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## I've got my EYE on you:

### Schooled Readiness, Standardized Testing, and Developmental Surveillance

By Emily Ashton



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by **Emily Ashton**

**Author's Bio**

Emily Ashton is currently pursuing a Doctoral degree in Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. She is a graduate of the Critical Studies in Education Master's program at the University of New Brunswick where she completed a thesis titled *Governing New Brunswick Early Learning and Child Care: Ethical and Political Tensions*.

**Abstract**

In recent years early learning and child care (ELCC) has become a significant priority area for many provincial governments, including New Brunswick (NB). The NB consortium perceives ELCC as instrumental to achieving broader economic prosperity and social well-being. In hopes of problematizing rather than normalizing the contemporary spotlight on ELCC, I interrogate how school readiness has become the selectively targeted problem for which pre-school developmental testing is proposed as the solution. The specific means purported to address school readiness in NB is the Early Years Evaluation – Direct Assessment (EYE-DA). While EYE-DA testing is ongoing and powerful, I conclude that the recent pan-Canadian uptake of curriculum frameworks and pedagogical documentation may incite counter possibilities and provocations for those of us working with young children.

In recent years early learning and child care (ELCC) has received unprecedented attention from Canadian politicians including Government of New Brunswick (GNB) policy players. Reverberating arguments of other provincial governments, the New Brunswick (NB) consortium perceives ELCC as essential to achieving broader economic security and social well-being. Mantras such as quality, self-sufficiency, readiness, future prosperity, and appropriate development are uttered mechanically at each ELCC related policy pass. Accompanying this discursive normalization are a host of new programs and practices that promise to be representative of best practice, complement the kindergarten curriculum, and effectively prepare

young children for school (GNB, 2008). In line with neoliberal regularities, these technologies of intervention demarcate instrumental ends for early childhood institutions, configure ELCC primarily as human capital investment, and produce new kinds of child-citizen-subjects.

With hopes of problematizing rather than normalizing the contemporary spotlight on ELCC in NB, I turn to Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality to frame my analysis. First presented by Foucault in a series of lectures in the late 1970s, governmentality has since been productively expanded by theorists in many disciplines including those of reconceptualising early childhood education (Ailwood, 2004, 2008; Bloch et al., 2003; Duhn, 2006; Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2007). Like many of the meaning-making concepts utilized in critical and sociological studies of childhood, governmentality embraces a host of terms that differ from their typical, common-sense meanings. An introduction to key notions of government, rationality, technology, and neoliberalism will follow.

Of particular interest in this article is how a neoliberalized construction of school readiness plays out as the selectively targeted problem of ELCC for which pre-school developmental testing has been proposed as a solution. A key technology of measurement and intervention purported to diagnose and remedy school readiness in NB is the Early Years Evaluation – Direct Assessment (EYE-DA). The EYE-DA is described as a “direct measure of the developmental outcomes of children ages 3-6 years” (Willms, 2009a, p. 43), and represents child development as four distinct, measurable domains. An inquiry into the EYE-DA permits a singular micro-level look at how neoliberalism and neoliberal assessment function in ELCC. Emerging questions include: how do measurement technologies figure children, families and educators; how does evaluation surveil the caretaking practices of families and educators; what happens when direct state intervention shifts to a celebration of privatized expertise; what gets altered when standardized evaluations become intelligible as best practice; and how has child developmentalism been extended and recoded to include neoliberal qualities of flexibility and readiness?

### **Governmentality: Key Terms**

In Foucauldian usage, government departs from its connection with the direct rule of political state parties, such as Liberals or Conservatives, and, instead, is concerned with structuring the “possible field of actions of others” (Foucault, 1982, p. 221). This understanding lends focus to “how” questions of government: How are we governed? How are our choices guided by others? How do we steer the actions of others? How do we govern ourselves? (Dean, 1999). Government here has two component parts: rationalities and technologies.

### *Governmental rationalities*

Rationalities, understood as “ways of thinking” (Miller & Rose, 2008), are the composite of thoughts, ideas, and justifications underlying and guiding our reasoning processes. Why do we make sense the way we do? How do we translate sense into action? What actions do we choose? Rationalities comprise discursive fields that are varied and inconsistent; they are tension-filled and require constant negotiation (Rose, 1999). As an example, consider the mainstay of Article 3 from the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child: “the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.” What theories and bodies of knowledge inform our beliefs about children and what is best for them? Do our frames of reference include human rights, economic future capital, or neuroscience discourses? What language do we use to think children and their needs? What do our cultures and histories teach us is desirable for children? Do we protect the child or promote their participation or both? How? Who should act - government, communities, families, educators – and in what capacity? Different rationalities will be reasonable in different contexts. The vital point is that rationalities make reality “thinkable in such a way that it is amenable” to action (Rose, 1996, p. 42). Once accessible in thought, political rationalities stimulate a variety of tactics and tools to instrumentalize “in practice those very notions, ideas, or visions that define a certain mode of political thinking” (Hultqvist, 1997, p. 406). The fusion between technologies of government and governmental rationalities is made: “Thought becomes governmental to the extent that it becomes technical, it attaches itself to a technology for realization” (Rose, 1999, p. 51).

