Class Struggles: Educational Value, Labour and Play

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Abstract

Play supports a child's healthy physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development, whilst research reveals that neoliberal education is antagonistic to play. It has been widely argued that there is an antagonism because neoliberal education normatively values economics over a broader range of educational concerns. But if neoliberal education's human capital-based foundation has refocused education around raising educational productivity, and if play supports the development of a child's productive capacities, the argument that economics is normatively valued over play does not fully explain the antagonism. This thesis uses this contradiction as the basis for an original examination into why neoliberal primary education in England is antagonistic to play. It is argued that to understand the contradiction, it is necessary to consider neoliberal education and play as forms of productive activity. Drawing on the latest thinking from Open Marxism, this thesis uses empirical data collected from one primary school in England to develop the original concept of educational value production (EVP). EVP allows both the subject and the object of neoliberal primary education to be located within a specific type of productive activity. It provides a negative critique that can consider the human content, social relationships, and experiences of struggle that a 'positive' focus on abstract commensurability variously denies. The work suggests that the productivity that defines neoliberal education in England can be considered a contradictory process of class reproduction that aims to reproduce pupils as potential personifications of the category of labour, a potential working class, by leveraging the teachers' class need to personify the category of labour. It is argued that such productivity can be understood as a process of fetishisation as it denies the antagonistic practice and social relations that constitute it. Here, teacher and pupil engagement in EVP is understood to constitute class within and through an antagonistic, contradictory and practical experience of struggle, in-against-and-beyond the category of labour. Neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England can be considered in the context of the struggle to reproduce and personify the category of labour, by raising standards and progress within and through a high-stakes engagement in EVP, that relegates the pupils' subjective desire to engage in play to a secondary concern. The central argument developed is that neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play can be understood in terms of the economic and social need to objectively classify a potential labour force, to reproduce class relations in a fetishised form, that variously

and contradictorily struggles in-against-and-beyond, the needs of the subjects who engage in it. The thesis provides an original empirical contribution to Marxian educational research that has traditionally been heavily theory-based. It develops Rikowski's 'web of capital's forms in education' argument, Ozga and Lawn's notion of 'proletarianization', it expands on Das's 'classroom as a site of class struggle' and critiques the idea that 'productivity is almost everything'. The work raises questions about quality and freedom regarding education's relationship to both economic and child development which aim to facilitate a reflexive consideration of educational practice, beyond the limitations that neoliberal education imposes.

Acknowledgements

This research highlights how the world of independent individuals is simultaneously a world of interconnection and social relations. Such a perspective reveals that nothing is produced truly independently, as our individual existence is the result of a wealth of labour expended by people who struggle and suffer, who have been, and continue to be, negated, erased and denied. This is to acknowledge that something so seemingly independent as writing a PhD is, in fact, a deeply social endeavour, something I believe that is remarkable and should be celebrated. In a literal sense, we constitute each other, regardless of whether we want to acknowledge or conceptualise it.

More specifically, I'd like to thank the teachers who encouraged me to play, especially John, Nigel and Ola. The time, space and freedom you gave me was, despite the noise, a lesson in learning that continues to resonate with me today. I want to thank the staff and pupils of the school where the fieldwork took place for their kindness, generosity, and the precious time they shared with me. I want to pay tribute to the efforts of staff whom I had the privilege to observe amongst the especially challenging backdrop of the COVID pandemic. I'd like to thank Professor Jo Warin for the quality of her supervision and patience as I've grappled with difficult, indeed, contradictory ideas. Without Professor Warin's skill, experience and ethic of care, the process of writing this thesis could have been very different indeed. The project, however, has been extremely rewarding and transformative as the patience, trust and good faith I've been shown have facilitated my own growth and development, for which I'm extremely grateful. Finally, I would like to thank Rebecca Shaw for her love, commitment, and support, for the part she has played in the life we have built together, which, within and through, this work has been produced.

List of Abbreviations

1988 ERA: 1988 Educational Reform Act

CVA: Contextual Value-Added Measure

EVP: Educational Value Production

EYFS: Early Years Foundation Stage

GERM: Global Educational Reform Movement

NPM: New Public Management

NRM: The New Readings of Marx

OFSTED: Office for Standards in Education

OM: Open Marxism

TA: Teaching Assistant

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Author's declaration: This thesis is entirely my own work. It has not been submitted for the award of higher degree elsewhere.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

1.1 Neoliberal Education

The transformation of the English education system into a neoliberal model is understood to have begun on the 18th October 1976 (Jones 2016, p.75), exactly one week following my birth. The Labour Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan, gave a speech at Ruskin College, Oxford, in which he argued for greater efficiencies and a refocusing of education around the needs of the economy:

> 'In today's world, higher standards are demanded than were required yesterday and there are simply fewer jobs for those without skills… there is a challenge… in education… to examine its priorities and to secure as high efficiency as possible … there is a role for the inspectorate in relation to national standards… there is the need to improve relations between industry and education' (in Barber 1997, p.33).

Callaghan's aspirations were translated into policy by Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives with the 1988 Education Reform Act (1988 ERA) during the year I began secondary education. The 1988 ERA is considered 'the most decisive break' (Glennerster et al. 1991) in English education since the 1944 Education Act as it introduced a national curriculum and the Standard Assessment Tests (SATS) in primary and the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in secondary, through which knowledge of the curriculum would be tested.

My personal experience of neoliberal education began in a primary school in Manchester situated less than a mile from the birthplace of Ellen Wilkinson, the Labour minister who introduced the 1944 Education Act and who argued for an 'independent working-class education' (Perry 2014, p.135) because 'class distinctions… are the negation of democracy' (Perry 2014, p.373). My experience was defined by a lack of interest and disaffection, as a focus on objective knowledge and learning was variously at odds with the practical, subjective antagonisms that constituted my broader 'working-class' experience. Disillusionment with formal education was common amongst my peers, but despite this, that my experience of education became rich and rewarding was somewhat unusual. I was encouraged by some committed teachers to

become involved in extra-curricular activities, *to play*, to make music by engaging freely in qualitatively rich social practice. The experience was transformative and significant to the degree it became a catalyst for some of my peers, with one teacher subsequently describing how 'one young man in particular… became the focal point… which encouraged lots of other youngsters (to play) to pick up drumsticks and guitars' (Hillary 2014, p.99). My experience of neoliberal education was therefore contradictory, as it was at once defined by qualitatively rich and transformative experiences and by failure, as I completed 11 years of compulsory schooling with just 2 GCSEs.

1.2 Neoliberalism

My own experience and English education's objective shift to a neoliberal model can be understood in the context of a 'neoliberal revolution' (Jaung 2001) that aimed to 'restore the rates of profit to capital that had fallen virtually everywhere from the late 1960s' (Anderson 2025). Thatcher had declared 'there was no alternative' to neoliberal capitalism (Fisher 2009) and as the cold war ended it was widely assumed the ideological battles that had underpinned the conflict had ended too; 'the end of history' (Fukuyama 1992) had been reached, 'the class war (was) over, but the struggle for true equality (had) only just begun' (Blair 1999). But despite such euphoria, history made an explosive return as the 'debt and… wage repression… (that was) central' (Anderson 2025) to neoliberalism triggered the 2008 financial crisis that has been described as 'the worst financial crisis in global history' (Bernanke in Worstall 2014).

By 2025, it was clear the neoliberal 'economisation of life' (Murphy 2017) had a well-defined class character in those countries that had embraced it most comprehensively, a point Fukuyama recently conceded (2024). This was reflected in the 'steep, and in some cases (United States and United Kingdom) staggering increases in inequality' (Anderson 2025) that were expressed within widely disproportionate social experiences that meant many were excluded from some of the basic essentials of life (Antonucci and Varriale 2020, Dorling 2023, Pring 2024, Walsh and McCartney 2024).

The radical, objective shifts that characterised neoliberalism substantially impacted my subjective experience, as neoliberal polices meant many local industries were forced to close within the area I grew up, including a large, state-supported enterprise that at one

point employed four of my family. Redundancies led to long-term unemployment as people either left the area or withdrew into their homes, slowly extinguishing any hope and sense of community that had previously existed. 'As the economic picture darkened, so did the portrayals' (Groom 2022, p.303) as decline became so entrenched that by 2000 the area had become infamous as the set for a TV drama about the dysfunctional lives of Manchester's underclass. I witnessed first-hand the human cost of neoliberal economisation as mental ill health, substance abuse, despair and reactionary politics variously became the response to declining quality of life and squandered potential. Rather than looking meaningfully and collectively outwards for answers, many retreated inwards, encouraged by a neoliberal orthodoxy that emphasised individual responsibility and a pathologised sense of shame and inadequacy.

My subjective experience was, in fact, common as neoliberal polices transformed national economies and the plight of millions. Processes of deindustrialisation and the relocation of production substantially affected working-class communities that had relied on such industries for their livelihoods (Postone 2012). These communities had traditionally been organised around a critical-left tradition that had been successful in bolstering working-class economic and political interests in developed capitalist economies through the labour movement and labour politics (Davies 1992), particularly during the 'golden years' in the aftermath of WW2.

The delegitimising of a critical left that had foregrounded issues of class corresponded with the rise of a 'post-ideological' (Žižek 2008, p.58) policy consensus amongst left and right governing parties (Ali 2018) who looked to implement policy based on objective, neutral evidence[1] (Biesta 2007). The 'retreat from class' (Wood 1986) meant the decline in working-class fortunes that occurred during the neoliberal period was variously ignored, unrepresented (Sanders 2023) and/or individually pathologised[2]. The implications of this are proving significant as the vacuum produced by the

[1] Barber (1997) is a good example of a strong, Fukuyama (1992) influenced argument for post-ideological education in England, as he makes the case for a micro-focus on culture in schools as the singular route to educational success.

[2] Davies (2021) has examined the extent to which the rise in diagnosis of mental health conditions during the neoliberal period can be understood in terms of a negative spiral of individuation and de-politicisation that was further underpinned by a drive for sales of prescription drugs. Of particular relevance is his discussion of mental health issues within compulsory education in England as they relate to children, staff, and the pressures to raise attainment (pp.158-186).

delegitimisation of a critical left within core capitalist states, that notably shared liberalism's universalist tendency, has been increasingly filled by a 'critical', illiberal, far-right nationalism (Runciman 2019, Piketty 2020, Davies 2021, Wolf 2023) that 'poses the most serious threat to liberal democratic values since the Second World War' (Chandler 2024, p.11).

1.3 The Problems with Neoliberal Education

The impact of neoliberalism on education has been the subject of widespread criticism. Educational research has followed broader trends during the neoliberal period as it has refocused away from concerns about the category of class towards 'new concerns with identity and difference, categories considered more appropriate to the postmodern condition' (McLaren in Dolby and Dimitriadis 2013, pp.36-37). Ball (2003) has discussed the toxic nature of 'performativity', Jeffery and Woods (1996) 'deprofessionalisation', Williamson (2017) 'datafication', Pratt (2016) 'marketisation', Bradbury (2019) a narrowing of education known as 'schoolification', whilst Sahlberg (2021) has described neoliberal education in terms of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM). It has been widely argued that these tendencies have emerged from neoliberal education's 'economisation' (Spring 2015), which normatively values economic concerns over broader educational and pedagogical concerns.

1.4 Neoliberal Education and Play

An awareness has developed that neoliberal polices are antagonistic to children's play in general (Edelman 2016, Garner et al. 2018, Haidt 2024), antagonistic to play in education (Elkind 2007, Maynard and Chicken 2010, United Nations 2013, Deruy 2016, Lewis 2017, CDCP 2018, Doyle and Sahlberg 2019) and antagonistic to play in English education (All-Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood 2015, Baines and Blatchford 2019, Bradbury 2019, Doyle and Sahlberg 2019, p.85, Trevor, Ince & Ang in Cameron and Moss 2020, p.104, Clark 2022, Raising the Nation/The Play Commission 2025). It is argued that the neoliberal economisation of education creates a high-stakes, 'punitive' (Moss et al. 2021) system, that undermines a commitment to a range of educational aims, concerns and values (Spring 2015, Ball 2016, Lewis 2020, Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021, Clark 2022, Vandenbroeck et al.

2022) such as play (Doyle and Sahlberg 2019, p.88) and playful pedagogies (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021, p.137).

1.5 Human Capital Theory

At the heart of neoliberalism's economisation of education is human capital theory (Becker 1993/1964), which posits a positive relationship between levels of educational attainment, skills, and training and economic productivity and growth. Human capital theory is advocated by influential international bodies such as the OECD who suggest it is the most important factor of production (Blair in Burton-Jones and Spender 2011, p.94). The OECD emphasises the links between education and economic growth (Spring 2015, p.30), noting that rising educational productivity is associated with increases in potential labour productivity (OECD 2023).

1.6 An Unexplained Contradiction

Evidence reveals that play is vital for the healthy physiological (Graham et al. 2005, Austin 2007, Lindon 2007, British Heart Foundation 2009) and cognitive development of the child (Moss 2009, Ball 2013, Lightfoot-Rueda and Peach 2015, Keddie 2016, Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017, Bradbury 2019, Doyle and Sahlberg 2019, Clark 2022, Vandenbroeck et al. 2022). Whilst play deprivation is known to be significantly detrimental to a child's health (Milteer and Ginsburg 2012), as it underpins trends in obesity (Frost 2009, p.6), psychopathologies (Gray 2011) and a broader 'mental health crisis' (Haidt 2024, p.17). If neoliberal polices have refocused education around raising educational productivity, I want to suggest that the charge of economisation does not explain their antagonism to play. If play facilitates healthy child development, then such children will be more active and productive and in a better position to contribute to economic growth than those who experience the ill effects of play deprivation. It is in this sense that I argue that neoliberal education's antagonism to play can be considered an unexplained contradiction.

1.7 Conceptualising the Economic

Much research that has examined neoliberal education has conceived of it culturally (Moss 2009, Ball 2013, Lightfoot-Rueda and Peach 2015, Keddie 2016, Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017, Bradbury 2019, Doyle and Sahlberg 2019, Clark 2022,

Vandenbroeck et al. 2022, Cris and Susan 2024) through 'cultural turn' (Alexander in Smelser 1988, pp.77-102) perspectives. Human capital theory reveals that neoliberal education's economisation is singularly concerned with the reproduction of the economic category of labour and the creation of labour productivity. To consider neoliberal education's antagonism to play, then, is to consider how the reproduction of the category of labour and the creation of potential labour productivity inform the form and content of neoliberal education as a type of productive activity. I want to suggest that a cultural approach alone that emphasises 'narratives' (Ball 2003, p.226), 'discourses' (Moss 2009, p.43) and 'identities' (Keddie 2016), is ill-equipped to consider the practical, material and/or economic dimensions of neoliberal education. This is to suggest that to understand neoliberal education's antagonism to play, an approach is required that can adequately and critically consider both the cultural and economic as they relate to neoliberal education as a form of productive activity.

1.8 Research Aims

I want to suggest that neoliberalism and neoliberal education, as they exist objectively and have impacted my subjective experience, are 'haunted by the spectre of social constitution' (Bonefeld 2014, p.21). For Open Marxism, the social constitution of capitalist modernity is defined by class, a social relation that expresses itself within and through experiences of struggle, 'mundane in its routines… silent in its screams, and occasionally coarse, colourful, and overt in its explosive release of pain and suffering' (Bonefeld 2023, p.94). Adorno noted, 'the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject' (1966/2007, pp.17-18). I want to suggest the experiences of struggle that constitute neoliberalism produce an immanent need to 'truthly' or adequately conceptualise it, to consider its economisation, its impact on education and its antagonism to play; a need that's simultaneously immanent to my own, subjective experience of neoliberalism and neoliberal education. Addressing this need is the broad aim of this thesis.

More specifically, it is argued that Open Marxism provides a theoretical foundation for such a conceptualisation. Within this thesis, Open Marxism has been employed to develop an original framework for empirical, classroom-based research. The work aims to examine the contradiction, if neoliberal education's economisation has refocused primary education around raising educational productivity, and if play engagement is

the central way a child's productive capacity is facilitated, why is neoliberal education in English primary schooling antagonistic to play? Given neoliberal education's intimate relationship to the reproduction of the category of labour, it is argued that Open Marxism provides an especially relevant foundation for considering neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play as it refocuses Marxian research, from a critique of capital from the standpoint of labour to a critique of economic categories themselves.

Using Open Marxism to develop an original, empirically based, practically reflexive immanent critique, this thesis looks to answer the following question:

1. Why is neoliberal education in English primary schooling antagonistic to pupil play?

Two sub-questions support the central research question:

i) What is the relationship between economisation and neoliberal educational practice?
ii) What is the relationship between neoliberal education and social class reproduction?

1.9 Approach, Method and Analysis

To understand why neoliberal primary education in England is, contradictorily, antagonistic to pupil play, Chapter Two argues that the contradiction cannot be understood solely in cultural or idealistic terms. It is argued an approach is required that can consider neoliberal primary education as a totality, in which both the material and the ideal, culture and economics, universal and particular, are taken into account. With Open Marxism as its foundation, the thesis adopts a practically reflexive immanent critique to consider the antagonism with play in relation to neoliberal primary education's *own normative assumptions*. This is an important point. For immanent critique, the standard of critique does not exist outside the object of study, transcendentally so to speak. As Horkheimer noted, immanent critique:

> ‘Opposes the breach between ideas and reality… (it) confronts the existent in its historical context with the claim of its conceptual principles in order to criticise the relation between the two and thus transcend them.’ (2004, p.123)

This study does not consider neoliberal education in English primary schooling and its relationship to play through a normative position or conceptual framing that exists separately from it. Rather, the work develops an analysis from *within* neoliberal primary education itself; it emerges out of an examination of the practice that defines it.

The critique proceeds by reflexively considering concrete, empirically observed teacher-led practice and play, ‘the existent’, in relation to the need to produce abstract levels of attainment and progress through commensurability to produce a future workforce. Empirical data were gathered that produced eighteen findings that are presented in Chapter Five. The issue of form and content is essential as the thesis is not, in the first instance, looking only at what was engaged in, e.g., how much time pupils spent playing relative to teacher-led practice. This is because consideration of the time spent on formal education and play alone cannot explain the contradiction the thesis is looking to address.

To unpack the contradiction, it was necessary to consider both what occurred in teacher-led and free-play sessions and how it occurred. A focus on both content and form allowed neoliberal primary education in England to be considered as a totality, as a particular type of productive activity. It’s by considering teacher-led practice and play as productive activities that the thesis seeks to ask the critical question: ‘Why does this content take this form?’ (Bonefeld et al. 1995, p.185).

The educational value production (EVP) conceptual model is introduced in part two of Chapter Six, which was developed from an analysis of the content and form of empirically observed practice in teacher-led sessions, along with consideration of key aspects of the current primary school framework in England and an Open Marxist reading of value theory. EVP transforms neoliberal primary education in England from a noun to a verb by providing a conceptual account of it as a standardising process that occurs within and through a particular type of practice.

Through Open Marxism, EVP is considered in relation to its contradictory ends of commensurability and the reproduction of a working class in part three of Chapter Six. In part four of Chapter Six, Open Marxism's notion of class as the personification of economic categories is utilised. Neoliberal education in English primary schooling is considered a process of fetishisation with regard to how it removes from view the teacher's class need to successfully personify the category of labour within and through EVP, to reproduce a potential working class. It is in the context of teachers struggling to successfully personify the category of labour, to reproduce pupils as a potential working class, that neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England is finally considered in part five of Chapter Six.

1.10 Thesis Contribution

1.10.1 Centrality of Class

The empirical and theoretically reflexive approach developed for the thesis represents an original contribution to Marxian educational research that has traditionally been heavily theory-based. Through EVP, the work expands on Rikowski (in Hall et al. 2023, pp.47-70) as it provides empirical accounts of the 'forms of value' within contemporary primary education in England that he notes are 'currently lacking' (in Hall et al. 2023, p.62). By revealing the centrality of teacher labour as the substance of educational value, EVP permits a reconsideration of Au's argument that 'high stakes, standardised testing' is a 'very broad measure of a broadly socioeconomic process of resource distribution' (in Hall et al. 2023, p.236). The conceptualisation of class and struggle in relation to EVP expands on Ozga and Lawn's (1981/2017) 'proletarianization' and Das's notion of the 'classroom as a site of struggle' (in Hall et al. 2023, pp.183-200). The class dynamic discovered in relation to play access can be considered alongside Maynard et al (2013) and Goodhall and Atkinson's (2019) work that permits consideration of the developmental appropriateness of neoliberal primary education.

1.10.2 Ideology and Neoliberal Education

As a critique of economic categories, the work emphasises the ideological, class-based nature of neoliberal primary education in England, which can be viewed as a

'hermeneutics of practice', as practical activity is theorised in relation to the ideological need to reproduce value through economic categories. Viewing neoliberal education in such a way allows the 'commodification of education' (Vandenbroeck et al. 2022) argument to be reconsidered as it relates to public and private provision. By emphasising the essential nature of the category of labour for individual and social reproduction, the thesis reveals some of the limitations of approaching play access through rights-based advocacy (Knee et al. 2006, Brown 2010, Gunnarsdottir 2014, Gray 2015, Lewis 2017, Charles and Bellinson 2019, Doyle and Sahlberg 2019, International Play Association 2019, Clark 2022, Raising the Nation/The Play Commission 2025). Theorising neoliberal education in this way contributes to a broader critique of economic productivity, allowing the tension between neoliberal education and play to be considered alongside similar debates in post-growth, de-growth and post-work scholarship.

Beyond an original contribution to knowledge, this thesis is rich in subjective value as it has emerged and developed in relation to the particularity of my experience. Engaging reflexively in the production of objective knowledge has been enriching, as to 'know thyself' 'involves an historical and social understanding as much as a psychological awareness' (Seidler 1986/2009, p.3). Exclusion, lost potential and neglect are implicit to the work, but so too is growth beyond 'growth', a 'movement of becoming' beyond a 'pre-determined yardstick' (Marx 1939/1993, p.488) as the labour of producing this work has constituted myself; this thesis being an abstract, objectification of a concrete, subjective transformation, that has occurred within and through many of the objects, it, that is, I, have considered.

1.11 Thesis Outline

The thesis is divided into seven chapters, following Chapter One, the introduction and background. Chapter Two reviews relevant literature on play, neoliberal education, and human capital theory to emphasise the contradictory nature of neoliberal primary education in England's antagonism to play. In Chapter Three, Open Marxism and its foundations in the New Readings of Marx are introduced as vehicles that provide an appropriate theoretical foundation for considering neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play. Chapter Four, epistemological and methodological foundations, details how an investigation into neoliberal education's antagonism to play proceeded

as an Open Marxist-based, practically reflexive, immanent critique. Chapter Five presents eighteen empirical findings drawn from the fieldwork, whilst Chapter Six, the analysis section, uses the findings dialectically to produce a practically reflexive, immanent critique. Chapter Seven, the conclusion, summarises the work, discusses its contribution to knowledge, its implications, its limitations and its potential use for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by highlighting research that shows that play facilitates the child's healthy physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. Research is then illustrated that reveals that play in education, and in English education in particular, is in decline. A range of explanations are examined as to why this is occurring and are brought together under the term neoliberal education. Work is then highlighted that suggests neoliberal education's antagonism to play occurs because the normative value of economisation has undermined the value of a broader range of educational and pedagogical concerns. It is suggested that the economisation argument does not fully explain neoliberal education's antagonism to play, and as such, it represents an unexplained contradiction. It is then argued that a central reason why neoliberal education's antagonism to play has not been adequately explained is because neoliberal education has largely been examined through a cultural lens. It is suggested that to adequately understand neoliberal education, its economisation, and its antagonism to play, it is necessary to consider neoliberal education as a type of productive activity through an acknowledgement of both the material and ideal, the economic and cultural, the subject and object, within practice. The chapter concludes by suggesting that Open Marxism provides an appropriate foundation from which such a study can proceed.

2.2 Play

2.2.1 Theories of play

Play is a complex form of activity that's bound to creativity, transformation, context (Brown 2010) and freedom (Henricks 2015, p.222). This has made play difficult to define (Eberle 2014) and underpins what's been described as the 'ambiguity of play' (Sutton-Smith 1997). Play is at once a universal behaviour; all children play (Gray 2011, p.443), yet no child (or adult) plays in the same way. 'Real play is historically situated' (Henricks 2015, p.214) as it emerges out of definite psychological, social, economic and geographical contexts that make it difficult to conceptualise. As such, play is somewhat opposed to abstraction and conceptualisation, following Huizinga

who noted that ‘play cannot be denied. You can deny… nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God… but not play’ (1949/2016, p.3).

Despite its ambiguity, Whitebread et al (2017) have argued that play is defined by five essential characteristics, Eberle (2014) six, and Burghardt (2005) twelve. Schiller (1795) noted a person flourishes only when both their rational and sensuous sides are engaged, and that play represents such a symbiosis (1795/1965, p.80). Spencer (1855/1996) suggested that play represents a necessary discharge of energy, whilst Groos (1898, 1901) argued that play is the foundation of cultural development. Huizinga (1949/2016) suggested that play is foundational to human life to the degree that he described humans as ‘Homo Ludens’, arguing that play has been a central force within the development of human society. Henricks (2015) has suggested that play is a type of ‘existential testing’ (2015, p.88) which facilitates the practical development of the self (2015, p.210) as a ‘distinctive strategy of self-realisation’ (2015, p.16).

The intense relationship children have with play was most famously examined by Piaget and Vygotsky. Piaget (1951/1999) argued that play is an assimilative mechanism which prepares the child for adult life; it is through play that ‘the child learns to imitate’ (1951/1999, p.5). Vygotsky (1967) agreed that play is symbolic, but moved beyond Piaget to suggest that play is a creative process through which meanings are developed and applied in relation to the idiosyncratic nature of a child’s engagement. Although differing theories contest the role of play, it is broadly accepted that ‘children are designed by natural selection to play’ (Gray 2011, p.443). Play is the ‘work of childhood’ (Moore 2014) that is currently acknowledged in Article 31 of the ‘United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child’ (2020) which declares play to be a universal right for all children.

2.2.2 Play and Child Development

A wide body of literature reveals the importance of play for the healthy physiological, cognitive, social, and emotional development of the child. Austin (2007) has examined how play facilitates a child’s physical engagement with the world, with Lindon (2007) describing how such engagement strengthens bones, increases muscle strength and lung capacity. Graham et al (2005) found a positive relationship between unstructured play and the healthy development of a child’s motor functioning. Bornstein et al (2006)

found a strong relationship between early play experiences and later cognitive development, whilst Bergen (1998) described play as the central 'learning mechanism' for children.

Zigler has shown how play contributes to the development of vocabulary, empathy and the understanding of concepts, Lepisto (in Charles and Bellinson 2019, pp.35-49) communication skills, whilst Manuilenko (1975) found that children could perform tasks at a higher level if the tasks were conducted playfully. Whitebread (2010) revealed a positive relationship between collaborative, play-based behaviours and levels of self-regulation. Christiano et al (1999) found that levels of pretend play in first and second grade were positively linked to creative thinking in later education. Diamond et al (2007) showed that children who attended schools with play-based curricula achieve higher scores on measures of executive function and regulatory abilities than children who experienced a non-play-based curriculum. Barker et al (2014) revealed a positive relationship between the amount of free-play a child experiences and their level of cognitive development.

2.2.3 Play Deprivation

Considering the importance of play for healthy child development, it follows that play deprivation substantially impacts a child's health and well-being. The link between play deprivation and obesity is complex. But as play is the central way a child physically engages with the world (Austin 2007), play deprivation is understood to be a significant contributor (Frost 2009, Milteer and Ginsburg 2012) to the current 'global childhood obesity epidemic' (Wang and Lim 2012) in which '39 million children under the age of 5 were overweight or obese in 2020' and 'over 340 million children and adolescents aged 5-19 overweight or obese in 2016' (World Health Organisation 2020).

Gray (2011) has discussed a 'causal link' (2011, p.443) between play deprivation and a rise in 'child psychopathologies' such as 'anxiety, depression, feelings of helplessness, and narcissism' (2011, p.459). Panksepp (2012) has examined the relationship between play deprivation and ADHD diagnosis, whilst Ridgeway (2003) found that 'levels of inappropriate behaviour were substantially higher on days when… study participants with a diagnosis of ADHD did not have recess compared with days when they did have recess' (2003, p.263). Hinshaw and Scheffler (2014) have emphasised the relationship

between play deprivation, educational pressures and ADHD, noting 'ADHD reveals itself through the ever-increasing push for academic and job performance in an increasingly competitive world economy' (2014, p.xiv).

A rise in play deprivation over the past fifteen years has corresponded with shifts in how children play using digital devices (Grimes 2021). Edelman's (2016) global survey found that 56% of the 12,000 participating parents reported that their children played outside for less than one hour a day, with this being more pronounced in the USA and the UK, at 65% and 74% respectively. 80% of children refused to play without some form of digital technology, 60% of parents noted their child didn't know how to play without digital technology, whilst 80% said their children preferred to play 'virtual sports' than actual sports (Edelman 2016). Haidt (2024) suggests such shifts are representative of a 'great re-wiring of childhood' as children increasingly engage with digital and mobile technologies rather than in a plurality of play activities. Haidt argues the re-wiring has underpinned a contemporary 'mental health crisis' (2024, p.17) among children and young people that's evident in 'a tidal wave of anxiety and depression' (2024, p.24) and in increases in recorded levels of self-harm and suicide as a 'transition from play-based to phone-based childhood has proceeded' (2024, p.15).

2.2.4 Reduction of Play in Education

Despite evidence that play has an important cultural and biological function that underpins a child's healthy physical and cognitive development, a body of research has revealed a tendency towards decreasing play engagement in contemporary education over the past 40 years, especially in the USA and the UK. Sahlberg and Doyle (2019) suggest 'the world is in a war against play. For schools and children under intense government pressure to achieve high scores on standardised tests, play… is dismissed as a disposable, unnecessary luxury' (2019, p.85). Elkind identified the issue early within 'The Hurried Child' (1981/2009) as he described how the 'industrialisation of our schools' (1981/2009, p.49) had meant 'school personnel… were under pressure to produce improved test scores' (1981/2009, p.77). More recently, Elkind noted:

> 'Our increasingly test-driven curricula have all but eliminated creative and playful teaching practices… I now appreciate that silencing children's play is as

> harmful to healthy development… as hurrying them to grow up too fast too soon' (2007, p.12-13).

Lewis (2017) has emphasised the 'erosion of play' within 'four distinct areas' describing how 'the most playful of environments, preschools and primary schools, have seen the erosion of play through changing curricula and teacher practice' (2017, p.16). Maynard and Chicken (2010) have examined how 'accountability regimes' in schools reduce the child's ability to play, whilst Deruy (2016) found that up to 40% of school districts in the United States had either reduced or prohibited school breaks due to academic pressures. A report by the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2018) discovered a significant drop in playtime in schools within the United States, from 95% of Kindergartners having recess to 35% in elementary schools that offer sixth grade.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) has flagged the antagonism to play in contemporary education as a significant concern. The committee have noted that 'pressure for educational achievement' has meant 'many children in many parts of the world are being denied their rights under article 31 (the right to play) as a consequence of an emphasis on formal academic success' (2013, p.13). The committee described how 'early childhood education is increasingly focused on academic targets' through the use of 'formal or didactic educational methods in the classroom that do not take advantage of opportunities for active playful learning' (2013, p.13).

2.2.5 Play in English Education

Within contemporary English primary education, there are significant discrepancies regarding statutory requirements for play. The Reception and Nursery years are underpinned by the English Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework, which puts play at the heart of the curriculum. In section 1.16 of the EYFS guidance it states:

> 'Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play and learning that is guided by adults… Practitioners must stimulate children's interests, responding to each child's emerging needs and guiding their

> development through warm, positive interactions coupled with secure routines for play and learning.' (UK Government 2014, p.17)

Whilst in section 1.18 it notes:

> 'Three characteristics of effective teaching and learning are: Playing and Exploring, Active Learning and Creating and Thinking Critically.' (UK Government 2014, p.17)

The strong emphasis on play within the EYFS-based Nursery and Reception years significantly shifts when pupils begin the national curriculum that underpins Key Stage One (KS1) and Key Stage Two (KS2) and covers years one to six in English primary schooling. There is no direct mention of play within the primary school national curriculum 'beyond learning to play' and no statutory requirement for English schools to maintain play-based approaches (Chartered College 2025). As such, pupil access to play and play-based pedagogies varies across primary schools in England as 'some schools use play throughout Key Stage 1 (whilst) others use it at the start of the year one to support transition' (Crowther 2021).

Although there is some variation regarding play access within KS1 and KS2, there is general agreement that play engagement is decreasing across English primary schooling. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood (2015) stated that 'over the last 10-15 years, there has… been a shift from the predominantly play-based curriculum traditionally associated with the first year of primary schooling in England to more formal teacher-led instruction' (2015, p.24). Sahlberg and Doyle argue that 'play is being eradicated from childhood education' (2019, p.96) due to the prescription of certain education policies (2019, p.85) of which the English education system represents 'a major example' (2019, p.88).

Trevor, Ince and Ang (in Cameron and Moss 2020) have discussed how the English primary curriculum:

> 'Has been subject to a growing tension between the proponents of the theoretical significance of rich and complex free-play inherent in a curriculum that recognises child-initiated activities and play as essential for children's development, and the exigencies of a prescribed and structured curriculum with

> explicit intended outcomes in line with social investments and good rates of return' (in Cameron and Moss 2020, p.104).

Bradbury (2019) has discussed 'a reduction in free-play time' due to a 'shift towards formalisation and the production of data over children's play-based learning' (2019, p.17), whilst Clarke (2022) has described the 'acceleration in education and in early childhood' (2022, p.3) in England that is opposed to the 'timefullness' (2022, p.25) that play engagement requires.

Adams (2020) has discussed how English primary schools are increasingly opening during school holidays to prepare pupils for SATs exams which has reduced the free time available for children to play. Baines and Blatchford (2019) have revealed significant reductions in the length of school break-times in English primary schools since 1995. A report that's looked to gauge the 'state of play in England' and that aims to contribute to a 'National Play Strategy' has revealed 'the extent to which time reserved for children to play has been cut' since 1995 in English primary schools (Raising the Nation/The Play Commission 2025, pp.84-85). This has involved '23 minutes less breaktime a day on average in 2021… compared to 1995 for Key Stage 1 and 18 minutes (breaktime a day less on average) for Key Stage 2' (2025, p.85).

The Raising the Nation/Play Commission report reveals further discrepancies in play access in relation to the material security of a school's cohort of pupils as 'schools with a higher proportion of children in receipt of free school meals have shorter breaktimes' (2025, p.85). The report suggests 'pressures on schools for academic achievement and delivering an overloaded curriculum have squeezed out the time children get to play during the school day' (2025, p.84). This has meant 'time afforded for children to rest and reset ahead of their next lesson has consistently been eroded over the past 30 years (in English primary schools)' (2025, p.33). The report concludes by recommending a range of policy suggestions, such as statutory ring-fenced time for play during the school day, guidance to discourage the withdrawal of play due to bad behaviour and the inclusion of play provision within Ofsted inspections (2025, p.137).

Some of the strongest reactions to the shifts undermining play in English education have emerged from within the primary sector. The campaign group 'More Than a Score' (2023) have been active raising awareness of the pressures and limitations of the

English primary accountability system and testing regime. In 2016, 44,000 parents signed a petition to boycott primary school SATS tests, with many parents removing their children from school on the day of the exam (Gill 2016). In 2025, a campaign was initiated to 'make play and continuous provision statutory in England's Key Stage 1 Curriculum' (Cosslett 2025). A petition was produced that attracted over 100,000 signatures and necessitated a government response that stated 'we recognise the current Key Stage 1 curriculum requires reform' (Lue-Quee 2025).

During March 2023, English primary headteacher Ruth Perry committed suicide after being told 'her school would be given the lowest possible Ofsted rating' (Sinmaz 2023). Perry's death became a lightning rod for concerns about the direction of English primary education that almost produced a national boycott of the Ofsted regime (Walker 2023). Many primary schools removed signs (on buildings and websites) that indicated their association with Ofsted (Gould 2023), whilst some headteachers refused Ofsted inspectors entry to pursue mandatory inspections (Walker 2023).

2.3 Why is Education Antagonistic to Play?

2.3.1 Schoolification

Roberts-Holmes and Moss argue that a process of 'schoolification' (2021, p.135), 'apparent in England' (2021, p.136), is central to understanding the antagonism to play. They describe how schoolification amounts to 'a narrowing of education and inappropriate pedagogy' (2021, p.136) that's underpinned by 'linear knowledge transmission and predetermined outcomes' (2021, p.136) and is antagonistic to a 'pedagogy of playful learning' (2021, p.137). Doherty defines schoolification as:

> 'An emphasis on the acquisition of specific pre-academic skills and knowledge transfer by the adult, rather than a focus on broad developmental goals such as social-emotional well-being and the gaining of understanding and knowledge by the child through direct experience and experimentation' (2007, p.7).

