

The Rigged Education System: How Neoliberalism Leaves Vulnerable Schoolchildren Behind

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Young people are expected more than ever to take charge of their own lives, yet they live within a system that works against them. Reflexive modernisation has produced new forms of individualisation and standardisation, expecting individuals to accept that it is their role to be the creators of their own lives (Kelly, 2001).

Arguably, discourses of at-risk youth aim to individualise the risks to the self that exist within the framework of the institutionally structured risk environments, which Beck (1992) refers to as the 'risk society.'

Now imagine these young people have become 'responsibilized' not only within society but more specifically within schools (Burchell, 1996). Neoliberalism promotes the individual's ability to change the world in which they reside; it seeps into every vessel of social life, especially within secondary schools. 'Magical Voluntarism' suggests that "if we don't succeed, it is simply because we have not put the work in to reconstruct ourselves" (Fisher, 2011, p.12). By this simplistic logic, if a pupil does not achieve good grades, it is their fault; they did not work hard enough, unfairly framing them as the ones to blame. However, what about those students that are disadvantaged in some way?

'Neoliberal economics relies on the values of choice and competition, rather than values of equity and sustainability, to accomplish its

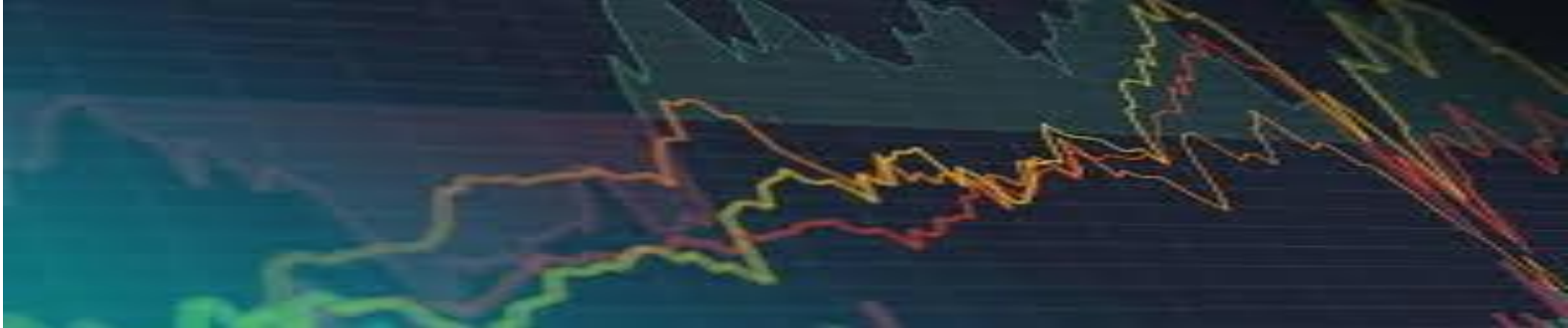
goals' (Webb *et al*, 2009, p.4). It involved the rolling back of state welfarism along with the commodification and individualization of progressively more facets of social life (Harvey, 2005). Education has been important to neoliberalism; for example, schools were seen as applying market principles responsible for

supporting competition for accessing decreasing reserves of public money and a tool used to drive up standards.

Schools that were once a public good have become a private good; Margaret Thatcher can be thanked for this development in the 1980s, which brought in the possibility of bankruptcy of schools (Savage, 2017 p.146).

Through the use of inspections, testing, publishing test scores and league tables, it forces schools to compete for 'customers.' Quasi-market forces in education introduced performance indicators (PIs) once the Education Reform Act of 1988 had been established. The reform persists within education today; it is based on 'local management of schools, with devolved budgets calculated on a per-capita basis, overlapping catchment areas and open enrolment' (Wilson, 2003, p.3).





Schools are under pressure to maintain resource levels by bringing in enough pupil numbers. However, the overlap of catchment areas can create competition for those pupils. Parents then have a choice over where to send their child, which is determined through the annual published PIs such as league tables. This makes parents responsible to make the right decision for their children (Burchell, 1996). Thus, it pressures teachers to achieve good standards for the schools, and it pressures students to perform well.

Policy-makers focussing on 'technical-rationality' decreases the overall value of education when the only purpose is to meet standards and sees teaching as a mechanism in developing instruction (Parker, 1997). The irony here is that the obsessive need to focus on standards has killed any form of educational quality. Policy-makers' persistent attention to performance indicators has resulted in 'economies of student worth'; students are subsequently seen as instrumental in producing outputs (Ball, 2004, p.10).



Consequently, focusing on performativity has also stripped humanistic approaches away from teacher professionalism (Woods & Jeffrey, 2002), eradicating the caring aspect of the teaching role (Troman, 2008). In order to avoid naming and shaming, the teacher must comply with the mechanisms that produce a version of a 'good school', which can create a toxic work environment for teachers and students. Although competition could create higher standards for a short while and produce greater educational practices, this economic value, however, can be oppressive when the game is rigged (Webb et al, 2009).