### *Governmental technologies*

In Foucauldian deployment technology also has more than nonstandard connotations. In everyday use, the designation technology might refer to computers, cell phones, or MP3 players; in sum, the machines that facilitate work, communication, and entertainment. These technologies are most often perceived as neutral, apolitical commodities that are disentangled in their materiality to any web of power. On the other hand, a governmentality perspective considers technologies to be interventionist and interspersed by power relations: technologies are the practical means and measures through which conduct is guided and regulated. Technologies include the techniques, procedures, apparatuses, equipment, tools, and strategies that affect action. In functioning to shape actions and bodies, even at their seemingly most mundane, technologies are always caught up in relations of power. Think again of the computer and the networked, hypertextual landscape of information that is available on the Internet: When I (re)search what do I find? See? Believe? What sort of machine do I use? What knowledge is accessible? Who has access? Where is this knowledge stored? Who controls it? What do I do with this information? What are the knowledge effects? “The very nature of a technology,” Iris Duhn (2006) contends, “is that it depends on connecting a diverse range of knowledges, practices, capacities, skills, dispositions, types of judgments and forces” (p. 36). In every way

technologies are political. In ELCC centres, examples of technologies are as varied as the materials in the room - from posters that hang on the wall, the lego in the block corner, the cutlery used at lunch - to the clock that marks activity transitions, the curriculum binder housed the office area, the division of children into aged groupings, the sign-in sheets at the entrance, to the green space of the naturalized playground. How we think about these technologies and how we intra-act with them and each other is governmentality.

### **Neoliberalism as Governmentality: Key Features**

Neoliberalism evades a simple, singular definition: each neoliberalism takes different forms and is realized in different ways to different degrees. Wendy Larner (2000) posits that neoliberalism be understood as policy, ideology, and governmentality. In this framing, neoliberalism includes a system of ideas, a transfer of ideas into policy-like pronouncements, and a translation of policy text in to everyday practices and actions. Neoliberalism as governmentality ties these facets together into a rationality (i.e. a way of thinking) made practical and technical (i.e. a technology). This is not to say that neoliberalism coheres neatly in application as translations will always be unequal and uneven. However, there are some neoliberal regularities that can be mapped including the role of the state, the prominence of experts, the individualized and responsabilized image of the adult and child subject, and technologized forms of assessment.

#### ***Neoliberal state***

The neoliberal state is an “enabling state” that functions primarily in an organizing role (Fejes, 2008, p. 87). This is not to say that the state and politicians no longer have a powerful influence in our lives, but that their primary function has shifted from authoritarian directors to network producers. For example, in the GNB (2008) ELCC policy document titled *Be Ready*, the “government role” is stated as providing “a policy and regulatory framework,” “supporting parents,” and “help[ing] to create an environment in which all members of society understand and value the benefits of high quality child care services” (p. 2). Creating frameworks and environments and helping parents is far removed from direct disciplinary intrusions that limit the freedoms of citizens. As such, the neoliberal state can be thought of as a as a “centre of calculation” (Rose, 1996, p. 46) through which a “delicate affiliation of a loose assemblage of agents and agencies flow” (Miller & Rose, 1993, p. 84). The state becomes one player among many, albeit a power participant or a team captain to carry the metaphor further. The neoliberal state relies on partnerships with privatized institutions, non-political experts, public employees, and economically savvy, self-governing individuals in order to govern at a distance (Miller & Rose, 1992, 1993).

### *Neoliberal expertise*

Foucault (1991) traces how neoliberalism arose in response to the problem of intensive, paternalistic, and centralized state rule (i.e. governing too much, governing too intimately). Expertise emerged as one solution to too much direct state intervention (Miller & Rose, 1992, 1993). The intensification of expertise allows for increased political action at a distance that is characteristic of the neoliberal state as described above. Experts are able to create and occupy networked zones between state authority and citizen experience. In one way, experts can align themselves with the issues deemed important by politicians. Experts link their agendas to the policy goals of the state. In another fashion, experts work directly with individual citizens in the contexts of their daily work and leisure lives. Dispersed from centres of political rule, experts can be perceived as non-political, neutral actors - especially when renamed as partners. Nonetheless, experts work to instill in individuals the self-regulatory, self-maximizing techniques that “will align their personal choices with the ends of government” (Miller & Rose, 1992, p. 189). Experts are not inherently good or bad, ethical or immoral, but function strategically in an always potentially dangerous network of governmentality. Experts – and no longer necessarily state officials – are most trusted to guide citizen action.

### *Neoliberal subjects*

Neoliberalism concurrently presumes and produces particular kinds of subjects. Flexible, self-sufficient individuals are to be responsible, response-ready, and response-able (Fendler, 2001). Individuals are expected to continuously learn more and work to improve themselves (Rose, 1999). Neoliberalism becomes “an ethic in itself” (Harvey, 2005, p. 3) as human action and relationships are reconfigured as entrepreneurial endeavours and contractual relations. It is important to note that neoliberal conduct is not automatically monetized but does entail a translation of market principles into all aspects of life. Money need not change hands for experiences to be figured in cost-benefit terms. For example, at the state level, care and learning translate into potential capital accumulation and risk management aversion. At a familial level, parents are encouraged to seek out, choose, evaluate, and monitor the best early learning programs for their children. At the level of the individualized child, learning is understood to begin at birth so children in quality ELCC centres learn earlier and learn more, which translates in to a more promising and productive future for all. Entrepreneurial, self-sufficient citizens translate care and learning “into market-oriented behaviour” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 45); in a marketized relationship, ELCC is transformed into a commodity to be shopped and bought.