Bradbury (2019) suggests schoolification refers to several key elements such as 'a greater prominence of formal teaching activities, a reduction in free-play time and an increased focus on core subjects of literacy and mathematics' (2019, p.11). These elements, Bradbury suggests, are 'concomitant with a reduction in the value placed on

spontaneous play, creativity, and the building of relationships' (2019, p.11). Gunnarsdottier (2014) has examined the threat to play from schoolification in Iceland, Patton and Winter (2022) found schoolification 'negatively impacting' the 'development of a coherent pedagogy of play in some pre-school settings' (2022, p.661) whilst Clausen (2015) has highlighted the 'limitations of the schoolification discourse… prominent in England' on the ability of pupils, parents and professionals to engage in education in ways of their choosing (2015, p.355).

2.3.2 Global Educational Reform Movement

Schoolification has been closely associated with the 'Global Educational Reform Movement' (GERM) (Sahlberg 2015), a notion that has been developed to explain a growing international tendency in education over the past forty years (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021, p.136). Saltman and Means (2019) describe how 'scholars in international and comparative education… refer to a global education reform movement to signify a set of clearly identifiable global education reform trends' (2019, p.2). Sahlberg suggests GERM can be defined by five common elements: the 'standardisation of education', a 'focus on core subjects in the curriculum', 'test-based accountability', 'competition among schools' and 'school choice' (2021, pp.178-181).

2.3.2.1 Standards

Burnitt (2016) notes that GERM is intimately related to a 'standards driven agenda' (2016, p.30) that has refocused educational activity around the attainment of 'clearly defined but narrow areas of knowledge and skills' (Burnitt 2016, p.30). Standards are usually determined centrally by national governments and, when grouped across disciplines, form a national curriculum. A pupil's ability to attain 'predetermined standards' (Burnitt 2016, p.34) at increasingly higher rates, along with a school's ability to facilitate this, is central to the notion of educational value that underpins GERM. Parcerisa and Verger (2019) describe how 'standardised and measurable learning outcomes are conceived as the most relevant indicator of education quality' (2019, p.7) within a 'global trend toward the standardisation of educational systems through an emphasis on setting prescriptive benchmarks with which to measure educational success and outcomes' (Sahlberg in Saltman and Means 2019, p.2).

2.3.2.2 Test-Based Accountability

GERM's focus on achieving pre-determined standards is intimately related to its emphasis on test-based accountability. Regan-Stansfield (2017) has described how the 'near ubiquitous feature of schooling systems in developed nations today' is 'mandatory standardised tests' (2017, p.2), what Au (2011) calls 'high-stakes testing'. If formally equal pupils engage in the attainment of the same educational standards, any measurable data produced is understood to legitimately reflect the 'effectiveness' of the educational process pupils have experienced. Standardisation and test-based accountability produce the commensurability that is foundational to GERM. It is the production of objective, commensurable data that has meant GERM is conceived as a rational, 'evidence-based' (Biesta 2007) 'neutral, apolitical' (Torres-Santomé in Saltman and Means 2019, p.352) policy mechanism. It is argued that the production of 'objective' measures of educational attainment and progress creates 'stronger accountability' (Sahlberg 2021, p.7) through transparency that sheds 'light on… political and bureaucratic failures' which 'encourages citizens to demand more from their leaders and service providers' (World Bank 2019, p.55-56).

2.3.2.3 Datafication

GERM's focus on accountability through commensurable data has meant it is strongly associated with datafication, 'the transformation of different aspects of education (such as test scores, school inspection reports, or clickstream data from an online course) into digital data' (Williamson 2017, p.23). Robert-Holmes and Bradbury have discussed 'the increased production, analysis and comparison of… compliance data' (2016, p.601) within primary schooling, with Lingard describing how 'data infrastructures are central to the structuring of schooling systems today' (in Amaral et al. 2019, p.139).

2.3.2.4 Choice, Competition and Markets

Accountability via standardisation, test-based accountability and datafication are related to the emphasis on 'choice' within GERM, as commensurable data is used to facilitate the ability of parents to make informed decisions about the most effective school to send their children. Ingersoll has described how 'the attraction of GERM lies in its promise of better educational offerings, improved outcomes, and high achievement for

all students' in which 'parental choice is a keystone' (in Saltman and Means 2019, pp.259-281). Choice is bound to GERM's promotion of competition, with Dumay and Dupriez noting that 'freedom of choice has been established… with the explicit desire to generate competition between schools' (2014, p.512). Competition occurs through the publication of league tables that make each school commensurable through a particular 'headline measure of progress' (Leckie and Goldstein 2017), creating what Le Grand and Bartlett (1993) describe as 'quasi-markets' in education. It is the advocacy of such markets that:

> 'Inextricably link GERM to broader economic, political, and cultural conflicts over public policy, and struggles over educational value and purpose… specifically the dominance of neoliberal frameworks' (Saltman and Means 2019, p.1).

2.3.3 Neoliberalism

Although there's a broad body of literature around neoliberalism, no singularly agreed definition exists which means it 'remains perplexingly elusive' (Peck in Cahill et al. 2018, p.35). Although views differ, it is agreed that an emphasis on markets is central, with Giddens (1998) describing how neoliberalism is committed to 'free markets' and 'unfettered market forces' as neoliberals believe 'markets will deliver the greatest good to society' (1998, p.13). The Adam Smith Institute declared itself to be 'neoliberal' by suggesting it is 'pro-markets, pro-property rights, pro-growth, individualistic, empirical and open-minded, globalist in outlook' (Bowman 2016).

2.3.3.1 Neoliberal Education in England

What has been described as schoolification, GERM and their constituent parts can be considered aspects of neoliberal policy or neoliberal education. Neoliberal education is strongly associated with English education as it is within England that 'neoliberal education reforms have… gone furthest' (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021, p.36); with Ball suggesting England is the 'social laboratory' (2016, p.1046) of neoliberal education and Olmedo (2014) noting that neoliberal education is 'from England with love'.

It was the 1988 ERA that transformed English education into a neoliberal, 'market-based model' (Saltman and Means 2019, p.1), focused on the production of objective measures of educational attainment and progress that made English schools and their pupils commensurable, facilitating choice in quasi-markets. For primary schools in England, commensurability has been achieved through two central policy vehicles: the Office for Standards in Education's (Ofsted) mandatory inspection regime and the production of an annual measure of a school's average standard assessment tasks (SATS) results. How the annual average measure of SATS has been calculated has varied, with a central aspect of debate about measurement being the degree to which contextual factors should be acknowledged (Goldstein and Leckie 2018).

2.3.3.2 Ofsted

Ofsted regularly inspects English schools through mandatory inspections that aim to facilitate 'transparency' by producing commensurable judgments within publicly available reports. Ofsted bases its judgments on a range of standardised factors besides pupil attainment and progress, but with respect to teaching and learning, levels of attainment and progress are important factors that significantly influence their judgments (Ofsted 2022).

2.3.3.3 Primary School Progress Measure

The second process of commensurability occurs through the creation of a primary school's headline progress measure (Leckie and Goldstein 2017). The current measure is calculated from attainment data gathered from KS1 baseline attainment tests (Reception) that are considered in relation to KS2 (Year Six) SATS tests. The measure conceives educational attainment and progress in terms of any *quantitative transformation* that occurs during a pupil's primary experience, based on data produced between the KS1 and KS2 tests. It is considered a value-added measure because it treats scores, pupils and schools equally, in relation to three differentiated groups, but it is understood to be a limited value-added measure because 'it only acknowledges that a pupil's prior attainment has any bearing on future attainment' (Goldstein and Leckie 2018).

A primary school's progress measure is produced 'by adding together the progress scores of all the pupils in year 6 and dividing them by the number of year 6 pupils in the school' (Department for Education 2022c, p.3). Progress scores are centred around 0, -5 and +5, 'a score of 0 means pupils in this school on average do about as well at KS2 as those with similar prior attainment nationally' (Department for Education 2022c, p.5), a positive score suggests the school does better than average to those with similar prior attainment whilst a negative score suggests the school does worse than average to those with similar prior attainment (Department for Education 2022c, p.5). A school's progress measure facilitates the commensurability of English primary schools within national league tables (UK Government 2024b).

Aggregate school scores are produced from the progress made by individual pupils between KS1 and KS2 with reference to national groups of 'low', 'middle' and 'high' attainers (Department for Education 2022b). Individual pupil KS2 test scores are not made public beyond parent/pupil access to a scaled score, whilst KS1 baseline assessment data is not made public at all and is used exclusively by the Department for Education (Department for Education 2022a). Results of KS2 SATS tests are expressed as a scaled score indicating whether a pupil has met the expected standard (Department for Education 2022b). The scaled score makes individual English primary pupils equal and commensurable in relation to their national year group peers with reference to the relevant low, middle, and high attainment groups. It is the commensurability of individual pupils, in which pupils are considered equal within certain parameters, that makes schools commensurable nationally through aggregate progress measures. The commensurability permits 'legitimate' judgments about the 'effectiveness' of a school and facilitates the parental choice that reproduces English primary education as a neoliberal, quasi-market. The neoliberal refocusing of education around linear, quantitative transformation, has produced 'dramatic' rises in levels of attainment and progress across all pupil cohorts in England during the neoliberal period, with 'especially sharp year-on-year increases evident from the mid 2000s' (Farquharson et al. 2022, p.14).

2.3.3.4 Criticisms of Neoliberal Education

2.3.3.4.1 Measurement and Decontextualization

There has been a wide range of criticism of neoliberal education which offer insights that help explain its antagonism to play. Leckie and Goldstein suggest that the way neoliberal headline measures in England have decontextualised pupils is problematic because they broadly fail 'to account for school differences in pupil socio-economic and demographic characteristics' (Leckie and Goldstein 2017, p.195). Ander et al describe how 'overall differences… in 2016 between state and private school pupils are associated with differences in pupils' socio-economic status (2024, p.13), whilst Garcia and Weiss suggest 'children's social class (is) one of the most significant predictors, if not the single most significant predictor, of… educational success' (2017, p.1).

Berliner has argued:

> 'Virtually every scholar of teaching and schooling knows that when the variance in student scores on achievement tests is examined… school effects account for about 20% of the variation in achievement test scores, and teachers are only a part of that constellation of variables associated with the "school"… Out-of-school variables account for about 60% of the variance… in aggregate, such factors include family income; the neighbourhood's sense of collective efficacy, violence rate, and average income; medical and dental care available and used; level of food insecurity' (2013, p.5).

Farquharson et al have described how there's been 'virtually no change in the disadvantage gap' (2022, p.2) during the neoliberal period in England, whilst Tahir suggests England's neoliberal 'education system preserves inequality' (2022). Ex-economist for the Department for Education, Paul Johnson, has described how in England, 'right across the income distribution the richer your parents, the better you do at school. This is not just a difference between the poor and the rest. Each step up the income distribution matters' (2023, p.191).

Moss et al suggest the decontextualisation associated with neoliberal 'high-stakes testing and accountability' in English primary education:

> ‘Often fails to do justice to the contribution actually made by schools working with disadvantaged pupils. The underlying, simplistic causal logic currently at work behind… (the current progress measure) – that all pupils progress to the same destination by following the same route at the same pace, and that variation in pupil success measured by examination ‘outputs’ depends upon the intensity with which schools supply the same necessary inputs – is fatally flawed in conception and in execution. It is flawed because it fails to address contextual factors that affect pupils’ (2021, p.9).

Leckie and Goldstein have examined issues that emerge from the central assumption of the current primary headline progress measure in England, that *only previous pupil attainment has any bearing on future attainment*. They argue the assumption is unfair and unmeritocratic because it punishes schools in relation to their cohort of disadvantaged pupils: ‘the higher the proportion of disadvantaged pupils in a school, the more (the school) will effectively be punished for the national underperformance of these pupil groups’ (2018, p.21). They emphasise their point by constructing a contextual progress measure that ‘qualitatively changes many of the interpretations and conclusions one draws as to how schools in England are performing’ (2018, p.21). They suggest that the current progress measure does not account for contextual inequalities due to a tension between ‘two opposing views’ in which either the school is understood to be ‘responsible for… national differences in performance’ or ‘government and society’ are considered responsible (2018, p.21).

2.3.3.4.2 Top-Down

The high-stakes nature of neoliberal education, which compels schools to compete against each other, has led to an acknowledgement that it is a particularly top-down form of education. Clarke and Newman (1997) have discussed this in relation to the Foucauldian notion of ‘regimes of power’ (1997, p.56) and its role in the transformation of public services known as new public management (NPM). Burnitt (2016) suggests neoliberal education represents the ‘industrial management’ of English schools that means pupils and professionals follow a ‘production path’ to achieve targets to ‘maximise outcomes’ (2016, pp.248-249). Wrigley (2013) suggests neoliberal education encourages a ‘positive’ work culture that maligns a plurality of views to fit a top-down mandate through ‘uncritical cohesion’ (2013, p.40). Hargreaves (1994)

similarly describes a culture of 'contrived congeniality' that compels schools to become 'administratively regulated, compulsory, implementation-oriented, fixed in time and space and predictable' (1994, pp.195-196).

Deal and Paterson (2016) argue that a top-down culture is necessary because 'schools should, in fact, resemble businesses' (2016, p.18) in which educational leaders should develop a 'shared culture with a cohesive and shared set of values' (2016, p.18). The top-down approach is exemplified by Michaela Community School in Wembley, London, which insists 'pupils walk to lessons in silence' and 'are punished for not making eye contact' (Cook and Wood 2022). The head teacher at Michaela has noted that 'we believe in authority', along with 'servant leadership', 'tough love', and 'national identity' (Birbalsingh 2020, pp.2-9), whilst the school is notable for its opposition to play:

> 'Many educationalists are keen to retain the playful world of the infant… unfortunately… this ideological position is ineffective… children's development is inhabited in this infantilised world' (Birbalsingh 2020, pp.93-94).

2.3.3.4.3 Power and Autonomy

The top-down nature of neoliberal education is bound to considerations of power and autonomy that Margaret Thatcher (1993) explicitly acknowledged as she justified the role of the state in administering neoliberal education in England:

> 'There had to be some consistency in the curriculum… the state could not just ignore what children learned' in response to 'propaganda... from left-wing local authorities, teachers and pressure groups' (1993, pp.590-591).

Michael Barber, who played a key role in developing neoliberal education in England during New Labour's first term, admitted the introduction of neoliberal reforms meant 'professional autonomy was dealt what… can be seen to have been a fatal blow' (1997, p.47).

Au (2011) suggests neoliberal accountability must be considered with issues of power in mind, as 'it seems evident that test-based systems of high-stakes accountability are

relatively successful in increasing control of teachers' practices by a tightening of the loose coupling between policy-makers intentions and the institutional environments created by their policies' (2011, p.38). Jeffery & Woods (1996) have discussed the 'deprofessionalisation' produced by neoliberal education in English primary schooling as they describe a 'social construction of emotions' that has created 'professional uncertainty… with teachers experiencing confusion, anomie, anxiety and doubt about their competence' (1996, p.325). Ozga and Lawn (1981/2017) argue a process of 'de-professionalisation' has occurred amongst the English teaching workforce which they describe as 'proletarianization', a process that has meant 'teachers are not merely made more like other workers in economic terms… the proletarianization process also involves a loss of control over the work process, a loss of definition by the worker of the essential elements of the task' (1981/2017, p.143).

2.3.3.4.4 Subjectivities and Struggle

Along with issues of autonomy and power, a range of largely cultural based research has examined the impact of neoliberal education upon the subjectivities of those engaged in it. Keddie (2016) has discussed how 'discourses of performativity' are shaping pupil 'understandings of education… their future… their worth and value as students' (2016, p.108). Pupils are increasingly 'aware of the relationship between education and employment credentialling' in which 'not doing well at school would lead to a degraded future lifestyle' (Keddie 2016, p.112). She notes how one Year 5 pupil believed 'doing well' would prevent him from becoming 'a rubbish man picking up stuff from the streets', a Year 6 pupil who thought educational success meant 'being able to afford decent housing and avoid living on the streets', whilst another Year 6 pupil stated 'if you're not clever academically you won't have a good job when you're older which means your life is over basically' (Keddie 2016, p.113).

Forrester (2000) has explored how teachers have adapted to neoliberal reforms, 'yet… have not accepted these constraints unquestioningly' (2000, p.149). She describes how teachers manage a tension between the need to prioritise attainment as well as considerations of the child's broader needs and welfare that produces a dynamic of 'anxiety, stress and guilt' (2000, p.149). Jeffrey (2002) has examined how neoliberal education produces 'dependent' (2002, p.533) rather than 'interdependent' (2002, p.533) classroom relationships, as pupils become dependent on teachers to deliver the

standardised knowledge necessary to pass tests, whilst teachers become dependent on pupil attainment to reproduce their professional position.

This has meant 'teachers become more formalised in their relations with the children' (Jeffrey 2002, p.534) as classroom interactions become 'indicators of quality and not as valid experiences or processes in themselves' (2002, p.535). Jeffrey suggests it represents a shift from 'dialogic engagement' (2002, p.535) towards a 'technical' or 'inculcatory' approach (2002, p.536) that means 'the teacher's gaze' moves 'from the children… to the curriculum' (2002, p.536). One teacher noted this meant:

> 'We are not working with the children anymore, I'm working at the children… it's not a very pleasant experience. There is a feeling of being alienated from it all, divorced from it all' (2002, p.536).

Ball (2016) has argued that neoliberal education transforms subjectivities into 'sites of struggle' as teachers become torn between their role in producing standards that is variously antagonistic to 'truth telling' (2016, p.1135). This can be understood in relation to the Foucauldian notion that 'a person is nothing else but his relation to truth, and this relation to truth takes shape or is given form in his own life' (in Ball 2016, p.1135). Ball describes how teachers engage in an 'agonism' as they struggle to 'wrest their self-formation' (2016, p.1135) from the pressures of neoliberal practice:

> 'In relation to the 'attitude' of neoliberalism generally, and… to the techniques of performativity specifically, subjectivity is now a key site of political struggle' (2016, p.1130).

Ball suggests such struggles are underpinned by tensions between 'who controls the field of judgement and its values… who is it that determines what is to count as a valuable, effective or satisfactory performance and what measures or indicators are considered valid' (2003, p.216). Such struggles, he argues, produce a dualism, an 'institutional schizophrenia' (2003, p.221) within organisations and a 'values schizophrenia' within individuals as beliefs or narratives clash; the imposition of neoliberal education produces a tension between 'belief' and 'representation' (2003, pp.221-223), 'a potential splitting' (2003, p.221) representative of 'two regimes of truth… in opposition… two systems of value and values' (2013, p.92).

2.3.3.4.5 Commodification

Ball believes these tendencies are representative of Lyotard's (1984) 'Post-Modern Condition' in which 'knowledge and knowledge relations, including the relationships between learners', are reconfigured to become 'de-socialised' and externalised, 'it is this externalisation and de-socialisation that… teachers… are struggling with and against' (Ball 2003, p.226). Externalisation is tied to Lyotard's notion of knowledge becoming an 'informational commodity' as neoliberal education transforms education into a process of 'commodification' (1984, p.5). Moss has discussed 'neoliberalism's fetishism of commodification' (in Vandenbroeck et al. 2022, p.1) whilst Au (2011) has argued that test-based accountability can be considered a process of 'decontextualisation' and 'commodification' (2011, p.38).

Roberts-Holmes and Moss argue that neoliberal education has meant 'education and schools have become reimagined as calculable commodities in an economics of results-based management' (2021, p.34). Vandenbroeck et al (2022) have emphasised the distinction between the public and private provision of education as they discuss the resistance that has occurred in response to:

> 'A broader trend… in which education… and ECEC… are turned into a commodity. This means… education is framed in economic terminologies… that providers are supposed to deliver a service that is transparent and competitive; that children are framed as passive users of that service; and that parents are framed as consumers' (in Vandenbroeck et al. 2022, p.17).

Richardson (2022), also emphasising the distinction between public and private provision as it relates to commodification, has argued 'good care and commodification are both theoretically and practically at odds with each other' (2022, p.107).

2.3.3.4.6 The Economisation of Education and Human Capital Theory

That neoliberal education can be considered a process of commodification brings us to what is widely considered at its heart: what Spring (2015) describes as the 'economisation of education'. Neoliberal education's economisation is bound to human capital theory that's refocused 'educational purposes… in terms of a narrower set of concerns about human capital development and the role education must play to meet the

needs of the global economy' (Lightfoot-Rueda and Peach 2015, p.3). Human capital theory emerged from debates within neoclassical economics in the 1960s about the causes of growth. These debates prompted a shift in emphasis, from a focus on physical capital accumulation towards the quality of labour as a function of production, 'the labour input had been mismeasured because increases in its quality had not been accounted for' (Savvides and Stengos 2009, p.20).

Emerging from the work of Schultz (1960, 1961) and Becker (1993/1964), human capital theory emphasised a positive relationship between rates of educational attainment and rising economic growth, in which levels of educational attainment and skills are understood as human capital. Becker notes it is 'fully in keeping with the capital concept… to say that expenditures on education, training… are investments in capital. However, these produce human, not physical or financial capital' (1993/1964, p.16). There's a wide body of human capital specific literature that examines, develops and endorses it as a policy vehicle in which human capital is understood to be 'by far the most important form of capital in modern economies' (Becker 2002, p.3). Much of the human capital theory literature is technical in the sense that it's based around mathematical modelling and neoclassical economic assumptions (Checchi 2006, Savvides and Stengos 2009, Burton-Jones and Spender 2011, Sandona and Aladi 2013).

Human capital theory is championed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as a seamless, simultaneous approach to educational success and economic development. Economic growth is at the heart of the OECD's mandate as it seeks to promote 'policies designed to achieve the highest sustainable rate of economic growth' (2020, p.88). Spring (2015) has written about the role of the OECD in 'disseminating the ideas of the Chicago School of Economics' as it has championed the 'link between education, human capital, and economic growth' (Spring 2015, p.30). The OECD describe how rising rates of human capital are important for microeconomics, 'those with more education and experience tend to earn higher salaries', as well as for macroeconomics (Égert et al. 2022), as higher levels of human capital are understood to have 'a strong link with rising productivity' (OECD 2023).

2.3.3.4.7 Human Capital Theory and The Category of Labour

Human capital theory is a theory about the economic category of labour. Prior to human capital theory, economists tended to view labour as a homogenised factor of production, 'a mass' (Keeley 2007, p.23), but a developing awareness of labour's 'abilities, knowledge… competences as a factor of growth' (Keeley 2007, p.26) meant economists 'began to seriously study labour, not just as a homogeneous factor of production… but as a differentiated and mouldable input to production, that is, as human capital' (Saltman and Means 2019, p.4).

Through human capital theory, neoliberal education can be understood to have placed concerns around the reproduction of the category of labour and labour productivity much more directly within contemporary education. This is what the neoliberal economisation of education represents. As 'education is the key factor informing human capital' (Keeley 2007, p.2) and 'human capital is… recognised as… the most important source of economic wealth and engine of economic growth over time' (Blair in Burton-Jones and Spender 2011, p.94), neoliberal education can be understood as the expansion of economic production much more directly into educational processes as it aims to raise educational attainment to increase potential rates of the 'marginal productivity of labour' (Saltman and Means 2019, p.4).

2.3.3.4.8 Human Capital and Measurement

The desire to produce human capital, to raise labour productivity to create growth, explains tendencies towards schoolification and GERM, because to produce human capital 'measurement matters' (Keeley 2007, p.129). To produce rises in human capital, an ability to measure it is essential, to measure current levels whilst gauging any rises or declines. The World Bank have described how measurement:

> 'Increases policy makers awareness of the importance of investing in human capital, thereby creating momentum for action… good measurement is essential to developing research and analysis to inform the design of policies that improve human capital' (World Bank 2019, p.55-56).

The centrality of measurement to neoliberal education has led to the development of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) international education

comparison rankings that aim to 'measure the cognitive skills learned in literacy and math programs and, consequently, the value of a nation's human capital' (Spring 2015, p.45). PISA is one of a range of international educational measures that include the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement's (IEA) Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Such measurements are understood to represent:

> 'The cognitive skills learned… the value of a nation's human capital… and the quality of a nation's labour force as a proxy indicator of a country's global economic competitiveness' (Normand in Teodoro 2022, p.50).

2.4 Play, Economisation and Contradiction

It is argued that the neoliberal economisation of education is antagonistic to play because it normatively values economic value over the 'traditional purposes of education, namely fostering intellectual, social and cultural development' (Lewis 2020, p.16). An 'economistic understanding of education' (Lewis 2020, p.16) has underpinned a 'general reworking of the relationship of education… to the needs of the economy' (Ball 2016, p.1047). Because human capital theory suggests 'productivity is everything' (Ball 2016, p.1054), this has led to 'the exclusion of other purposes and rationales' (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021, p.53) that has undermined the perceived value of play.

I want to suggest that the economisation argument does not adequately explain neoliberal education's antagonism to play. As has been highlighted, research reveals that play engagement facilitates healthy children who will be relatively more productive than those who experience the ill effects of play deprivation. If neoliberal education has refocused education around raising productivity, then a contrary tendency might be expected in which more play and playful pedagogies are employed in schools, that is, if neoliberal education is consistent with its human capital theory foundation.

It is argued that neoliberal education's antagonism to play emerges from a clash of values as educational processes are refocused around the production of economic value that is variously in opposition to a plurality of educational values such as play and

playful pedagogies (Lightfoot-Rueda and Peach 2015, p.3, Bradbury 2019, p.11, Clark 2022, p.6). For Sahlberg and Doyle, play is normatively undervalued because of:

> 'Inept political attempts to raise standards… it is a war being waged by an alliance of politicians, administrators, and ideologues' who 'have little or no knowledge of how children actually learn. It is… a conspiracy of ignorance, misguided polices and misinformation' (2019, p.88).

But if play raises the productive capacities of children, why would a tendency towards increased play, the 'work of childhood' (Moore 2014), not equate to a boost in the 'stock' of human capital, which, if human capital theory is correct, would lead to rises in 'the marginal productivity of labour' (Saltman and Means 2019, p.4) and economic growth? If the 'globalisation of education' (Spring 2015) has emerged in response to pressures on national governments to refocus their education systems around an intense competition for investment, jobs and resources because 'economic development is the primary objective of the majority of the world's nations' (1998, p.10), is it conceivable that national governments would put themselves at a competitive disadvantage by not utilising such a cheap and easily accessible resource such as children's play?

I want to argue that the economisation argument does not adequately explain neoliberal education's antagonism to play because to deny the opportunity to produce a healthy and productive workforce on the basis of normative concerns about the value of play would, in fact, constitute an anti-economic position on human capital theory's own terms. This is because the ends of neoliberal education and play, are, seemingly at least, aligned in their relationship to productivity. It's in this sense that I want to argue that neoliberal education's antagonism to play constitutes a contradiction that is not adequately explained.

2.5 Neoliberal Education and the Cultural Turn

I want to suggest that to consider the contradiction adequately, there is a need to look 'beneath' words, truths, and discourses, to consider what 'productivity' means with regard to both neoliberal education and play. The majority of the work highlighted in this chapter has used cultural turn (Alexander in Smelser 1988, pp.77-102) perspectives that emphasise ideas, language, and culture to examine neoliberal education. Ball draws

heavily from Foucault as he uses notions such as ‘governance’, ‘power’ and ‘biopower’ (2013), in which he considers neoliberalism a ‘master narrative’ (2003, p.226) that produces clashes or struggles between competing ‘truths’ (2013, p.93). Moss suggests ‘neoliberalism at heart can be seen as a story that lays claim to tell the world how human life works’ (in Vandenbroeck et al. 2022, p.2) that produces a need to ‘contest dominant discourses, confronting what Foucault terms regimes of truth’ (2009, p.43).

Bradbury and Roberts (2017) consider performativity in terms of a ‘narrative of progress’ whilst Keddie (2016) discusses the ‘construction of student identities’ through ‘neoliberal discourses’ (2016, p.3). Within ‘Global Perspectives on Human Capital in Early Childhood Education’ (Lightfoot-Rueda and Peach 2015), a range of authors examine human capital theory through ‘Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari to focus… on one discourse, human capital’ (Lightfoot-Rueda and Peach 2015, p.x). Shore and Wright (2024) describe the ‘extraordinary rise in the use of numbers as performance indicators’ in education in terms of an ‘audit culture’ (2024, p.1). Schoolification, GERM and its constituent parts are descriptions of processes that suggest play is being undermined in relation to the normative value of ‘economisation’ (Lightfoot-Rueda and Peach 2015, Spring 2015, Ball 2016, Lewis 2020, Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021, Teodoro 2022, Vandenbroeck et al. 2022), but these analysis do not explain the contradiction, that if neoliberal education has refocused education around productivity, and if play engagement facilitates a child’s productive capacities, why is neoliberal primary education in England antagonistic to play?

2.5.1 Separation of Culture and Economy

I want to argue that, at the heart of understanding this contradiction is a theoretical issue that arises from the separation of culture and economics into distinct spheres. The cultural turn developed in response to the limitations of a Marxian economism that was often based on a reading of the base-superstructure argument (Marx 1859/1904, pp.11-12) that determined the cultural (superstructure) and economic (base) to be separate entities; ‘the cultural level’ should be recognised ‘as a relatively discreet entity with its own logic and forms’ (Willis 1977, p.188). The limitations of such perspectives led to the ‘crisis of Marxism’ (Mau 2023, p.26) in the mid 1970s as Marxian analysis was considered an ‘overly economistic way of seeing society’ (Fraser and Jaeggi 2023, p.7)

defined by ‘a tyranny of numbers… monocausal explanations… totalisation and closure’ (Mandler 2004, p.95).

The cultural turn represented a necessary refocusing that meant the nuances of culture could be researched through a focus on ideas, language, and narratives. Marx, Gramsci and Freire ‘influenced previous generations of educational theorists’ but ‘contemporary educational theory… has revolved around… Derrida… Bourdieu… Foucault and… Habermas’ (Murphy 2013, p.3). Such frameworks have opened a wealth of previously inaccessible areas of lived experience to researchers that have allowed issues of gender, race, and sexuality to be considered in detail.

But although the cultural turn has widened the scope for research, this has come at a cost, as the contingency and nominalism that permitted such breadth have resulted in a ‘tendency to exclude the economy from discussions about power’ (Mau 2023, p.26). A focus on discourses and narratives has been unable, or indeed unwilling, to consider how cultural phenomena are related to broader economic reproduction within capitalist modernity, what Bonefeld describes as ‘economic objectivity’ (2023, p.11). This is due to the cultural turn’s opposition to ‘grand narratives’ (Lyotard 1984, p.xxiii), with Tormey and Townsend describing the cultural turn as a ‘critique of meta-narratives’ (2006, p.85) that has emphasised particularity ‘as concrete forms of the exercise of power’ (Foucault 1995, p.281).

Questions of political economy, economic categories, property and social class relations have variously been ignored as in Foucault (Mau 2023, p.36), considered culturally as in Bourdieu (1990) or approached idealistically as in intersectionality theory (Carastathis 2016). Fraser and Jaeggi note that during:

> ‘The late twentieth century… poststructuralism became the official opposition to liberal moral and political philosophy. And yet, despite their differences, these ostensible opponents shared something fundamental: both liberalism and poststructuralism were ways of evacuating the problematic of political economy’ (2023, p.16).

Wood has described a 'retreat from class' (1986) as a fundamental category of social research[3] that's evident in the work examining neoliberal education in this chapter. Although cultural turn research has acknowledged the centrality of privatisation to neoliberal polices (Lloyd and Penn 2014, Ball 2016, Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021, p.8), the retreat from class has meant such work has been unable to consider how such shifts in ownership (Christophers 2023) and the rising inequalities they represent (Piketty 2020, Milanoviâc 2023) are related to processes of class reproduction. This is a significant blind spot when neoliberal education's relationship to the reproduction of class inequalities is considered (Farquharson et al. 2022, p.2, Tahir 2022).

The refocusing of research towards culture is problematic as it has occurred at precisely the 'time when we are in the midst of returning to the most fundamental form of class struggle' (Mclaren & Scatamburlo-D'Annible in Dolby and Dimitriadis 2013, p.39). By forwarding notably, cultural critiques, that suggest mass immigration and minority groups are responsible for the social and economic decline produced during the neoliberal period, an inegalitarian far right (McManus 2024) has leveraged 'culture wars' (Sarkar 2025) to successfully harness an 'explosive cocktail of discontent' that has emerged from the 'humiliation of those' that neoliberal polices have 'left behind' (Chandler 2024, p.47).

Fraser notes that 'we are living through a capitalist crisis of great severity without a critical theory that could adequately clarify it' (in Deutscher et al. 2017, p.142)… 'we cannot simply return to an older received critique of political economy but must rather complicate, deepen, and enrich that critique' (Fraser and Jaeggi 2023, p.7). Fraser and Jaeggi suggest 'it's time to restore the balance. It's not enough to avoid economism. We must… take care not to lose sight of the importance of the economic side of social life' (2023, p.7).

[3] Class analysis has proceeded in education within the Bourdieusian tradition (Bennett, Savage et al, 2009, Bourdieu, 1979, Ingram 2018, Reay, 2017) that has examined questions of identity and consumption as they relate to class position. Although class differences are fundamental to the analysis, I would argue the tradition remains blind to an important range of issues because it proceeds by separating the cultural from the economic (see Desan, 2013).

2.5.2 Neoliberal Education, Play, Economy and Culture

I want to argue that, to adequately consider neoliberal education's antagonism to play, an approach is needed that can consider both the cultural subject and economic object. That productivity is seemingly and contradictorily intrinsic to both neoliberal education and play emerges from a focus on the conceptual that is unable to consider practical activity and the social relations that presuppose it. I want to suggest that to understand neoliberal education's antagonism to play what is required are empirical and practical understandings of neoliberal primary education in England to consider its economisation, its relationship to the category of labour, labour productivity and economic objectivity, that can look beyond, or indeed, underneath neoliberal education's conceptuality, so both its subjective practical and objective dimensions can be considered. This is to argue that there is a need to consider neoliberal primary education and play not in terms of narratives, discourses, or truths, but as forms of productive activity, that is, as labour processes. I want to suggest that Open Marxism provides an appropriate theoretical foundation for such a study.

2.6 Conclusion

Play is a central mechanism through which healthy child development occurs; it allows children to function more fully and to become more productive than those who experience play deprivation. Through human capital theory, neoliberal education's economisation is understood to have refocused educational activity towards the reproduction of the economic category of labour and potential labour productivity as it has emphasised raising children's productivity within educational processes. If play engagement raises a child's productive capacity, then, play and neoliberal education seem aligned with regard to this? As such, it's been argued a significant decline in play and play-based pedagogy within neoliberal primary education in England represents a contradiction that is not adequately explained by the charge of economisation. This contradiction, it has been suggested, emerges from a cultural analysis of neoliberal education that has considered ideas, discourses, and narratives, but has been unable to conceptualise practical and material issues of economic reproduction. It has been argued that to adequately understand the contradiction between neoliberal primary education and play in England an approach is required that can empirically and practically consider the cultural subject, economic object, and social relations, as they

relate to neoliberal education and play as types of productive activity. The chapter concluded by suggesting that Open Marxism provides an appropriate theoretical foundation for such a study. Chapter 3 introduces Open Marxism and some of its central concepts.

Chapter 3: Theory

3.1 Introduction

Chapter Three begins by discussing the theoretical roots of Open Marxism in the New Readings of Marx and highlights the differences between the New Readings and 'traditional' readings. The centrality of value theory to the New Readings is emphasised that allows Marxian analysis to consider 'potential' sites of value production, such as neoliberal primary education. Open Marxism is then introduced, along with the notion that economic categories are personified through experiences of struggle and Bonefeld's conception of primitive accumulation. Some of the limitations of traditional Marxian educational research are illustrated, whilst relevant examples of the application of the New Readings and Open Marxism to education are considered. The chapter concludes by suggesting that, as a critique of economic categories, Open Marxism provides an appropriate foundation for examining neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England.

3.2 Development of The New Readings

The Neue Marx-Lektüre, or what has become known as the New Readings of Marx (NRM) in the English speaking world, along with its offshoot Open Marxism, have been broadly overlooked within Anglophone scholarship, 'the… tradition has fallen into obscurity' (Memos 2025, p.1) whilst their potential is only just being realised within educational research (Hall et al. 2023). This 'subterranean strand of Marxian critical theory' (O'Kane 2021, p.213) significantly reconfigures Marxian analysis to provide a theoretical foundation that unites economic objectivity and subjective accounts of lived experience within a focus on practical activity.

