachers to show off their teaching abilities, and their best practice and display their internalisation of school strategy (Page, 2017: 1001).

The professional identities of teachers have therefore been transformed. Angus (2017: 340) highlights how neoliberal reform of education doesn't just change what teachers *do*, but who teachers *are*. Under this system it is not important that teachers focus on understanding, provoking and responding to young people's ideas and creativity. Rather, the focus of performativity and outcome is soulless, heartless and devoid of any attempt at developing pupils' critical and creative thinking (Angus, 2017: 340). Teachers are encouraged to think of themselves as adding value to themselves and improving productivity, where excellence is based on calculation, thus value replaces values (Ball, 2003: 217).

Special Needs Teachers' work particularly, draws attention towards how building meaningful relationships with pupils are meaningless within a performance culture due to its lack of representation within metrics. Ball (2003: 223) suggests that teachers who work with pupils with



SEND are unlikely to attract investment from performance managers. This is due to the fact that improved performance is limited, therefore, an organization will only invest where measurable returns are likely to be achieved (Ball, 2003: 223). Because of the change regarding teachers' professional identities and expectations within their role, this has impacted pupils, particularly vulnerable young people. Students have become reduced into 'auditable commodities' where they are held accountable and 'success' is determined by quantified standards (Keddie, 2016: 109).

Just like products or things within a market there are some children who are viewed as more valuable commodities, thus devaluing others. SEND pupils, due to their need for additional support, therefore requiring additional investment, as well as the perception of a lack of measurable returns, become devalued commodities.

Because of their devaluation within the education system, SEND pupils are at risk of failing to gain qualifications. Beck (1992) highlights how institutions themselves create risk environments that characterise the 'risk society'. Due to the nature of neoliberalism, thus the risks resulted from it, individuals become responsible for the outcome and consequences of their individual biographies, whilst also having less control. (Kelly, 2001: 25). Due to the expansion of the knowledge economy, knowledge has become a key 'asset' and central to economic growth (Grint & Nixon, 2015: 272).

This emergence means employers require potential employees to have acquired qualifications, high-level skills and computer-based

competencies; it is more important than ever therefore that young people leave school with qualifications (Grint & Nixon, 2015: 272). However, pupils with SEND are increasing, whilst the Government made cuts by 17% in 2017 (Warnes, et al, 2022: 31). Inequalities between pupils who may be performing well, and pupils with SEND who have a less equitable education have therefore been created. Schools are also often selective in the number of pupils with SEND they accept due to fear of a lack of resources and outcome (Rayner, 2017: 30).

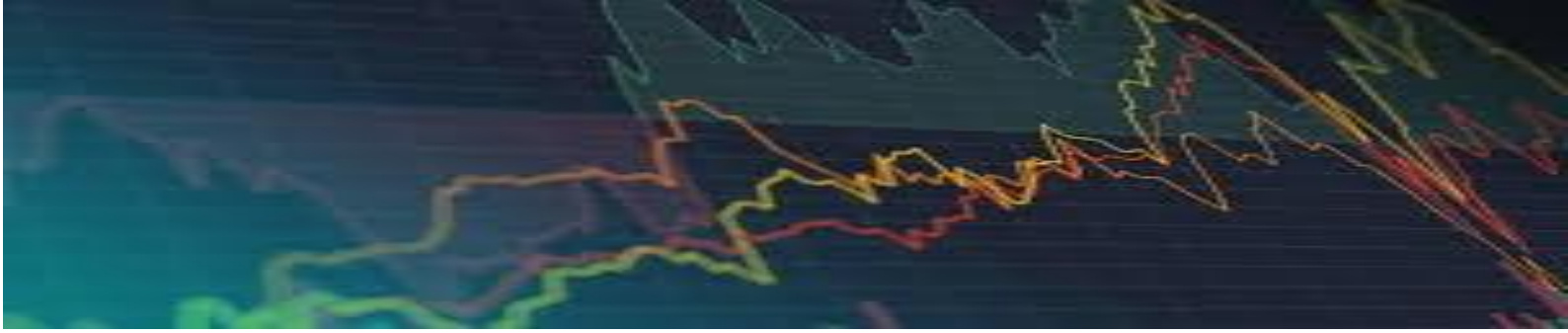
Therefore, marginalizing these young people and placing them at risk of leaving school without qualifications. SEND pupils, due to the prevalence of risks, have become individualised to an extent where structural inequalities are perceived as personal failings. The emphasis on 'choice' and 'opportunity' has created a false reality for young people (France & Haddon, 2014: 307).



Learning Knows No Bounds

Young people believe they live in a society where they are in control of their own lives; where anyone can achieve anything they work hard at (France & Haddon, 2014: 307). Furlong and Cartmel's (2006: 114) theory of 'epistemological fallacy' is important to consider in the context of SEND pupils, as they may believe to be in control of their reality, however, it leads to failure whilst they blame themselves.

Are we really suggesting SEND pupils should just try harder? That they are free and liberated within the neoliberal education system? Of course, it is ludicrous to suggest that SEND pupils are solely responsible for their educational success. Perhaps the question should really be: What kind of

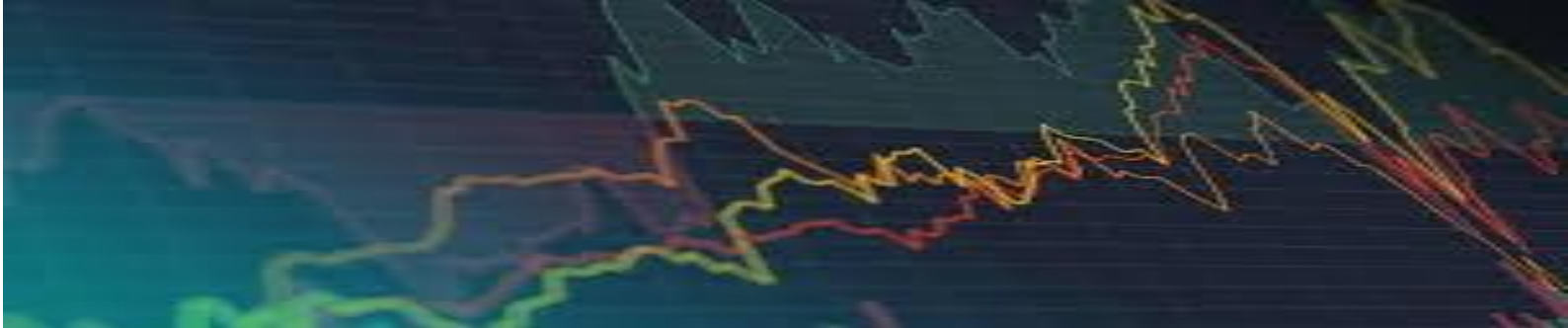


Government reduces young people and children with SEND into measurable commodities or things, whilst simultaneously framing such pupils as responsible and accountable for their own 'success' or 'failure'?

It is a real tragedy that vulnerable young people and children are objectified; treated as *things*, where they are rejected, discarded and viewed as a mere hindrance, as meeting the needs of the economy takes precedence over the needs of vulnerable pupils. Needless to say, every SEND child or young person is valuable in their own right and deserves truly equitable opportunities within education in order to reach their full potential in school and beyond.

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Pictures:

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