### *Neoliberal technologies of assessment*

“Studies of governmentality,” Jo Ailwood (2004) writes, “are concerned with the ways in which particular knowledges at particular moments become established within circuits of power” (p. 536). These circuits of power are deeply enmeshed in disciplinary knowledges which “determine what is normal, then develop measures and other practices to assess if individuals are normal and to shape them towards a norm” (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2006, p. 29). These measures and practices are collectively termed technologies. As an illustration of how knowledge and technologies co-construct each other, the scientific knowledge of child development is combined with technical and statistical knowledge designed to measure learning in the production of standardized readiness achievement tests. These tests figure as technologies of measurement that relate what counts as knowledge, construct what it means to be an educable subject, and determine who are considered to be good teachers, schools, and nation state (Fendler, 1998; Fejes, 2006). Such tests are also examples of what Foucault names dividing practices – the knowers (and non-knowers) become sortable. Tests as a singular technology then give way to a host of other interventions designed to bring others up to the norm. In ELCC contexts these additional technologies may include literacy intervention programs, playgroups, tutoring and worksheet practice, or parenting classes.

In this neoliberal climate of increased responsabilization and accountability, Sue Dockett and colleagues (2007) note, “it is not surprising that there is an accompanying focus on assessment [that] extends to assessment before school entry” (p. 19). Amos Hatch (2002) refers to this phenomenon as an “accountability shovedown” into the early childhood years (p. 457). While some may wish to distinguish between what qualifies as an evaluation, a test, or an assessment, I tend to use the terms interchangeably as each implement shares a will to know, sort, and divide. Carol Ann Wein’s (2011) observations convey some of my unease:

I avoid the terms assess and assessment here because they imply a range of meanings that I hope to distance from pedagogical documentation—accountability and the judgment of learning. To judge is to remove oneself from participation. If the teacher is removed from relationship to and responsibility for the learning, it becomes solely the learner’s responsibility. The learner who has not learned is then considered to be in jeopardy and a failure. To view the child learner as a failure is, in my view, unethical, violating the rights of children to have a safe learning environment. (n.p.)

Rather than avoiding the terms evaluation, test, and assessment I wish to highlight their intrinsic judging character by collectively referring to them as technologies of measurement that

constitute individualized childhoods. Furthermore, Wein's introduction of pedagogical documentation as ethical praxis will be revisited in a later section as a technology of counter-measurement that holds potential to disrupt the high-stakes testing regime of neoliberal accountability.

The intent thus far has been to provide the groundwork for an analysis of how features of neoliberal governmentality including expertise, individualism, responsabilization, marketization, assessment and surveillance combine to configure the conditions of possibility for the full-scale implementation of the EYE in NB.

### **At First Sight: Introducing the EYE<sup>i</sup>**

The EYE is described as a “universal assessment tool to assess children’s early development” (PEI, 2011, “EYE”), and a “direct measure of the developmental outcomes of children ages 3-6 years” (Willms, 2009a, p. 43). The EYE consists of two measurement mechanisms: the EYE-DA (Direct Assessment) and the EYE-TA (Teacher Assessment). In NB the EYE-DA is directly administered to all Anglophone and Francophone 4 year-old children attending “school readiness clinics” as part of transition-to-school initiatives in the year prior to kindergarten (GNB, 2007b, p. 10).<sup>ii</sup> The EYE-TA is a “systematic online assessment” carried out once school starts by kindergarten teachers without the direct participation of the individual child (CRISP, 2008). The EYE-TA is completed in a student’s first months of kindergarten with possible follow-up tests at a later period. In NB the EYE-TA is currently used by the Francophone sector only (St-Laurent, 2010). EYE assessments are being implemented in other Canadian provinces as well, including the EYE-DA in PEI and the EYE-TA in Alberta (EYE, “News”). This discussion however will mostly engage the EYE-DA and will focus on NB.

The EYE-DA represents child development as four distinct, measurable domains: (1) awareness of self and the environment, (2) cognitive skills, (3) language and communication, and (4) physical development, which is subdivided into gross and fine motor skills (EYE, “EYE-DA”). As a one-on-one individually administered assessment, the EYE-DA testing directly involves children in face-to-face skill-based activities. The test administration takes between thirty minutes to an hour per child, and, except in exceptional circumstances, a child is ushered into a private testing space with a “district evaluator” who he or she has just met for the first time (Butler, 2009, p. 8). The test is composed of 48 specific measures which break down to 12 tasks in each of the four developmental domains listed above. Provided below are samples of the scripted test prompts:

- Now we are going to do some matching with shapes. I’m going to point to a shape on this side, and I would like you to show me which one on the other side matches the shape.”



- “Now we are going to do some counting...can you count to 6?” (Scoring guide: Can count to 6= 3 Points; Can count to 5 = 2 Points; Can count to 4 = 1 Point; Unable to count to 3 = 0 Points)
- “We are going to use a crayon – this time I want you to colour in this shape – try to be very careful and do your best work.”
- “Now we are going to get up and get moving! Watch closely. I am going to stand on one foot!”... “Now, I want you to do the same as I did...( Willms, 2009a, p. 7)<sup>iii</sup>

Data from the individually administered assessments is inputted into a web-based tool that generates reports on each individual child in addition to mapping and graphical summaries at the school, district, community, and provincial levels (EYE, “Overview”). Parents are subsequently mailed copies of their child’s report card, and sometimes follow-up phone calls are made to secure participation in selective interventions (McAuliffe, 2009). Mary Butler (2010) gives the following examples of interventions:

- child makes scheduled visits to the school to experience and practice kindergarten routines;
- parent and child attend one ½ day per week for five weeks in the spring or summer to learn language development strategies;
- some children receive individual attention for 45 minutes per day for the first five weeks of school;
- referral made for additional assessment by related professionals; diagnosis and interventions followed. (p. 37)<sup>iv</sup>