The roots of Open Marxism through the NRM can be traced back to Rubin's 'Essays on Marx's Theory on Value' (1923 / 1924/1972), Lukàcs 'History and Class Consciousness' (1923/2023) and the first-generation of Frankfurt School Critical theorists and their 'systematic exploration of… (the) standardisation of the world' (Jameson 1990, p.24). The work of Horkheimer (1944/2016, 2002, 2004) and especially Adorno's 'Negative Dialectics' (1966/2007) has been particularly influential, 'Adorno did not establish the new reading, (but)… provided the theoretical impetus and

inspiration for it' (Bonefeld and O'Kane 2022, p.14). It was from the work of Schmidt (1968), Hans-Georg Backhaus (1980, 1992, 2005) and Helmut Reichelt (2005) that the NRM emerged, then later through writers such as Michael Heinrich (2012, 2021) and Søren Mau (2023).

3.3 Traditional Marxism

The NRM emphasises the importance of the foundational categories Marx introduces in his mature work, the 'The Grundrisse' (1939/1993), 'Capital Vol.1' (1867/1990), 'Capital Vol.2' (1885/1992), 'Capital Vol.3' (1894/1991), as well as the significance of Vol.1's subtitle 'a critique of political economy'. For the NRM, the categories Marx introduces are negative categories. This is in contrast to what's been described as traditional readings, most obviously in the work of Engels (1878/1996), Kautsky (1925), Luxemburg (1900/2015), Lenin (1961, 1967) and Trotsky (1975), that emphasised 'the brilliant formulation… of historical materialism' (Stalin 1941, p.44). Traditional readings consider historical materialism to be a generalised theory of human society that considers the categories introduced in 'Capital' ahistorically. Mirroring the 'classical economists' (Mazzucato 2019, p.30), Smith (1776/1986) and Ricardo (1817/1990), traditional readings were underpinned by a labour theory of value that uncritically regarded labour as the ahistorical substance of value.

Due to their substantialist understanding of value as it relates to labour (Pitts 2021, p.8), traditional readings argue that the dominance of the labouring class by the capitalist class is an unnecessary, contradictory, and unjust aberration. Underpinned by a teleological notion of history, traditional readings suggest the contradictory relationship between capital and labour should/will be negated, the 'the negation of the negation' (Engels 1878/1996, p.80). This would occur when the working class became conscious of its own exploitation and fulfilled its destiny by emancipating itself through social revolution. To achieve this, it will be necessary to organise politically, through a 'vanguard' party (Lenin 1961, pp.100-107), to seize state power to enable the rational distribution of value amongst the producers of value themselves. By naturalising economic categories, traditional readings turn Marx's analysis into a partisan critique of privately owned wealth from the 'ontologically privileged position' (Dinerstein et al. 2020, p.12) of labour in which the central problematic is the replacement of the rule of capital by the rule of labour.

3.4 The New Readings of Marx

Contrary to traditional readings, the NRM argue that Marx developed a negative critique within his mature work, 'the negative force of Marxism' (Bonefeld et al. 1995, p.182), that underpinned a reflexive, immanent critique that understood capitalism as a historically unique form of social organisation. Although the categories of 'value', 'commodity' and 'labour' have appeared in 'different economic epochs' (Marx 1867/1990, p.286), the NRM suggest Marx looked to emphasise the unique forms these categories took within capitalist modernity. Considering economic categories negatively is a subtle shift that has substantial implications, refocusing the nature of Marx's analysis from a partisan critique of capital from the standpoint of labour to a 'qualitative sociological' (Pitts in Dinerstein et al. 2020, p.87) critique of labour itself.

The NRM suggest Marx's mature work represents a critical analysis of capitalist economics and the role that economic categories play within it. Rather than a partisan critique of capital from the standpoint of labour, the NRM recognises the achievement of capitalist productivity, 'it has been the first to show what man's activity can bring about' (Engels and Marx 2018, p.27), whilst simultaneously providing a negative critique by foregrounding the human activity and social relations, 'the human social content' (Bonefeld 2023, p.22) an 'economic focus' on productivity negates. For the NRM, 'Marx's Capital is not an economic text' (Bonefeld 2023, p.23), the 'economists are engaged in the business of transforming social relations into abstract, quantifiable units… Marx's critical theory does the opposite' (Mau 2023, p.14).

3.4.1 Value Theory

The NRM draws heavily from the first three chapters of 'Capital Vol.1' (Marx 1867/1990, pp.125-244) in which Marx describes value theory that aims to explain why economic categories take the form they do. These sections are considered 'the most difficult parts of the entire book' and 'present major problems for readers' (Heinrich 2021, p.17), which (in part) explains much of the confusion and disagreement that have had significant consequences as attempts were made to realise Marx's work in history.

3.4.1.1 Use and Exchange Value

For Marx, capitalism is 'a society of commodity producers' (1867/1990, p.133) in which 'wealth… appears as an immense collection of commodities' (Marx 1867/1990, p.125). The foundational nature of commodities and commodity production to capitalism means that exchange and exchange relations shape the commodity's form, they provide it with a 'dual character' (Marx 1867/1990, p.132) or dual value. Commodities simultaneously have a 'use-value' (1867/1990, p.126), a value derived from their utility and qualitative properties and an 'exchange-value' or 'value' (1867/1990, p.126), an abstract, quantitative measure that determines the ratio of one commodity to another.

3.4.1.2 Labour

There is a contradiction between use and exchange-values, 'use-values differ above all in quality, while… exchange-values… differ in quantity and… do not contain an atom of use-value' (1867/1990, p.127). This raises the question: what is being compared in exchange-values? Marx argues the commensurable element is labour, 'if we… disregard the use-value of commodities, only one property remains, that of being products of labour' (1867/1990, p.128). This is a key point as it reveals the centrality of the category labour to value production in which labour is understood to produce the commodity's value; that is, value is understood to be a measure of labour.

3.4.1.3 Dual Character of Labour

Because commodities must be exchanged, a commensurable, standardised notion of value is necessary. Like the commodity itself, the category of labour has a dual character defined by its physical, heterogeneous and useful properties, 'concrete-labour' (1867/1990, p.150) that produces use-values, and simultaneously by 'abstract-labour', standardised, homogeneous labour with the 'quality of being equal or abstract' (1867/1990, p.137). Abstract-labour is what Marx describes as the 'substance of value' (1867/1990, p.129).

3.4.1.4 Value-Form

The comparison of exchange-values, or values, to one another is what Marx calls the 'value-form' (1867/1990, p.138), an objective, relational, immaterial notion the importance of which 'cannot be overemphasised' (Harvey 2010, p.33). Within the NRM, the value-form is foregrounded as fundamental to understanding capitalist modernity as it represents 'the abstract relation of all things with all other things in monetary exchange… and the status of money as universal equivalent' (Pitts in Dinerstein et al. 2020, p.85). For the NRM, 'value is not embodied in individual commodities… value is a social value. It is through exchange that the expenditure of concrete labour is validated as a socially necessary expenditure of the abstract, social labour. It might not be, with ruinous consequences' (Bonefeld 2023, p.27). That 'value can… only be a potential quantity, pending validation in the exchange of commodities' (Pitts in Dinerstein et al. 2020, p.85) alters the focus of research, it allows Marxian analysis to examine an 'expansive terrain of mediations' (Pitts in Dinerstein et al. 2020, p.93) with respect to how activity is directed towards the production of potential value, such as in neoliberal education.

3.4.1.5 Socially Necessary Labour Time

If value is a homogenous, abstract, quantitative measure of labour, what aspect of labour is being measured? Marx's answer is 'socially necessary labour time', what he describes as the 'magnitude of value' (1867/1990, p.129). Socially necessary labour time is 'the labour time required to produce any use-value under the conditions normal for a given society' (Marx 1867/1990, p.129); it is a temporal standard that commodity producers must at least meet within competitive markets for their business to be viable. As there is a relation of competition between producers, an incentive exists for each to become more efficient, and so more productive, than their competitor, to reduce individual labour-time (per unit) below average levels of socially necessary labour time. The more a producer reduces their individual labour time (below socially necessary labour time), the more surplus-value or profit can be realised, the more reinvestment in production can occur, the more efficiency and productivity can be created, the more dominant a producer's market position becomes, the more capitalist development proceeds through an accelerating, expansionary dynamic.

3.4.2 Commodity Fetishism

The NRM argue the 'duality of the concrete and the abstract' evident within value 'characterise(s) the capitalist social formation' (Postone 2003, p.152) as a totality. The NRM draws from Chapter Four of 'Capital Vol.1', 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secrets' (1867/1990, pp.163-177) in which the centrality of abstract values for capitalist development underpins a societal focus on the 'abstract relation of all things with all other things' (Pitts in Dinerstein et al. 2020, p.85). The tendency is considered a fetish because it is a representation of human social relations as things, 'the definite social relations between men themselves [sic] … assumes… the fantastic form of a relation between things' (Marx 1867/1990, p.165). Although capitalism is seemingly constituted by a fracturing (Richmond and Charnley 2022), as separate individuals and private businesses invest and labour to produce various things, this is understood to be a fetish as the individuation is constitutive of extensive social relations, 'the epoch which produces… the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social relations' (Marx 1939/1993, p.84), the scale and interconnectedness of global production reflecting the sophistication of contemporary social relations.

A 'fetishised' focus on things, therefore, conceals the social relations, the social class relations; the human practice and concrete, useful, qualitative aspects of life that produce such things. The fetish tendency is evident within the dominance of growth figures, levels of inflation, debt, employment and productivity statistics in the contemporary policy landscape, in which economics is 'the mother tongue of public policy, the language of public life and the mindset that shapes society' (Raworth 2018, p.15). It is important to note that Marx does not suggest commodity fetishism is a 'false consciousness'. It is the form that social relations take within capitalist modernity, 'it is only things that stand in a social relation, which is mediated by the extrasensory quality of value. Commodity fetishism is not an illusion. It is a real phenomenon' (Heinrich 2021, p.154).

Holloway considers commodity fetishism in terms of processes of 'fetishisation' (in Dinerstein and Neary 2002, p.40), as the economic necessity to produce objective value transforms social life, human practice, and social relations into abstract things with a 'phantom objectivity' (Lukács 1923/2023, p.83). Value production and its fetishised character result in 'a world which really is topsy-turvy' (Debord 1992/1970, p.13), in

which ‘individuals’ are ‘ruled by abstractions’ (Marx 1939/1993, p.164) and human life is a ‘resource’ that has value only in relation to things. It is in this sense that dialectical thought understands itself to be immanent to capitalist modernity, ‘the ontology of the wrong state of things’ (Adorno 1966/2007, p.11), as a dualistic analysis looks to ‘penetrate the world of things’ (Aronowitz in Horkheimer 2002, p.xiii) to reveal the human content and social relations; the human suffering that a focus on things both produces and denies.

3.4.3 Crisis of Labour

The fetishised nature of value production has significant implications for the category of labour as it produces what Postone has described as the ‘crisis of labour’ (Damile 2017). The magnitude of value means that in order for producers to survive, they must respect a downward pressure on labour within a rational effort to create efficiencies to raise ‘the marginal productivity of labour’ (Saltman and Means 2019, p.4). This decreases socially necessary labour time and creates ever greater levels of productivity, following Krugman, as ‘productivity… is almost everything’ (in Haynes 2020, p.1).

Although capitalism’s raising of labour productivity has revolutionised human life by increasing the quantity and availability of things, the same increases in productivity and efficiency have simultaneously entailed significant shifts in labour processes through automation and/or the geographical relocation of production. During the neoliberal period, this has involved processes of de-industrialisation within developed capitalist economies (Edgerton 2018) that have created increased unemployment, underemployment (Rafferty, Ress et al Goulart et al. 2022pp.461-485) and precarity (Standing 2015), wage stagnation (Goulart et al. 2022), decreases in life expectancy (Rashid et al. 2021, Geronimus 2023, Walsh and McCartney 2024), regional economic decline (Dorling 2023) and increased inequality (Piketty 2014). It is acknowledged, even by supporters of the neoliberal agenda (Wolf 2023, Fukuyama 2024), that such issues have underpinned the success of right-wing populism (Neiwert 2018, Davies 2021, Wendling 2024) within core, liberal capitalist states.

The crisis of labour looks set to intensify as the ‘economic necessity’ to incorporate artificial intelligence (Dyer-Witheford et al. 2019) is driving efforts to cut costs, create efficiencies and raise productivity. Such processes will inevitably undermine working

conditions and reduce opportunities for stable livelihoods, with Musk predicting 'there will come a point where no job is needed' (Milmo and Stacey 2023). The NRM critique of the category of labour should be contrasted with Keynes's prediction that capitalism would deliver 'a 15-hour week… 3 hours a day' by the year 2030 (in Pecchi and Piga 2008, p.23). Although reductions in socially necessary labour time have transformed the ubiquity of economic things since 1930, this has not led to 'the shortening of the working day… more time for enjoyment and increasing freely disposable time' (Bonefeld 2023, p.151). Such issues are directly relevant to the consideration of free time, leisure and play.

3.5 Open Marxism

The NRM have tended to emphasise the tension between the abstract and concrete produced by the 'peculiar nature of labour' (Postone 2003, p.17) in which 'abstract labour is decisive' (Heinrich and Wei 2014, p.725). In so doing, they have, broadly speaking, downplayed the centrality of class relations[4] to Marxian analysis because 'the twofold character of labour rather than the market and private ownership of the means of production' constitutes 'the essential core of capitalism' (Postone 2003, p.387). The NRM's focus on abstract labour has sometimes viewed value as a free-floating entity 'that unfolds of its own accord, without the antagonistic social basis that makes it historically and continuingly possible' (Pitts in Dinerstein et al. 2020, p.70). Although adopting much of its theoretical foundation, Open Marxism critiques the NRM by arguing that class and class struggle remain fundamental to the Marxian framework, but they must be viewed in a substantially different way than how traditional readings have considered them.

3.5.1 Personification of Economic Categories

The tension between the abstract and concrete that underpins processes of fetishisation is considered up close by Open Marxism, within practical, lived experience. Central to Open Marxism is a recognition that 'individuals are… the personifications of economic categories, the bearers of particular class-relations and interests' (Marx 1867/1990,

[4] See Bonefeld (2004) for a critique of Postone's 'courageous but unsuccessful attempt to banish the class antagonism from the critique of political economy' (2004, p.105)

p.95). As opposed to a consideration of objective 'things' as in economics or an examination of abstract labour as in the NRM, Open Marxism unites subject and object, ideal and material, culture and economics within a 'determinate negation of the constituted forms of capital'; a 'reductio ad hominem' (Bonefeld 2004, p.111) that foregrounds the struggle between the abstract and concrete as it's expressed within and through social individuals as they personify economic categories.

3.5.2 Class and Primitive Accumulation

Open Marxism emphasises how the personification of economic categories is presupposed by class relations based on inequality in property. Working in the Open Marxist tradition, Bonefeld notes a 'logic of separation' (Bonefeld 2014, p.85) is central to understanding class, which he develops from a reading of Marx's 'Primitive Accumulation' (1867/1990, p.873) and Harvey's work on 'accumulation by dispossession' (2003, pp.137-182). The separation of people from their means of life has traditionally been conceived in terms of a historic separation from the land[5], what Marx calls primitive or 'original accumulation' (Marx 1867/2024, p.650). The 'original' acquisition of property is understood to be the foundation of class and the precondition from which capitalist development proceeds, the 'one historical precondition… the separation of the means of existence from the direct producers' (Bonefeld 2023, p.59).

For Bonefeld, the logic of separation is not just the necessary precondition of capitalist development, it 'belongs to the conceptuality of capital' (Bonefeld 2014, p.81) and class relations within capitalism. Here, the categories of capital and labour are understood to presuppose class relations with respect to levels of property ownership, and as such, degrees of separation or dispossession. As opposed to original accumulation as a historical act, Bonefeld argues that ownership and separation are essential aspects of class relations that must be 'continually reproduced, what at first was merely a starting-point… becomes the characteristic result of capitalist production, a result which is constantly renewed and perpetuated' (Marx 1867/1990, p.716).

[5] See Hayes (2020) who examines contemporary and historical issues of access/separation to/from property and its class basis as it relates to broader social reproduction and access to the 'natural' world.

The economic category of capital is understood to represent the private ownership of the means of life. Presupposed within such ownership is the separation from the means of life for non-owners, and so a certain social class relation, as to be separated from the means of life presupposes some form of relation to the means of life. Considered across an 'economy', private ownership means it is necessary for those separated to personify the category of labour by hiring themselves within labour markets to sustain a living. As opposed to a fetishised understanding of economic categories that views them as separate things, the categories of capital and labour are viewed here relationally, 'the capital relation' (Bonefeld et al. 1995, p.187), in which they presuppose each other for their existence. For capitalist development to proceed, inequality in property is necessary as the categories of capital and labour presuppose a 'naturalised' (Best 2024, p.15) social relation based on a 'separation between labour and property' (Marx 1939/1993, p.307).

3.5.3 Economic Compulsion and Struggle

Degrees of ownership and dispossession are understood to produce a compulsion for individuals as they personify the categories of capital and labour that gives capitalist class relations an abstract character. To personify the categories of labour or capital as a means of life means being dependent upon 'economic' production, in which it is necessary to produce growth by raising productivity and increasing profits. Capital's need for efficiency and increased productivity, and labour's need for employment, mean capital and labour are compelled to relate to each other in certain, distinct, practical ways. For Open Marxism, it is the naturalised condition of inequality in property expressed as things that gives class relations their 'abstract, impersonal, quasi objective character' (Postone 2003, p.5). The naturalised condition underpins an 'economic' (Bonefeld 2023) or 'mute compulsion' (Mau 2023) that compels individuals to practically and somnambulistically personify economic categories as 'bearers of particular class-relations'.

Those who personify the category of capital are compelled to struggle, to increase their market dominance through greater ownership, buying 'labour power to avoid bankruptcy by profiting from its employment' (Bonefeld 2023, p.4), producing rises in 'labour productivity… through the introduction of labour-saving methods of production' (Bonefeld 2023, p.83). Those who personify the category of labour must

also struggle, in the first instance, to acquire employment to secure a livelihood within competitive labour markets. Once work is secured, capital's need to produce profits through efficiencies and productivity amounts to further experiences of struggle for labour. In the short term, it could mean a more intensive and challenging workplace experience through the 'rational' reorganisation of work practices (Boltanski and Chiapello 2018). In the long term, it could result in underemployment (Rafferty, Ress et al Goulart et al. 2022, pp.461-485), precarity (Standing 2015), poverty (Desmond 2023) and the lowering of life expectancy (Head 2021, Geronimus 2023, Walsh and McCartney 2024).

To personify the category of labour is therefore to struggle with 'inequality and unfreedom' (Marx 1939/1993, p.249), as those who personify the category of capital are compelled to 'rationally' determine what labour should engage in and how such engagement should occur. Due to the contractual nature of labour's relationship to capital, those who personify the category of labour risk having their employment terminated if they fail to 'successfully' personify the category. I would argue this represents a significant existential dimension to class in general and the personification of the category of labour in particular as 'labour discipline (is) instilled, more often than not by means of terror and, always, abject poverty' (Bonefeld 2014, p.108). This existential dimension is understood here, not as 'pure subjective feeling' (Bonefeld 2023, p.10), but rather as the product of 'objectivity' as it 'weighs upon the subject' (Adorno 1966/2007, p.17).

In traditional readings, struggle is broadly understood in terms of the relationship between capital and labour within immediate production, as labour goes on strike or capital attacks the conditions of labour's employment. Critiquing economic categories provides a richer analysis that reveals the depth and extent to which struggle is intrinsic to capitalist society, which 'stays alive, not despite its antagonism, but by means of it' (Bonefeld 2014, p.3). Holloway has described the lived experience of struggle in terms of existing 'in-against-and-beyond' (Holloway 2022, p.56) economic categories. To be separated from property means it is necessary to personify the category of labour *in* the category of labour. Yet a fetishised focus on producing things that considers the labourer's needs a secondary concern produces a contradictory, critical tendency *against* economic categories, and as such, a tendency to look *beyond* economic

categories. It is here that an adequately critical perspective, a critical theory, is considered to be immanent to capitalist modernity.

By foregrounding contradictory experiences of struggle, Open Marxism seeks to reveal the ways in which capitalist modernity is 'haunted by the spectre of social constitution' (Bonefeld 2014, p.21). As opposed to traditional readings that consider labour to be ontologically privileged and class struggle a noble end, Open Marxism emphasises practical, antagonistic experiences of struggle as the painful fact of everyday life, in which 'to be a productive worker is not a piece of luck, but a misfortune' (Marx 1867/1990, p.644). Whereas a traditional focus on economics might emphasise quantities and the distribution of economic things, rates of employment, levels of productivity and growth etc, Open Marxism looks underneath such economic objectivity to foreground their practical meaning as they are constituted in history, within and through contradictory, antagonistic, subjective experience. It is in this sense that Open Marxism aims 'to lend a voice to suffering' (Adorno 1966/2007, pp.17-18) as it exposes experiences of struggle that are fetishised in economic forms.

3.5.4 Ad Hominem Critique

This represents a substantially different approach to class analysis than, for instance, the traditional consideration of stratified groupings (Savage 2015). Open Marxism can be understood to be 'against the sociology of class' (Houseman in Best et al. 2018, p.702) as it suggests that such perspectives sever the relationship between practical activity and social position as they transform class into a 'thing' which 'presupposes what needs to be explained' (Bonefeld and O'Kane 2022, p.30). Open Marxism aims to de-classify and reflexively de-mystify the fetishised appearance of individuals, by making them explicable as they're constituted within and through practice and definite social relations.

Such an approach allows us to consider both the subjective, cultural experience of individuals and the economic objectivity their practice produces. The separation of these spheres being a significant issue that has hindered social and educational research, as was discussed in Chapter Two. Open Marxism addresses many of the limitations the cultural turn sought to remedy in reaction to the economic reductionism that defined much traditional Marxian research. Following Best (2024), Open Marxism provides an

answer to Jameson's question of 'how does one connect the base and superstructure?' (2024, p.237) by suggesting that practice is the means through which subjective experience is connected to the reproduction of economic objectivity.

The focus on practice is important as it produces a negative critique against-and-beyond capitalist modernity's fetishising tendency; it reflexively shapes analysis away from a focus on things that represent a 'revolt of verbs against nouns' (Holloway 2017, p.268). Rather than an analysis that presumes class to be pre-constituted, a focus on the personification of economic categories, lived experience and struggle, reveals class as an experience 'in the process of it being constituted' (Holloway in Dinerstein and Neary 2002, p.42). Economics or economic objectivity is not conceived separately here; rather, it is revealed as one aspect of the totality of human experience in the ways it is constituted within and through practice. For Open Marxism, economic categories are personified by individuals, in which 'the line of class antagonism falls not merely between but also, and importantly, through social individuals' (Bonefeld 2014, p.107).

As a negative critique, the analysis of practice challenges the somnambulism of mute compulsion by producing a reflexivity that highlights our own role in social reproduction, revealing how 'we', not 'it', 'are the crisis of capitalism' (Holloway 2017). This opens up class, from a homogenous and somewhat limited category, to one that can acknowledge struggles in their plurality. It allows questions about the reproduction of race, gender, sexual relations, etc, which have often been conceived solely in cultural terms, to be considered in relation to practice, as material reproduction proceeds within and through the necessity for social individuals to personify economic categories. Such an approach reveals the contradictory nature of class. It shows that the necessity to reproduce the category of labour is an individualistic, competitive and antagonistic endeavour, which offers some answers to the 'failures of (working class) solidarity' (Cicerchia 2021, p.611). Open Marxism's ability to reflexively locate economic and cultural life within practice addresses many of the issues Fraser and Jaeggi (2023, p.7) suggest an adequate critical theory of capitalism has been lacking.

3.6 NRM and Open Marxism-Based Educational Research

The subterranean nature of New Readings of Marx and Open Marxism has meant they've enjoyed limited application to educational contexts. Neary (2020) has developed the notion of 'Student as Producer' in HE, discussing 'unlearning the law of labour as a critique of capitalist work and the institutions through which the law of labour is enforced, including the capitalist university' (2020, p.1). Harvie (2006) has theoretically explored the role of teachers as 'productive labourers' through an Open Marxist perspective, describing how 'the labour of those who work in schools, colleges and universities… has a two-fold nature containing both abstract and concrete labour… that produces value and surplus value for capital' (2006, p.26).

As a 'Marx revival' (Musto 2020) has gathered pace in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, 'The Palgrave International Handbook of Marxism in Education' (Hall et al. 2023) has presented a range of work that has applied the New Readings and Open Marxism to educational contexts. Rikowski (in Hall et al. 2023, pp.47-70) has developed the value-form argument to consider how the 'web of capital's forms grounds and facilitates value production' (in Hall et al. 2023, p.47) in 'schools in England and higher education institutions' (in Hall et al. 2023, p.52). Rikowski suggests his work is limited because it contains 'no actual account of any educational forms e.g. curriculum, examination, qualification, tests etc' (in Hall et al. 2023, p.53). Das (in Hall et al. 2023, p.60) has theoretically considered the classroom as 'a site of class struggle' in HE as he distinguishes between struggle 'from below and from above' (in Hall et al. 2023, p.62), whilst also considering ideological struggles over educational content.

Au (in Hall et al. 2023, pp.223-241) has examined the 'violence of abstraction' with the rise of 'high-stakes, standardised testing' in the United States. He suggests that standardised tests operate as a mechanism 'for the abstraction, decontextualisation, and commodification of students to support capitalist models of schooling and education' (in Hall et al. 2023, p.223). Standardised tests are understood to 'create commensurability' (in Hall et al. 2023, p.231) by denying:

> 'Large amounts of local context, local variability, or local difference, in order to establish a common measurement that can reach across a wide range of locations/contexts' (in Hall et al. 2023, p.230).

Au suggests ‘commodity fetishism’ appropriately describes the way that standardised processes ‘commodifies students’ and enable ‘systems of education to be framed akin to systems of commerce, because the logics of capitalist production require commodities to be produced, assessed, compared, and exchanged on the market’ (in Hall et al. 2023, p.231). He argues that such processes of classification are a poor measure of a student’s cognitive ability because they absorb:

> ‘Family poverty levels, how much tree cover there is on school grounds, the temperatures experienced by students, stress experienced by students both at school and at home, student cardiorespiratory fitness, and levels of cognitive fatigue’ (in Hall et al. 2023, p.234).

Au notes that standardised tests can be considered in relation to ‘socially necessary labour time’ as they represent a ‘very broad measure of a broadly socioeconomic process of resource distribution’ (in Hall et al. 2023, p.236).

Following Holloway (2010), Ferguson (in Bhattacharya 2017, pp.112-130) has applied an analysis of the twofold nature of labour to a theoretical discussion of children’s play. She suggests schools should be considered a ‘contested site of social reproduction’ in which ‘capitalism’s demand for labouring subjects exists in tension with other dimensions of forming and reproducing life in general’ (in Bhattacharya 2017, p.124). Play is considered:

> ‘A form of concrete labour that is, in many senses, freer than… waged labour… this greater freedom has everything to do with the relative distances separating spaces and times of play… from workplaces and the sites and times of much social reproductive labour’ (in Bhattacharya 2017, p.123).

Ferguson concludes by suggesting that:

> ‘Children remind us… that labour power is not a thing. It is a capacity of concrete, potentially playful individuals whose needs and desires come into conflict with the capitalist impulse to separate work and play’ (in Bhattacharya 2017, p.129).

3.7 Open Marxism and Neoliberal Education's Antagonism to Play

Following Chapter Two, in which it was argued that to understand neoliberal primary education's contradictory antagonism to play in England, there is a need to consider neoliberal education in its totality, both its ideal and material, cultural and economic dimensions. Given the limitations of both the cultural turn and traditional readings of Marx in this context, it has been argued that Open Marxism, as a critique of economic categories, provides an especially relevant foundation for such a study.

To consider neoliberal primary education and play in such a way it is necessary to consider both as respective forms of productive activity. Drawing from empirical data that was gathered from one primary school in Northern England, the thesis proceeds as a practically reflexive, immanent critique that looks to consider the tension between neoliberal primary education and play with respect to neoliberal education's normative commitment to formal equality and its end of reproducing an adequately productive workforce.

The Educational Value Production (EVP) model that's presented in part two of Chapter Six, was developed from a consideration of the form and content of observed practice within teacher-led sessions in relation to the neoliberal primary framework in England and an Open Marxist reading of value theory. EVP allowed practice observed in teacher-led and free-play sessions to be located within the broader context of English neoliberal primary education as a standardised system. By acknowledging that EVP engagement has been designed to reproduce the category of labour and raise potential labour productivity, EVP allows observed teacher-led practice and play, and so neoliberal primary education in England, to be considered as it facilitates broader capitalist reproduction through the reproduction of 'economic objectivity' (Bonefeld 2023, p.11)

The practically reflexive analysis is developed in part three of Chapter Six to consider the abstract commensurability that defined observed practice in teacher-led sessions, together with the concrete, material inequalities of social class that constitute English primary school pupils. EVP allows the controversy surrounding objective measurement and social context in English primary schooling to be considered in relation to meritocracy, material security, and social class reproduction (Leckie and Goldstein

2017, Goldstein and Leckie 2018). As an immanent critique, the work reveals the contradictory nature of neoliberal primary education in England, as it aims to raise educational productivity to produce a potential working class through a practice underpinned by a normative commitment to formal equality and meritocracy.

Using Open Marxism's notion of class as the personification of economic categories in part four of Chapter Six, EVP allows a unique class analysis to proceed in which class can be considered as it is variously constituted. The empirical data on observed practice in teacher-led and play sessions is considered as teachers sought to 'successfully' personify the category of labour by engaging pupils as potential personifications of the category of labour, within and through EVP. Using Open Marxism's notion of fetishisation, neoliberal education in English primary schooling is considered a process of fetishisation with regard to how it removes from view the teacher's class need to successfully personify the category of labour to reproduce a potential working class. It is in the context of teachers struggling to successfully personify the category of labour, to reproduce pupils as a potential working class, that English neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play is finally considered in part five of Chapter Six.

The centrality of Adorno's 'Negative Dialectics' (1966/2007) to Open Marxism underpins the analysis, as EVP allows both the subject and the object, the universal and the particular, the cultural and the material, to be located within a certain type of productive activity. It's in this sense that EVP transforms neoliberal primary education in England from a noun to a verb as the thesis foregrounds the fundamental role of practice. Following Holloway, the approach is reflexive, as it produces an ad hominem critique that reveals the idiosyncratic ways in which the practice of those engaged in neoliberal primary education reproduces and constitutes neoliberal primary education. It reveals the subjects who constitute, or rather, who are, neoliberal primary education in England. The contradictions, tensions and antagonisms, the practice and social relations that are exposed, allow both the positive and negative aspects of neoliberal primary education to be considered. EVP provides a negative critique as it produces a perspective beneath the objective focus on 'positive', abstract measures of educational attainment and progress, to reveal the human content, the social relationships and experiences of struggle a focus on abstract commensurability variously denies.

Such an approach is sympathetic to a Marxian tradition that's materialist in the sense that it foregrounds the centrality of practice, as following Marx:

> 'All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice' (1976, p.29).

Considering how fundamental Marx understood practice to be, it is strange there has been so little empirical research within a Marxian tradition in which 'rarely are the issues posed in terms of their implications for the concrete investigations of social life' (Wright 1981, p.36). Pitts (2017) is the only empirical study I'm aware of that has utilised Open Marxism within an examination of the 'crises of measurability' in the creative industries in the UK and the Netherlands, in which he denotes 'an absence of practical empirical qualitative research informed by value theory' (2017, p.15). By utilising some of the latest developments drawn from Open Marxism, a unique, empirical, practically reflexive classroom study has been developed that aims to be adequate, indeed immanent to its object, to explain why neoliberal primary education in England is antagonistic to play.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted some central tenets of the New Readings of Marx and Open Marxism and distinguished them from traditional readings. It has emphasised the importance of value theory to the New Readings and has discussed the significance of potential value-making activity. The focus on potential expands the remit of Marxian analysis that allows neoliberal primary education, its economisation and antagonism to play, to be examined. Open Marxism has been introduced through its emphasis on economic categories personified by human practice that presuppose class relations, along with Bonefeld's notion of class struggle through the logic of separation and primitive accumulation. It has been argued that consideration of both the economic and cultural aspects of social life is necessary to adequately understand neoliberal primary education in England as a form of productive activity, to explain why it is antagonistic to play. As a critique of economic categories, Open Marxism provides an appropriate foundation for such an analysis as it unites culture and economics by revealing how economic categories are personified within and through practical experiences of

struggle. Such an approach seeks to be totalising as it allows neoliberal primary education's positive, abstract dimension to be critically considered in relation to its negative aspects, the practical activity, the social relations, and experiences of struggle that produce its abstractions. Chapter Four, methodological and epistemological foundations, illustrates how some of the central concepts of Open Marxism described in this chapter were employed in an empirically based, practically reflexive immanent critique of neoliberal education's antagonism to play in England.

Chapter 4: Methodological and Epistemological Foundations

4.1 Introduction

Chapter Four begins by introducing immanent critique as the appropriate vehicle for an Open Marxist-based examination of neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England. The relationship between immanent critique and first- and second-order theory is highlighted, along with practical reflexivity, totalisation, determinate abstractions and negative dialectics. How an immanent critique of economic categories shifts the perspective of research to foreground a consideration of the nature of truths is then discussed. The central research questions are introduced followed by the research design, which explains how the methodological and epistemological foundations of Open Marxism were employed within a classroom-based, immanent critique of neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play. This is followed by access and sampling, data collection and data analysis. The chapter concludes by discussing some ethical considerations that arose due to the nature of the research.

4.2 Immanent Critique

Open Marxism suggests, in the first instance, that Marx's mature analysis should be considered an immanent critique, and secondly, that immanent critique is the correct, indeed, immanent approach for an adequate analysis of capitalist modernity. The influence of the first-generation Frankfurt School on Open Marxism is evident as their 'critical theory' was understood 'not as a general theory, but was instead a method of analysis deriving from a non-positivist epistemology… the method of immanent critique' (Antonio 1981, p.330). The Frankfurt School aimed to reflexively situate their work within a historical context to critically highlight the ideological functioning of seemingly 'natural' social phenomena. A significant aspect of their research was an analysis of the epistemological presuppositions within 'traditional theory', which they argued was:

> 'Uncritical of its own social and historical preconditions. Instead of seeking to establish the social and historical constitution of its object, (traditional theory) identifies society as given' (Horkheimer in Best et al. 2018, p.2).

4.2.1 First and Second-Order Theory

The methodological foundations of immanent critique developed from the work of Hegel (1807/1977) and discussions surrounding the relationship between first- and second-order theory. First-order theory engages with the practical, empirical social world; it 'devotes itself to the task of explicating… a cognitive object' (Bonefeld et al. 1992, p.3) through the use of categories deemed appropriate to the object of study. Second-order theory engages with the philosophical and methodological questions that emerge from first-order enquiry; it 'reserves to itself the task of validating, or criticising, first-order theory's categories' (Bonefeld et al. 1992, p.2).

From the point of view of immanent critique, traditional theory's distinction between first- and second-order theory is the product of a split or separation between the concrete/empirical and abstract/philosophical. Traditional theory argues the separation is necessary because if first-order theory examines its own categories, through its categories, 'vicious circularity' is produced (Bonefeld et al. 1992, p.2). From the point of view of immanent critique, second-order theory's interrogation of the first-order does not resolve the problem of the validation of categories, as it instead produces infinite regress that requires third, fourth, fifth-order interrogation… ad Infinium.

4.2.2 Practical Reflexivity

Immanent critique is considered a solution to the problem of the validation of categories and infinite regress. Contrary to traditional Marxism's reading of Marx as an 'objective' theory of human society, Open Marxism suggests that Marx's mature work was an immanent critique of capitalist modernity that united first- and second-order theory through 'practical reflexivity' (Gunn in Bonefeld et al. 1992, p.2). Within a practically reflexive approach, first- and second-order theory are united within a mode of enquiry that is capable of 'reflecting upon the validity of its own categories in the course of reflecting upon its own practical situation and vice versa' (Bonefeld et al. 1992, p.2); practical reflexivity 'reflects upon and understands itself as inhering in a practical and social world' (Gunn 1987, p.92). Theory and metatheory become intertwined within practical reflexivity as first- and second-order theory are reflexively brought under the scrutiny of one another, 'each of the two dimensions… informs and interrogates the other' (Gunn 1987, p.93).

4.2.3 Totalisation and Determinate Abstractions

The uniting of first- and second-order theory 'in one and the same theoretical movement' (Bonefeld et al. 1992, p.2) substantially refocuses the nature of research as it produces a totalising analysis. An Open Marxist immanent critique proceeds through a practically reflexive focus on categories deemed foundational to the reproduction of capitalist modernity. Which categories are used within the enquiry are essential:

> 'The adequacy of an immanent social critique depends upon the adequacy of its categories. If the fundamental categories of the critique are to be considered critical categories, adequate to capitalist society, they must express the specificity of that society' (Postone 2003, p.89).