Competition that the capitalist market uses to support neoliberalism overlooks equity within education. Instead, it can exploit inequities to benefit from those it leaves behind. Within education policy, equity has been reframed to be central to the broader economic reform agendas. Students who do not finish their education are thus seen as a policy issue because it costs the nation economically.

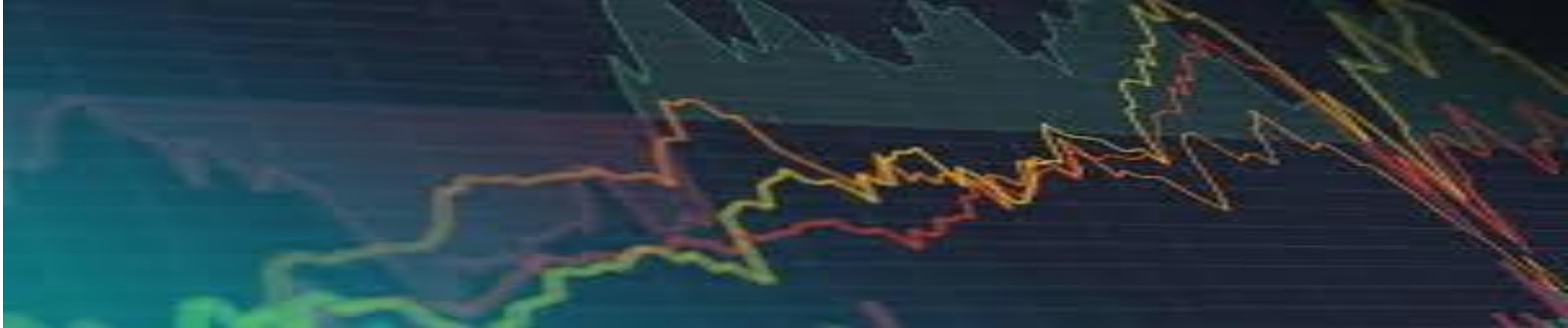
Schooling is seen as only important to the economy, so when a young person fails to engage in schooling, it is viewed as an economic problem. Consequently, equity has been constructed as a 'market-enhancing mechanism' (Savage, 2017, p.151). Therefore, the emphasis on equity being an economic issue has lost other ways of understanding

equity, so social justice is disregarded.

The 'school improvement' discourses created by the OECD have become hegemonic within schools (Skerritt, 2020,

p.2). It has created school autonomy to increase student attainment on a global policy level. However, there is a paradox at play here; on the one hand, schools are given more autonomy, yet they are governed through inspections (Ofsted, for instance), monitoring and accountability.

Accountability has been devised as a central policy solution to increase efficiency and maintain academic excellence and equity. For politicians to appear as if they are striving for education change, care about results, and are concerned with the futures of children and their country's future in the global economy.



Consequently, this renders accountability an important part of education, so surveillance is often viewed as an essential way schools function, particularly autonomous schools, effectively making them quasi-autonomous.

Foucault's (1995) theory on the panopticon suggests that teachers can be surveilled without their knowledge. Panopticon means 'all-seeing' and refers to a prison design with cells allocated around a tower in the centre. Using a backlight, a guard can keep watch of the inmates in their cells without any of them knowing if they are being surveilled. Foucault (1995) suggests this can also apply to hospitals, workshops and schools, meaning the workers can be spied on and judged to control their behaviour and methods, creating docile bodies.

In this case, learning walks and classroom observations. Teachers are thus constantly under pressure to maintain and follow PIs, for example, student achievement and strong attendance levels. However, teachers don't work in an entirely panoptic environment; for example, they know they are being watched by their colleagues, senior leaders in their offices, visitors and pupils (Page, 2017).

For example, data on performance is not only seen by headteachers; it is made public and informs competence levels. Page (2017) suggests that the UK has seen this transition from panoptic to post-panoptic surveillance. For instance, three types of surveillance occur: vertical surveillance (lesson observations and student voice initiatives), horizontal surveillance (parent comments and surveillance in and out of the classroom

through peers) and intrapersonal surveillance (self-surveillance, student performance data and paperwork monitored by management).