### **Gazing Deeper into the EYE**

The intensified focus on ELCC in NB is largely “about preparing our youngest children for school” (GNB, 2008, p. 6). School readiness - or as I rewrite the term “*schooled* readiness” to draw attention to the narrow accumulation of skills that typically act as the referent – is constructed as the dominant problem for which ELCC interventions such as the EYE are poised as solution. Schooled readiness has become a prominent feature in recent GNB documentation. For example:

- *Our Action Plan to be Self-Sufficient in New Brunswick*, the government’s overarching policy plan: “To Transform Our Workforce we will: Make the strategic investments required to ensure that every child arrives at kindergarten ready to learn.” (GNB, 2007a, p. 7)
- A government public relations’ and media campaign slogan for the new ELCC curricula, “For now. For life. Be ready!” (<http://www.gnb.ca/ELCC-Curriculum.asp>)

- The Department of Education and Child Development *Policy 703: Provincial Student Code of Conduct*: “As a parent, I will ensure that my children come to school ready to learn.” (GNB, n.d., p. 6)
- *Be Ready for Success: A 10 Year Early Childhood Strategy for New Brunswick* (GNB, 2008).
- *When Kids Come First*, the Department of Education plan’s first commitment: “To Ensure School Readiness” (GNB, 2007b, p. 9).

While the contextual specificity of the statements should be taken into account, I nonetheless include them in order to draw attention to the ever more present and frequent use of readiness to link disparate statements and policies together.<sup>v</sup>

An analysis of the EYE must therefore include attention to the political contexts and ethical conditions under which so-called problems become problematized. For example: How did schooled readiness become a problem to be solved? How is readiness used? What does readiness do? This troubling of schooled readiness is also directed towards the role that knowledges play in its constitution, and, subsequently, to the experts authorized to conduct interventions in conduct. Guiding questions of this sort include: How is schooled readiness assembled as knowable? Who is authorized to know and solve readiness? How have readiness and child development been mobilized together? What comes together in the readiness assemblage? Following these sorts of questions, the EYE is figured as a political, cultural, and economic affair as much as it is an ELCC concern.

The meaning and significance of a technology can be made intelligible through interrogating the particular historical and political moment in which it is set. In this way the EYE can be seen as one component of a larger composition of political shiftings - a singular embodiment of preeminent neoliberal rationalities mixed and strengthened by discourses of schooled readiness and child developmentism. Within these structurings the EYE erects children’s schooled readiness (and therefore children, parents, and educators) as a problem to be known, diagnosed, and overcome. The EYE portends a response to policy statements such as, “We must make certain that every child acquires the reading and problem-solving skills they will need in the modern economy” (GNB, 2007a, p. 22). Only the EYE is not so much a response, solution, or guarantee to such stated neoliberal requirements but intimately entangled in the address. What I mean is that the EYE continually assures its own existence by re-proving and constituting the very problem (i.e. schooled readiness) it relies on for its existence. In order to explore these complicated complicities I read the EYE in concert with the marketization of readiness, development, and fun, and the impacts for ELCC educators.

### *Marketing readiness*

The EYE is created, owned and operated by KSI International Inc., a self-proclaimed “commercial research organization” (KSI, “About KSI Research”) that takes on the role as child development expert who networks between government agencies and individual citizens. The organization states that their “primary focus has been on developing assessment tools to provide educators with data on child development to maximize the accuracy of the educational planning and design decisions they make” (“About KSI Research”). My aim is not to discount their supportive motives, nor to villainize KSI personnel in any way, but to bring attention to what can happen when ELCC, children, schools, and families are constituted in a marketized relationship.

How does this marketized relationship take form? On their website, KSI aims “to be ‘second to none’ in terms of service and support to our *clients*. We value your *business*” (“About KSI Research”; emphasis added). KSI is “dedicated to the *clients* we serve...from the children who are assessed, the teachers using the evaluations, to the policy makers designing school curricula” (EYE, “About us”; emphasis added). What image of the child is evoked when children are named as clients? What might it mean when we consider that readiness can be bought and sold? In NB the EYE implementation is paid for by the Department of Education and Child Development. Costs include the purchase of training, assessments, and reports directly from KSI, and the hiring of additional staff comprised of largely retired teachers to be testers, short-term staff such as supply teachers to run intervention programs, and specific departmental appointees to liaise with KSI (e.g. Program Coordinator position, 2011). Actual figures have proven to be unattainable. The only public cost-related mention of the EYE is in a policy document, in a section on current investments: “\$2 million annually in early kindergarten registration, orientation sessions, Transition-to-school Coordinators, a new Early Years Evaluation (EYE) assessment tool, and various transition to school initiatives” (GNB, 2008, p. 8). Is this how public education dollars are best spent?

This last question is of course very complicated. Neoliberalism is seductive. We desire the best, that same “second to none” that KSI promotes. We want children to do well in school and in life, we hope to teach and raise them well, and we are understandably confused by the contradictory messages and techniques served-up in the surplus of educative readiness products now available on the marketplace. Neoliberalism works because all these important questions and many more besides can be gathered into particular ways of thinking and doing that connect to our hopes, dreams, and fears. But these desires do not have to be taken for granted; we can trouble what we find to be self-evident. This said let us not forget that KSI’s profit motive cannot be severed from their educative one. In a presentation for the cross-Canada National Strategy for Early Literacy consultation event, the EYE presentation ended with this slide: “Last but not least: Other products and services are offered through KSI and affiliated companies. Please see our

website for details. [www.ksiresearch.com](http://www.ksiresearch.com)” (Butler, 2009, p. 19). The EYE are listed on the Early Years Evaluation website under the heading “Products.” The EYE is for sale across Canada and around the rest of the world as well.<sup>vi</sup>