For Open Marxism, it is the economic categories that Marx highlights within his mature work that are considered foundational to capitalist reproduction as they contain within them the 'systematic content of capitalism… the categories of abstract labour, value, exchange value, money, capital, surplus value, capital accumulation, etc… presuppose the systematic content of primitive accumulation in their conceptuality' (Bonefeld 2014, p.91). Economic categories are understood to be neither wholly theoretical, universal abstractions nor concrete descriptions of the particular. They are 'determinate abstractions' (Gunn 1987, p.107) that exist both in theory and practice and which allow an empirically based, practically reflexive, immanent critique to proceed.

The foundational and totalising nature of economic categories means an Open Marxist immanent critique emerges, both out of and in response to, economic categories themselves. Traditional readings perceived Marxian analysis as an alternative socialist economics (Brennan et al. 2017) underpinned by an 'objective' and 'scientific' approach to the 'economy'. From the perspective of Open Marxism, material life is produced and reproduced within and through idiosyncratic and contradictory experiences of practice, struggles, as social individuals personify economic categories that presuppose class relations. Such social individuals, for instance, engage in knowledge production within a social constitution defined by class relations and material inequalities that shape the researcher, within and through the quality of their lived experience. From this perspective, purely objective, neutral knowledge, untouched by the 'dirt of history', is not possible. An Open Marxist immanent critique is therefore

sceptical of the idea that ontologies, methodologies and theories can be plucked from an idealistic 'marketplace'. It is in this sense that an Open Marxist immanent critique does not consider itself a method in the formal sense, one that is 'chosen' from a range of other methods. It is 'the very opposite of a method or methodology which can be established prior to and independently of the project of social enquiry in any given case' (Gunn 1987, p.46). This is to say, an Open Marxist immanent critique of economic categories understands itself to be immanent to capitalist modernity.

4.2.4 Contradictions

Central to an Open Marxist immanent critique of economic categories are contradictions. In the first instance, a practically reflexive, immanent critique of economic categories is understood to be critical in the sense that it initially involves an 'interrogative theoretical stance' (Gunn 1987, p.47) to practical engagement with determinate abstractions, that is, the approach is initially interrogative rather than oppositional. The critique becomes oppositional when contradictions are acknowledged to underpin 'oppressive or dehumanising practices' (Gunn 1987, p.45) that are contrary to the normative claims of liberal capitalism.

By revealing contradictions within categories understood to be foundational to capitalist modernity, a critical reflexivity is produced that is understood to represent a dynamic immanent to the social totality. A Marxian immanent critique distinguishes itself from social research that looks to remedy social issues by arbitrarily declaring what 'ought' to be from the outside. The critique is immanent as the standard upon which the critique proceeds does not exist transcendentally, outside the object of the study. Immanent critique concerns itself with the potential immanent to the contradiction itself, as it suggests that only from within the contradiction can a realistic and grounded resolution be found:

> 'Inasmuch as immanent critique, in analysing its context, reveals its immanent possibilities, it contributes to their realisation. Revealing the potential in the actual helps action to be socially transformative in a conscious way' (Postone 2003, p.89).

4.2.5 Negative Dialectics and the Critique of Economic Categories

As discussed in Chapter Three, Adorno's 'Negative Dialectics' (1966/2007) provided the foundation from which the New Readings of Marx and Open Marxism emerged. For Adorno, the identarian nature of thought is in a continual, contradictory tension with material reality: 'contradiction is non-identity under the aspect of identity' (1966/2007, p.5). Concepts are only ever incomplete abstractions that do not fully represent what they claim to symbolise, 'all concepts misrepresent their objects and all thinking involves an act of brutality to its object' (Jeffries 2017, p.327). The New Readings have tended to emphasise the 'form of abstract, structural domination' (Postone 2003, p.30) and the centrality of abstract labour, that produces a contradictory social constitution defined by the 'duality of the concrete and the abstract' (Postone 2003, p.152). Open Marxism uses negative dialectics to consider the contradictions between the abstract and concrete as they are expressed in the practice of concrete, social individuals, as they reproduce abstract, economic objectivity within and through the personification of economic categories.

4.2.6 Within And Through

The totalisation produced by uniting first- and second-order theory reconfigures the perspective of research by grounding an analysis of capitalist reproduction in the here-and-now of lived experience. The analysis reveals the ways that we, idiosyncratically and practically, reproduce capitalist modernity, with Holloway noting 'this can be seen as a critique ad hominem, or… (a form of) materialism; materialism (being) quite simply the understanding that we… create the world in which we live' (2010, p.132). Rather than producing objective, abstract models as in economics, having a critical view of economic development through a partisan concern for labour as in traditional Marxism, or a focus on discourses or arbitrary engagement as in cultural turn research, Open Marxism suggests that both the subject and object of capitalist modernity can be grasped within a reflexive analysis of practice. This produces a perspective that foregrounds social reproduction as it occurs and is constituted within and through idiosyncratic acts of practical engagement.

This is an important, if somewhat difficult point that bears repeating as it reveals that practical reflexivity both produces and represents a distinct approach to thought itself.

Rather than an objective analysis of abstract models, an account of the subject abstracted from broader social reproduction, or a focus on the meaning of language and discourse, an Open Marxist immanent critique looks to present a negative, 'de-fetishised' and reflexive view of social life that reveals capitalist reproduction as it variously occurs within and through the practice of social individuals. Bonefeld notes that such an approach:

> 'Is both a method of thought and a process of thinking in and through the social object. It is not a method of organising concepts and of thinking about society. Rather than applying thought to the social object, it argues that conceptuality holds sway within it. This insight formulates the task of critical theory as an immanent critique of society, one that sets out to uncover what is active in objects' (Best et al. 2018, p.2).

4.2.7 Ideology Critique

An immanent critique, therefore, refocuses the object of research, from the production of original findings and new truths towards a critical examination of truths themselves, 'it asks after the validity of the categories in virtue of which X counts as true' (Gunn 1987, p.89). The approach is reflexive in the sense that it aims to be aware of itself within a historical and social context, and that, by highlighting, examining, and critiquing the ideological nature of truths, it could potentially impact the context within which it is part. The totalising nature of economic categories and the class interests they presuppose mean partial or ideological truths can be, and readily are, expressed and/or hidden, consciously or unconsciously, within contradictions contained in knowledge and practical social life[6].

For Open Marxism, the naturalisation of economic categories and the separation of first- and second-order theory should itself be critiqued and historicised within the ideological landscape of capitalist modernity. The separation of first-order concrete empirical content from second-order abstract philosophical forms can be understood to mirror the fetishising tendency of capitalist value production that treats abstract things

[6] Although working outside the NRM/OM, Jameson (2002) developed a similar approach that draws on Marxian critical theory within a hermeneutics that looks to reveal '*the political unconscious*'.

as separate from the concrete world they emerged from. The ideological implications of this separation formed the basis of Adorno's and Horkheimer's critique of the Enlightenment (1944/2016) and what they generally termed positivist approaches to knowledge production (Ramsey in Best et al. 2018, pp.1179-1192).

Open Marxism has similarly critiqued traditional Marxism's fetishised approach to knowledge production due to its naturalisation of economic categories and focus on abstract forms that suggested Marx had proposed a universal theory of human society. Bonefeld notes:

> 'To argue form exists without content is to say that form is external to its own social determination. Like the notion of constituted forms, the notion of 'value' as 'form' without 'content' espouses the religion of bourgeois society: commodity fetishism' (1995, p.193).

It was in response to the limitations of traditional Marxism that the cultural turn emerged during the 1970s and 'dissolved… the materiality of social reproduction' into an 'economy of signifiers' (Mau 2023, p.25). Although this meant that social research could excel in providing detailed descriptions of life that had been previously overlooked, the nominalism and opposition to grand narratives that underpinned such approaches resulted in an equally 'abstract' analysis that 'isolated the micro level from its wider social context' (Mau 2023, p.47). This suggests that the cultural turn responded to the limits of traditional Marxism's foregrounding of form over content by emphasising content over form.

An immanent critique of economic categories reveals the unreflexive nature of the cultural turn's evacuation of political economy, which has made it implicitly (and/or explicitly) ideological. The cultural turn has proceeded as neoliberalism has engaged in a process of class warfare (Dumenil and Levy 2004, Harvey 2005) that's evident in the rise in social inequalities (Hutton 2010, Dorling 2012, Stiglitz 2012, Dorling 2014, Milanovic 2016, Pickett and Wilkinson 2018, Piketty 2020, Savage 2021, Flick 2022, Sanders 2023) that have occurred under the guise of 'neutrality', in which a technocratic approach to policy making was considered appropriate as a 'post-ideological' period of history had been entered (Fukuyama 1992). The de-legitimisation of traditional Marxism with its focus on economic and social class relations, and the

rise of the cultural turn during the neoliberal period, have meant that much social research has not been able to adequately consider content in relation to form. This is to say, there have been significant difficulties in conceptualising broader material reproduction or economics with regard to subjective experiences of culture. In Marxian terms, there has been an inability to consider the economic base in relation to the cultural superstructure and vice versa. As such, questions of class, income and value, as they relate to the subject and their lived experience, have either been considered from a cultural point of view (Bourdieu 1979/2010) or neglected completely, as is evident in the literature discussing neoliberal education and its antagonism to play in Chapter Two. It is precisely such issues that underpin Fraser's assertion that 'we are living through a capitalist crisis of great severity without a critical theory that could adequately clarify it' (in Deutscher et al. 2017, p.142).

It has been an inability to consider content in relation to form that has prevented the cultural turn from reflexively situating itself within the historical moments it has occupied. The inability to reflexively grasp itself has produced significant criticism of the cultural turn as an ineffective and ideological theory of neoliberal capitalism. This has included criticism of Foucault's 'complex' relationship to neoliberalism (Dean in Cahill et al. 2018, pp.151-185), Žižek arguing 'Deleuze (is) the ideologist of late capitalism' (in Holloway 2009, p.66) and Jefferies describing postmodernism as neoliberalism's 'cultural handmaiden' (2021, p.288). This is not to dismiss the many important contributions of cultural turn research; rather, it is to highlight the issue of reflexivity which an Open Marxism-based immanent critique of economic categories places at the centre of its analysis. Such reflexivity asks for humility by revealing that neutrality is impossible in the context of the necessity to produce economic value through antagonistic class relations. An Open Marxism-based immanent critique of economic categories reveals the depth and extent to which we are all implicated as historical subjects, as it suggests the contradictions and ideological notions that constitute the society we are part of do not exist separately from us, they are variously and inescapably reproduced by us, often despite our better intentions.

4.3 Research Questions

The following research questions were developed in relation to neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play as described in Chapter Two and the form of enquiry deemed necessary to investigate the antagonism as an Open Marxism-based, practically reflexive, immanent critique, as has been described in Chapters Three and Four.

1. Why is neoliberal education in English primary schooling antagonistic to pupil play?

    i) What is the relationship between economisation and neoliberal educational practice?
    ii) What is the relationship between neoliberal education and class reproduction?

The central research question (1) was developed with reference to the lack of an adequate explanation of the contradiction discussed in Chapter Two: if neoliberal education is singularly focused on raising educational productivity, and if play facilitates the development of children's productive capacities, why is neoliberal primary education in England antagonistic to play?

The first sub-question (i) was developed with reference to question 1 and the Open Marxism-based approach deemed necessary to facilitate the study, in which neoliberal education's economisation is considered in relation to labour productivity, the influence of economic categories and potential value production. By considering the relationship between economisation and practice, this question seeks to contribute to a materialist understanding of neoliberal primary education in England, beyond the wealth of cultural perspectives that dominate contemporary literature. The Open Marxism foundation made it possible to consider content in relation to form by examining the relationship between economisation and neoliberal education as a form of productive activity. The second sub-question (ii) was developed from the knowledge that neoliberal education's economisation is focused on the reproduction of the category of labour, and, through Open Marxism, that the category of labour presupposes social class relations. Following the first sub-question (i) and its emphasis on economisation, the second sub-question (ii) aims to develop the materialist analysis by considering how

neoliberal education's economisation is related to social class reproduction. An original class analysis was developed and applied to the empirical observations of primary schooling in England, in which the necessity for teachers and pupils to reproduce the category of labour was considered in relation to engagement in neoliberal primary education and pupils' desire to play.

4.4 Research Design

The research design has much in common with 'Action Research' and its concern for 'practical issues and human flourishing' (Bradbury 2015, p.7). The nature of neoliberal education, its economism and antagonism to play, requires, as I've argued, an Open Marxism based immanent critique of economic categories to examine it. Such a study, as far as I'm aware, has not been developed from within the action research tradition. Eikeland acknowledged this limitation when he noted:

> 'Action research might strengthen itself by extending its subterranean roots into important concrete and ongoing developments… amounting to immanent critique… which start from inside practice and proceeds through practice, exposing insufficiencies, blind spots, inner tensions and contradictions' (in Bradbury, 2015, p.388).

As such, the research design that has been developed, can be considered in Eikeland's terms, something of a 'reinvention' (in Bradbury 2015, p.388) of action research, as he acknowledges research solutions reminiscent of action research that have necessarily developed outside the tradition.

Pitts (2017) has produced the only empirical Open Marxism-based immanent critique I'm aware of. The research design emulates Pitts inasmuch as it:

> 'Sets out to explore what lies behind the objective economic forms through which we live and subsist and the practical and material world that sustains them. In so doing, it rediscovers the vanishing subject that disappears in economic objectivity' (2017, p.58).

Pitts's work examines the tensions and contradictions that employees experience within the creative industries, drawing on data gathered from interviews. Pitts's approach was

considered unsuitable for two reasons. I don't believe it would have been appropriate to directly translate value theory into education as it is used to consider generalised commodity production due to the normative commitment to the welfare and development of the child that is central to English primary schooling. This commitment exists somewhat beyond purely economic concerns and is formally acknowledged within UK safeguarding legislation that aims to prevent 'the impairment of children's mental and physical health and development' (UK Government 2023a, p.8).

Consideration of this commitment to child development is important because, as an immanent critique, this thesis is looking to judge neoliberal primary education in England in relation to its own standards. Contrary to Pitts, therefore, there was a requirement to consider education somewhat differently from commodity production in general, with these concerns leading to the development of EVP. Secondly, Pitts empirically explored contradictory experiences through a series of interviews with workers. Although participants' words are important, this thesis is looking to consider the form and content of neoliberal education as it is practically expressed to develop an understanding of neoliberal primary education as a type of productive activity.

As such, an original design for empirical classroom research was developed. Neoliberal education's economisation of primary education was viewed in terms of the expansion of potential value production into education aimed at increasing potential labour productivity and reproducing a potential workforce, in the context of primary schools simultaneously having a normative commitment to formal equality and child development. The research has not been designed to necessarily confirm or deny trends about the amount of time pupils spend playing in English primary schooling. It is acknowledged that there are discrepancies in play access across different year groups, from the EYFS-based Nursery and Reception years, which foreground play (UK Government 2014, p.17), to the national curriculum of KS1 and KS2 that lacks any statutory guidance for play engagement (Crowther 2021). That neoliberal education in England is antagonistic to play is accepted, as evidenced by the research highlighted within sections 2.2.4 and 2.2.5 of Chapter Two. In the first instance, the thesis considers the contradiction between productivity and play in neoliberal primary education by examining the form and content of each as distinct types of productive activity.

To consider neoliberal education and play as types of practical activity, empirical data were gathered that sought to examine what occurred in an English primary school, how it occurred, and why it occurred as it did. In considering the questions that arise from neoliberal education's contradictory antagonism to play, the empirical data provided the foundation from which the thesis sought to address 'the critical question of why this content takes this form?' (Bonefeld et al. 1995, p.185) with respect to practical activity.

As discussed in Chapter One, an examination of the content and form of practice is key to the research design as the thesis looks to consider the contradiction between neoliberal primary education and play. It's been argued that a cultural approach focused solely on empirical content is inadequate to address questions about neoliberal education's productivity, its economisation, economic categories, and how these relate to questions of form and their impact on play. It's also been argued that a traditional Marxian focus on untethered economic forms, which foregrounds class through an emphasis on unjust distribution, although acknowledging the economic, is not an appropriate way to consider questions about both the form and content of contemporary educational practice.

Open Marxism understands Marxian analysis as an immanent critique of capitalist modernity and not as a general theory of human society. It is as a practically reflexive immanent critique that neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England has been examined. The empirical observations and interviews that yielded the eighteen findings in Chapter Five provide a concrete foundation for the practically reflexive analysis in Chapter Six. The findings do not represent the end of the research, so to speak. They inform a dialectical analysis of the form and content of teacher-led practice and play, allowing each to be considered as a type of productive activity within part one of Chapter Six. The analysis of form and content is developed using the educational value production model in part two of Chapter Six. As neoliberal primary education in England is a standardised process that most primary schools must engage in, EVP can be understood as a generalised framework for conceptualising the practice that occurs within it.

EVP highlights the twofold nature of practice, as teachers work with pupils to produce abstract, commensurable, universal figures of attainment of progress, what has been described as 'datafication' (Williamson 2017). The practice is dualistic as abstract

levels of attainment and progress are simultaneously produced through idiosyncratic, concrete practice. The transformation of the concrete to the abstract within the classroom occurs within the finite time of the school day and a linear notion of progress. This is done to ensure commensurability, facilitating the reproduction of English neoliberal primary education as a quasi-market.

EVP allows neoliberal primary education in England to be considered as a totality that accounts for both its positive and negative dimensions. The abstract, commensurable measures of attainment and progress are the readily acknowledged, 'legitimate', 'positive' aspects of neoliberal primary education in England. EVP also reveals the particularity that's not readily acknowledged, the negative, concrete, practical engagement and social relations, which are the means that produce the abstract measures. The influence of negative dialectics within Open Marxism allows a negative critique to proceed, as EVP de-fetishises neoliberal primary education to reveal the contradictions, tensions and antagonisms, the human content and experiences of struggle, that its focus on objective measures of attainment and progress both produces and denies.

The practically reflexive immanent critique proceeds in part 3 of Chapter Six as engagement in EVP and play are considered with respect to the material, class inequalities that define English primary school pupils. As a practically reflexive, immanent critique, the work finds the contradictory tension *within* EVP, between the formal equality of EVP's abstract commensurability and the material inequalities that constitute English school pupils; inequalities which presuppose neoliberal education's aim of reproducing an adequately productive workforce. This enables ideological debates to be reconsidered that have criticised the decontextualisation which has characterised the measurement within English neoliberal education (Leckie and Goldstein 2017, Goldstein and Leckie 2018).

In part four of Chapter Six, Open Marxism's notion of class as the personification of economic categories is employed to produce a shift in perspective. This occurs by considering the teachers' class need to successfully personify the category of labour, as well as the pupils' class need to potentially personify the category. As EVP acknowledges both the subject and object of neoliberal primary education within a specific type of practice, a class analysis is produced that goes beyond either a

decontextualised cultural focus on subjective behaviour or an examination of abstract proxies in relation to material inequality. The analysis allows social class to be considered in the process of it being constituted, within and through EVP engagement. It is from here that neoliberal education's economisation can be regarded in relation to the teacher's class need to successfully personify the category of labour, the pupils' future need to personify the category of labour, the economy's need for an adequately productive workforce, and, as such, neoliberal primary education's role within capitalist reproduction. It is by locating the content and form of observed practice within the necessity to reproduce the category of labour, and so the need to reproduce class relations for capitalist reproduction, that neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play is considered within part five of Chapter Six.

4.5 Access & Sampling

Play engagement in primary education is understood to be diminishing in those countries that have most eagerly adopted the neoliberal model (Gray 2009, United Nations 2013, Gray 2015, Lewis 2017, Doyle and Sahlberg 2019, Clark 2022). The choice of England and an English primary school as a site for the empirical research was therefore based on the recognition that 'neoliberal education reforms have… gone furthest in England' (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021, p.37). The fieldwork took place in one primary school in Northern England during the 2021 Summer term. Gaining classroom access was challenging because the research began during the COVID-19 pandemic that involved a national lockdown and the mandatory closure of all educational institutions in the UK. Schools and colleges in England were closed from 20th March 2020, with a staggered reopening beginning with primary schools, commencing on 1st June 2020, with all schools and colleges reopening from September 2020. When reopened, primary school timetables in England were disrupted as mandatory measures were implemented to enable testing and social distancing to reduce COVID infection during the pre-vaccine period. Class year groups in primary schools were prevented from mixing. If at least one member of the class tested positive, all pupils and staff in the class were required to isolate for 10 days. An exponential rise in COVID cases occurred during the 2020 Autumn term, which led to an increase in fatalities and a second national shutdown at the start of 2021, with all English primary schools forced to close from January 4th until 8th March 2021.

On the 8th September 2020, I contacted eighteen primary schools via email to discuss gaining classroom access to conduct the research. Only one school expressed a willingness to participate. An initial start date was agreed for 6th November 2020, but as COVID infections rose during October, the school stated they had had to repeatedly close due to infections, and so the start date would have to be postponed. A revised date of the 15th of January 2021 was agreed, but it was delayed again because all English schools were forced to close as another national lockdown began on 6th January. Following the March 8th reopening of all primary schools in England and the implementation of a national vaccine program, fieldwork finally commenced on the 22nd April 2021. Taking these issues into account, the project was highly fortunate to have gained classroom access during this unique and challenging period.

The school in which the fieldwork took place is situated in the North of England, within a 'deprived' area in the bottom three per cent of the most deprived areas of England (UK Government 2019). The school is a larger-than-average primary school with 500 pupils on the school roll. It is mixed gender, with a larger-than-average proportion of its pupils from 'minority ethnic groups', the largest of these being 'Black' or 'Black British-African', followed by 'White British'. The proportion of pupils considered 'disadvantaged' is above the national average, and the proportion of pupils with a special educational need is above the national average. Previous Ofsted reports graded the school 'Satisfactory' in 2006, 'Good' in 2009, 'Good' in 2014 and 'Outstanding' in 2019.

Five differing class year-groups were selected for data collection (see Table 1). Generally, year-groups were selected based on two key considerations: the year-group's positioning within the current Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework (EYFS) and national curriculum and the degree to which play was integrated into the group's day. The five year-groups chosen for observation were Nursery, Reception, Year Two, Year Four and Year Six (see Table 1). Reception was observed twice as teachers noted that the initial observation (23/4/21) had involved a disproportionate amount of 'choosing' (play) and so they (kindly) invited me back to observe a more proportionate day on 27/05/21.

Table 1: Fieldwork Details

Date	Year-Group	Data Collection Method	Duration
23/04/2021	Reception One	Classroom Observation	300 Minutes
30/04/2021	Year Two	Classroom Observation	300 minutes
07/05/2021	Year Four	Classroom Observation	318 Minutes
14/05/2021	Year Six	Classroom Observation	316 Minutes
21/05/2021	Nursery	Classroom Observation	300 minutes
27/05/2021	Reception Two	Classroom Observation	360 Minutes
		Total Classroom Observation	**1894 Minutes**
11/06/2021	Year Six	Semi-Structured Interview	32 minutes
17/06/2021	Reception	Semi-Structured Interview	45 minutes
25/06/2021	Year Two	Semi-Structured Interview	53 minutes
02/07/2021	Nursery	Semi-Structured Interview	36 minutes
02/07/2021	Year Four	Semi-Structured Interview	55 minutes
		Total Interview	**221 minutes**

More specifically, the Reception and Year Six groups were selected because of the mandatory national tests pupils take in these years: the Reception Baseline Assessment and SATS, respectively. Observations looked to consider the potential impact of the tests on classroom pedagogy and play engagement. Nursery and Reception were chosen for the prominence of play in their respective curricula. Although play engagement occurred across all year-groups, the prominence of play within the Nursery and Reception EYFS-based curricula provided an opportunity to collect a wealth of play data. Years Two and Four were selected to examine how the shift from the EYFS, play-based curriculum to the standardised, formal, teacher-led, national curriculum manifested itself.

As discussed in Chapter Two, there are discrepancies across year groups in the current English primary curricula regarding statutory play access. The Nursery and Reception years are based on the EYFS framework (UK Government 2014), which emphasises the importance of play and playful pedagogy for child development. KS1 and KS2 are based on the national curriculum, which provides no statutory guidance for play engagement. The work seeks to understand, in the first instance, why, if neoliberal education has refocused education around raising educational productivity and if play is the central way a child's productive capacities are supported, is neoliberal primary education in England antagonistic to pupil play? The work is not necessarily looking to confirm or deny trends about time committed to play within English primary schooling. It seeks to consider any tensions between neoliberal education and play as forms of productive activity. Discrepancies in access to play across year groups, although vital in

themselves and are factored into the analysis, are not the central means through which questions about neoliberal practice and play is considered.

4.6 Data Collection

Most of the empirical data collected were qualitative, but some quantitative data was also collected. Two data collection methods were employed. Observations of the six class year-groups, of both formal, teacher-led sessions and informal play sessions, and a series of semi-structured interviews with the teachers of the class year-groups that had been observed. 1894 minutes of classroom observation and 221 minutes of semi-structured interviews were conducted (see Table 1).

4.6.1 Observations

The six classroom observations sought to gather empirical data on the form and content of practice in teacher-led and free-play sessions. In the first instance, the thesis is looking to consider neoliberal primary education in England and free play as respective types of productive activity. It is from an analysis of the content and form of practice observed in teacher-led and free play sessions, along with a consideration of how these practices related to each other, that the work proceeds as a practically reflexive immanent critique. Consideration of practice in teacher-led and free-play sessions provides a concrete foundation for the practically reflexive analysis that is developed in Chapter Six.

Data were collected using handwritten notes, pen, paper, and a notebook (see Appendix 8.2 & 8.3). 1095 minutes of teacher-led sessions were observed in the only place they occurred: dedicated classrooms, where teachers led year groups to produce standards and progress as they related to the demands of the EYFS and the English national curriculum. Teacher-led sessions constituted the central part of the school day and formed the core of a pupil's formal educational experience. 799 minutes of free-play were observed, mainly outside of teacher-led sessions, outside of classrooms, during three daily playtimes facilitated by Teaching Assistants (TAs) – 'morning break', 'lunch' and 'afternoon break'. Some play engagement was observed in the classroom during the daily 'choosing' sessions in Nursery and Reception, as well as during the weekly 'Golden-Time' sessions experienced by all year groups. Golden Time was a

school-wide policy that encouraged pupil engagement in teacher-led sessions during the week. For about one hour each Friday afternoon, pupils were allowed to engage in free play based on how well they had worked that week. Golden Time represented transactional access to free play that pupils acquired at the teacher's discretion.

To observe in the classroom, parental consent was required and granted for each year group (see section 4.8). In considering the form and content of practice, observations examined what occurred within the school, the classroom, and the different year groups. What practice occurred within both teacher-led and play sessions; what was done during the school day, most obviously, what educational content did pupils engage in? What type of play did pupils engage in? What instructions were given, and how did pupils respond? What time was allotted for teacher-led practice and play? What occurred within the intersections between teacher-led sessions and playtimes? What tensions were evident between the need to produce standards and the pupils' need for play? What impact did standardised practice have on pupils and their access to play?

To consider questions of form, observations also looked to record how things occurred. How was practice engaged in within the school? How much time was spent on specific activities? How did teachers manage to engage pupils with class work? How did pupils engage with their work? How did teachers and pupils interact with each other? How did pupils engage in play? How did play engagement differ between year groups? How was play and standardised practice managed within class year-groups, and how did this change between the groups? How did engagement in standardised practice differ from play engagement? All observations were recorded with reference to time; how long activities were engaged in and at what time they occurred during the school day (see Appendix 8.2 & 8.3). Through Open Marxism, teachers were acknowledged to personify the category of labour within the classroom, and, as such, observations looked to consider how these 'people' variously navigated their role as teacher and how this impacted play. This tension within the category of labour raised some ethical concerns that are addressed in section 4.8.

4.6.2 Interviews

Five semi-structured interviews were arranged with the teachers whose classes had been observed (see Table 1). A list of questions was prepared to provide some structure for

interviews (see Appendix 8.4). I wanted to use the semi-structured nature of the interview to encourage a free-flowing conversation that allowed teachers to feel comfortable discussing any tensions they may have experienced, following Hawkey and Ussher, who note that semi-structured interviews give voice to participants (in Flick 2022, p.185). Teachers represented the most obvious involvement of economic categories within the primary education process, as, following Open Marxism, they are workers who must 'successfully' personify the category of labour by producing standards and progress in line with the EYFS and English national curriculum. The interviews provided an opportunity to probe teachers as the managers of the classroom, in which the necessity to successfully personify the category of labour variously affected how they managed pupil play.

Acknowledging that teachers were workers who are compelled to successfully personify the category of labour raised several issues that the semi-structured nature of the interviews sought to address. Due to the high-stakes, competitive nature of neoliberal education, upon which a teacher's livelihood depends, there was a risk that interviewees would not engage openly and authentically when answering questions due to professional considerations, what Pitts has described as 'front stage professionalism' (2017, p.61). There was a risk that some teachers might have felt providing critical responses, against-and-beyond the category of labour, could be professionally detrimental because their role, in the category of labour, was a means of life that produced an incentive to 'stick to the script'.

As the sole interviewer, I looked to use the semi-structured nature of the interview to produce and reaffirm a degree of trust. I stated before each interview began that any responses would be anonymised. Additionally, given the 'unbridled individualism' (Cameron and Moss 2020, p.183) acknowledged to be central to neoliberal education, I emphasised that the research was not seeking to find answers to the issue of declining play amongst 'bad teachers'. Within interviews, I aimed to convey a sense of 'we' and 'us' by stressing the research sought to understand a common problem. In so doing, I aimed to de-individualise and contextualise the interview, discussing issues in a way that provided a foundation for participants to contextualise themselves and feel comfortable engaging authentically and reflexively. The approach was dialectical in that interviews aimed to explore the tensions between teachers as 'people' with their

own views, perspectives, and needs, and these same 'people' being workers who needed to engage in certain practices to sustain their quality of life.

4.7 Data Analysis

4.7.1 Observations

Data collected in handwritten notes were typed into a digital format and coded when observations were complete. An analysis of the empirically observed practice informs the core of the thesis, from which a negative critique of neoliberal primary education in England is produced. Data that was gathered from interviews supported the analysis of observed practice. This emphasis on practice was chosen because the thesis is looking to consider the form and content of neoliberal education and play as types of productive activity to understand the contradiction highlighted in Chapter Two. It is through an analysis of practice that the thesis proceeds as a practically reflexive immanent critique, as observed practice is dialectically and negatively considered in relation to the positive, abstract figures of attainment and progress that define neoliberal primary education in England. Informed by Adorno's 'Negative Dialectics', the Open Marxism-based analysis seeks to 'rediscover the vanishing subject that disappears' (Pitts 2017, p.58) within neoliberal primary education's focus on abstract, objective measures of educational attainment and progress.

Table 2: Categories of Observed Content

Categories Produced from Time Engaged in Particular Content	
Categories	**Description**
Teacher-led literacy	Pupil engagement in literacy-based content directed by teacher
Teacher-led numeracy	Pupil engagement in numeracy-based content directed by teacher.
Teacher-led other subjects	Pupil engagement in other content such as science or art, directed by the teacher
Teacher-led misc.	Engagement in miscellaneous content such as taking the register, packing away equipment
Golden time	Weekly golden time sessions
Free-play outdoors	Free play that occurred during 'morning break', 'lunch' and 'afternoon break'
Ability/behaviour	Pupils observed to have free play forfeited due to 'academic progress' or 'bad behaviour'

Seven categories were derived from the gathered data regarding the content that subjects engaged in during observations (see Table 2). Content was categorised with respect to the amount of time that practice was engaged in. Data were then produced from the seven categories as totals and percentages across all year-groups and within class year-groups. Within Reception 2, Year Two, Year Four, and Year Six observations, some pupils were observed to engage in more numeracy and literacy and less free-play than their peers, whilst some pupils were observed to have some of their playtime forfeited. This is illustrated in finding 16 (F.16).

I discovered the observed pupils were either behind with their work and progress or had engaged in 'bad behaviour'. Having play removed, either due to 'low progress' or 'bad behaviour', is a different issue in some respects, but both were related to pupil engagement in teacher-led sessions in the observed context. A significant aspect of the 'bad behaviour' that occurred during teacher-led sessions variously involved pupils disrupting, preventing and/or not adequately engaging in formal schoolwork. I therefore created the 'ability/behaviour' sub-group from data gathered from all year-group observations, besides Nursery and Reception 1 where no discrepancies were observed (see Table 5). The ability/behaviour sub-groups were produced from a calculation of the

average amount of time between 5-14 pupils engaged in extra numeracy and literacy and/or had play access removed. Most pupils in the ability/behaviour sub-groups were observed to engage in extra numeracy and literacy, resulting in a corresponding reduction in play access. A small number of pupils were observed to play less because they had engaged in 'bad behaviour', which resulted in part of their playtime being forfeited, while a few pupils sat across both categories. The ability/behaviour sub-group is an approximation of groups of individuals within each class; the exact number of individuals varied from one class to another. The group has been created to produce a generalised, abstract figure, from which its impact on play engagement is considered in Chapter Six, section 6.4.1.5.

Marxian value theory and key theoretical notions from Open Marxism were employed to consider the form and content of observed practice in a practically reflexive way to develop Educational Value Production (EVP). EVP is a conceptual model designed for this research that was developed immanently from Marxian value theory, the neoliberal education system in England and the collected empirical data. EVP transformed the observations of neoliberal primary education into a form of productive activity. As has been discussed, EVP was developed in relation to the contradiction this thesis seeks to explore, namely, the simultaneous commitment of English primary education to economic development *and* the development of the child. The EVP model allowed a practical analysis of neoliberal primary education and play to proceed in which they could be considered as respective forms of productive activity. EVP was then used within a practically reflexive theorisation, in which observed concrete practice in teacher-led and free-play sessions was considered in relation to the need to produce abstract educational value. Using the EVP model, an answer to sub-question i) was developed, in which neoliberal education's economisation, with its aim of reproducing the category of labour, was considered in relation to EVP's form and content.

As Open Marxism reveals the need to personify the category of labour is a matter of class; EVP engagement and any tensions it had with play could be theorised as a process of class reproduction. Most obviously, the teacher was a worker who struggled to successfully personify the category of labour to reproduce their role and quality of life by engaging in EVP. A pupil's familial relationship to economic categories and the material security this provided, along with an understanding that EVP engagement was

designed to facilitate the transformation of pupils into potential personifications of the category of labour, allowed consideration of pupil engagement in EVP as a process of class reproduction. A practical and relational class analysis proceeded around observed engagement in EVP, in which both the teacher and pupils' need to successfully (and potentially) personify the category of labour was variously dependent upon the degree to which engagement in EVP occurred and/or was 'successful'.

This permitted a theorisation of EVP engagement in terms of a contradictory process of class struggle, in which engagement in EVP could be considered with reference to the pupils' desire to play, against-and-beyond EVP. An answer for sub-question ii) was developed from this analysis: What is the relationship between neoliberal education and class reproduction? A practically reflexive, immanent critique then considered neoliberal primary education's economisation and its role in class reproduction in relation to the pupil's desire/need to play. These factors were considered in relation to neoliberal education's own notions and normative claims to provide an immanent critique and answer to research question 1: Why is neoliberal education in English primary schooling antagonistic to pupil play?

4.7.2 Interviews

Audio recordings of the five semi-structured interviews were created using an iPhone (see Table 1) and were later transcribed into a series of Microsoft Word documents, which were coded. Data collected from observations were used to produce a theorisation of observed practice and provided a concrete base from which interview analysis contributed. The interviews produced fine-grained data that explored tensions within observations as they related to teacher experience and their relationship to pupil play in the knowledge that the teachers' working-class condition meant it was necessary for them to successfully personify the category of labour.

Ball has described a 'splitting' (2003, p.221) that occurs among practitioners engaged in neoliberal education because 'two regimes of truth' (2003, pp.221-223) come into conflict. With an eye on this splitting, the notion that the lived experience of the working-class is contradictory, in-against-and-beyond, was used to consider teacher behaviour and their relationship to play. This facilitated a holistic analysis of teachers, that grounded them in mind and body, culture and economy, rather than through a

solely idealistic focus on ideas, truths, or narratives. This made it possible to consider how the teachers working-class condition meant it was at once necessary for them to successfully personify the category of labour by engaging *in* EVP, whilst the specificity of EVP, its form and content, variously put them at odds with a range of other practices, *against-and-beyond*, most obviously pupil play.

4.8 Ethical Issues

Classroom observations raised some ethical issues regarding pupil agency and familial approval that meant it was necessary to gain consent from pupils' parents/guardians. It was arranged with the school to send an email to all parents/guardians of children in classes that would be observed, providing them with an 'opting-out' option if it was desired (see Appendix 8.1). This was consistent with Lancaster University's ethics guidance (Lancaster University 2025). The email described the nature of the research which was exploring why play engagement was decreasing in English primary schools. It stated that all data, including the names of the school, pupils, and teachers, would be anonymised. The email noted that if a parent/guardian preferred their child to be exempt, if they responded to the email, this would be arranged. The school administration officer sent the email to over 150 parents/guardians, but no requests for pupil exemption from the study were received.