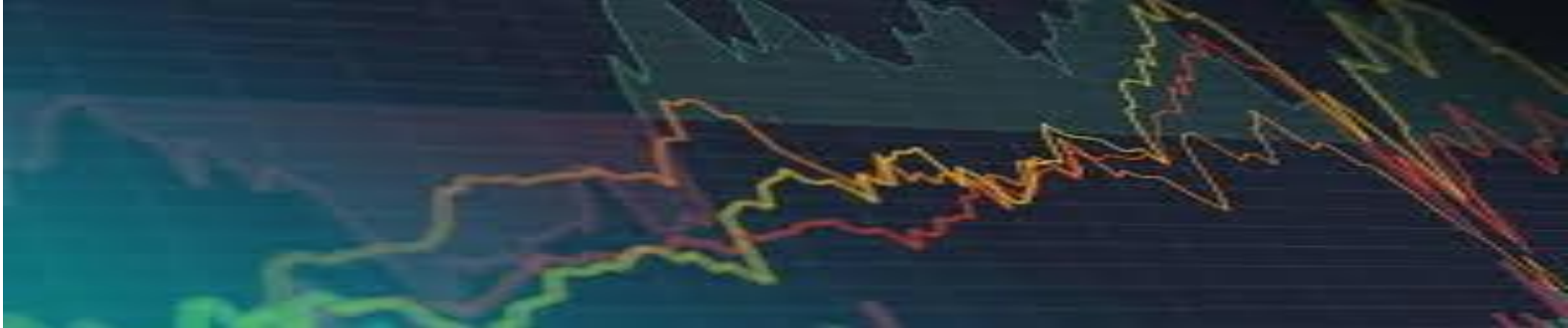
It could be argued that teachers don't have to comply with the rules of the game and could go against the demands of their workplace (Page, 2018). However, the looming fear of job sanctions and, in some cases losing their jobs leaves some with no choice. This system can produce cynical teachers and students. Unfortunately, some teachers have internalised the normality of the neoliberal workplace, and some go even further and use it for their own rewards, such as promotions, earning autonomy and pay-rises. In this case, teachers have been known to game the system in the form of 'off-rolling' underperforming students, so they don't appear within schools' data (Done & Knowler, 2020).

The neoliberal marketised educational culture and accountability measures have made these practices possible, giving senior leaders the incentive to engage in gaming the system. For



example, students with low attendance or grades reflect poorly on the school data, such as Ofsted reports and league tables.

It can incentivise teachers to put less effort into those students or get rid of them unofficially. This means that those students that need extra care and attention run the potential for slipping the net and being left behind as they are not perceived as valuable as their peers that produce good data. The students at risk of being excluded are those with special educational needs (SEND), disadvantaged students (those eligible for free school meals), ethnic minorities and boys.



(Done & Knowler, 2020, p.519). Similar correlations have been made with off-rolling.

In this case, equity is not prioritised, especially since efficiency and profit are deemed more important than social justice (Espinoza, 2007). When students are pushed out or left behind within the system, the neoliberal values are internalised, resulting in them blaming themselves for the state's failings. It reduces students to something that can be quantified and treats them as worthless commodities when the data they produce is not good enough.

The worst part of it all is how these young people will believe it was their choice all along. 'Blind to the existence of powerful chains of interdependency, young people frequently attempt to resolve collective problems through individual action and hold themselves responsible for their inevitable failure' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997 p.114), also referred to as being 'collectively individualised' (Beck, 2000, p.167). As it can be imagined, in contemporary society, young people are under pressure more than ever to gain qualifications and aim high. The knowledge economy demands that knowledge is an essential asset to economic growth (Grint & Nixon, 2015).

Jobs now require high-level skills and qualifications; arguably, it is more important than ever for young people to at the very least achieve GCSEs. If society demands that young people are educated, then the focus should be on ensuring schools are equipped to deal with every student's needs rather than leaving behind those requiring additional support. Instead of making students responsible, it has to be acknowledged that the game is rigged. Let us not forget that they are *people*, not things that can simply be tossed away.

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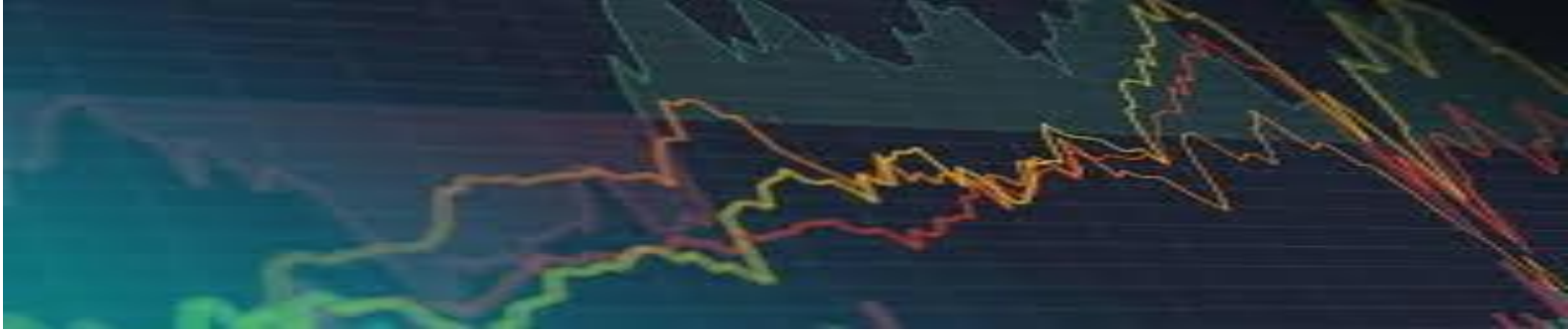
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