### ***Marketing developmentalism***

Proponents and creators of another Canadian-made readiness assessment used worldwide, the Early Development Index (EDI), argue, “school readiness is increasingly defined as a holistic construct, encompassing not solely cognitive facets, but also physical, social, emotional, and communicative ones” (Guhn, Janus, & Hertzman, 2007, p. 369). Early childhood education reconceptualists Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss, and Alan Pence (2006) offer a jarring critique:

Despite frequent talk about a holistic perspective...the child is frequently reduced to separate and measurable categories, such as social development, intellectual development, motor development. Consequently, processes which are very complex and interrelated in everyday life are isolated from one another and viewed dichotomously, instead of viewing them as intrinsically interrelated functions that all work together in the production of change. (p. 46)

The implied assumption of the EYE-DA and similar tests is that knowing which readiness domain is weakest can lead to specifically targeted interventions which can simply isolate and redress the problem. This reductive focus on isolated skills and developmental domains is especially problematic with young children because “standardised assessments do not recognise that young children can demonstrate skills and abilities in many different ways, and are not particularly sensitive to cultural and linguistic diversity” (Dockett et al., 2007, p. 35).<sup>vii</sup> The EYE-DA perceives children’s learning and development as distinguishable, separable entities, and this is visible in the reports issued to parents.

Explained by Doug Willms, president of KSI, parents receive a report which “lists each of the developmental areas and uses a colour-coded box to indicate the child’s results” (p. 47). Although described by its creator as “not used to label children” (Willms, 2009b, p. 51), the EYE-DA reports showcase a traffic-light colour rating system. Red for Stop, Yellow for Caution, and Green for Go. Furthermore, a slide from an EYE presentation reads: “Children are identified using three colour codes” (Butler, 2010, p. 28). In a semantic framing, synonyms for identified include branded, categorized, recognized, and *labeled*. What might attempts to avoid label do? Can such evaluation ever avoid labeling? What are ways of doing assessment that might engage possibilities of doing otherwise?

The red, yellow, and green colours correspond to categories of development outlined at the bottom of the parental report card: “Appropriate development: Approximately 70% of children of this age are in this category; Experiencing some difficulty: Approximately 15% of children of this age are in this category; and Experiencing significant difficulty: Approximately 15% of children of this age are in this category” (Willms, 2009b, p. 48; Butler, 2010, p. 28). Located to the left-hand side of the report page are brief descriptions of the four developmental domains with 2-4 bulleted examples for each. For example, the details provided to parents for the “Physical/Motor” domain are as follows:

This area refers to children’s abilities to:

- Use crayons, pencils, and scissors (e.g. copying shapes, letters, and numbers)
- Balance, jump and hop on one foot (Willms, 2009b, p. 48; Butler, 2010, p. 28)

Part of how the EYE has become an unquestioned inscription device is through banalized statements of development like the above. I am not arguing against children having experiences with scissors, markers, or physical activity, nor their importance, but what concerns me is that these skills become the truth of child development and of the children themselves. The language and practice of child development can neutralize political and ethical questions; what counts as child development and readiness is not natural or universal, nor is its measurement. Child development assumptions are integral to the construction of the EYE evaluation questions and to the evaluative conclusions drawn from the data.

In a document titled “Classification Criteria for the Early Years Evaluation (EYE)” it is explained that “age-based norms are used for the EYE-DA to determine whether children are indicated as red vs. yellow vs. green” (EYE, “Research”). While my displeasure with the formula has already been expressed, I wish here to focus on the pre-determination of coloured placements. The colours signal “cut-off scores” which “are set such that approximately 20% of the population will be red and 20% yellow per domain. Intentional so that we don’t have children ‘falling through the cracks’” (St-Laurent, 2010, p. 3). In other words,

Within each domain we establish two cut-off scores, one distinguishing between red and yellow, the other between yellow and green. The cut-scores were set such that the percentage of children with red scores is about 15%, and the percentage with yellow scores is about 30%. These two levels of vulnerability are consistent with national and international results on other assessments, such as the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). (EYE, “Research: Classification Criteria”)

What the quotations make known is that the EYE-DA is purposefully designed so that 15-20% of the child population will be Red and judged to be “experiencing significant difficulty.” This is another way in which developmentalism works with assessment technologies to sort, manage, label, and discipline children. There is something immensely unsettling about a test which is intentionally designed so that a fifth of children do not perform well and are therefore constructed as failing to develop appropriately and normally, and an even larger 30-40% are identified at-and-as- risk.

### *Marketing social justice*

The marketization of EYE takes another precarious turn in its connection with social justice. KSI and its affiliated research institute (CRISP) promote their services in terms familiar to neoliberal rationalities wherein politics are now being played out on the “moral register” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 5). Rose (1999) argues that citizen-subjects “have become obliged to think ethically. Hence it is likely on the terrain of ethics that our most important political disputes will have to be fought for the foreseeable future” (p. 188). With the ascension of the ethical in mind, the EYE and other similar quantitative measurements are being justified in the name of “inclusion” (Willms, 2010) and “social justice” (Beswick, Sloat, & Willms, 2008). What are the possible implications and ramifications when ethics are refigured in a marketized formulation?

