The datafication of primary and early years education

The Datafication of Primary and Early Years Education: Playing with Numbers by A.
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Data have become the most significant and contentious resources for contemporary education
policy and governance. Although a significant body of research has illuminated the
educational data work of international organizations such as the OECD, and other research
has traced the policy networks of commercial businesses, technologies, and policy actors in
producing and using data, the experience of teachers and school leaders has largely been
neglected in studies of the flow of numerical information around the system. *The
Datafication of Primary and Early Years Education: Playing with Numbers* by Alice
Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes is a powerfully argued and rich empirical contribution on
the ways data are reshaping school practices, leadership and teacher subjectivities.

The book is especially urgent at the current time because it charts the first wave of Reception
Baseline Assessment in early years settings in England. The subject of considerable
controversy on its introduction in 2015, Baseline was intended to measure the progress of
children from entry in reception (at age 4-5) as a way of calculating 'progress' at the end of
key stage 2 (age 10-11), and would be used as an accountability mechanism to rate schools.
Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes compellingly document its emergence, uptake and effects.
Since publication of the book, however, a new Baseline 2 assessment with an even more
pronounced focus on using early years data to monitor pupil progress as a proxy for school

accountability has been announced by the Department for Education. The British Education Research Association (BERA) has vigorously campaigned against the £10million proposal, arguing it lacks reliability, validity and utility. Similarly, in Scotland standardized national tests for Primary 1 children are the subject of a political row and activist campaigning.

While Baseline provides the empirical substance of *The Datafication of Primary and Early Years Education*, Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes offer a more expansive analysis and theorization of 'what happens when an education system becomes data-obsessed' (3). Datafication in schools, they argue, is: (1) productive of data-driven subjectivities; (2) reduces the complexity of learning to single numbers; (3) increases the visibility of performance; and (4) leads to enhanced beliefs in the accuracy and usefulness of tracking and prediction. These themes are the focus for four of the book's central chapters. In the introductory chapters Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes offer an admirably concise survey of recent critical research on data in education policy studies as well the wider social scientific literature in 'critical data studies'.

Building on both Foucauldian accounts of disciplinary power and Deleuzian control, they show how teachers are turned into 'data collectors' and 'organisers of data-producing environments' (57) who feel their professional culture is trusted less than simplified numerical results, and who are compared and evaluated by patterns of performance found in analyses of data points (60). As such, new teacher subjectivities are produced by the data-obsession in English schools policy. Children are then reduced to enumerated statements of capability by Baseline Assessment—as represented in test result print-outs—as serious contradictions emerge for early years teachers 'between the idea of children as individuals to care about and as producers of data' (64). Schools, in turn, are made more visible and transparent for neoliberal forms of market-based comparative governance, thereby producing a 'self-quantifying school' which is required to engage in 'relentless institutionalized

dataveillance' of itself and its competitors (89). Moreover, with the enhanced trust in the authority of numbers associated with school data, education has also been opened up as an international marketplace of 'datafication business opportunities' (112), with schools exhorted to purchase 'data services' to help them 'manage the volume, range and complexity of data production, visualisation and analysis required by the current policy context' (115).

A particular strength of the book is the presentation of rich empirical material from interviews with teachers, school leaders and local authorities. These voices provide a strong sense of the lived experience and practical complexities of policy enactment in a data-centred, performative, and accountability-driven education system. Teachers and leaders reveal throughout the book the affective anxieties caused by datafication, their sense of losing professional judgment, and the strategies and 'gaming' they sometimes have to play. The book's final chapter calls for alternative approaches to producing 'meaningful data' through formative assessment (138).

With Baseline 2 on the horizon for national rollout in the school year 2020/21, *The Datafication of Primary and Early Years Education* is an important text for researchers, activists, teachers, school leaders and parents wishing to understand the emerging dynamics of datafication in English primary schools and early learning settings. It is also, however, an important contribution to a growing body of critical data studies in education—possibly one of the most crucial current areas of education policy research, as data-processing technologies, edu-businesses, international organisations and data-centred policies continue to cast a dense statistical net across education systems, with largely unknown effects and consequences.