I had initially intended to be a 'neutral' observer in the classroom, to spend the time taking notes and, if possible, to avoid engaging with the class. Following the first Reception One interview, however, I realised this would not be possible as pupils were immediately curious about my presence and wanted to interact with me. As such, within observations, I variously engaged with pupils when they looked to engage with me. Engagement occurred primarily within free-play sessions and golden-time, with pupil engagement rarely occurring within teacher-led sessions due to their top-down nature. I believe my presence in free-play sessions, particularly within Reception and Nursery observations, changed the content of what occurred, as pupils variously engaged with me about different things. I don't believe the form of the engagement changed during free play sessions, however, as pupils engaged in playful, idiosyncratic ways, as described in section 5.2.2.

Following Open Marxism, teachers were understood to be working class in the sense that they were required to successfully personify the category of labour, in-against-and-beyond, to sustain a living. As such, it was necessary to ethically and reflexively navigate sensitivities around any tensions that arose when engaging with teachers during observations. This became quite explicit within the Reception One observation (F.5). During a free-play 'choosing' session, teacher Anne told me that teachers didn't usually engage with pupils whilst they played. I asked why this was, and Anne became defensive and gave several reasons why this didn't occur. Following the exchange, however, I noticed that Anne was spending quite a lot of time engaging with the pupils in play that afternoon. I suspected this could well have been due to neoliberal performativity culture, the individuation it produces, and teacher sensitivity to it, as the teachers' working-class position and their reliance on the category of labour made them vulnerable to 'perceived' criticism. As such, I positioned myself by reassuring teachers during classroom observations that I was not seeking to understand the antagonism to play by blaming individual teachers, but rather, I was developing an analysis of the context from which it emerges.

During interviews, several ethical issues were identified that the research sought to avoid and/or manage. Interviews looked to draw data from 'working-class' subjects considered to exist in-against-and-beyond the category of labour. This meant responses could be variously critical of the teacher's role and the system that teachers worked within. The top-down, high-stakes nature of neoliberal education is acknowledged to produce 'a strongly supervised macro-system' that 'aligns staff views' (Wrigley 2013, p.41) and 'distorts any moves towards authentic participation' (Wrigley 2013, p.40). This is to say, within an environment such as this, any critical responses provided by teachers could be perceived to be and/or could be potentially professionally harmful. To counter this, the school has been anonymised, all data produced within observations and interviews has been anonymised, pupils are anonymised, whilst the names of all participating teachers have been changed.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter introduced an Open Marxist immanent critique as an appropriate form of enquiry through which neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England has been considered. The chapter highlighted the foundations of an Open Marxism-

based immanent critique in the New Readings of Marx and explored their relationship to first- and second-order theory, whilst introducing the conceptual notions of practical reflexivity, determinate abstractions, totalisation, and ideology critique. Due to the limited empirical application of Open Marxism, these methodological and epistemological foundations have been developed and applied to produce an original research design to examine neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England. The need to understand the practical form and content of neoliberal primary education underpinned the development of an empirical, practically reflexive approach that could consider neoliberal education and play as particular forms of productive activity. Empirical data were collected from one primary school in the North of England during the 2021 Summer term through a series of observations and semi-structured interviews. The empirical data, the central tenets of neoliberal primary schooling in England and an Open Marxism reading of value theory allowed a practically reflexive theorisation to occur through which neoliberal education was transformed from a noun to a verb, EVP. EVP allowed consideration of neoliberal primary education in England as a totality, in which both its positive, abstract measures of attainment and progress could be considered with respect to its negative dimension, the concrete, idiosyncratic practice and social relations that produce such abstractions. An Open Marxism-based analysis proceeded in Chapter Six that was grounded in a practically reflexive, dialectical consideration of the form and content of the observed practice in Chapter Five. The analysis of EVP and play as forms of productive activity was considered in relation to economisation and the reproduction of the category of labour, to critically examine how neoliberal primary education's antagonism to pupil play aligns with its own normative assumptions. The chapter concluded by highlighting some ethical issues that arose. Chapter 5 continues with a presentation of the eighteen empirical findings.

Chapter 5: Empirical Findings

5.1 Introduction

Chapter Five presents eighteen empirical findings in two sections, part 1 & part 2 (see Table 3). In part 1, eleven findings were drawn from the empirical data that reveal aspects of the form and content of observed practice in teacher-led and free-play sessions. It consists of five findings from teacher-led and six from free-play sessions. In part 2, seven findings were drawn from the empirical data on how teacher-led practice and free-play were observed to relate to one another. Five observations highlight aspects of the relationship between teacher-led practice and play, whilst two reveal how the necessity to engage in teacher-led practice affected teachers' and pupils' ability to engage in a range of practices. The eighteen empirical findings do not represent the end of the research. As a practically reflexive immanent critique, the findings provide a negative, concrete basis for a dialectical theorisation of neoliberal primary education's positive focus on abstract commensurability and its relationship to play in Chapter Six.

Table 3: Eighteen Empirical Findings

Part 1: The Form and Content of Practice Observed in Teacher-Led and Free-Play Sessions.	
Teacher-Led Sessions	**Free-Play Sessions**
1.Practice was determined exogenously, in line with the demands of the standardised system.	6. Practice was determined according to the various endogenous needs/considerations of the child.
2. Pupils were most frequently observed engaging in English and Mathematics during teacher-led sessions. This occurred more frequently the higher the year group that was observed	7. Practice involved limited interaction with classroom teachers as free play sessions were largely coordinated by Teaching Assistants.
3. Practice was controlled by a, top-down, linear, teacher-led dynamic. The amount of teacher-led engagement rose the higher the year group observed.	8. The form of practice was social, complex and multi-directional.
4. Practice was engaged in individually and in silence. Individualised practice was observed more frequently the higher the year group observed.	9. Practice was often defined by a tendency towards immediate recognition and expression.
5. Practice was focused on the production of data. Pupils were acknowledged by the school mainly through the data they produced.	10. Practice was shaped by context.
	11. A natural curiosity was evident.
Part 2: Relationship of Teacher-Led Practice to Other Practice.	
Play	
12. Play behaviours were expressed less the higher the year group that was observed.	
13.The expression of play behaviours was illegitimate during teacher-led sessions.	
14. Time pressures were considered the biggest factor that prevented pupil play engagement.	
15. Pupils' desire to play was used to facilitate the attainment of standards and progress.	
16. Evidence of a social class dynamic in pupil access to play.	
Other Practices	
17. The pressure to produce standards and progress impacted teachers in a range of ways.	
18. The pressure to produce standards and progress impacted pupils in a range of ways.	

5.2 The Form and Content of Practice in Teacher-led and Free-Play Sessions

5.2.1 Teacher-Led Sessions

5.2.1.1 Finding 1 (F.1)

Practice was determined exogenously, in line with the demands of the standardised system.

All practice observed in teacher-led sessions, except for Year 6, was focused on the attainment of pre-determined standards as they related to the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework (EYFS) and the English national curriculum for Key Stage 1 (UK Government 2014) and Key Stage 2 (UK Government 2013). The Year Six group was the exception due to the cancellation of the 2021 SATS exam because of the COVID pandemic (Year Six observation). The SATS exam had been cancelled during 2020 and 2021 due to COVID, and it was by coincidence that the Year Six observation was arranged within the week the 2021 SATS exam would have taken place (10th-14th May). The Year Six teacher had organised for the class to engage in a relatively free watercolour painting session whilst music played, with the teacher stating the activity probably would not have occurred if the SATS exam had gone ahead, as pupils would most likely have been revising or taking the test (Year Six observation).

Since the introduction of the coalition government's (2010-2015) educational reforms, primary schools not under local authority control do not have to engage in the English national curriculum (Department for Education 2015). This means it is feasible for non-local authority-run schools to develop their own curriculum, but in practice, the need to take mandatory KS2 SATS tests means primary schools do not veer far from the national curriculum as its content is reflected in the tests (TES Magazine 2023). The majority of primary schools in England (58%) during 2022/23 (UK Government 2024a), including the school in which the fieldwork was conducted, were run by local authorities, which means they followed the English national curriculum. The EYFS is currently mandatory for all Ofsted-registered primary schools and early years providers in England.

That the curriculum and the broader accountability system were imposed from the outside was expressed by Year Six teacher Becky and Reception teacher Anne, as they described an external pressure that they felt overlooked their engagement in their work:

> Becky: I think there's a pressure on the schools, which means there's pressure on teachers… and because of that… every minute is filled. (Year Six interview)

> Anne: There's pressure on our leadership teams… because the end of year targets that reception children must meet... And the way you're seen to do that is through the… formal side… a lot of teacher time…so… there's pressure from every angle. (Reception interview)

Year Four teacher Ellen suggested the pressure imposed on schools was hierarchical:

> Ellen: I just think everything filters down from Ofsted, they put the pressure on… all Heads feel it, Heads feel pressure and that is filtered down through the school. (Year Four interview)

Nursery teacher Ola suggested the external pressure impacted play:

> Ola: I think there is less play in schools… because of the government and the expectations they've put on us for years… it is the pressure that leads us to… get the children to certain standards. (Nursey interview)

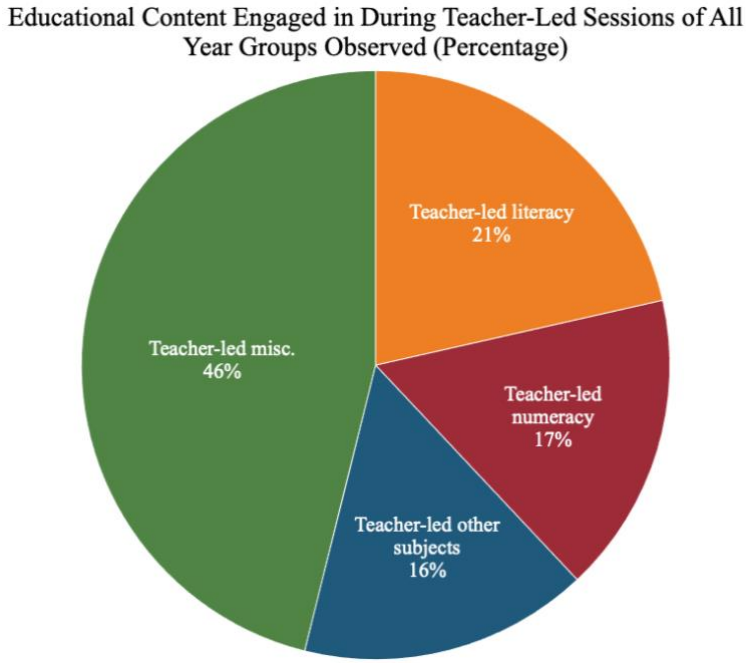
5.2.1.2 Finding 2 (F.2)

Pupils were observed most frequently engaging in English and Mathematics during teacher-led sessions. This was observed more frequently the higher the year group that was observed.

During the 1095 minutes of observed teacher-led sessions across six observations in five year-groups, English and Mathematics were the most common educational content pupils were observed engaging with, collectively accounting for 38% (416 minutes) of teacher-led sessions (see Table 4). English represented the most observed content at 21% (235 minutes), with Maths second at 17% (181 minutes). Other educational content (such as science and art) constituted 16% (174 minutes) of teacher-led sessions,

whilst miscellaneous tasks within teacher-led sessions (such as taking the register, packing away equipment, COVID related hygiene measures and eating lunch amongst other things) represented the largest amount of time not committed to educational content at 46% (505 minutes) of total observed teacher-led time. The strong focus on Maths and English can be understood in relation to their double weighting within the SATS exam that determines a primary school's progress measure (Department for Education 2022b).

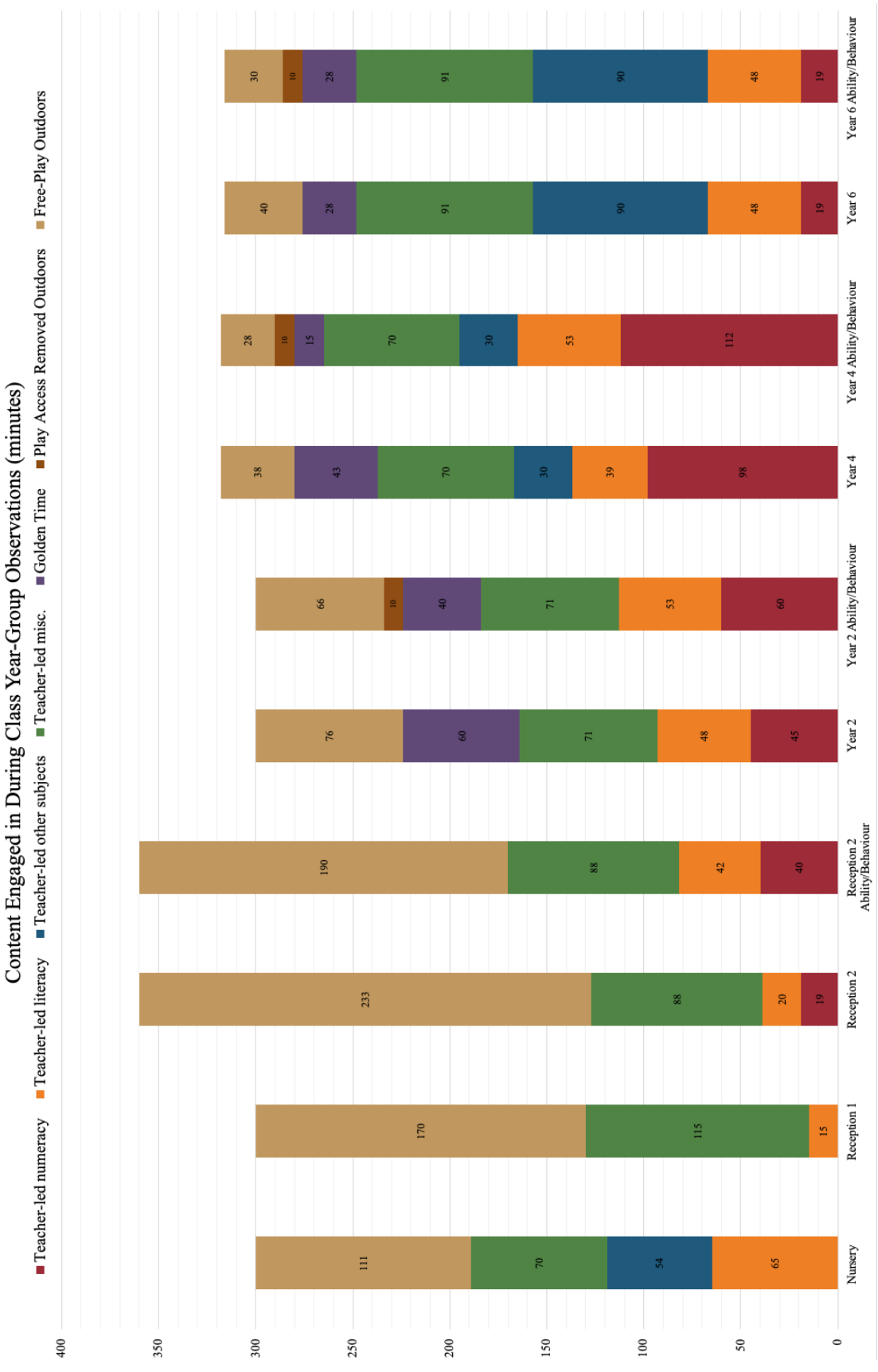
Table 4: Educational Content Observed in Teacher-Led Sessions (Percent)



The higher the year group that was observed, the more Maths and English pupils were observed to engage in, except in Year Six (see Table 5). During the 189 minutes of observed teacher-led practice within Nursery, no mathematics was observed, whilst literacy amounted to 33% (65 minutes) of the day's activity. During the 130 minutes of teacher-led practice in Reception One, English accounted for 12% (15 minutes) of the day and, like Nursery, no teacher-led maths was observed. During the 127 minutes of teacher-led practice in Reception Two, English amounted to 16% (20 minutes) and Maths 15% (19 minutes). During the Reception Two observation, there was a distinction in Maths and English engagement: the ability/behaviour sub-group engaged in almost double the amount of Maths and English as a proportion of the teacher-led session, with Maths engagement at 31% (40 minutes) and English at 33% (42 minutes).

During the 164-minute Year Two teacher-led observation, English accounted for 29% (48 minutes) and Maths 27% (45 minutes). Like Reception Two, there was a distinction within the group, as some pupils were considered behind in their progress or had been penalised for either not completing homework or engaging in ‘bad behaviour’ (Year Two Observation). The Year Two ability/behaviour sub-group consisted of 37% (60 minutes) Maths and 32% English (53 minutes). During the 237-minute Year Four teacher-led observation, Maths totalled 41% (98 minutes) with English at 16% (39 minutes). The Year Four ability/behaviour sub-group experienced 22% (53 minutes) English and 47% (112 minutes) Maths. The Year Six observations broke the positive trend, during the 248 minutes of teacher-led activity, English accounted for 20% (48 minutes) and Maths 12% (29 minutes).

Table 5: Total Observed Content (Minutes)



5.2.1.3 Finding 3 (F.3)

Practice was controlled by a top-down, teacher-led, linear dynamic. The amount of teacher-led engagement rose the higher the year group was observed.

Teacher-led sessions were highly controlled by a top-down, teacher-led dynamic. This wasn't immediately obvious, but it became clear, for instance, during the Year Two observation when the teacher left the room. Pupils immediately started engaging with one another who just a moment ago had been working individually and in silence (Year Two observation). A similar situation occurred during the Year Six observation when the teacher left the room, and the TA took charge. Pupils immediately began to engage with each other in a confrontational manner, aware that the TA was in the room and that their behaviour was 'inappropriate', yet they proceeded anyway. The moment the Year Six teacher, Becky, returned, engagement stopped as the teacher loudly and authoritatively told the class to 'Be quiet!' (Year Six observation).

The teacher-led dynamic had a linear quality that was unidirectional, with Year Two teacher Joan making this point when she remarked, 'I hardly ever let them just go and play, and learn through their play, it's more… I tell them what to do… I give them instructions' (Year Two observation). The top-down form of interaction was evident when a pupil complimented Joan's appearance, 'I think your dress looks nice, Miss' (Year Two observation), whilst the rest of the class sat in silence. This momentarily disrupted the unidirectional flow of Joan's relationship to the class and noticeably unbalanced her. She responded by engaging dialogically with the pupil, thanking him, and then returning the gesture with a complimentary remark about his shirt (Year Two observation).

TAs engaged most dialogically with pupils, especially those acknowledged as having special educational needs or a disability (SEND). That TAs engaged more dialogically with pupils was evident in their relationship to play as TAs oversaw and managed the majority of observed free-play sessions (see Table 7). I asked Joan:

> Paul: Who supervises pupil play during break and lunch times?
>
> Joan: The Teaching Assistant… she sees them play a lot more than me because she is with them outside all the time. (Year Two interview)

There was a positive trend in direct, teacher-led engagement relative to the year group observed, which was broken by the Nursery observation (see Table 5). Activities that were observed to occur in teacher-led sessions led to the creation of the following categories about educational content: 'Teacher-led Literacy', Teacher-led Numeracy', 'Teacher-led Other' and 'Teacher-Led Misc' (see Table 2). There were 189 minutes of teacher-led engagement during the Nursery observation, 130 in Reception One, 127 in Reception Two, 170 in Reception Two ability/behaviour, 164 in Year Two, 184 in Year Two ability/behaviour, 237 in Year Four, 265 in Year Four ability/behaviour and 248 in Year Six. That the Nursery observation was an exception to the trend could be explained by the pupils' age. They were so young that many could not move, walk, and/or talk confidently, and so the relatively high level of teacher engagement was related to the pupils' capacities and care needs.

5.2.1.4 Finding 4 (F.4)

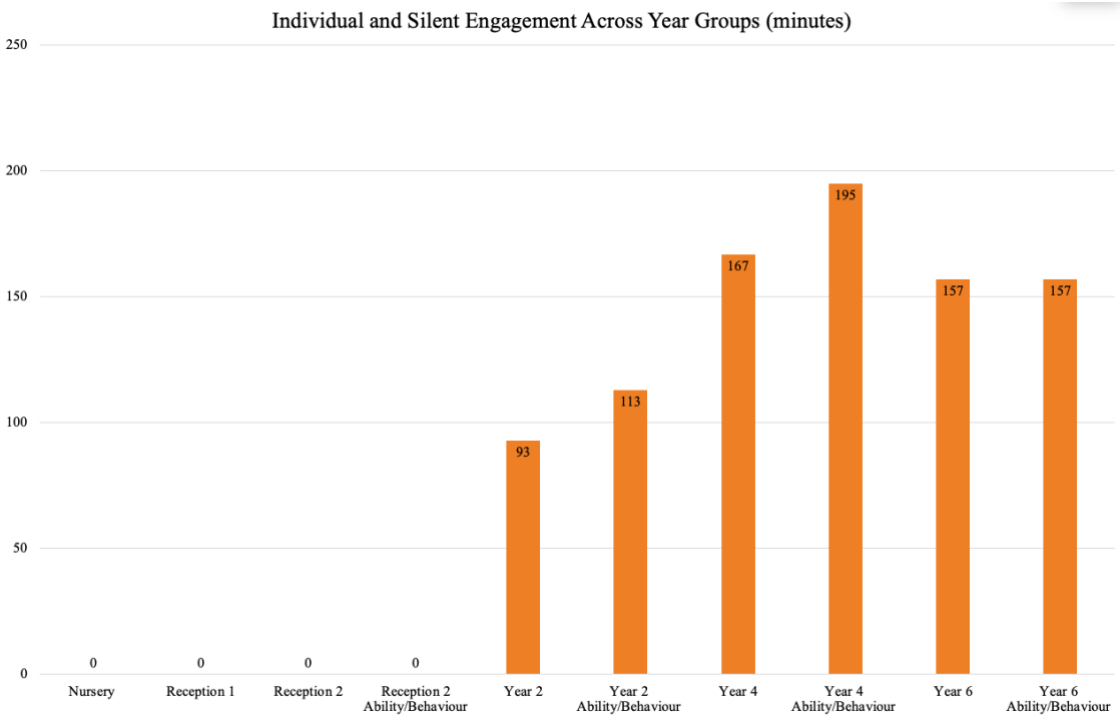
Practice was engaged in individually and in silence. Individualised practice was observed more frequently the higher the year group observed.

Intimately related to the top-down, teacher-led dynamic was the extent to which pupils engaged in activities during teacher-led sessions individually and in silence. The most explicit example occurred during the Year Two observation when individual pupils were asked to stand at the front of the class and recite times tables whilst their peers watched. This provoked anxiety amongst some pupils as a number refused to engage in the task. Those who did engage chose the "easy" five times table and stood, tense, their faces displaying nervous expressions, whilst some of their voices trembled as they spoke the numbers out loud (Year Two observation).

There was something of a positive trend of individualised and silent practice observed in the higher year groups, which was broken for Year Six (see Table 6). Although there were teacher-led sessions within the Nursery and Reception observations, there was no individualised, silent engagement, as pupils were allowed to engage more freely and openly with classmates, TAs, and teachers. The closest to individualised learning occurred during the Reception Two observation of literacy and numeracy 'catch-up' classes (Reception Two observation). Pupils were required to provide solutions and answers to problems, but they were allowed to interact freely with staff and other

pupils. During these sessions, several pupils became distracted by the choosing (play) session outside, pointing to their classmates and asking the teacher if they could join them. Within the Year Two group, 93 minutes of individualised silent learning were observed, with 113 minutes observed within the Year Two ability/behaviour sub-group. In Year Four, 167 minutes were observed, with 195 minutes in the ability/behaviour sub-group. In Year Six, 157 minutes were observed. The Year Six observation was dominated by a non-curriculum-based watercolour session that was pupil-led, with pupils free to paint what they liked whilst listening to music, but they engaged individually and in silence.

Table 6: Individual and Silent Engagement (minutes)



5.2.1.5 Finding 5 (F.5)

Practice was based around the production of data. Pupils were acknowledged by the school mainly through the data they produced.

Except for the Year Six observation, the evidencing of standards and progress through the production of data underpinned all the practice observed within teacher-led sessions. Furthermore, data that had already been produced variously determined how pupils were acknowledged during teacher-led sessions.

Becky expressed frustrations around data production as she discussed the unspoken rules she believed governed her practice:

> Becky: I think as teachers we've… got this idea in our heads that every bit of work has to be recorded… But nobody has told us it has to be like that… So, it's not being said by anybody, but now it's something that we're doing… If I do an ad-hoc whiteboard lesson… and the pupils just do their work on white boards… I often feel that's some of my best teaching and that I get the best out of the pupils in those lessons. But as far as they're concerned (the school), they've (pupils) not done a lesson because they've not written anything, but… they've made loads of progress. But then I'll feel guilty, or panicky, that I haven't done any work in a book, but nobody's told me I have to do this in the first place.
>
> Paul: If it's not recorded, it's not valued?
>
> Becky: Yes, not having the evidence. (Year 6 interview)

A tension between the need to produce data and play was made explicit as Nursery teacher Kathrine described the experience of one Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) who had failed her NQT year, which permanently prevented her from becoming a teacher in England:

> Kathrine: I worked in a previous school where they focused… on outdoor play… and they had someone who very much catered for that… but when it came to the moderation of the teacher… the moderator had to come back because they didn't have enough evidence… the moderator… looked through

> some books, and… said this child is expected to be at this (level), this (level), and this (level), and… asked "where is your evidence for it? It's just your judgement".
>
> Paul: So, she struggled to record what she was doing?
>
> Kathrine: That obviously was her downfall. (Nursery interview)

Collected data influenced where pupils were seated and who sat with whom, as pupils were moved around the classroom during the day, depending on the activity and their previously recorded ability with that activity. During the Year Four observation, Ellen had devised a variety of seating plans based on 'pupil ability' that were drawn from attainment data in certain subjects, including Red, Yellow, Blue, Green, and Orange groups. These groups were further differentiated around 'ability' as pupils engaged in 'Hot, Mild or Spicy' questions in relation to their difficulty (Year Four observation).

During the Reception One observation, teacher Bev noted it was necessary to collect data to evidence how pupils had attained standards with reference to the 'seven areas of learning' within the EYFS. Standards included, for instance, whether pupils were able to 'recognise numerals 1 to 5', 'count objects to 10', 'find the total number of items in two groups by counting them all' (Reception One observation).

Across the school, collected data was recorded in a pupil's 'Progress Tracker' that highlighted any 'progress made', with the data being used to facilitate any 'necessary intervention' (Reception One observation). The impact of teaching on pupil progress was regulated by the school's 'triangulation approach'. Senior leaders frequently evaluated teachers throughout the year, through lesson observations and 'book scrutiny', whilst 'pupil progress meetings' were held between teachers and senior leaders in which data was discussed and interventions devised (Reception One observation).

5.2.2 Free-play Sessions

5.2.2.1 Finding 6 (F.6)

Practice was determined according to the various endogenous/contextual needs of pupils.

During free-play sessions, pupils determined what practice they engaged in as play engagement emerged out of a complex, interdependent relationship between endogenous and/or contextualised factors. The relative freedom of the free-play sessions was reflected in the naming of the sessions as 'choosing sessions' in the Reception and Nursery observations. Anne stated that the use of the word 'play' was discouraged because it might undervalue the 'work' that occurred during the sessions (Reception interview).

Within the Nursery observation, I observed several pupils exploring coloured pens. Pupils sat around a table and touched the tips of the pens with their fingers whilst placing them on whiteboards using various pressures. From this, one pupil held two pens together and tried to write with them, which produced two different coloured lines. This resulted in excitement among his peers who immediately began copying the practice (Nursery observation).

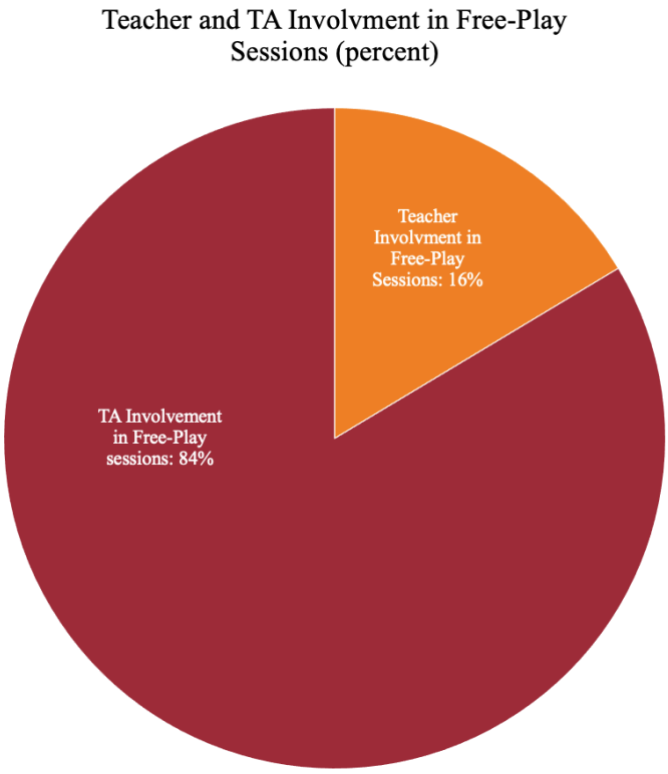
There were various examples of idiosyncratic behaviour during the free-play sessions as pupils engaged in complex, endogenously/contextually determined practice. Within the Year Six observation, I noticed football being played in different ways. In Year Four, pupils played a card game, whilst others played 'tag'. In Year Two, some pupils danced, whilst others drew with pens and crayons. Content varied, particularly in relation to which year group was observed; the practice was often physically playful, whilst at other times, and especially amongst older pupils, it involved the use of language through conversation, talking, and joking. There was a fluidity and complexity inherent to the endogenous, contextually defined nature of the practice.

5.2.2.2 Finding 7 (F.7)

Practice involved limited interaction with classroom teachers as free-play sessions were largely coordinated by Teaching Assistants.

The majority of observed free-play sessions were managed by TAs in which pupil interaction with a teacher either did not occur or was significantly reduced. Class teachers varied in how they managed their own weekly Golden Time sessions across all year groups, but this happened with significant TA support. It was TAs who managed the majority of observed free-play. Out of a total of 799 minutes of observed free-play, teachers variously managed 16% or 131 minutes whilst TAs managed 84% or 668 minutes (see table 7).

Table 7: Teacher and TA Involvement in Play (Percent)



Within Reception observations one and two, the day mainly consisted of choosing sessions or free-play in which TAs managed pupils whilst teachers either worked with 'weaker' pupils who were not meeting standards or they engaged in planning activities (Reception observation one & two). During the Reception One observation, Anne stated that teachers didn't engage with pupils during choosing sessions. When I asked why,

she became defensive as she tried to explain that there wasn't time to engage with pupils. I suspect the defensiveness was tied to teacher sensitivity and performativity culture within neoliberal education. Notably, for the rest of the choosing session that afternoon, I observed Anne engaging with the pupils in play.

Joan described how:

> Joan: I hardly ever see them play, which is very strange, because a teacher is surrounded by children all the time. (Year Two interview)

I asked Anne why TAs managed the choosing sessions?

> Anne: That's because of where the value is… it's in 'formal' education… whereas TAs looking after children are… not less valuable by any means… (but) that's the thing that gets assessed… when we do our performance management, that's how people judge us as teachers. (Reception interview)

TA labour is valued less than a teacher's in a very real sense, through the terms and conditions of their employment and a lower rate of pay. Although there was politeness about how colleagues considered each other, level of pay is an 'objective' valuation of the practice a person engages in. That play engagement was facilitated by TAs whose time and labour were valued less than teachers' can be considered an implicit statement of the value of play.

5.2.2.3 Finding 8 (F.8)

The form of practice was social, complex, and multi-directional.

There was a sociality, complexity, and multidirectional form to the practice observed in free-play sessions that emerged out of a variety of unplanned possibilities. Some pupils engaged alone, but this was fluid and shifted in relation to the group's social dynamics. During the Reception One observation, two pupils were keen to show me some natural items they'd found, such as insects, leaves, stones, seeds etc. One student gave me some sticks and stones and noted, 'It's a present'. The engagement was social, fluid and highly contextual, as pupils interacted with a particular environment, with me, and other

pupils, in line with their own unique psychological impulses that imbued it with idiosyncratic meaning (Reception Two observation).

Within the Nursery class, I was observing play in the ‘construction area’ when pupils asked if I would build a tower with them. Although spontaneous, the practice quickly found a form as pupils began gathering foam bricks and placing them on top of the tower. Some pupils got bricks from the edge of the construction area, who passed them to the pupils who stood next to the tower, who stacked them on top. As the tower grew beyond the pupils' reach, they began passing me bricks so we could continue building. I placed the bricks on top of the tower, which created anticipation as it grew taller until it eventually collapsed, resulting in shrieks of excitement and requests to build another. The building was highly social and naturally found its own practical arrangement. It was, I believe, an impulse to engage playfully and freely that drove the practice, with any issues of ‘organisation’ following from this desire. Pupils found it fun, as was evidenced by their manner; they were smiling, engaged and seemingly happy, whilst there was a strong sense of anticipation as the height of the tower grew.

Such social, complex, and multi-directional engagement was evident across all free-play observations, for instance, within the chasing games and coordinated dancing in Year 2, the talking, joking and board games in Year 4 and the playground games in Year 6. The play engagement was genuinely complex; it was often humorous and continually expectant as it unfolded within the moment. Within this was a curiosity, as engagement facilitated learning and discovery. It was also imbued with social meaning as bonds were queried, produced and reproduced, evaluated and revaluated. The pupils’ attitude towards me was interesting because I was an adult who was not determining what they should engage in. Considering the teachers and TAs need to manage pupils, this form of engagement with an adult was, I believe, a novelty in school. I don’t think my presence changed the form of the interaction I observed, as it was abundant amongst the pupils I had little interaction with. However, my presence varied in its effect on the content as pupils engaged with me in complex, idiosyncratic, and multidirectional ways.

5.2.2.4 Finding 9 (F.9)

Practice was often defined by a tendency towards immediate recognition and expression.

Pupils were repeatedly observed to engage directly and immediately during free-play sessions, as they variously recognised aspects of one another in their interactions. During the Reception One observation, one pupil queried a graze on my hand, which I explained I'd acquired during a running accident. The explanation led to a flurry of questions from other pupils whilst it intrigued others who looked on, standing and/or sitting in the vicinity. Several of them started to examine their own cuts and grazes on arms, elbows, legs, knees, hands, showing them to their peers and me. The contextualised interaction could not strictly be considered play, but it was playful, as pupils variously, immediately, and freely expressed and recognised each other through shared experience and good humour.

During Golden Time in the Year Two observation, I became aware of a pupil I'd been told had 'special needs'. I sat next to him on the 'Lego Table' and the pupil immediately began to engage with me. He wanted to show me a car he'd built whilst he described why he'd made it the way he had. I suggested we could build something together, to which he enthusiastically agreed. He responded by saying, 'What about a Garage?' to which I agreed. We set to work building a Lego garage together, continuously discussing how it should look, as I followed the pupil's lead. When the garage was completed, the pupil was keen to show his work to his teacher, who praised him, and then he went around his classmates who examined and commented on his efforts.

5.2.2.5 Finding 10 (F.10)

Practice was shaped by context.

Practice observed during free-play sessions was variously a representation and expression of a wealth of complex needs shaped by context. For instance, the Nursery observation of pupils experimenting with pens was intrinsically related to the specific pupils involved; another group of pupils may not have experimented in the same way. The reasons for the experimentation were undoubtedly complex; they could be tied to a

pupil's past and current experiences and how these shaped the actions and patterns of their behaviour at that time. There was also a social dynamic in which a contextual interdependence produced and reproduced the observed behaviour. A full explanation of the reasons why this practice occurred in the way that it did is beyond the scope of this study. The central point is that practice in free-play sessions was heavily dependent upon an array of contextual factors, without which they would not have occurred, and which made them unrepeatable in the exact form that they were observed.

5.2.2.6 Finding 11 (F.11)

A natural curiosity was evident.

A natural curiosity was evident that, as with the other qualities highlighted in free-play sessions, cannot be understood singularly, as it was seamlessly interwoven with a range of other qualities that expressed themselves as complex, holistic patterns of interdependent behaviour. For instance, play behaviour cannot be discussed without consideration of a particular free, social, contextual, and temporal dynamic that was infused with complexity and multi-directionality. Despite the challenges of conceptualising such behaviour, I believe it is important to emphasise the curiosity that was observed in the free-play sessions in a discussion of the relationship between contemporary education and play.