Joan Beswick, Elizabeth Sloat, and Doug Willms (2008), in their article titled “Four Educational Myths that Stymie Social Justice,” frame “early monitoring” (p. 124) and testing of children as the material of social justice (p. 125). The authors write:

Unfortunately, educational practices are shaped by multiple forces and, all too often, are influenced less by empirical evidence than by prevailing sociopolitical mores and the deeply held beliefs of educators and educational communities... The result is a plethora of practices that persist even though their effectiveness remains unproven. These practices are widely adhered to because educators believe they confer benefits—a belief that, although false, resonates with the idiosyncratic experiences or value systems of influential individuals. In other words, these persistent ineffectual practices assume the status of myth, acquire credibility, and rarely are critically examined. (p. 116)

I intend no disrespect to the authors, however, I do take issue with many of their ideas. Firstly, I find the possibility that “educational practices are shaped by multiple forces” hopeful. I name this hope a possibility because it seems very few people are making decisions for the many, and the democratic experimentalism that Peter Moss (2008) speaks of resides in the realm of hoped-

for and not-yet. I oddly agree with the authors that there are “influential individuals” whose “value systems” dominate educative practices, although our perception of who those individuals are clashes mightily. I believe these authors and some of their colleagues in the fields of child development and educational testing are the “influential individuals” whose – to twist their words against them – “ineffectual practices assume the status of myth, acquire credibility, and rarely are critically examined.” Social justice is definitely a desirable and admirable goal - but its meaning needs to be continually unpacked and its actions continually debated. I cannot provide a sign-posted path on how we can achieve social justice with and for children, however, I am fairly confident that technologies of measurement and surveillance are not the most just route to take.

### *Marketing fun*

The EYE-DA is repeatedly rationalized by pronouncements of pleasure by those responsible for both its administration and marketization. Examples include: “Children love doing the EYE!” (Willms, 2009b, p. 44), and, “Colourful pictures, manipulatives, and physical activities make the EYE-DA fun and engaging for children” (Butler, 2010, p. 18). These discursive assertions are further tied to the materials used in the testing procedures. The Early Years Evaluation boasts that the “EYE-DA test kit materials...include...Stickers for the children” (EYE, “Products: EYE-DA”). Stickers, as we are all expected to know, make for good childhood fun. Sara Ahmed (2008a) adopts a cultural studies approach “to explore how happiness can make certain truths 'true' and certain goods 'good'” (p. 7). Ahmed asks, “To what do we appeal to when we appeal to happiness?” (p. 7). I wonder: What is appealed to when the EYE is fashioned as fun? Why is fun so integral to the EYE public perception campaign? What truths does fun make seem true and what goods does fun make appear good? How does fun intersect with an image of the child? How does fun help sell the EYE? How might claims of fun shut out dissensus? Thinking back to my own school evaluation experiences, I question whether fun is an appropriate tag line.

In bringing happiness and power into encounter Ahmed (2008a) considers how happiness functions as a “world-making device” (p. 11). More questions emerge: What world does fun bring about? What world does the EYE help make? The EYE brings into being a world where the schooled readiness of children is an object to be known and children are subjects to be managed (while nevertheless being happy). The complexities of neoliberalism figure messily in this configuring of worlds. Ahmed writes that thinking about happiness in a critical way pays attention to “how happiness and unhappiness are distributed and located within certain bodies and groups” (p. 11). What child-bodies get to have fun? Who is excluded? Who gets rewarded with a sticker? How does fun support the norms and ideals of normal child development, of schooled readiness, of being “successful in school and in life!” (EYE, “About Us”)?

Part of what makes the EYE presentable as fun “is in part what it conceals or keeps from view” (Ahmed, 2008b, p. 132). In an article in a local NB newspaper, parent Andrea McAuliffe (2009) describes the EYE-DA testing environment:

Over the last two weeks, much of the talk among the moms at my son's pre-school has centred around mysterious meetings. Children across the province have been having one-on-one sessions with teachers in preparation for entering kindergarten in September... "What goes on once we leave the room? What are they talking about in there for 45 minutes? My kid told me she was jumping on one foot. What does that have to do with kindergarten?"

Such a scenario might be expected to evoke critical questions; however, critiques of the EYE-DA are rarely, if ever, made in public forums. McAuliffe asks important questions that deserve further engagement. Ahmed (2008b) encourages such asking too when she instructs, “We need to get beyond the appeal of happy surfaces” (p. 134). We need to ask what lies under fun.

### *Marking educators*

Part of what underlies the EYE is a host of consequences for ELCC educators. The processes of EYE marketing discussed above make their mark on our image of ELCC educators. Schooled readiness panic works to bring actions of ELCC educators under minute inspection, and also re-envision ELCC centres and educators as producers of schooled children. The perceived lack of “training” of ELCC educators then becomes a derived area of concern; the EYE acts as an indirect measure of ELCC educator “performance” (Ball, 2003). There are approximately 2600 ELCC educators in NB and slightly less than a third are reported to have “a one-year early childhood education (ECE) certificate, a BEd or a university degree in child studies” (GNB, 2008, p. 8). This information is presented in a policy document as “70 per cent do not have recognized ECE training” and the statistic is textually positioned directly before the statement: “a key requirement for high quality child care is appropriately trained staff” (GNB, 2008, p. 8). This textualization matters. What image of educators is being constructed? What counts as training? Neither experience working with children nor professional development of other sorts, such as self-directed study or participation in meetings, workshops and conferences, are acknowledged. If un-schooled readiness is the problem for which the EYE and KSI produces solutions then “untrained” educators are unfairly being put to task for the constructed state of a readiness crisis. Constructing a perceived lack of training as a correlate for a lack of readiness marks a failure to move beyond the reification of “training the always, already ‘failing’ early childhood educator” (Novinger, O’Brien, & Sweigman, 2005). Schooled readiness as the



problem space of ELCC is not designed to highlight educators' innovative strengths.

The EYE-related effects for ELCC educators and centres are uneven. Educators are being pressured to contextlessly and directly teach the skills measured by the EYE-DA, and their practices come under increased surveillance.<sup>viii</sup> Furthermore, children have been pulled from fee-paying ELCC centres to attend the free readiness sessions offered by the Department of Education and Child Development through local School Districts. Other ELCC centres have capitalized on the readiness push and remarketed their programming to offer “preschool” in addition to the provincial curriculum. I have visited a centre where children of age 4 were rote taught phonics for a portion of their preschool morning routine. However, ELCC educators also engage in many everyday acts of resistance against the EYE and the testing of children. Hallway conversations with parents have revealed the well-kept secret that “you can just say no to the test, your child doesn't have to take it, and nothing bad will happen”; parent meetings have been held to discuss concerns about the schoolification of children with invitees from the School Districts and Department in attendance; educators have accompanied parents and children to meet their kindergarten teacher, and have encouraged families to take their learning story portfolios and narrative documentation with them to their schools. Educators are unequally positioned against this powerful test, powerful corporation, and powerful discourses, but they prove now and again that they are not powerless.

### **EYEing an Otherwise**

The EYE is only a portion of the picture of ELCC in NB. The *New Brunswick Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care ~ English (NBCF)* offers another vision (UNB ECC, 2008).<sup>ix</sup> Constructed as a framework, the *NBCF* requires interpretation and meaning making. This, I believe, marks its pedagogical promise and potential. As a values-based curriculum, possibilities exist to rethink the image of the child, trouble developmental discourses, and complicate standardized technologies of measurement. In the *NBCF* two types of assessment practices are mentioned:

*Narrative assessment* illustrates, describes, and interprets the learning of individual children or groups of children through careful listening, photographs, observations, anecdotal records, and multimodal learning stories such as those developed in conjunction with *Te Whāriki* - the New Zealand Curriculum. This form of assessment builds community and links children's learning to curricular goals and future planning.

*Normative assessment* is typically an individual assessment that locates an individual's development in relation to age-group norms, such as developmental

milestones. This form of assessment must be used carefully and thoughtfully, keeping in mind that all norms are socially and culturally biased. (p. 63)

The *NBCF* notes that the kind of assessment practiced makes available, reflects, and enacts different perspectives, beliefs, and insights about children, families, learning and curriculum. The *EYE* is clearly situated as a form of normative assessment whereas the *NBCF* recommends practices of narrative documentation that “emphasize a strengths-based approach” (p. 63). Especially important to me is that in the many examples of documentation and assessment practices listed in the *NBCF* - for example, creating learning story portfolios, constructing project webs, and listening to children (p. 64) - 15-40% of children will not be left behind or labeled as vulnerable. What could shift if children came to kindergarten with a learning story portfolio rather than a one-page report with a few green, yellow, or red lights? There are possibilities offered in the *NBCF* to see and do differently.

However the *NBCF* is not immune to neoliberal influences, although they do present differently than the *EYE*. A pedagogical framework is not an innocent technology as it is always already enmeshed in specific historical, cultural, and political contexts (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2011). The flexible, competent, and individualized child introduced earlier takes form in pedagogical expressions which figure “children as curious and communicative individuals” (UNB ECC, 2008, p. 8), “agents in their own learning” (p. 60) who demonstrate “flexible and fluid thinking” (p. 45). Also the neoliberal push for learning is perhaps inescapable in any curricular document regardless of its postmodern affinities and efforts to shift dominant discourses. I am not against learning nor am I discounting this strong reconceptualized image of the child by any means. I offer this because I am for not getting too comfortable or too settled. This new image of the child and the other pedagogical principles expressed in the *NBCF* are perhaps best understood as provocations (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2011). In provocations lie possibilities.

The recent take-up of curriculum frameworks across Canada has opened spaces for ELCC practices that engage with meaning-making (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2006), and “attend to the complexity and plurality of childhood” (Hodgins, 2012, p. 4). A form of what the *NBCF* names above as narrative documentation is practiced in British Columbia as pedagogical narrations. Iris Berger (2010) writes of pedagogical narrations as a process of making visible educational experiences, thought, and practices “in the public realm, thus becoming subject to public critical thought and dialogue. These narrations provoke us to think anew and to resist normalized and habitual conceptions of childhood, education, learning, and assessment” (p. 58). What might become of assessment if practiced publically? How might foregrounding responsibility and relationality reconceptualize assessment? What is possible if we make

meaning together? What these brief counterexamples show is that within the cacophonous complexities and contradictions of neoliberalism are productive possibilities, potentialities, and provocations for all of us working in early learning and child care.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Most of the references to the EYE were obtained from the official Early Years Evaluation website. As dates and page numbers are not available, I have referenced the webpages with title descriptors and hyperlink headings which should allow easy discovery of the information via the homepage:

<http://earlyyareevaluation.com/EN/>. The same citation process was used for KSI:

<https://ksiresearch.com/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Each School District in NB (7 total) offers their own transition-to-school programming although most contain a variation of the following elements: “October and November: *Ready Set Go- Kindergarten Parent Information Meeting facilitated by Transition to Schools Coordinator*. Many facts regarding your son/daughters pre-K development will be discussed. November: *Welcome to Kindergarten program from the Learning partnership*. Both Parents and children attend this active session put on by the schools. You will receive a bag of fun educational activities and materials for your child. January, February and March: *Early Years Evaluation (EYE-DA)* for all the children that are attending Kindergarten in the fall and are administered at zone schools. Appointment times will be set at Ready Set Go meeting and you will receive a phone call to confirm. May: *Kindergarten Orientation for children and Parent information at each zone school*. Parents and Children attend this session as we have an exciting day planned” (Anglophone West School District, 2013).