An intense curiosity was evident across all class groups during free-play sessions, which played a central role in defining the form of the observed practice. Within the Year Six observation, pupils took a lot of pleasure from conversation with each other; they were interested and engaged as was evident by their body language and expressions (Year Six observation). During Year Two Golden Time, pupils were intensely involved in activities; some played games, others built, whilst others danced and looked around at their peers for a response and recognition (Year Two observation). The interdependent, complex, social and fluid nature of the engagement was intimately bound to a type of curiosity. There was a relaxed quality about the behaviour, and the curiosity could be understood to be organic in this sense; pupils displayed a 'natural', informal manner that was seamlessly bound to the context, which was variously expressed in relation to the idiosyncratic rhythms of a group of interdependent children freely engaging with one another.

5.3 Relationship Between Neoliberal Education, Play and Other Practice

Outside of an examination of the form and content of practice observed in teacher-led and free-play sessions, empirical data were collected that looked to examine the relationship between teacher-led practice, play, and other types of practice.

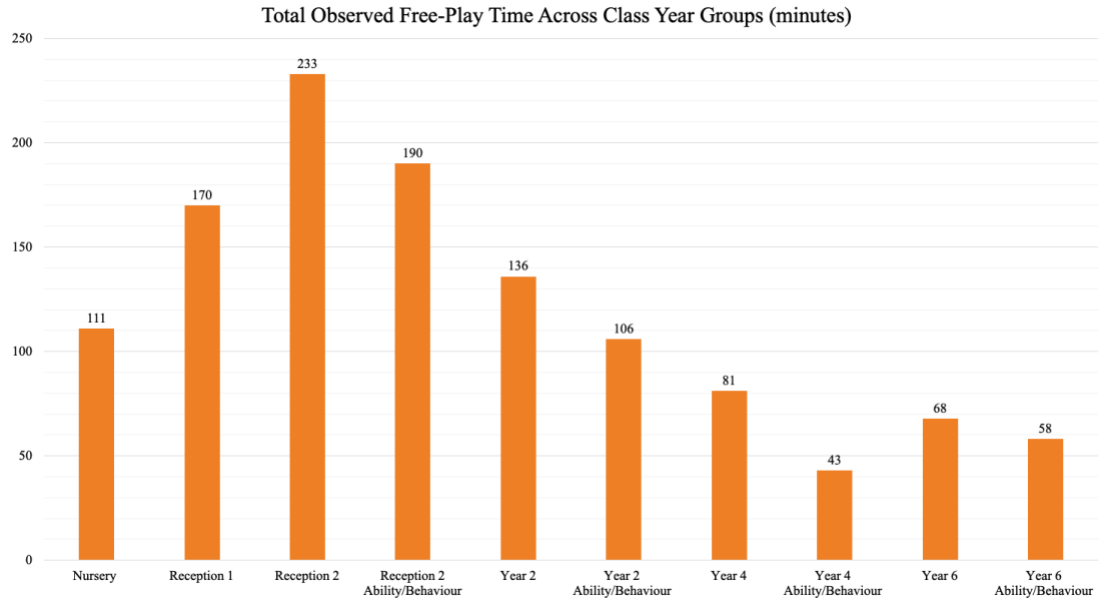
5.3.1 Play

5.3.1.1 Finding 12 (F.12)

Play behaviours were observed less the higher the year group that was observed.

There was a general trend that the higher the year group a pupil was in, the less free-play pupils in that year group were observed to engage in, with Nursery and the Year Four ability/behaviour sub-group being the exception to the trend (see Table 8). During the Nursery observation, free-play constituted 37% of the day at 111 minutes, Reception One 57% with 170 minutes, Reception Two 65% with 233 minutes, Reception Two ability/behaviour pupils at 53% with 190 minutes, Year Two pupils 45% at 136 minutes, and 35% at 106 minutes for the Year Two ability/behaviour sub-group. Within the Year Four observation, free-play accounted for 25% or 81 minutes of the school day, with the Year Four ability/behaviour sub-group at 14% or 43 minutes. The Year Six day consisted of 22% or 68 minutes of free-play, whilst the Year Six ability/behaviour sub-group consisted of 18% or 58 minutes of free-play.

Table 8: Observed Free-Play Across Class Year Groups (Minutes)



5.3.1.2 Finding 13 (F.13)

The expression of play behaviours was illegitimate during teacher-led sessions.

Play was strictly prohibited during all teacher-led sessions. The most explicit example occurred during the Year Two observation as one pupil was caught glancing at some 'Top-Trump' cards he had placed on his lap under the table. The teacher spotted the pupil and reacted angrily, shouting, 'You must not bring these into class! I have told you before!'. The teacher warned the class that they must not bring items such as these into class and play with them during class time. The pupil looked embarrassed whilst the point was publicly and clearly made that play was illegitimate during teacher-led sessions (Year Two observation).

The opposition to play in the classroom was expressed by Ellen when she discussed Golden Time:

> Ellen: I don't think many teachers like Golden Time… for me, those few difficult children, in their minds think, well I've done really well this week… I've managed to keep my Golden Time, now I can steal Jenga bricks or whatever... So, I think they get to Friday afternoon, and they think they don't have to behave. (Year Four interview)

Despite teacher opposition to play in the classroom, somewhat contradictorily, every teacher stated they believed play was valuable for the child and their development. Ola noted play was 'the most valuable thing that a child can do in terms of their development (Nursery interview), Anne stated 'our role, as far as I'm concerned, especially in the early years setting, is to facilitate learning through play and for it to be child centred' (Reception interview). Joan said, 'I think play is undervalued' (Year Two interview), Ellen reflected on how 'children learn a lot through play and discovering things for themselves… I think it's a shame that there's clearly that cut-off' (Year Four interview), whilst Becky noted 'especially in a school like this, play is invaluable' (Year Six interview).

5.3.1.3 Finding 14 (F.14)

Time pressures were considered the single biggest factor that prevented pupil play engagement.

During interviews, teachers repeatedly made the point that time pressures were the single biggest factor that obstructed play engagement:

> Paul: I'm looking for your own views really, on why you think play is being pushed out of schooling?
>
> Bev: I think time restraints and pressure on results, I think time constraints are caused by pressure on results, I think that's it. (Reception interview)
>
> Ola: In terms of play… everyone understands that in a primary school, in early years, that's how they learn. But then, there is this pressure to get the children to a certain level, to get them to do certain academic things that maybe they should be able to do. (Nursery interview)
>
> Ellen: So, I think… there's not enough time, really, for play. I forget how young the children are that I work with because they are always so focused on the academic side of what children need to achieve. (Year Four interview)
>
> Paul: Do you think play is undervalued?

> Anne: Definitely, and, I think… the assessment needs… detract away from the time we have with the children, we've got to hit certain goals with the children by certain times, and that is kinda' the focus. (Reception interview)

Notably, both Reception teachers stated that due to the large amount of free-play their pupils experienced, along with the pressure to produce standards and progress, they had been considering asking management if it was possible to use their Golden Time for extra maths:

> Bev: We're trying to put another maths group into Golden Time because we don't have time to fit it in anywhere else. (Reception Interview)

5.3.1.4 Finding 15 (F.15)

The pupils desire to play was used to facilitate the attainment of standards and progress.

Play access was the central way the school managed pupil engagement in teacher-led sessions, mainly through the threat of, and/or the removal of play access during daily play times or Golden Time. The most common issues of 'bad behaviour' in teacher-led sessions involved pupils either talking to each other, a perceived lack of engagement or failure to produce homework. If a teacher spotted such behaviour, it resulted in a 'telling off', with more persistent behaviour leading to the threat of and/or play access being removed.

During the Year Two observation at lunchtime, I noticed one pupil sitting on her own on the ground in the playground, with her back to everyone else. I asked the TA why the pupil was sitting like that? The TA responded, 'she'd misbehaved in class and was missing ten minutes of play today' (Year Two observation). During the afternoon break, I noticed three other pupils standing against the wall who had also had some of their play time removed (Year Two observation). The removal of play due to 'bad behaviour' was evident on a larger scale in the Year Four observation. As I went out into the Year Four play area, I noticed one pupil standing facing the school building wall. I asked him why he was standing there, and he replied, 'I've got 5 minutes' (Year Four Observation). I then noticed seven other pupils were standing facing the wall. I asked the TA why the pupils were standing there and she told me four pupils had five

minutes of play taken from them, whilst three pupils had 10 minutes due to bad behaviour in class (Year Four observation). During the Year Six observation, I noticed three pupils stood against the wall during play time. When I asked the TA, she said they had 10 minutes due to 'behaviour' (Year Six observation).

Golden Time

There was an across-school policy of providing pupils with an hour a week of free-play time in classrooms that was called Golden Time, which was used to incentivise pupils to work in teacher-led sessions during the week.

Ellen described Golden Time as:

> Ellen: A carrot that we dangle. (Year Four interview)

Becky noted Golden Time was:

> Becky: Almost a reward, they have to earn their Golden Time, they have to do their homework, they have to learn their spellings just to get their Golden Time. (Year Six interview).

Joan described how Golden Time was bound to managing and directing pupil behaviour:

> Joan: It's working as a reward system because it's very much tied into behaviour policy so the children throughout the week, if they don't achieve, or if they don't fit in your standard… they will lose their opportunity a week to play.
>
> Paul: Play is used to support standardised learning?
>
> Joan: It's a tool for the teachers to manage behaviour, very much so.
>
> Paul: When you say manage behaviour, would you say it's fair to say it is to direct behaviour?
>
> Joan: Yes, very much so… because that's sometimes the only way you can get children to be responsible for their actions when you say your choices are not

> impressing me, make sure you change that, or… you could lose your Golden Time. (Year Two interview)

During the Year Two and Year Four observations, several students had their Golden Time reduced due to misbehaviour and/or because they'd failed to make adequate progress in class, as these pupils engaged in extra English and Maths (Year 2, Year 4 observation). Ellen noted how she believed the transactional nature of Golden Time had undermined the intrinsic value of 'good behaviour' for some pupils:

> Ellen: It's funny actually, yesterday, when the class were told that… you'll be going home (to isolate because of COVID). And one boy who had ongoing behaviour issues… He actually said, it doesn't matter what I do now because I won't lose Golden Time because I'm going home. So, in his eyes, because Golden Time was… not happening this week… he was probably thinking I can do what I want… because it doesn't matter. (Year Four interview)

5.3.1.5 Finding 16 (F.16)

Evidence of a social class dynamic in pupil access to play.

There were discrepancies observed in access to free-play within four of the six year-groups that were related to issues of attainment and progress as well as issues of 'bad behaviour' (see Tables 5, 8 & 9). The majority of reduced play access corresponded to increased engagement in Maths and English (see F2 and Table 5). Within the Reception Two observation, a group of pupils were taken from the 'choosing session' so they could engage in extra numeracy/literacy as they were deemed 'furthest behind' in attaining relevant standards and progress. This group experienced 12% less free-play than their peers on the day the observation took place, as their school day consisted of 190 minutes or 53% free-play, whilst their peers' day consisted of 233 minutes or 65% free-play.

Table 9: Difference in Observed Play Within Ability/Behaviour Sub-Groups

Standard Play Time vs Ability/Behaviour Sub-Group						
	Standard Play Time		Ability/Behaviour Play Time		Difference in play engagement in minutes	Difference in play engagement in percentage
	Minutes	Percentage of total day	Minutes	Percentage of total day		
Reception 2	233	65%	190	53%	43	12%
Year Two	136	45%	106	35%	30	10%
Year Four	81	25%	43	14%	38	11%
Year Six	68	22%	58	18%	10	4%

During the Year Two observation, several pupils had their playtime reduced as punishment for behaviour, whilst other pupils had their Golden Time reduced for bad behaviour and were required to engage in extra numeracy and literacy. The pupils whose Golden Time was reduced had their access to free-play reduced by 10%, with access to play in the standard group being 136 minutes (45%) and 106 minutes (35%) in the ability/behaviour group. Within the Year Four observation, 'behaviour issues' led to the reduction of free-play during playtime for several pupils, whilst some pupils had their Golden Time reduced due to bad behaviour which involved extra numeracy and literacy. These pupils had their free-play reduced by 11% at 43 minutes (14%) compared to 81 minutes (25%) within the standard group. During the Year Six observation, behaviour issues led to a reduction in free-play for a few pupils who had 58 mins (18%) compared with 68 minutes (22%) in the standard group.

I was told that one pupil in the Reception group had extra numeracy and literacy because of significant problems with the English language as she and her family had recently arrived in England as refugees from Iran. Beyond this, I have no further information about the pupils observed to play less than their peers within the ability/behaviour sub-groups. The patterns of reduced access to play only became fully apparent when the data were analysed following the completion of the fieldwork.

I want to suggest that material security, and as such, a social class dynamic, was a factor that impacted the reduced play access within the ability/behaviour sub-groups. There is an acknowledged link between 'bad' pupil behaviour and the material conditions that pupils experience (Chowdry and McBride 2017). Data from the UK

Department for Education reveals a strong relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and 'bad behaviour' in English schools, as 'disadvantaged' pupils are 3.5 times more likely to be suspended and 4 times more likely to be permanently excluded in England relative to their non-disadvantaged peers (UK Government 2022).

As has been discussed in section 2.3.3.4. there is also a robust link between material security and the levels of educational attainment and progress that children produce in England (García and Weiss 2017, p.1, Anders et al. 2024, p.13). Ex-economist for the Department for Education, Paul Johnson, has noted how in England, 'right across the income distribution, the richer your parents, the better you do at school. This is not just a difference between the poor and the rest. Each step up the income distribution matters' (2023, p.191). A negative relationship between play access and material security within English primary schools is acknowledged within current literature as 'schools with a higher proportion of children in receipt of free school meals have shorter breaktimes' (Raising the Nation/The Play Commission 2025, p.85).

Although it is not possible to definitively support the claim from the empirical evidence alone, the work is a practically reflexive immanent critique that, in the first instance, aims to question the nature of truths through a dialectical theorisation of the empirical findings. As such, I believe it's possible and reasonable to suggest observed patterns of low attainment, low progress, and bad behaviour followed national trends, and so a class dynamic played some role within the reduced access to play that was observed within the ability/behaviour sub-groups.

5.3.2 Other Practices

5.3.2.1 Finding 17 (F.17)

The pressure to produce standards and progress impacted teachers in a range of ways.

Within interviews, some teachers expressed a feeling that they were being pulled in conflicting directions due to the necessity to produce standards and progress that variously clashed with their practical ability to satisfy their own idiosyncratic needs and desires. The school acknowledged these tensions through the 'well-being' corner in the staff room that had a selection of drinks and magazines:

> Anne: Not dissing the well-being corner… but having a cup of hot chocolate isn't going to help me reduce my workload. (Reception interview)

Kathrine described the anguish she experienced due to the teaching job:

> Kathrine: You are just always like, have I done enough… but then you're like, okay, how can we do more… I feel like it's getting them all to do what individually they need to do, but it is so stressful. I think you're constantly going home thinking about what you need to do… It's just constantly… constantly thinking about school. (Nursery interview)

Ellen noted she regularly experienced a sense of guilt due to the need to push pupils:

> Paul: I noticed you said you felt guilty… I'm just wondering how common is that?
>
> Ellen: For me, personally, it's quite a common feeling actually, but then, I suppose, it's the demographic of the school. (Year Four interview)

The demands of the job meant Joan felt the persona she expressed in school was different to the broader persona she expressed at home:

> Joan: At work, you have to uphold a certain version of yourself whereas in your own time, in your leisure time, you can be yourself. (Year Two interview)

The space and time the COVID lockdown gave Becky allowed her to engage more directly and intimately with her family:

> Becky: I was able to make my son a birthday cake (due to lockdown), there's no way I'll have the time to be doing those things now we're back. (Year Six interview)

The pressures of the teaching role and the impact it was having on family relations led Ellen to decide to work part-time:

> Ellen: Being part-time is my way of coping with that balance. When I was a full-time teacher, I would spend a lot of time… keeping on top of things and

> then a lot time over the weekend was planning. But now I've got two children, I want to be able to give them my full attention at the weekends. I have Monday to do my housework and things, so that's my way of dealing with those tensions. (Year Four Interview)

An ethical tension was expressed by Anne, who had considered falsifying data to satisfy the demands to produce adequate attainment and progress:

> Anne: I came in the other day and said 'Oh. my' there's only six from my group (up to standard), this isn't going to be okay, I need to speak to my head of year… but she wasn't saying it was okay. But then there's a horrible tight feeling in my chest, that there's nothing I can do other than fudging it… I'm not comfortable doing anything that's dishonest, and I don't think the school would want you to do that necessarily, they don't want you to do that explicitly, but then, at the same time, there's this pressure. (Reception interview)

Within interviews, teachers were asked what they believed a successful pupil looked like? Teachers responded by contradictorily providing an alternative notion beyond the official, quantitative measure they spent their working lives producing. For Ola, success was related to 'values, ethics and attitude' (Nursery interview). Kathrine noted 'on paper' she felt obliged to provide a certain answer, whilst 'as a person' she felt differently, finally noting 'as long as they're happy' (Nursery interview). Bev similarly stated, 'I like to see them being happy, and I want them to come into school' (Reception interview). Joan suggested success amounted to 'social skills and being able to have empathy for others… I think learning to know who you are, being able to respect yourself' (Year Two interview). I asked Joan whether she saw a tension between the need to produce standards and progress and her idea of success:

> Joan: You have to get a job to survive in this world… you have to get a job… I think your kinda' told from really early, that you have to do that because if you don't, you won't get the job you want, you can't go to university, you can't go study, you can't go to college or whatever you want to do. (Year Two interview)

Ellen provided two sets of answers, first as 'a person', then as 'a teacher'. Speaking 'as a person', she responded, 'for them to have tried their best, but 'speaking as a teacher,

on the whole, they are expected to make a certain amount of progress from the end of last year' (Year Four interview).

5.3.2.2 Finding 18 (F.18)

The pressure to produce standards and progress impacted pupils in a range of ways.

Teachers discussed how the need to engage in the high-pressure work of producing standards and progress prevented pupils from engaging in certain ways that often resulted in limited, sometimes negative experiences.

> Ola: I personally feel under quite a lot of pressure… and because of all the pressure… play gets knocked out. (Nursery interview)

Anne described how the focus on standards and progress impacted her ability to relate to the pupils:

> Anne: If the children can't feel comfortable with you and they can't trust you, you've lost them... So, if you've got that relationship with them, then it's invaluable… whereas we spend a lot of the time saying 'oh not now'. (Reception interview)

Joan suggested the standardised nature of schoolwork meant pupils with diverse learning needs were not being fully acknowledged:

> Joan: Some children just do not fit that system in my opinion… there are different ways of learning and I think what the curriculum does is treat children like everybody's the same because they all need to learn the same things, they all need to do it at a similar speed and if they don't, well, their levels are not matching up and the numbers of the school come down. (Year Two interview)

Ellen made a similar point when she described how the necessity to raise attainment and progress clashed with the needs of the pupils:

> Paul: Do you feel the need to attain standards clashes with the needs of the child?

Ellen: Yes, definitely.

Paul: Who do you think the measurement is for?... Is it for the benefit of the child?

Ellen: No, not at all. (Year 4 interview)

Ellen gave two examples where she believed child wellbeing had been negatively impacted due to pressures for attainment and progress:

Ellen: We had a girl this year that had a lot of time off… relatives in another country who the Mum has had to be with… and it was that Mum… who said my daughter is really worried… because we had all the test papers at the back of the classroom… she obviously twigged. And the Mum said "Is there anything you can do? She's worrying". I think that's terrible. (Year 4 interview)

Ellen: At my previous school, there was a lot of pressure to keep standards high and I was sometimes demanding things, certain standards of the children, and I felt really sorry for them. It wasn't because of my own belief… it was due to the pressure on me which was then passed down to the children. (Year 4 interview)

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has presented eighteen findings drawn from six classroom observations and five semi-structured interviews conducted in one primary school in Northern England during the summer term of 2021. The eleven findings in part one reveal aspects of the form and content of the practice observed within teacher-led and free-play sessions. Seven findings were presented in part two, highlighting aspects of the relationship between teacher-led practice and play and how the need to produce standards and progress variously impacted pupils, teachers, and the need to engage in other practices. As a practically reflexive immanent critique, the eighteen findings provide a concrete foundation for a dialectical theorisation of neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in Chapter Six.

Chapter 6: Practically Reflexive Analysis of Empirical Findings

Chapter Six will use the eighteen empirical findings within a practically reflexive analysis to produce an Open Marxism-based immanent critique that will offer an explanation as to why neoliberal education in England is antagonistic to play. Within part 1, the form and content of the practice observed in teacher-led and free-play sessions are considered in themselves and in relation to each other. In part 2, some key conceptual tools from Marxian value theory are developed and utilised to consider practice in teacher-led sessions and broader aspects of neoliberal education in England as Educational Value Production (EVP). In part 3, the commensurability that is central to EVP, along with the material inequality presupposed within human capital theory, is considered to suggest neoliberal primary education in England is a contradictory and ideological process with respect to the reproduction of these two ends. In part 4, how these contradictory ends were expressed within empirical data is considered through which neoliberal education in England is understood as a fetishised process of class reproduction, an experience of struggle for those engaged in it, that is antagonistic to play. In part 5, it is argued that neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England can be understood in the context of the expansion of value production into English primary education that has relegated the practical, subjective needs of those who engage in it to the social need to reproduce economic objectivity.

6.1 Part 1: Contrary Forms of Practice

The empirical observations of teacher-led and free-play sessions revealed contrary practices in form and content, yet their differences seemed related, as their contrasting nature mirrored each other in their opposition to the other's form (see Table 3). Within teacher-led sessions, content was determined exogenously, in line with the EYFS (UK Government 2014) and the English national curriculum (UK Government 2013) (F.1). Within free-play sessions, pupils were broadly free to engage in a range of activities in a way of their choosing (F.6, F.7), in which practice was determined by endogenous considerations as pupils navigated the expression of their practical, subjective needs, within a particular context (F.8, F.9, F.10, F.11).

Within teacher-led sessions, exogenously determined practice was administered by a top-down dynamic, in which the teacher had a decisive role in managing pupils to

engage in the formal attainment of standards (F.3). This dynamic was observed more frequently the higher the year group that was observed (F.3), with increased teacher-led engagement corresponding to a decrease in observed play engagement (F.12). Free-play sessions were managed, by and large, by non-teaching staff, Teaching Assistants (TAs), who were responsible for initiating and ending playtimes whilst mediating any issues that occurred (F.7). Although TAs wielded authority, play sessions were not managed in a top-down fashion, as pupils, by and large, were free to engage with respect to their needs and context (F.6, F.8, F.9, F.10, F.11).

Practice in teacher-led sessions (except for Year 6) was focused on the attainment and evidencing of standards and progress, through the production of data (F.5), in which there was a strong focus on numeracy and literacy (F.2). Pupil play was strictly forbidden in teacher-led sessions (F.13), whilst the threat of the removal of play access was repeatedly used as a tool to engage pupils in formal schoolwork (F.15, F.16). Activity in teacher-led sessions was characterised by an individualism as pupils engaged in activities on their own and in silence, with this being observed more frequently the higher the year group that was observed (F.4). Practice in free-play sessions was notable for its complexity, plurality, and fluidity; it exhibited a multi-directional dynamic in which social interaction was one of its essential characteristics (F.8). Practice in free-play sessions occurred in range of forms- physically, audibly, individually/socially and/or through a variety of explicit/implicit cues. Much of the practice was underpinned by an immediate recognition and expression (F.9), whilst a 'natural' curiosity was evident as pupils engaged in idiosyncratic behaviour that emerged out of, within and through, a particular context (F.11).

6.1.1 Abstract Quality of Teacher-Led Sessions

I want to suggest that the practice observed in teacher-led sessions had an abstract quality, whilst the practice observed in free-play sessions had a concrete quality. Practice within teacher-led sessions was determined from the outside, separately (F.1). Several teachers expressed this point in interviews as they discussed an external force impacting their practice which they felt they had little control over (F.1). Abstract time pressures drove the production of exogenously determined standards and progress (F.1, F.14) that proceeded through a top-down dynamic (F.3) which meant pupils had little

control over their practice that variously separated them from engaging in play (F.12, F.13, F.14, F.15, F.16). To note, the root of the word abstract is to separate.

During teacher-led sessions, pupils were viewed as individuals, separate from their social context (F.4), as they were recognised by teachers through objective, abstract data (F.5). Teacher-led sessions were focused on the production of data from which an objective, commensurable, abstract, indeed, separate measure of educational attainment would be produced (F.5). The necessity to engage in this process not only separated pupil's from engaging in play (F.12, F.13, F.14, F.15, F.16), it separated teachers and pupils from engaging with each other, and from participating in a range of practices necessary to satisfy their needs (F.17, F.18).

I want to suggest that the abstract quality of teacher-led sessions emerged from a form of equality, a universalism contained within the commensurability necessary for England's neoliberal, quasi-market of primary education to proceed. The abstract universalism that underpins the current primary progress measure is indifferent to context beyond a pupil's previous attainment (Department for Education 2022c). It is indifferent to the particularities of teachers and pupils, their subjectivities, and the social context of which they are a part. This abstract equality, I want to suggest, underpinned the uniformity of the form of practice within teacher-led sessions, as teachers engaged pupils through a top-down dynamic (F.3), individually and in silence (F.4), in exogenously determined content (F.1) to produce abstract data (F.5). The abstract nature of the process was further evident in the unreflexive nature of teacher-led sessions as an exogenous, separate, 'objective' process, demanded that standards and progress must be attained and evidenced often despite the teacher's better judgement (F.17), whilst pupils who failed to engage adequately risked having their access to play, notably a reflexive practice, removed (F.15, F.16).

6.1.2 Concrete Quality of Free-Play Sessions

Contrary to the abstract nature of teacher-led sessions was the concrete quality of free-play sessions. Practice in free-play sessions was embedded to context (F.10) and the particularities of the children in which a practical expression of their needs (F.6, F.9, F.11) occurred in interconnected ways (F.8) whilst an 'organic' curiosity was evident (F.11). The concrete quality that defined the form of observed play engagement can be

considered in relation to the notion of play as the 'work of childhood' (Moore 2014) or as a type of 'existential testing', in which engagement is variously a practical, contextually defined means of 'self-building' (Henricks 2015, p.88). Play's concrete nature is so bound to context, and as such, so opposed to the abstract, that it has proven difficult to produce a working definition (Eberle 2014), 'you can deny… nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God… but not play' (Huizinga 1949/2016, p.3).

The curious thing about play is, as a type of 'existential testing' or the 'work of childhood', it cannot be either of these things to the player. Whilst play facilitates the objective development of the child, play is not engaged in to produce any desired end, as by doing so, it would prevent the engagement from being play. Any objective, quantitative transformation that occurs through play is directly and intimately connected to the qualitative transformation that defines the subjective experience of playing, 'process and result are actually one and the same' (Adorno 2008, p.5), as they occur within and through play engagement.

Play defies abstract conceptualisation, at least in part, because it is opposed to pre-determined outcomes. Curti and Moreno (2010) describe this quality when they note:

> 'Such trajectories of becoming can never be pre-determined or boundaries declared prior to their very constitution, as becoming-other is directional . . . but not directed . . . It leaves a specific orbit but has no predesignated end point. For that reason, it cannot be exhaustively described. If it could, it would already be what it is becoming, in which case it wouldn't be becoming at all, being instead the same' (2010, p.416).

Play is a unique form of human practice, a type of concrete-labour process bound to the development of the child that occurs within and through practical, qualitative transformation, play being 'a well-defined quality of action' (Huizinga 1949/2016, p.4). Play variously involves a merging of subject and object as play's ends are its means and its means are its ends, that is, subjective, qualitative experience is simultaneously the object of play. As such, play cannot possess an objective, abstract value, as any objective value derived from play emerges precisely from the idiosyncratic, qualitative experience that is seamlessly bound to the subjective needs of the player.

6.2 Part 2: Educational Value Production

To develop the practically reflexive analysis, I will adopt some of the central conceptual notions from an Open Marxism-based reading of Marxian value theory with reference to the empirically observed form and content of teacher-led practice, along with some of the key tenets of the neoliberal primary framework in England. The practically reflexive theorisation will allow neoliberal education in England to be understood as a particular form of productive activity, Educational Value Production (EVP).

6.2.1 Dual-Nature of Practice

Virtually all practice observed in teacher-led sessions was focused on the attainment and evidencing of standards and progress through the production of data (F.5). Put differently, teacher-led sessions were defined by a practice that transformed a range of concrete, heterogeneous activities into homogenous, abstract, commensurable data. As such, I want to suggest that practice in teacher-led sessions was dualistic; it had a 'twofold character' (Marx 1867/1990, p.137) that involved a variety of concrete practices being transformed into abstract data.

The dualistic practice was not a partnership of equals. As was evidenced from observations and interviews (F.5, F.14, F.17), due to the 'increasing obsession with data in English schools' (Williamson 2019, p.1), evidence of attainment and progress was contradictorily valued more than the concrete practice that produced it. I want to suggest this practical contradiction was variously expressed within the empirical findings, most commonly in terms of the 'pressure' teachers stated they experienced (F.1, F.17, F.18), as a necessity to produce abstract data was variously valued over and above the concrete means, the practice and human content, that produced it.

The contradictory valuing of the abstract over the concrete was most explicit when Reception teacher Anne described how she had been considering entering false data to satisfy the pressures to produce acceptable levels of progress (F.17). I want to suggest the abstract, commensurable data produced in teacher-led sessions can be considered the substance that allows a neoliberal, quasi-market in English primary education to function. Following Marx (1867/1990, p.137), the abstract data produced from dualistic, teacher-led practice can be considered the substance of educational value.

6.2.2 Socially Necessary Time

Along with the substance of educational value, abstract time pressures were a significant aspect of teacher-led sessions. Time pressures were repeatedly raised as the single most important factor that prevented play engagement (F.14), with these pressures negatively impacting teachers and pupils in a variety of ways (F.17, F.18). During 2021 there was a general consensus about the length of the primary school week in England, with 71% of schools requiring their pupils to be in for around 32-35 hours a week, 7% over 35 hours and 14% less than 32 hours (Department for Education 2021). More recently, non-statutory guidance has outlined expectations that primary schools in England should deliver a minimum of 32.5 hours a week (UK Government 2023b). I want to suggest that such time provides a contextual standard through which English primary schools produce the substance of educational value upon which their 'effectiveness' is judged.

To produce the substance of educational value takes time, labour-time, through which those schools considered 'successful' are the ones most able to translate their labour-time into the highest rates of attainment and progress relative to how other schools in England utilise their labour-time. Within the context of a quasi-market in English primary education, I want to suggest that the 'appropriate' and 'efficient' utilisation of time is central. This explains the issue of time pressures that were consistently raised by teachers (F.14) that are understood as a 'downward pressure… to reach prescribed benchmarks (which) can squeeze out other practices that cannot be easily measured' (Clark 2022, p.15). Such time-pressures, in relation to the production of the substance of educational value, following Marx (1867/1990, p.129), can be considered socially necessary labour time that is representative of the magnitude of educational value.

Au (in Hall et al. 2023, pp.223-242) has similarly argued that what is measured within neoliberal education is socially necessary labour time which he describes as 'the labour of social, family, institutional, and community resources that have gone into producing the student taking the test… the differential social resources accrued within students' (in Hall et al. 2023, p.234). Although there is much I agree with in Au's analysis, I believe the EVP model contributes to this discussion by emphasising how socially necessary labour time should be considered in relation to educational productivity, teacher labour, and the teacher's class position within EVP, as is developed below.

6.2.3 The Form of Educational Value

The production of the substance of educational value within the limitations of the magnitude of educational value is bound to a process of commensurability that facilitates parental choice within England's quasi-market of primary education. Neoliberal education in England has been defined by a range of headline measures since the introduction of the 1988 ERA, with each measure accompanied by criticism of its meritocratic legitimacy (Leckie and Goldstein 2017, Goldstein and Leckie 2018). As discussed in Chapter Two, a central criticism has been the extent to which headline measures can be considered fair and meritocratic in relation to the level of material deprivation that pupils experience (García and Weiss 2017, p.1). Despite such 'ideological' (Leckie and Goldstein 2017, p.208) debates about the precise form commensurability should take, the production of a homogenous, commensurable measure of education loomed large over teacher-led practice, whilst such a measure is foundational to neoliberal primary education in England more broadly. Following Marx (1867/1990, p.138), I want to describe this commensurability as the form of educational value.

6.2.4 Progress

The substance, magnitude and form of educational value can be understood to be underpinned by a linear notion of educational progress, in which growth was desired through the attainment of ever higher, potentially infinite rates of attainment. As was described in Chapter Two, the current primary school progress measure conceives educational progress in England as a *quantitative transformation*. The drive to create progress, conceived quantitatively, underpinned observed practice within teacher-led sessions, whilst more broadly it is central to the neoliberal 'standards-driven agenda' (Burnitt 2016, p.30) understood as a 'continuous drive for improvements in very clearly defined but narrow areas of knowledge and skills' (Burnitt 2016, p.30). The centrality of progress to neoliberal education, conceived as linear, quantitative growth, is evident in the 'dramatic' rise in pupil attainment and progress that has occurred across all pupil cohorts during the neoliberal period in England (Farquharson et al. 2022, p.14).

6.2.5 Educational Value Production (EVP)

Considering the practice observed in teacher-led sessions with reference to educational progress, along with the substance, magnitude, and form of educational value, allows us to conceptualise neoliberal primary education in England beyond a purely cultural notion. Rather than a focus on 'discourse' (Lightfoot-Rueda and Peach 2015, p.x) in which neoliberal education is considered part of a 'master narrative' (Ball 2003, p.226), 'a story that lays claim to tell the world how human life works' (in Vandenbroeck et al. 2022, p.2), neoliberal primary education in England can be considered practically, as a particular nexus of activity, a labour process I want to call educational value production (EVP).

As a type of productive activity, EVP's substance, form, and magnitude have been devised to produce commensurability. How commensurability is produced through the current progress measure in England has been a point of controversy (Goldstein and Leckie 2018, Moss et al. 2021) because, as a limited contextual measure, it only acknowledges that prior pupil attainment has any bearing on future attainment. This is despite the creator of the measure acknowledging that 'factors other than prior attainment… influence… (progress) outcomes (Burgess 2013, p.7), notably, material security or a pupil's social class position (Berliner 2013, p.5, García and Weiss 2017, p.1, Moss et al. 2021, p.9, Johnson 2023, p.191)

The impact of material inequalities on pupil attainment is acknowledged in contemporary English primary education through access to extra funding, which is known as 'Pupil Premium' (Department for Education 2023, p.5). Access to Pupil Premium funds is determined by how much of a school's cohort is considered 'disadvantaged' in relation to their eligibility for free school meals (FSM). FSM is the most widely used proxy for poverty, economic disadvantage, and social class in English education, as the most common reason for FSM eligibility is low household income (Department for Education 2023, p.5). Pupils in receipt of FSM are formally termed 'disadvantaged', with the level of disadvantaged pupils a school serves permitting a corresponding access to Pupil Premium funding (Department for Education 2023b).

Although material inequality is acknowledged through access to Pupil Premium funding, I want to suggest the current primary progress measure's assumption, that only

prior attainment impacts future attainment, is significant because it shapes EVP as a productive activity. If standards and progress are assumed to be produced by teachers, it is simply 'the intensity with which schools supply the same necessary inputs' (Moss et al. 2021, p.9) that's understood to raise levels of attainment and progress. Underpinning the assumption is the notion that teacher labour produces the substance of educational value, which is notable as it mirrors Marx's notion of value as 'a… good' that has 'abstract human labour… objectified or materialised in it' (Marx 1867/2024, p.16). The implication of the assumption is significant as it creates a closed, practical, reproductive loop that incentivises teachers to engage in a potentially infinite dynamic. Increases in attainment and progress can occur, but only if schools and their teachers are willing to work 'effectively' and 'efficiently' within and through EVP as a specific dynamic of action.

6.2.6 EVP, Neoliberal Education and Economisation

EVP can be further understood in relation to the 'economisation' (Spring 2015) that is considered central to neoliberal education as a result of its human capital theory basis. As was discussed in Chapter Two, human capital theory is concerned with the reproduction of category of labour as 'a differentiated and mouldable input to production' (Cypher and Dietz 2009, p.405). More specifically, human capital theory suggests that higher levels of educational attainment and progress should translate into higher levels of economic productivity, and so potential rates of economic growth (Becker 1993/1964). This is to say, the focus of human capital theory is the production of potential, objective, quantifiable rises in 'the marginal productivity of labour' (Saltman and Means 2019, p.4).