<sup>iii</sup> In a report titled “Quality Criteria for Measurement in Social Research: A Study of Item Bias in the Early years Evaluation Direct Assessment (EYE-DA)”, Marotta (2010) lists the following EYE-DA test items: The items of Domain D...Item 1, for example, asks children to stand on one foot for a certain period of time; Item 9 asks them to draw a person; Item 10 asks them to print their name...In Item 8 of Domain C, for instance, test administrators must evaluate how well children pronounce ‘Dogs like to run and play’ (‘Les chiens aiment courir et jouer’); ‘Most rabbits have soft fur’ (‘La plupart des lapins ont le poil doux’); and ‘A turtle moves slowly’ (‘La tortue avance tres lentement’). Item 9 of the same domain presents three pictures and asks respondents to tell a story about the picture. Test administrators are required to evaluate students based on story coherence and use of appropriate grammar” (pp. 12-13).

<sup>iv</sup> What must be made clear here is that a direct and causal relationship cannot be drawn between the EYE-DA and the aforementioned interventions. For example, pre-kindergarten visits to schools are not EYE specific – they would happen anyway and did so before the EYE became commonplace. Furthermore, referrals to what NB calls Early Intervention services are not a direct consequence of the EYE either. Referrals to specialized services do happen post-EYE-DA testing, I am not denying that fact, but only making the point that many children and families have received additional support regardless of EYE-DA administration. As one last hesitation on my part I wish to bring attention to the short duration of the applauded interventions. Educational research has consistently shown that interventions of short-term duration, including parental education programs, are short-lived and ultimately ineffective in the long term (Lansford & Borstein, 2007; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2006; Wilson et al., 2012).

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<sup>v</sup>The more recent ELCC policy document published in NB does not contain the phrase “school readiness”. I do not interpret this absence as a strong change in focus but an indication of a system in flux. In 2011 the day care and childhood services division of the Department of Social Development was transferred to the Department of Education. The focus of the newly amalgamated Department was on a “continuum of learning” as introduced in the plan, *Putting Children First*, “which will better prepare young children for the future” (GNB, 2012, June 7, Press Release).

<sup>vi</sup> Since its beginnings in 2005 the EYE has been used in four countries to evaluate more than 44,000 children (Butler, 2010, p. 13). While my analysis attends to KSI specifically, I wish to make clear that they are neither the sole contributors nor practitioners of school readiness in NB. Part of the power of neoliberal governmentality is that we are all (unequally) enrolled and implicated. As Rosi Bradiotti (2010) reminds us, “We are in this together” (p. 42).

<sup>vii</sup> A related critique of the EYE-DA I wish to highlight emerges from a very unlikely source – the Early Years Evaluation website itself ([earlyyearevaluation.com/EN](http://earlyyearevaluation.com/EN)). A promotional series on the website titled, “EYE-TA in Action,” showcases video clips from teachers and administrators in Edmonton Catholic Schools who are using the kindergarten level EYE-TA. Teacher, Lisa Milan, shares the following about the EYE-TA: “It really, I think, is an authentic way of looking at children and targeting what their needs are because as teachers [we] know them the best, and we see them for the whole month and we can see what they can do in a variety of situations. And so it’s not just someone coming in and seeing what they can do at one point in time, we can see what they can do in different situations and they’re comfortable with us and we’re able to see what their true needs are and how we can help them” (“EYE Video”, 2012). Milan (unintentionally) brings focus to several problems with the EYE-DA: singular context, singular measurement, singular encounter, and singular time. The EYE-DA is not designed to recognize that young children show different strengths in different contexts in different ways with different people, and that children’s abilities are rapidly changing in the prior-to school years (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2006).

<sup>viii</sup> In *Be Ready* (2008) plans were also initiated to “create a new childcare resource service” where parents can “access background information on caregivers” (p. 31). Such surveillance of ELCC educators fits with Jo Ailwood’s (2008) comments on how “the work of early childhood educators in the year prior to compulsory schooling is increasingly becoming public, as their professional practices are produced and managed in order to create the ‘school-ready’ child” (p. 549).

<sup>ix</sup> The Francophone sector early childhood curriculum, *Curriculum Éducatif: Services de garde francophones*, was produced and published in a similar timeframe to the *NBCF*.



**In this issue:**

From the Editor's Desk  
Special Issue: Neoliberalism  
Guest Editor Dr. Luigi Iannacci, PhD, Trent University,  
Peterborough, Ontario

I've got my EYE on you:  
Schooled Readiness, Standardized Testing, and Developmental  
Surveillance  
by Emily Ashton

Bear-Child Stories in Late Liberal Colonialist Spaces of Childhood  
by Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, Lara di Tomasso, Fikile Nxumalo

Producing Neoliberal Parenting Subjectivities:  
ANT-Inspired Readings from an Informal Early Learning Program  
by Rosamund Stooke

Neoliberal Fun and Happiness in Early Childhood Education  
by Cristina D. Vintimilla

Radical Education and the Common School:  
A Democratic Alternative  
by Michael Fielding and Peter Moss  
Reviewed by Kim Atkinson

Call for Contributions:  
'The Visual Arts in Early Childhood Education'

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