For human capital to be produced and developed, measuring educational processes is fundamental: 'measurement is essential' (World Bank 2019, p.55-56). It is precisely the need to objectively measure educational attainment, to produce human capital, that explains what I've described as the substance of educational value, as teachers and pupils transform concrete, heterogeneous activities into a singular, abstract, commensurable measure. Human capital theory has its roots in neoclassical economics (Sandona and Aladi 2013), which views market participation as a positive social good. It is here we can understand the 'marketisation' associated with neoliberal education (Pratt 2016) as schools are made commensurable through the substance of educational

value within a quasi-market, with reference to their effective use of time, the magnitude of educational value, to facilitate parental choice through the form of educational value. The production of human capital through marketisation looks to create positive outcomes that shed 'light on the political and bureaucratic failures… (by) encouraging citizens to demand more' (World Bank 2019, p.55-56). The raising of standards and attainment in such a way is understood to facilitate accountability, and so the further raising of standards and progress in a positive feedback loop. Neoliberal primary education's emphasis on productivity via commensurability looks to raise overall quantities of educational attainment and progress, to produce an adequately productive labour force that will engage in economic value production and produce economic growth defined quantitatively and objectively.

6.2.7 EVP and Play

As a specific type of productive activity, EVP has important implications for pupil play. Teacher-led practice, or EVP, along with practice observed during free-play sessions, were contrary to the degree to which their opposing forms negatively mirrored each other. Play engagement was defined by qualitative transformation, whilst EVP was focused on quantitative transformation, a high-stakes focus so strong that qualitative considerations were sacrificed to this end. The substance of educational value, essential to allow objective commensurability to proceed, was, contrary to play, produced despite the idiosyncratic needs of those who engage in it; attainment of pre-defined, abstract standards and progress were produced regardless of any contextualised, subjective considerations. This occurred to create EVP's form, an external, commensurable measure that, contrary to play, lacked any intrinsic, contextualised meaning beyond a comparison with other like measures. The meaning produced through EVP's commensurability was for those who sit separately and make judgements on those who have already engaged in EVP, as parents 'choose' an 'effective' school to send their children within England's quasi-market of primary education. This is an important point. EVP is engaged in for an 'abstract other' and not for those who produce it, contrary to the satisfaction of subjective needs that defines play engagement. The tensions and antagonisms produced by engagement in this process have an intensity in relation to EVP's magnitude, as the finite time upon which effectiveness is judged underpins a linear dynamic of action that produces a downward pressure on those

working towards quantitative transformation using a potentially infinite notion of progress. This analysis reveals that, contrary to play, EVP is a qualitatively poor form of practice that is variously difficult, indeed antagonistic, for subjects to engage in.

Play's intimate relationship to the subject and context means it cannot be included in EVP's nexus; play cannot have an objective value, and so it can only exist separately from EVP. Play is of little value to EVP's high-stakes engagement; indeed, it is detrimental to it. This is because play diverts both labour and time away from the finite socially necessary labour-time that is available to produce the substance of educational value. Pupil engagement in play prevents 'legitimate' educational attainment and progress from occurring when defined by these terms because play reduces the amount of socially necessary labour time available to teachers and schools. Play decreases the perceived 'efficiency' in which the substance of educational value is produced in relation to the magnitude of educational value. As such, a practical antinomy is evident: EVP's high-stakes, expansionary drive to raise levels of attainment and progress is antagonistic to any practice that prevents this from occurring. This, I want to suggest, is the crux of neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England.

6.3 Part 3: Class as Objective Classification

In part 3, I will further develop the practically reflexive analysis by highlighting the centrality of class reproduction to neoliberal primary education in England as it emerges from a contradictory, ideological tension between abstract equality and material inequality contained *within* EVP. This process of class reproduction, as an objective process of classification, will then be considered from a different perspective in part 4, as the tension between the abstract and concrete is considered as it impacts teachers, pupils, and play, within and through EVP as an experience of struggle.

6.3.1 Commensurability, Equality, and Inequality

I have suggested that what underpinned the abstract nature of teacher-led sessions, or EVP, is a universalism expressed as commensurability based on a certain notion of equality. This notion of equality is highly abstract because human beings, children, vary in their psychology and physicality. Along with this, as was discussed in Chapter 3,

children in England are further defined by concrete, material inequalities, with UK-based research revealing:

> '3.8 million people experienced destitution in 2022, including around one million children. This is almost two-and-a-half times the number of people in 2017 and nearly triple the number of children' (Bramley et al. 2023, p.2).

Such material inequalities are produced by 'economics' as it occurs through the personification of economic categories. As described in Chapter Three, Open Marxism understands social class in terms of levels of property ownership that compel social individuals to personify economic categories. One's economic condition, the quality of life attained through the personification of economic categories, variously permits access to a range of commodities that shape people, for instance, by satisfying basic needs or by providing access to activities defined by particular social groups. Social class is understood here, in the first instance, in terms of unequal levels of property ownership that necessitate a struggle to personify economic categories. Thinking about the need to personify the category of labour, for most, this means their positioning within labour markets which are 'deeply stratified around degrees of social vulnerability and exposure to risk' (Best 2024, p.154). The stratified nature of labour markets determines access to commodities amongst a 'working class', the unequal distribution of commodities being simultaneously an 'objective' symptom of class and a fundamental, constituting factor.

6.3.2 Equality and Capitalist Modernity

A contradictory tension is evident within EVP when we consider its abstract equality and the material inequalities that define English school pupils, inequalities that are a result of, and which constitute their class experience. I want to suggest this tension at the heart of EVP is fundamental to understanding neoliberal primary education, its productivity, and antagonism to play; whilst taking a few steps back, I want to argue it represents, or rather it is, a core contradictory tension at the heart of contemporary liberal education and liberal capitalist modernity as a totality.

The abstract equality within EVP emerges from a liberal normative assertion, what McManus describes as 'the moral project of modernity: that society consists of moral

equals who should be free to pursue their interests within participatory political institutions' (2024, p.2). This liberal universalism is bound to a notion of citizenship that grants individuals 'formal equality' (Heywood 1999, p.286) realised in terms of equal access to a range of contemporary political, social, legal and economic rights. This includes, of course, access to a fair, meritocratic system of education that treats its participants equally, with Tony Blair epitomising this commitment when he declared 'Equal rights. Equal Responsibilities. The class war is over, but the struggle for true equality has only just begun' (1999). It is precisely a commitment to formal equality, I want to suggest, that underpinned the coalition government's decision to remove the previous headline measure of education in England, the contextual value added measure (CVA), because it was 'morally wrong to have an attainment measure which entrenches low aspirations for children because of their background' (Department for Education 2010, p.68).

6.3.3 Inequality and Capitalist Modernity

I want to suggest that in antinomy with liberalism's abstract universalism is liberal capitalism's simultaneous need for social class, which is necessary to facilitate material reproduction through economic categories. Liberalism has a normative commitment to private property ownership, a universal right most famously expressed by John Locke (1690/1980). The right to private property is fundamental to capitalist development and is presupposed within economic categories. As described in Chapter Three, the category of capital presupposes ownership of property as well as a relationship to the category of labour, which, conversely, presupposes a lack of ownership and a separation from the means of life. Capitalist economic reproduction, therefore, requires a social relation based on inequality in property to proceed. This emphasis on social relations is the negative, 'controversial' flipside to an 'uncontroversial', positive focus on economic things. As separate things, the economic categories of capital and labour are known to be essential for capitalist development (Keeley 2007, p.23), their fundamental nature expressed within neoliberal education's economisation that understands the 'purpose of education' as 'the engine of the economy' (Gibb 2015).

6.3.4 Contradictory Social Totality

A contradictory commitment to both the equal individual and inequality in property can therefore be understood as essential to contemporary liberal capitalist reproduction. I want to suggest that the essential nature of this tension is significant to the degree it shapes the fabric of social, political, and economic life, producing both a material and social constitution from which much contemporary thought emerges, most obviously within tendencies across the left-right spectrum.

In broad brush strokes, we can consider a right tradition that has emphasised the primacy of the individual, 'there's no such thing as society, there are individual men and women' (Thatcher 1993, p.529), and in so doing, it has justified social and economic inequalities as the legitimate expression of the various talents of individuals and organisations (Nozick 2013). I want to suggest it is precisely liberal capitalism's own normative commitment to the equal individual that has historically galvanised and, importantly, legitimised a left tradition that has critiqued inequalities as unfair representations of privilege, often through an advocacy of 'social justice'. In many liberal capitalist states, this 'progressive' tendency has led to universal suffrage and a general widening of access to rights and services, perhaps reaching its zenith with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (United Nations 2023). The relationship between liberal modernity and a tendency towards formal equality is acknowledged by Ashley who has described how 'the majority of our rights (in the UK) have only been granted in last century or two' (2008, p.12).

If we acknowledge that capitalist economic production requires a class relation based on inequality in property to proceed, a singular concern with social justice, although necessary and humane, can be understood to be partial or limited as it represents a 'bourgeois critique of society... instead of a critique of bourgeois society' (Bonefeld 2023, p.95). Liberal capitalist democracies can undoubtedly be organised in fairer, more humane ways, most obviously as in the Nordic model (Reay 2012, Sahlberg 2021), but genuine social justice within a class-based society is an oxymoron because class relations represent inequalities of power that are contrary to the notion of justice.

I want to suggest that the need for both abstract equality and material inequality produces a contradictory, antagonistic and unresolvable tension, a struggle woven into

the fabric of liberal modernity's social and economic constitution. Although it is possible to conceptualise the tension, it is not possible to be separate from it. Inequalities in property, and so quality of experience, variously shape individuals and whatever social and political position they consider appropriate. As such, a normative advocation of either the abstract individual or greater equality can be regarded as ideological in the sense that each position represents a partial aspect of a contradictory social constitution; they're representative of positions that cannot 'elucidate the object of (its) critique' (Bonefeld 2023, p.95), that is, liberal capitalist modernity as a contradictory totality.

6.3.5 Neoliberal Education and Class Reproduction Through Classification

As has been highlighted, abstract commensurability shapes EVP as a nexus of action focused on quantitative transformation through a linear, potentially infinite productive dynamic. This abstract commensurability proceeds in the context of significant material inequality, with the UK recently recording the highest levels of economic inequality in Europe (Dorling 2023, p.15). Such inequalities are acknowledged to impact educational attainment. This is important as it suggests neoliberal education's commensurability is problematic on its own terms because it undermines a commitment to formal equality its commensurability both represents and aims to constitute.

I want to argue this antagonistic and contradictory tension has underpinned debates about headline measures in England since the introduction of the 1988 ERA, most recently with the controversy surrounding the current headline progress measure (Leckie and Goldstein 2017, Goldstein and Leckie 2018, Moss et al. 2021). Leckie and Goldstein suggest the measure's limited contextuality does not take account of material inequalities because of a tension between 'two opposing views' in which either the school is 'responsible for… national differences in performance' or 'government and society' is responsible (2018, p.21). I agree that the tension is representative of an antinomy, but I want to argue that the antinomy emerges out of liberal capitalism's contradictory social constitution. Neoliberal education's productivity via commensurability presupposes the necessity for economic reproduction through a potential working class. With the current progress measure, this end has been ideologically and contradictorily placed, over and above, neoliberal education's own commitment to formal equality, which as such, produces distortions in attainment and

progress data as they relate to a pupil's class position (Goldstein and Leckie 2018, Au in Hall et al. 2023, p.235, Anders et al. 2024).

Because there's 'nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequal's' (Jefferson in Harvey 2010, p.290), if we acknowledge that English school pupils are materially unequal due to their class position, neoliberal education's focus on raising productivity through commensurability uncritically and directly translates material inequalities into progress and attainment measures. This is despite Anders et al. (2024) and Leckie and Goldstein (2018) clearly demonstrating that controlling for socio-economic discrepancies significantly alters progress and attainment data for pupils and the schools that serve them. The focus on raising productivity has produced 'dramatic' rises in attainment for all English pupils, but a vicious circularity is evident, as these rises have simultaneously meant there's been 'virtually no change in the disadvantage gap' (Farquharson et al. 2022, p.2) because the English neoliberal education system 'preserves inequality' (Tahir 2022).

Considered in the context of a contradictory social totality in which a normative commitment to formal equality struggles with the material inequalities of class, the supposed neutrality of attainment and progress data produced by neoliberal education in England is ideological and can only be as such. By not acknowledging the material inequalities of class due to a focus on raising productivity through commensurability, attainment and progress data reflect what needs explaining because it 'presupposes what needs to be explained' (Bonefeld and O'Kane 2022, p.30). Neoliberal primary education in England variously and uncritically transforms the inequalities of class into quantitative, objective things, levels of attainment and progress, educational value, and human capital, which, it is hoped, will further sustain the broader world of economic objectivity. This occurs by undermining neoliberal education's own normative commitment to formal equality that its commensurability both represents and aims to constitute. In so doing, social class is much more directly reproduced through an objective process of classification, as levels of attainment and progress at once reflect what's presupposed, whilst such outcomes are simultaneously the means through which hierarchical class differences are legitimised, reproduced and constituted.

6.4 Part 4: Class Struggles Within and Through

EVP allows us to take the practically reflexive analysis one stage further, to produce a perspective beyond an objective focus on classification and nouns to reveal the constitution of such nouns in practice. Through EVP, class reproduction as it occurs through an objective process of classification can be reconceptualised so the tensions between abstract equality and material inequality can be considered as they constitute a 'working class' in practice. EVP allows the negative of neoliberal primary education, human practical activity and social relations, to be simultaneously considered along with its positive focus on things, abstract figures of attainment and progress. EVP facilitates a form of class analysis that allows class to be considered as it is reproduced and constituted within and through the quality of practical experience, as social individuals struggle to produce the objective substance of educational value to satisfy their class need to successfully personify the category of labour.

6.4.1 EVP and Fetishisation

I want to suggest that the class relations neoliberal primary education in England presupposes, reproduces, and legitimises, along with the nexus of practice described as EVP, are variously fetishised within neoliberal primary education's 'positive' focus on abstract, objective measures of attainment and progress. Following Holloway (in Dinerstein and Neary 2002, p.42), I want to suggest neoliberal primary education, within and through EVP, can be considered a process of 'fetishisation' that expresses social class relations and human practice as abstract things, with Au (in Hall et al. 2023) similarly suggesting Marx's notion of commodity fetishism is central to neoliberal education (in Hall et al. 2023, p.231).

As capitalism is a 'society of commodity producers' (Marx 1867/1990, p.172) that reproduces itself through the production and exchange of commodities, substantial aspects of social life must be commodified; they must be transformed into things with a 'phantom objectivity' (Lukács 1923/2023, p.83). The necessity of creating the world of 'economic objectivity' (Bonefeld and O'Kane 2022, p.18) is understood as a fetish because it represents social relations, human practice, and subjective experience within capitalist modernity. This has been described as the 'bewitched' (Bonefeld 2014, p.5) 'perceptual physics of capital' (Best 2024, p.22), as processes of fetishisation produce a

seemingly inhuman world of objective, abstract appearances, in which a necessity to transform ‘definite social relations’ (Marx 1867/1990, p.165) into things denies ‘sensuous human practice’ (Bonefeld 2014, p.23) and the quality of human experience.

6.4.1.1 Teachers and Class

EVP fetishises the social relations, the class nature of teacher engagement in neoliberal education, whilst subsuming the practical activity and quality of experience that constitutes their class experience. If we acknowledge that the category of labour presupposes inequality in property and a separation from the means of life, this allows us to recognise that ‘teachers are part of the working class’ (Wrigley in Gilbert 2018, p.395) because they must personify the category of labour to secure a livelihood. The contractual nature of their employment means teachers must successfully personify the category of labour in ways they have little control over. A teacher’s working-class condition of being separated from any means of life means a significant aspect of their engagement is underpinned by a ‘mute’ (Mau 2023) or ‘economic compulsion’ (Bonefeld 2023), as they are compelled to successfully personify the category of labour to sustain a standard of living.

This allows us to consider teacher engagement in EVP as a particular form of lived, working-class experience. The creation of the abstract substance of educational value, within limited time (magnitude of educational value), to produce a commensurable measure (form of educational value) is designed to raise productivity, to produce accountability, through which parental choice is facilitated within England’s quasi-market of primary education. Neoliberal education in England, has, by and large, denied the impact of social context or material inequalities on educational attainment (Leckie and Goldstein 2017), ‘we must take on… the culture of excuses which still infects some parts of the teaching profession. A culture that… treats poverty as an excuse for failure (Blair in Taylor 1999), with this tendency currently expressed within the current progress measure’s assumption that only prior attainment impacts future attainment.

As a separated worker whose livelihood depends on successfully personifying the category of labour, the current primary progress measure’s assumption is significant for a teacher’s ‘working class’ experience. It suggests that to successfully personify the category of labour necessarily equates to the magnitude of their engagement in EVP’s

potentially infinite dynamic. I want to suggest a significant aspect of neoliberal education's controversial emphasis on commensurability (Leckie and Goldstein 2017, Goldstein and Leckie 2018, Moss et al. 2021) is its class nature as it relates to a teacher's practical experience. The assumption that teachers produce educational value leverages the teacher's class position as it suggests that to successfully personify the category of labour necessarily equates to the intensity with which teachers engage in EVP's potentially infinite dynamic of action. This leveraging, I want to suggest, has been fundamental in creating the rises in educational productivity that have occurred in English education during the neoliberal period (Farquharson et al. 2022, p.14).

6.4.1.2 Teachers, EVP and Struggle

When neoliberal primary education is considered through EVP as an antagonistic and difficult form of productive activity, the leveraging of teachers' class position can be considered an intensified, contradictory, and existential experience of struggle, 'in-against-and-beyond' (Holloway 2022, p.56), the category of labour. As has been highlighted, EVP is a qualitatively poor, antagonistic nexus of action, because its focus on quantitative transformation comes at the cost of the qualitative experience of those who engage in it. EVP substantially limits teacher agency, as it is underpinned by engagement with predetermined, standardised content necessary to produce the commensurable substance of educational value. Such engagement is further prohibitive and antagonistic when we consider the finite time (magnitude of educational value) over which the commensurable substance of educational value is produced and upon which objective judgements about the effectiveness of schools are made (form of educational value). The experience of struggle is existential in the sense that a teacher's livelihood is derived from their ability to successfully personify the category of labour; this existential dimension being expressed by teacher Kathrine who described how a trainee teacher was banned for life from teaching in England because they'd encouraged pupil play without adequately producing the substance of educational value (F.5, Nursery Interview).

EVP at once represents a significant limitation of teacher practice, an 'unfreedom' (Marx 1939/1993, p.249), yet EVP's commensurability simultaneously compels teachers into a more intense engagement in its dynamic. As a form of practice, EVP notably reduces agency whilst simultaneously producing a need for more intensive

engagement. An unreflexive, somnambulistic tendency is evident in the existential necessity to successfully personify the category of labour, following Marx (1867/1990, p.742), which demands the production of standards for the sake of standards, progress for the sake of progress, and growth for the sake of growth.

The need to subsist in the category of labour can be understood together with a simultaneous, contradictory struggle, against-and-beyond the category due to EVP's antagonistic nature. Most obviously, tensions within F.17 can be considered in terms of a contradictory experience of struggle, as it was necessary for teachers to successfully personify the category of labour (in), but due to the antagonistic nature of EVP this variously, simultaneously, and practically clashed against-and-beyond a range of other activities and concerns, such as teacher identity (Year Two interview), ethical considerations (Reception interview), family life (Year Six Interview) and personal health (Nursery Interview). The contradictory nature of teacher experience was evident in interviews as teachers refused to state that the level of educational value a pupil produced was reflective of pupil success, with each offering an alternative notion. Such responses were deeply contradictory, given that a teacher's working life is, at least formally, singularly focused on the production of educational value.

I want to suggest a contradictory experience of struggle, in-against-and-beyond the category of labour, defined the teachers' relationship to play within the empirical data. All teachers variously acknowledged the value of play whilst they simultaneously stated there was little time for play, with one teacher suggesting teachers in the school did not like Golden Time because of the disruption it caused (F.13). All teachers acknowledged the positive benefits of play for the child and their development (against-and-beyond), yet, I want to suggest, the high-stakes, class necessity to successfully personify the category of labour, within and through EVP (in), was valued over and above the known benefits of play for the pupils (against-and-beyond).

This allows us to reconsider Ozga and Lawn's (1981/2017) notion of the 'proletarianization' of teaching that 'involves a loss of control over the work process, a loss of definition by the worker of the essential elements of the task' (Ozga and Lawn 1981/2017, p.143). As opposed to proletarianization being imposed upon teachers, the analysis of neoliberal primary education in England through EVP reveals the ways in which teachers participate in their own, contradictory, class experience, as they

idiosyncratically and contradictorily struggle to personify the category of labour, in-against-and-beyond. This opens the category of class to reveal complexity and plurality, as class reproduction occurs within neoliberal primary education in England through a specific class dynamic, as working-class teachers antagonistically and contradictorily struggle to manage pupils to engage in EVP, a process devised to facilitate the transformation of pupils into an adequately productive, potential working class.

6.4.1.3 Pupils and Class

EVP also reveals how neoliberal education in England fetishises the social class relations that define pupils whilst denying the practical and qualitative aspects of their social class experience. Through EVP, productivity via commensurability transforms practical, pupil activity, and the social class relations that have defined pupil experience, into a measured, objectified thing- educational value. This occurs through a hierarchical class dynamic, as EVP leverages the teacher's class position to engage pupils in top-down management within a potentially infinite dynamic of difficult, antagonistic, productive activity, to produce potential, adequately productive workers. As was discussed in part 3, this process is ideological and contradictory in the sense that neoliberal primary education in England has placed the end of raising educational productivity, over and above, neoliberal education's own normative commitment to formal equality, its commensurability both represents and aims to constitute. Although neoliberal education has raised standards and progress for all English pupils during the neoliberal period (Farquharson et al. 2022, p.14), the process has more directly reproduced, pathologised, and legitimised the class experience of English pupils. This is not to suggest that neoliberal primary education in England reproduces class relations in their entirety; rather, neoliberal education facilitates the reproduction and constitution of a potential working class through a process of fetishisation, as productivity via commensurability raises the productivity of potential workers, whilst classification supports their distribution within labour markets.

6.4.1.4 Play in-against-and-beyond the Category of Labour

Because play cannot be fetishised, it can only exist against-and-beyond EVP, against-and-beyond neoliberal education, against-and-beyond economic objectivity. This is not to suggest that the objects that facilitate play cannot be commodified; rather, the

practical act of play in which subjective experience is simultaneously its object, cannot possess an objective value. This is an essential point. Neoliberal education's antagonism to play occurs because play can only sit outside of EVP, play prevents engagement in a process focused on raising productivity by objectively classifying a potential working class.

This allows us to say, quite broadly, that neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England occurs due to the economic necessity to produce an adequately productive working class in the context of competitive, global labour markets, as the UK government uses their education system to invest in human capital to facilitate economic growth. The human capital theory inspired refocusing of English primary education around the category of labour has meant the child's desire to play is more sharply at odds with the child's existential class need to work by personifying the category of labour and the social need to reproduce social class relations. As for the teacher, for the pupil, neoliberal education's antagonism to play through EVP can be considered a contradictory, antagonistic, existential experience of struggle, in-against-and-beyond the category of labour. Considering pupil engagement in neoliberal primary education in such a way allows us to reconsider Keddie's (2016) 'discourses of performativity' in which pupil anxiety about employment can be reconsidered in relation to a genuinely existential, class-based need to personify the category of labour as it relates to educational success, 'if you're not clever academically you won't have a good job when you're older which means your life is over basically' (Keddie 2016, p.113).

Within the Reception interview there was evidence of this contradictory struggle as Bev noted that both her and her colleague Anne were looking to ask management if they could use Golden Time for extra Maths due to pressures to produce standards and progress (F.14). This is notable as it reveals neoliberal primary education's contradictory antagonism to play within the EYFS based Reception setting in which play engagement is central to the curriculum. The pressure to ask management to reduce play time, and the potential reduction in pupil play this would produce so that pupils could engage in extra EVP, can be considered in terms of a contradictory, existential experience of struggle, in-against-and-beyond the category of labour, for teachers and pupils, as it relates to qualitative experience and play access.

Golden Time (F.15) expressed the contradictory experience of struggle particularly well as the school employed a strategy to manage the practical antinomy between neoliberal primary education and play. The promise of play was offered to pupils against-and-beyond EVP, yet this was only permitted when pupils had adequately engaged in EVP. Though Golden Time represented a reduction of engagement against-and-beyond EVP, this was considered a worthwhile 'carrot to dangle' (F.15, Y4 Interview) to incentivise potential engagement in EVP during the rest of the week. The tension between EVP and play contained within Golden Time was suggestive of a value beyond economic 'value', as a desire to engage in the qualitatively rich, 'golden' experience of play, struggled against-and-beyond the need to engage in the antagonistic practice of EVP, whose form is bound to the reproduction of economic value objectively and quantitatively defined.

I want to suggest that findings F.12, F.13, F.14 and F.15 can be similarly understood in terms of a contradictory, existential, experience of struggle for pupils as it relates to play engagement. That play engagement was observed less the higher the year group that was observed (F.12). That play was prohibited within teacher-led sessions (F.13), that time pressures prevented play from occurring (F.14), and that the pupil's desire to play was used to facilitate EVP engagement (F.15). A substantial aspect of these tensions, I want to argue, was produced by neoliberal primary education through EVP's productivity via commensurability, which underpinned a high-stakes, heightened, practical, contradictory, and existential experience of struggle, for pupils (and teachers) as it related to play, in-against-and-beyond the category of labour.

The Year Six observation offers evidence that supports this conclusion. It broke with trends about EVP engagement, with educational content being determined exogenously (F.1), the amount of Maths and English pupils engaged in (F.2), the amount of top-down teacher-led time that occurred (F.3), the amount of time pupils worked individually and in silence (F.4) and that practice was based around the production of data (F.6). The downward trend of observed play in relation to the year-group continued (F.12), although the Year Four ability/behaviour sub-group were observed to play less than the Year Six standard group and Year Six ability/behaviour sub-group (see Table 8).

I want to suggest the form and content of the Year Six session of watercolours and music acknowledged pupil agency, relatively speaking, which, following findings F.1, F.2, F.3, F.4 and F.6, gave it a qualitatively different feel to the teacher-led sessions observed in Year Two and Year Four that were based around the attainment of standards and progress through EVP. I want to suggest a relative acknowledgement of pupil subjectivities meant Year Six pupils engaged in a less antagonistic form of practice; it was a diminished, less contradictory experience of struggle, in-against-and-beyond the category of labour. This occurred, notably, within a year group that was, for a while at least, somewhat outside of the existential need to produce educational value due to the COVID pandemic, as the teacher stated that such activity would most likely have not have occurred if the SATS exam had proceeded (Y6 observation).

6.4.1.5 Pupils, Play and Class Struggles

Beyond the broad conclusion that the need to create a productive workforce produced a tension with play engagement across observations within the school, the EVP model allows us to develop the practically reflexive analysis with regard to F.16, in which a class dynamic played a role in reducing play access. It is widely acknowledged that 'disadvantaged' children from low-income households struggle disproportionately; they have a relatively difficult lived experience compared to children from more materially prosperous households. To struggle, I'd suggest, is the fabric that constitutes the experience of class and is why the necessity to personify the category of labour, to be part of the 'working class', is 'not a piece of luck, but a misfortune' (Marx 1867/1990, p.644).

Economically vulnerable children have a relatively limited and difficult experience of life within a mature capitalist economy because they have limited access to commodities. They experience relatively poorer quality housing (Dorling 2015), relatively limited access to food (Goudie 2023), and all things being equal, are more likely to experience poorer health (Smith et al. 2016) and lower average life expectancy (Walsh and McCartney 2024) in adulthood, amongst a range of disadvantageous experiences. Material disadvantage is known to have a psychosocial dimension (Pickett and Wilkinson 2018) that's been described in terms of 'hypervigilance' (McGarvey 2017) and 'stigma' (Tyler 2020) and conceptualised through the notion of 'allostatic load' (Phua et al. 2023). Allostatic load 'refers to the cumulative burden of chronic

stress and life events… when environmental challenges exceed the individual's ability to cope then allostatic overload ensues' (Guidi et al. 2021, p.11). Evidence reveals a strong, negative relationship between a child's allostatic load and their level of household income and neighbourhood quality (Guidi et al. 2021, p.13, De France et al. 2022).

In English education, issues of material deprivation and its impact on learning are acknowledged through the notion of 'barriers to learning' (Hancock in Gilbert 2018, pp.125-133). Within England's quasi-market of education, schools and pupils are made commensurable with respect to the magnitude of educational value, the temporal efficiency with which standards and progress are attained through EVP. I want to suggest that such barriers mean more labour-time is variously necessary to teach the same standardised content to disadvantaged pupils relative to their materially advantaged peers. Paul Johnson, ex-economist for England's Department for Education, has described how 'it's harder and costs more to educate… disadvantaged pupils' (2023, p.189). When we acknowledge the centrality of the magnitude of educational value to EVP and that primary schools in England have relatively similar amounts of labour-time available to them (Department for Education 2021, UK Government 2023b), the EVP model allows us to consider the significance of the magnitude of educational value in relation to material, class inequalities and their impact on play.

If more labour-time is necessary to teach the same standardised content to materially disadvantaged pupils relative to their materially advantaged peers, because EVP suggests only teacher labour produces the substance of educational value, an intrinsic bias is evident *within* EVP with regard to the impact of material inequalities upon the magnitude of educational value. The tension between abstract equality and material inequality within EVP, the need for commensurability to raise productivity in the context of materially unequal pupils, can be understood to be ideological as it absorbs the barriers to learning (or lack of them) produced by class inequalities which become naturalised or fetishised within a school's progress score as a relative measure of the efficient use of socially necessary labour time. As such, the 'the higher the proportion of disadvantaged pupils in a school, the more (the school) will effectively be punished for the national underperformance of these pupil groups' (Goldstein and Leckie 2018,

p.21) as the current progress measure ‘fails to do justice to the contribution actually made by schools working with disadvantaged pupils’ (Moss et al. 2021, p.9).

Beyond unfair objective classification, the bias within EVP regarding the impact of material inequalities on the magnitude of educational value, has significant practical implications. Although each primary school has access to the same amount of abstract time, the concrete material inequalities of class mean a more intensive engagement in school is required to produce the same relative outcomes in relation to a school’s cohort of disadvantaged pupils. This suggests neoliberal primary education in England produces a greater downward pressure on schools relative to their cohort of disadvantaged pupils, that is, it produces a greater pressure to engage more intensely in EVP’s dynamic in relation to the class position of a school’s cohort. Put somewhat differently, it suggests EVP produces a disproportionate, antagonistic, existential, lived experience of struggle, in-against-and-beyond the category of labour, for teachers and pupils, relative to the material security that pupils experience.

This conclusion about the impact of neoliberal education upon primary schools in England relative to the material security of a school’s cohort emerges from a theoretical analysis that cannot be verified solely by the empirical data gathered for the thesis. It does allow us to speculate whether such pressures explain why schools with the most disadvantaged cohorts also have the highest staff turnover (Allen et al. 2018). Such pressures would also create an incentive for teachers to work in schools that serve more economically and materially advantaged cohorts. There is evidence of such a ‘race to the top’ as ‘the most effective teachers are not teaching in the most needy areas’ (Johnson 2023, p.189), with recent figures revealing ‘a quarter of schools in the most disadvantaged tenth of areas (are) fail(ing) to meet the standard for ‘Good’ teaching’ (Johnson 2023, p.187). Such a tendency, of course, would further disadvantage some of the most disadvantaged children in England, as it would create a more difficult, antagonistic educational experience for children who already endure disproportionately difficult experiences.

The analysis of EVP’s antagonism to play suggests that if there are greater, relative pressures to engage in EVP between schools in England, depending on the material security of a school’s cohort, then there will be a corresponding and disproportionate

antagonism to play, depending on the material security of a school's cohort[7]. Although these conclusions about EVP and play between schools in England cannot be empirically verified, F.16 provides some empirical evidence that supports these conclusions within the one school used to gather data for this thesis.

Within F.16, inequalities in play were observed within the ability/behaviour sub-groups, within class year groups, that were bound mainly to extra EVP engagement and ranged between a 4% to 12% relative reduction in play access for certain pupils on the days that observations occurred (see F.2 & Tables 5, 8 and 9). As argued in F.16, material disadvantage, and so a class dynamic, played some role in which some pupils were observed to experience extra EVP engagement, while others played disproportionately less. This is supported by national data that reveals a strong negative relationship between household income and educational attainment (Farquharson et al. 2022, p.2, Johnson 2023, p.191), a strong, negative relationship between household income and 'bad behaviour' (UK Government 2022) and a negative relationship between the material security of a schools cohort and pupil access to play (Raising the Nation/The Play Commission 2025, p.85).

This allows us to consider such engagement in a two-fold way. Considered in terms of access to things, it is possible and entirely reasonable to argue that a greater downward pressure on the weakest producers of educational value is progressive or 'socially just', as EVP produces the biggest necessity to engage those pupils in educational processes who arguably require it the most. It is hoped that such extra engagement will raise their levels of attainment and progress and so their ability to gain employment, raising their levels of productivity, their earning potential, and the quantities of commodities they can command, boosting the economy and so creating economic growth quantitatively defined.

Shifting the focus from things and quantities to consider social relations and the quality of practical experience, however, a contradiction is revealed. Contemporary labour markets are highly stratified and produce disproportionate, unequal levels of material

[7] The UK government has recently introduced careers advice for schools that cater for 'disadvantaged' pupils, see (UK Government, 2023c). This supports the general argument being made. It is government policy that aims to rectify issues of class through further labour market engagement, which raises questions about the impact of such extra activity upon disadvantaged pupils' ability to play, relative to their materially secure peers.

security and relatively difficult lived experiences for workers and their families. For children whose lives are already defined by disproportionately difficult experiences, increased EVP engagement and reduced play access intensifies an already difficult, lived experience. It is precisely social class relations, the necessity to personify the category of labour due to being separated from any means of life, that has produced the pupil's difficult condition of relative disadvantage in the first instance. As such, a vicious circularity is evident, as neoliberal primary education in England suggests a more intense engagement in the class relation is the solution to the problems of the class relation, or put somewhat differently, it suggests a more intensive, antagonistic, contradictory experience of struggle is the solution to an antagonistic, contradictory, existential experience of struggle.

6.5 Part 5: Why is Neoliberal Education in English Primary Schooling Antagonistic to Play?

Play prevents educational value from being produced, a working-class from being classified, and so the world of economic objectivity from being expanded. Neoliberal primary education in England is antagonistic to play because, as a form of activity in which subjective experience is its object, play prevents engagement in EVP, a contrary form of activity concerned with objectifying and measuring educational practice. This explains why neoliberal education is antagonistic to play but it does not fully explain the contradiction this thesis has looked to explore: if neoliberal education has refocused education around the creation of productive workers, and if play is beneficial for the physical, cognitive, and emotional development of the child, and so a child's productive capacity, why is neoliberal primary education in England antagonistic to play?

To understand neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England an understanding of the social relations that constitute liberal capitalism is necessary. Neoliberal education's antagonism to play emerges out of the necessity for fetishisation, the form that social class relations take within capitalist modernity. The reproduction of economic objectivity requires the transformation of social life, practice, and social relations into objective things, individuals who personify economic categories whose legitimacy and adequacy are determined by a 'phantom objectivity'. The necessity, and so value, of transforming the world into objective things, in the first

instance, relegates the immediate satisfaction of practical, subjective needs to a secondary value, to a greater or lesser degree.

Neoliberal education's economisation has placed this contradiction much more directly within English primary education. Teachers, as individualised personifications of the category of labour, work within finite time in a national competition to decontextualise pupils by objectively classifying them as individuals to facilitate their transformation into potential personifications of the category of labour. The 'value' of producing an objective, abstract measure of educational value within the finite time available variously relegates practical, subjective, human experience to a secondary concern. This produces an antinomy between a child's desire to play and the objective, social need to reproduce class relations through the creation of a labour commodity. For the teacher, play gets in the way of their class need to successfully personify the category of labour, for the pupil, play hampers their success in school and potential as a future worker, for 'society', play prevents the creation of a potential labour force and so economic growth. The need, and so value of practically producing a world of objective things occurs despite the benefits of play for the child being widely understood. Neoliberal primary education can be understood to relegate the needs of the individual to the social need to produce labour; it relegates subjective needs to the objective need to reproduce social class relations. Struggles therefore ensue, as neoliberal primary education in England proceeds through the production of objective, quantitative measures within finite time that variously and necessarily struggles, in-against-and-beyond, the practical experience of the subjects engaged in it.

6.6 Conclusion

In part 1, the form and content of practice observed in teacher-led and play sessions were considered and it was suggested that they were distinct types of practice. In part 2, Marxian value theory was applied to the observations, along with the English primary neoliberal framework, to develop the educational value production (EVP) model. EVP transforms neoliberal primary education in England into a verb and allows the contrary forms of practice to be considered with respect to the economic need to produce human capital through the objective measurement of educational attainment and progress. It was argued that time engaged in play prevents objective classification from occurring within the finite time that defines the commensurable process. As such, play prevents a

'legitimate' process of education from proceeding that is defined by such terms. This offered part of an explanation as to why neoliberal primary education in England is antagonistic to play. In part 3, it was suggested that human capital theory and EVP's abstract commensurability define neoliberal primary education in England as an ideological and contradictory process. It was argued that it is contradictory because its aim of reproducing a working class by raising educational productivity through commensurability, undermines neoliberal education's own normative commitment to formal equality, its commensurability both represents and aims to constitute. Raising productivity by not acknowledging context, it was argued, is ideological and representative of a vicious circularity. The vicious circularity occurs because neoliberal primary education in England undermines its own meritocratic foundation as it translates and legitimises the material inequalities of class through objective classification. The contradictory nature of neoliberal primary education, it was suggested, both reflected and constituted an inescapable ideological tension at the heart of neoliberal primary education in England, liberal education more broadly and liberal capitalist modernity as a contradictory social totality. The tension can be understood as an expression of liberal capitalism's democratic tendency through a normative commitment to formal equality in antinomy with a simultaneous need for a class relation based on inequality in property for economic reproduction. In part 4, the perspective shifted to locate the tension between abstract equality and material inequality, as expressed in the practical experiences of struggle that defined the observed engagement. It was argued that the objective classification that occurs within and through EVP can be considered a process of fetishisation that transforms social relations and practical activity into things, abstract figures of attainment and progress and ultimately a working class objectively and quantitatively defined. The class necessity for teachers and pupils to engage in EVP due to their need to personify the category of labour was considered with reference to the practical experiences of struggle the tension produced. A hierarchical class dynamic was located within EVP, as its abstract ends were prioritised over its concrete means. This was expressed by teachers as they struggled to successfully personify the category of labour by managing pupils who were understood by neoliberal primary education in England as a potential working class. The EVP model theoretically and tentatively suggests that neoliberal education produces a disproportionate need to engage pupils in its dynamic between schools in England, relative to pupil class position, resulting in disproportionate play

access. A disproportionate need to engage in EVP emerges due to EVP's ideological emphasis on productivity through commensurability. By emphasising productivity via commensurability, EVP absorbs the impact of material, class inequalities that become fetishised within a school's progress score as a relative measure of the efficient use of socially necessary labour time. There was some empirical evidence of this process occurring within the school used for the fieldwork, as EVP produced a disproportionate need to engage some pupils in its dynamic relative to their material security, resulting in corresponding inequalities in access to play. This represented a vicious circularity as disproportionate experiences of struggle were pursued to remedy disproportionate experiences of struggle. Such engagement occurred to facilitate the personification of the category of labour, with the necessity to personify the category of labour producing the disproportionate experiences in the first instance. In part 5, it was argued that neoliberal primary education in England produces a contradictory antagonism to play because of the necessity of fetishisation as the form of social class relations, which values the reproduction of things over concrete, practical human experience. Neoliberal primary education's focus on quantitative transformation can be understood to represent social class as it was reproduced and constituted within and through idiosyncratic experiences of struggle. Neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England can therefore be considered in the context of a legitimate need to reproduce economic value as a singular means of life through quantities of things, which struggles with play, a contrary productive activity, that facilitates child development within and through a form of activity concerned with qualitative transformation.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Thesis

Neoliberalism and neoliberal education in England have developed in tandem with my personal, lived experience. I want to suggest that the object of this thesis, neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England, emerges from, is immanent to, the same contradictory tendencies that have variously defined my subjective experience of neoliberalism and neoliberal education. As such, this thesis aims to be a reflexive response to an objective experience. Working on the project has had value in a double sense, as it has proceeded in the hope that the development of such reflexivity would have some objective value as an original contribution to knowledge.

As a practically reflexive immanent critique, the work has not primarily been concerned with the production of new findings. This is because:

> 'Immanent critique… refocuses the 'object' of research, from the production of original findings and new truths, towards a critical examination of truths themselves, it asks after the validity of the categories in virtue of which X counts as true' (Gunn 1987, p.89)

The thesis has sought to consider neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play as a totality, in relation to its own normative assumptions. As opposed to what Horkheimer described as 'traditional theory' (in Best et al. 2018, p.2), the work's contribution to knowledge, I believe, is in the development of an original, practically reflexive approach through which neoliberal primary education's dualistic and ideological nature can be considered. Considering neoliberal primary education in England as a specific type of productive activity, EVP, allows its positive and negative, fetishised character to be revealed. On the one hand, there are the 'legitimate' and 'positive' abstract measures of attainment and progress that aim to support increases in educational productivity and the development of human capital to facilitate labour market access and economic growth. Together with a focus on the conceptual (abstract objective measures of attainment and progress), EVP also permits consideration of neoliberal primary education's 'illegitimate', negative character, as it reveals how the conceptual is produced from concrete, idiosyncratic practice defined by social class relations. EVP

allowed a dialectical, negative critique of neoliberal primary education to proceed that allowed the abstract and conceptual to be considered in relation to the difficult and antagonistic practice that produced it, a high-stakes experience of struggle that's antagonistic to any other practice, such as play, that prevents engagement in it from occurring.

Through a practically reflexive consideration of both the positive and negative aspects of neoliberal primary education, contradictory antinomies were revealed. For instance, that individuals are simultaneously defined by social relations, that pupils are both equal and unequal, and that commensurability is unfair. The eighteen findings, therefore, do not represent the end of the research as such, as they were used to dialectically consider the material with the ideal, following Horkheimer, to allow 'the existent in its historical context' to be considered in relation to 'the claims of its conceptual principles' (2004, p.123). The empirical findings should be viewed in relation to how they inform the practically reflexive analysis, and vice versa, to allow neoliberal primary education in England to be considered in its totality, with respect to its contradictory, fetishised nature. Below is a summary of the reasons why this research was initiated, how it developed, and a description of the negative and positive, dualistic aspects of neoliberal education, which provide an answer to the question of why neoliberal primary education in England is antagonistic to pupil play.

7.1.1 Unexplained Contradiction

An examination of the current literature on play deprivation in relation to neoliberal education revealed an unexplained contradiction. If neoliberal education has refocused educational processes around raising educational productivity, and if play raises the productive capacities of children, why is play in decline in English primary education where neoliberal reforms have gone the furthest? Cultural turn arguments have suggested that neoliberal education's antagonism to play can be explained by its normative valuation of economic concerns over broader educational, pedagogical, and child development concerns. The economisation argument does not fully explain the contradiction, however, because to oppose play when play raises a child's productive capacity amounts to an anti-economic position on human capital theory's own terms. It was therefore suggested that the question of neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England revolves around what constitutes productivity within it. To

adequately consider the contradiction between neoliberal education and play in England, it was argued, it is necessary to look beneath cultural notions, symbols, discourses and nouns, to locate neoliberal primary education in England within practice, as a labour process or as a verb. A cultural approach alone is inadequate to consider this question because neoliberal primary education, its economisation, its relationship to economic categories and antagonism to play, requires an approach that can consider both the material and ideal, economic and cultural, as they relate to its practical content and form.

7.1.2 Approach and Method

The separation of the cultural and economic spheres that has emerged from traditional readings of Marx and has continued within the cultural turn has been a significant issue for social and educational research. It's been argued that the separation is a key reason why neoliberal education's antagonism to play has not been adequately conceptualised. It has been suggested that traditional Marxian analysis has, by and large, emphasised form at the expense of content, whilst cultural turn research has emphasised content at the expense of form. As a critique of economic categories, it has been suggested that Open Marxism provides a solution to these theoretical and methodological issues by locating the cultural subject and the economic object within practice. With Open Marxism as its foundation, a unique, empirically based approach was developed to examine the form and content of neoliberal education and play as they were observed in one primary school in the North of England. Eighteen empirical findings were gathered from fieldwork that provided a concrete foundation that allowed the practical negative: the human practice and social relations, to be considered in relation to neoliberal primary education's positive focus on abstract measures of attainment and progress. Consideration of the form and content of observed practice informed the thesis as an Open Marxism-based, practically reflexive, immanent critique of neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England.

7.1.3 EVP

An Open Marxism-based reading of value theory was used to consider the eighteen empirical findings and the broader neoliberal education system in England from which the educational value production (EVP) model was developed. Marxian value theory

proved a particularly appropriate tool to consider neoliberal primary education in England, which allowed a negative critique to emerge. EVP transformed neoliberal primary education in England into a verb through which it could be considered as a specific form of productive activity. As a standardising process, EVP provides a framework through which to consider practice within neoliberal primary education in England more broadly, as Open Marxism's grounding in Adorno's negative dialectics allowed practice to be considered with respect to both its universal and particular dimensions.

A central difference between Marx's use of value theory and the EVP model is that Marx looked to conceptualise the production of commodities in general. EVP was developed in reference to the contradiction this thesis sought to examine, in which a tension was evident between English primary education's normative commitment to the development of the child and the need to reproduce the category of labour to facilitate economic growth. This normative commitment to the child is somewhat unique to education, and it is particularly relevant when considering early years and primary education; production in general does not share this commitment to the degree it exists in contemporary English primary education. As such, EVP was developed with this in mind.

Human capital theory reveals that neoliberal education's economisation has refocused educational processes more intensively around the reproduction of the labour commodity and the marginal productivity of labour to facilitate potential economic growth. In this sense, neoliberal education in England can be understood as the expansion of value production into educational processes, which can be considered a process of commodity production or commodification. Open Marxism's emphasis on 'potential' was particularly relevant with regard to the production of a potential labour commodity, as it revealed the depth and extent of value production within contemporary English education. The analysis broadens the discussion of the 'commodification of education' beyond the more commonly considered tension between public and private provision. That neoliberal primary education is not discussed directly in terms of reproducing a labour commodity and raising the marginal productivity of labour as economic things, beyond the claim that education is looking to increase prosperity and growth, expresses, I believe, the tension between economic

development and child development contained within the contradiction between neoliberal primary education and play. Considering pupils as an objective thing, a potential labour commodity, quantitatively defined, is at best ethically and morally suspect in relation to young children. But regardless, economic, material reproduction must proceed, *in*, yet this occurs by considering subjective, practical, human needs, secondary, to the reproduction of the economic object. This tension both reflects and is constitutive of struggle that necessarily underpins a simultaneous, contradictory, critical tendency, *against-and-beyond*.

7.1.4 Why is neoliberal education in England antagonistic to pupil play?

A practically reflexive analysis of the eighteen empirical findings, which considered the content and form of practice observed within teacher-led and play sessions, revealed them to be contrary forms of productive activity. EVP revealed that practice within teacher-led sessions was antagonistic and contradictory because it was engaged in to produce objective commensurable data (substance of educational value), within finite time (magnitude of educational value) and a potentially infinite notion of progress to allow an unknown 'other' to 'choose' within England's quasi-market of education (form of educational value). It was concluded that EVP's focus on the production of abstract, objective quantification means EVP is a difficult, antagonistic, and contradictory practice for subjects to engage in in the first instance, which is antagonistic to any practice that prevents such engagement in the second instance. This offers part of an answer to the central research question. Play is a concrete practice that cannot be objectified, and so it cannot be included within EVP as a standardising process. Play, therefore, will always sit outside EVP and reduce the amount of labour time available to engage in its singular focus on abstractly objectifying educational experience. Play prevents 'legitimate' learning and educational progress from occurring when it is defined by such terms. As a high-stakes, competitive process, therefore, neoliberal primary education in England is variously antagonistic to pupil play.

7.1.5 What is the relationship between economisation and neoliberal educational practice?

Using EVP to conceptualise neoliberal primary education in England provides an answer to the first sub-question: what is the relationship between economisation and neoliberal educational practice? Neoliberal education's economisation is founded on human capital theory that emphasises a link between educational productivity, the reproduction of the category of labour, labour productivity, and potential economic growth. To produce human capital, it is necessary to objectify educational processes through measurement and quantification. Human capital theory is based on the assumptions of neoclassical economics, which holds that markets are a positive social good. Objective measurement of educational processes enables the judgement of levels of progress and attainment within England's quasi-market of primary schooling. This is understood to increase efficiency and effectiveness within a positive feedback loop as teachers and schools compete to produce the same educational standards within the limited time available to them. The raising of attainment and progress, conceived of as an objective, quantitative transformation, is the end that human capital theory, and so neoliberal primary education in England, aims to achieve. This occurs to reproduce a workforce that will produce potential rises in the marginal rate of labour and so economic growth, abstractly and quantitatively defined. As a specific form of productive activity, neoliberal primary education in England can be understood in relation to human capital theory's emphasis on producing linear, potentially infinite amounts of attainment and progress, conceived abstractly, objectively, and quantitatively, to raise the productive capacity of a potential workforce.

7.1.6 What is the relationship between neoliberal education and class reproduction?

That neoliberal education's economisation has refocused primary education around the category of labour and labour productivity provides an answer to sub-question two: what is the relationship between neoliberal education and class reproduction? It's been argued that the contradictory tension between ends and means that EVP reveals, which is contained within it, in which EVP's end of producing an abstract measure of educational attainment is variously antagonistic to its means, the concrete needs of the subjects engaged in it, presupposes a class tension with respect to property ownership.

It's been argued that this contradictory tension is foundational to liberal education and liberal capitalist modernity as an antagonistic social totality.

Analysis of EVP reveals a liberal, normative commitment to formal equality and meritocracy within its commensurability, whilst its human capital theory basis also reveals it to be committed to the reproduction of the category of labour and, so, a social class relation based on inequality in property. It's been argued that this tension is fundamental to capitalist modernity as it has proceeded through the expansion of democratic rights to a wider constituency, whilst it has developed materially by reproducing a class relation based on inequality in property through the personification of economic categories. The contradictory tension is so foundational to liberal capitalism, it's been argued, that it underpins ideological or partial positions that are expressed most explicitly across the left-right ideological spectrum.

Within neoliberal primary education in England, this ideological, class tension is expressed, in the first instance, within the assumption that teachers are responsible for the production of the substance of educational value. If we acknowledge that teachers are working class because they must successfully personify the category of labour to subsist, the assumption leverages a teacher's class position, their dependence on the category of labour, so they must engage more intensely in EVP. This class leveraging has been central to raising educational standards and progress for all English school pupils during the neoliberal period. The class analysis of teachers was conceived around the form and content of practice necessary for them to successfully personify the category of labour, in which the antagonistic nature of EVP revealed neoliberal primary education in England to be representative of a more intensive, practical, existential experience of struggle, in-against-and-beyond the category of labour. EVP allowed this contradictory experience to be considered in empirically observed practice. As teachers variously looked to successfully personify the category of labour in EVP, which was simultaneously an antagonistic, practical experience, against-and-beyond EVP, as it prevented them from engaging in a range of practices necessary to satisfy their needs. It's been argued that as manager of the classroom, it was the teacher's class need to successfully personify the category of labour that variously and practically prevented pupils from playing, as neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play is produced within and through the teachers's struggle to successfully engage in EVP. The

contradictory nature of this antagonism was evident in the gathered empirical data, as teachers acknowledged that play was valuable and vital for child development, yet they also stated there was not enough time for pupils to play.

It's been argued that the ideological and class nature of productivity via commensurability as represented by EVP, was significant with respect to the class position of pupils and their practical experience. Neoliberal education in England has raised productivity by leveraging teachers' class position, but this has come at the cost of undermining its own commitment to formal equality and meritocracy its commensurability both represents and aims to constitute. A vicious circularity was evident as neoliberal primary education's normative commitment to formal equality has raised educational productivity *and* much more directly, classified and constituted a potential working class. It's been argued that neoliberal primary education's emphasis on abstract commensurability is prejudicial, partial and ideological, with respect to a pupil's material security or class position, as it objectively reproduces social class through classification.

EVP allowed the ideological tension between abstract equality and material inequality to be considered in practice, as pupils were observed engaging in EVP to produce objective classification. It was argued that due to the material inequalities that underpin the class experience of pupils, it takes longer for materially insecure pupils to attain the same standards and progress relative to their materially secure peers. Because the labour-time available to schools is the temporal standard through which schools are made commensurable within England's quasi-market of primary education, neoliberal primary education's emphasis on commensurability to raise productivity was considered ideological because it fetishises these temporal inequalities within the objective classification it produces. It was argued that neoliberal education's ideological focus on productivity produces distortions in attainment and progress measures with respect to the magnitude of value as it relates to a pupil's material security.

Beyond distortions in objective classification, the analysis suggests the bias with respect to the magnitude of value as it relates to a pupil's material security has important practical implications. Although schools in England have access to the same amount of abstract time, the concrete material inequalities of class mean a more intensive engagement is required to produce the same relative outcomes in relation to a

school's cohort of disadvantaged pupils within a quasi-market of education. EVP theoretically suggests that neoliberal primary education in England creates a greater need to engage pupils in EVP relative to the material security of a school's cohort. When we consider the antagonistic nature of EVP, these greater pressures would equate to such pupils (teachers and schools) enduring a more intensive experience of struggle, in-against-and-beyond, relative to a pupil's material security or class position. It further suggests that these pressures would produce a greater antagonism to play between schools in England, relative to a pupil's material security or class position.

The conclusions about disproportionate experiences between schools in England lack empirical support and are grounded in theoretical considerations. There was some empirical evidence supporting the conclusions within the class year-groups observed in the thesis. Some pupils were observed to engage in extra EVP and play less than their peers because they were deemed to be either behind with their attainment and progress, or because they had engaged in 'bad behaviour'. It has been argued that if these pupils reflected national trends, a good proportion were likely to have been materially disadvantaged. EVP allows us to consider this extra engagement in a twofold way. Additional pressure to engage the most materially and educationally insecure can be regarded as socially just, as it may help such pupils secure potential employment, higher incomes, and, in turn, broader access to a range of commodities in the future. But when considered from the perspective of quality, practice, and social relations, a vicious circularity is apparent, as neoliberal primary education in England can be understood to intensify class as an antagonistic lived experience. The analysis of the content and form of practice through EVP reveals that such extra engagement would equate to a more antagonistic, contradictory and existential experience of struggle for pupils who disproportionally endure difficult, contradictory and existential experiences of struggle.

It has been argued that neoliberal primary education in England represents a process of fetishisation that transforms social relations into abstract things and denies the practical activity that constitutes class as lived experience. This occurs to produce a potential economic thing, a labour commodity, that, it's hoped, will eventually realise objective, quantifiable, economic value by raising the marginal productivity of labour. Fetishisation, it's been argued, is the necessary form of social relations within capitalist

modernity, the society of commodity producers, as social class relations are contradictorily constituted by abstract individuals. These findings, arguments and conclusions provide an answer to sub-question ii) what is the relationship between neoliberal education and class reproduction? The analysis located class reproduction both in things, abstract measures of attainment and progress, and within the quality of practical experience. Neoliberal primary education in England has been designed to facilitate the reproduction of pupils as things, an adequately productive, potential working class, objectively and quantitatively defined. This occurs within and through a social class dynamic, in which the teacher's class position is reproduced by leveraging them in an experience of struggle, to reproduce a potential working class by managing pupil engagement in EVP as an experience of struggle. Engagement in neoliberal primary education in England can be considered a contradictory, antagonistic, existential experience of struggle, in-against-and-beyond the category of labour, as it relates to both teachers and pupils.

7.1.7 Why is Neoliberal Primary Education in England Antagonistic to Pupil Play?

This brings us back to the central research question: why is neoliberal education in English primary schooling antagonistic to pupil play? Neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play occurs because class reproduction is constituted by practical, antagonistic experiences of struggle that are necessary to produce the objective, economic things needed for capitalist development to proceed. Neoliberal primary education in England sacrifices concrete, practical, qualitative experience to the efficient production of things, objective, abstract quantities. The economic necessity to produce standards, human capital, a working class, and labour productivity, objectively and quantitatively defined, for pupils, teachers, and society, is detrimental to play because play cannot be objectified; it cannot be standardised. Play prevents the production of such objective things of 'value', yet, regardless, play supports child development through a form of practice in which its object is the quality of subjective experience. Neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play emerges from the social need to reproduce objective class relations, which is variously antagonistic to the subject, the child's desire to play. Neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England can therefore be understood to represent a contradictory antagonism in which the economic necessity for capitalist development to proceed through abstraction,

quantification, and objectification is in an antagonistic, contradictory struggle, in-against-and-beyond, concrete human development as it occurs through the subjective engagement that defines play. Neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play is an example of how capitalist development proceeds within and through objectifying, and so self-denying practice; this contradictory class experience is both objectively representative of and constitutive of class in a fetishised form.

7.2 Concluding Remarks

Michael Barber, who was instrumental in developing neoliberal education in England, begins his book on the 'Challenge of Achieving Targets' (2007) with Marx's line from the 'Thesis on Feuerbach', that 'philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it' (2007, p.3). In quoting Marx, Barber was looking to address his critics, many within the Labour movement, by justifying the New Labour project that had proclaimed 'the class war… over' (Blair 1999) as it embraced neoliberal capitalism amongst a post-Cold War euphoria that believed ideological conflicts had been settled and history had ended. Barber was suggesting that whilst much of the 'old' left had been impotently criticising capitalism from the side, he and his New Labour colleagues had obtained power and succeeded where they had repeatedly failed. They were changing the world, raising standards and attainment in English education, and improving the prospects of English school pupils, regardless of their class background. This study of neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England highlights the problems with Barber's position.

Play is a direct and immediate means of life for the child, in which the practical and free expression of subjective needs variously facilitates a child's objective social, physical, cognitive and emotional development. Children's play is a form of productive activity, a means of production, in which its ends *and* means are intimately intertwined within and through the totality of the child's development. By contrast, neoliberal primary education in England seeks to produce an objective, quantitative measure of educational attainment, to facilitate the production of economic objectivity and a singular notion of value as a means of life. Neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play is representative of a clash of values, but this is a practical clash born of social relations based on inequality in property and constituted by struggle; the necessity to engage in a certain form of practice that can be objectified and measured to facilitate the

reproduction of economic objectivity. Marx's notion of primitive accumulation is particularly apt for understanding the expansion of economic production into English primary education, which aims to strengthen and facilitate capitalist value as a singular, dominant means of life. The neoliberal economisation of educational processes facilitates economic growth by producing a more intensive dependence on value as a singular means of life, which, in the context of a high-stakes competition over the efficient use of labour time, separates children from engaging in play as a contrary, non-value-creating means.

The separation of subjects from the objective, material world is presupposed within neoliberal education and underpins neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play. EVP leverages the teacher's working-class condition of separation to engage them in a practice that is contradictorily antagonistic, a practice that further separates teachers from the objective world they inhabit, including a physical, emotional, and psychological separation from the pupils they teach. This proceeds by engaging pupils in a way that limits, yet intensifies their engagement, as it variously prevents pupils from engaging in play, as the process aims, reasonably and legitimately, to secure for them future labour market access and potential economic prosperity. The need for fairness through a meritocratic system *and* the need for productivity through classification presuppose a class of dispossessed, separated workers, who must compete to secure a livelihood by successfully personifying the category of labour.

Neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play emphasises one of the most fundamental, yet underacknowledged features of working-class experience, its unfreedom. Neoliberal education's antagonism to play in England is a struggle over agency, in which the necessity to produce economic value creates significant practical limitations for subjects who must struggle within and through EVP's nexus. Within capitalist modernity, working-class subjects are free, to one degree or another, to choose which noun they will personify: a teacher, baker or plumber, for instance. But fierce competition over resources means such workers have much less choice about how such nouns are constituted in practice. It is the condition of the working class that means teachers and pupils are compelled to struggle within and through EVP, to successfully, and for pupils, to potentially personify the category of labour, by

practically engaging in ways outside of their control. It is the practical unfreedom of class that underpins neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play in England.

This brings us back to Barber and his use of Marx. The unfreedom of class relations based on inequality in property is variously expressed as a practical compulsion, an unconscious, naturalised reflex, which means it is *necessary* for social individuals to personify economic categories, to produce quantities of commodities, and so growth at ever higher rates. Neoliberal education has placed this reflex much more directly within primary education in England, which means the pupil's natural desire to engage in free, self-reflexive practice is increasingly relegated to a secondary concern because the necessity to produce educational value, and so economic value, requires the reproduction of objective social class relations. Despite liberalism's normative commitment to freedom, neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play suggests that such claims are at best limited when the necessity for material, economic development, within and through economic categories, is acknowledged.

Marx noted 'the realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends' (1894/1991, p.959). This study of neoliberal education's antagonism to play is a reflexive act that aims to facilitate consideration of economic necessity along with issues of practical freedom, education, and child development. Such reflexivity allows us to consider: to what degree are the subject's interests and agency necessary within educational processes? What aspects of education are necessary, and what can or should be sacrificed to facilitate value production? Is it necessary to undermine liberalism's own commitment to formal equality to raise educational productivity? Is it necessary for educational processes to be concerned with the total development of the child, their physical, emotional, psychological and social development?

Contrary to Barber, neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play reveals that changing the world, practice, is not a virtue in and of itself. Instead, neoliberal education's antagonism to play suggests it is necessary to critically and reflexively consider the social relations and forms of activity that shape how and why change occurs. Marcuse described how 'the constitution of the world occurs behind the backs of the individuals; yet it is their work' (1968/2009, p.111). Neoliberal education's antagonism to play asks that we more fully cognise educational practice, to consider

both the material and ideal, economics and culture, subject and object; it asks that we reflect on the value, legitimacy and purpose of the practice we engage in. Such reflexivity is foundational to any meaningful notion of education, learning and democratic participation, that looks not merely to change 'the world' but to a conscious constitution of the world. Practice is constitutive of those who engage in it; the point, therefore, is not simply to change 'the world', it is to consider how we change ourselves and each other.

7.3 Contribution to Knowledge

7.3.1 Empirical Marxian Educational Research

The practically reflexive approach developed for the thesis represents a unique contribution to Marxian educational research that has largely been theory-based. With Open Marxism as its foundation, the approach addresses the separation of culture and economics that has proved variously limiting and distorting for social and educational research. The separation has often erased the subject due to a focus on 'economic objectivity', or prioritised subjective, cultural concerns, without adequate consideration of objective material conditions and social relations. By locating both the cultural and economic within practical activity, this thesis is a response to a current need to 'not… lose sight of the importance of the economic side of social life' (Fraser and Jaeggi 2023, p.7) as it provides an answer to the question of 'how does one connect the base and superstructure?' (Jameson 2024, p.237). Such issues, I believe, are especially pertinent in a social context in which a growing, illiberal, authoritarian turn leverages class grievances by successfully emphasising issues of culture.

7.3.2 Centrality of Class

By locating the economic within neoliberal primary education as it relates to the personification of economic categories, the thesis expands on Rikowski's work by providing empirical accounts of the 'forms of value' within contemporary primary education in England that he has noted are 'currently lacking' (in Hall et al. 2023, p.62). Considering neoliberal primary education in England through EVP allows a reconsideration of Au's argument that 'high stakes, standardised testing' is a measure of 'socially necessary labour time' as a 'very broad measure of a broadly socioeconomic

process of resource distribution' (in Hall et al. 2023, p.236). By revealing the significance of teacher labour as the substance of educational value, contrary to Au, EVP suggests that socially necessary labour time is intimately bound to neoliberal education's productivity as it occurs through the intensification of experiences of struggle as it relates to teachers' working-class experience.

The conceptualisation of class as a contradictory and existential experience of struggle develops Ozga and Lawn's (1981/2017) notion of 'proletarianization' as it reveals the contradictory nature of teacher class experience beyond something simply imposed upon them. The work expands the notion of proletarianization by providing empirical examples of teacher engagement in a contradictory, antagonistic, existential practice that reveals the idiosyncratic ways that teachers are active participants in their own working-class experience. Conceptualising class as a contradictory experience as it idiosyncratically and practically occurs within the classroom provides original, empirical perspectives that develop Das's notion of the 'classroom as a site of struggle' (in Hall et al. 2023, pp.183-200).

The limitations on agency that neoliberal education's antagonism to play represents contribute to discussions about the importance of pupil agency within education (Chapparo and Hooper 2002, p.300). The class dynamic observed in relation to play access can be considered with Maynard et al (2013) who found that 'underachieving' children respond most positively when given opportunities to direct their own learning through play-based activities. Similarly, Goodhall and Atkinson (2019) found 'children with low learning self-concept or those considered 'underachieving' may be further disadvantaged by curricular inflexibility (2019, p.1704). In the context of such work, this thesis contributes to a broader discussion of the 'developmental appropriateness' (2019, pp.1704-1705) of neoliberal primary education, especially with regard to its impact on socially and economically vulnerable children.

7.3.3 Ideology and Neoliberal Education

Cultural turn-based research has tended to view neoliberal education ideologically through a focus on ideas, as a 'master narrative' (Ball 2003, p.226) or 'regime of truth' (Moss 2009, p.43) whilst Vandenbroeck et al (2022) have considered neoliberal education through Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony (2022, p.22). As a critique of

economic categories, the work has highlighted the ideological nature of neoliberal practice, which, following Jameson (2002), could be considered a hermeneutics of practice, as practical activity has been theorised in relation to the ideological nature of value production through the personification of economic categories.

The EVP model reveals how concrete engagement is undervalued in relation to the abstract ends it aims to produce, which both reflects and constitutes the inequality of class relations presupposed by economic categories. By emphasising the ideological nature of such practice, a form of value is revealed that is somewhat outside of immediate cognition and normative assumptions. This was evident in the empirical data, as teachers' practices variously contradicted the normative values that teachers stated they held. As a practice, EVP was variously and practically ideological, it was prejudicial to pupils depending upon their material security, it was antagonistic to the value of play as a contrary type of productive behaviour, whilst it was disproportionately antagonistic to the 'value' of play in relation to a pupil's material security.

Viewing neoliberal education in this way reveals the depth and extent of capitalist value production, allowing us to reconsider the notion of neoliberal education as the 'commodification of education' viewed solely in terms of public and private provision (Vandenbroeck et al. 2022). By emphasising how the need to reproduce the labour commodity, and so class relations, is an inescapable aspect of liberal education, the work reveals the limitations of viewing commodification just with regard to private sector provision. This emphasis builds on Richardson's finding that 'good care and commodification are both theoretically and practically at odds with each other' (2022, p.107) by locating such tensions between neoliberal education and play within publicly provided primary schooling in England.

The essential nature of work, or labour, for teachers and pupils, as it relates to education and broader capitalist reproduction, reveals some of the limitations of approaching play access through a rights-based approach (Knee et al. 2006, Brown 2010, Gunnarsdottir 2014, Gray 2015, Lewis 2017, Charles and Bellinson 2019, Doyle and Sahlberg 2019, International Play Association 2019, Clark 2022, Raising the Nation/The Play Commission 2025). By revealing how the tension between neoliberal primary education and play is produced by legitimate concerns/needs about/for labour reproduction, a

genuine antinomy emerges between the need for both work and play. This shifts the discussion, from one that abstractly and partially seeks to impose the right of the child to play that often fails to consider the child's economic need to reproduce themselves, toward a broader, more complex discussion. Here it becomes possible to acknowledge both the necessity and limitations of labour which, as such, critically opens the economic categories of labour, productivity, and value, through which alternative notions can be developed, against-and-beyond. Such considerations challenge the assumption that 'productivity is almost everything' (Krugman in Haynes 2020, p.1) as it reveals that quality of experience matters substantially, particularly as it relates to child development and educational engagement.

7.4 Limitations

Observations about play access as it relates to pupils' class position within year groups were discovered in retrospect, following the completion of the fieldwork. They could have been strengthened if I'd been aware of them earlier and requested background information on pupils who were observed to engage in extra EVP and played disproportionately less. It has been theoretically suggested that there is a relationship between the material security of a school's cohort, the necessity to engage in EVP, and pupil access to play between schools in England. Having involved other schools in the research, especially those that serve different socioeconomic groups from the one used for the fieldwork, could have helped substantiate and develop this.

As TAs played a central role in managing the free-play sessions, in retrospect, it was an oversight not to have included them in the interviews. The TA's relationship to play was only fully recognised when data was being analysed following the completion of the fieldwork. The pupils' voices were also absent, which may have provided important insights into their thoughts about their simultaneous need to work and play. I was continuously aware that obtaining primary classroom access at all during the COVID pandemic was an achievement that was precarious. A recognition of this, and an acknowledgement of the unprecedented pressures staff at the school were experiencing, did contribute to a reluctance to both consider and request wider access.

7.5 Implications

The notion that EVP is a difficult, contradictory, antagonistic, and existential experience of struggle is a highly abstract expression that nevertheless has aimed 'to lend a voice to suffering' as 'objectivity… weighs upon the subject' (Adorno 1966/2007, pp.17-18). Substantial, concrete issues of suffering within English neoliberal education are real and ongoing. This is reflected in declining teacher retention (Education Executive 2022) and declining teacher mental health and well-being (Jepson and Forrest 2006, Day and Smethem 2009, Skinner et al. 2019). The death of Ruth Perry and the national reaction it provoked (Adams 2023, Walker 2023, Weaver 2025) is an indicator of the scale of ongoing problems. There has been an explosion of health conditions amongst children and young people that relate to play deprivation, which, at its most extreme, is expressed within a substantial rise in levels of self-harm and suicide (Haidt 2024). Controversy, disquiet, and turbulence within English education have led to some change. From September 2019, Ofsted looked to emphasise quality within inspections (Ofsted 2019) through a focus on the curriculum, whilst Ruth Perry's death has led to some proposed, if controversial, changes to the Ofsted framework (Weaver 2025). The decline in children's physical and mental health has led to an enquiry into the 'state of play' within England and English schooling that has recommended the adoption of a national play strategy (Raising the Nation/The Play Commission 2025).

The acknowledgement that neoliberal primary education in England is an existential, antagonistic, and contradictory class experience of struggle speaks directly and immediately to these issues. The thesis does not offer easy answers, but it provides a foundation from which the ideological positions that justify such suffering can be addressed and navigated. In the first instance, the work suggests that an adequately critical approach is vital to consider English neoliberal primary education in relation to its own normative standards and values. An appropriately critical and reflexive approach must sit alongside the good faith of those who look to, and presently work within, a system of education that's constituted by experiences of discomfort, pain and suffering.

7.6 Further Research

The EVP model theoretically suggests neoliberal primary education produces a more contradictory and antagonistic lived experience for pupils and teachers between schools in England, in relation to a school's cohort of disadvantaged pupils. This could be further examined through empirical research that uses a broader range of schools serving different socioeconomic cohorts. Studies could, for instance, consider how antagonistic experiences relate to pupil 'bad behaviour', teacher retention, and a 'race to the top' within the teacher labour market.

A recent report has described a 'significant decline in arts education in England that has been caused by funding measures and performance measures' that has meant 'the number of art teachers in English state secondary schools has dropped by 27% between 2011 and 2024' (Ashton et al. 2024, p.9). Given that EVP reveals that neoliberal education sacrifices quality for quantity, a study of the decline of arts education in England could proceed by examining it in relation to quality of experience and the related issue of time.

The strong focus on class within the thesis could be criticised as a form of economic reductionism that fails 'to acknowledge the power of other kinds of domination that are not reducible to class differences or economic effects' (Cicerchia 2021, p.606). The thesis has emphasised how the separated condition of the working class produces a compulsion to struggle, to engage in a form of practice that is antagonistic in itself, and to play. This is not to suggest that issues of race, gender, sexuality, etc., are not important; rather, the thesis has sought to address issues of class given the shortcomings of cultural turn-based analyses of neoliberal education which have broadly ignored the category as it relates to 'economics'.

Economic categories, and the class relations they presuppose, must be acknowledged to grasp social life within capitalist modernity adequately. Social life proceeds within and through the personification of economic categories that variously determine the quality of life that social individuals experience. Such activity occurs in patterns by age, gender, race, sexuality, familial background, geography, etc. For instance, Warin's work reveals the extent to which the primary school workforce is gendered 'a tiny minority of early childhood teachers are male… with a global average of 2% or 3%'

(2018, p.v). As a critique of economic categories that reveals a bridge between culture and economics as individuals variously personify economic categories, further research could be developed to consider the inter-relationships between class, gender and race, as they are expressed within contemporary education and relate to the reproduction of labour.

The foundational and totalising nature of economic categories offers significant opportunities for interdisciplinary research. Neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play is suggestive of a form of productivity beyond 'economic productivity'. This allows questions of education as they relate to human and economic development to be considered with a growing body of scholarship examining human flourishing (VanderWeele 2017, Węziak-Białowolska et al. 2019, Höltge et al. 2023). The tension between neoliberal education and play as it relates to the reproduction of a potential labour force, labour productivity, and economic growth, raises similar questions being posed within post-growth, de-growth (Meadows and Club of 1972, Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2013, Jackson 2016, Pilling 2018, Raworth 2018, Hickel 2020, Jackson 2021, Saitō 2023, Schutter 2024) and post-work scholarship (Weeks 2011, Srnicek and Williams 2016, Bastani 2019, Dinerstein and Pitts 2021, Horgan 2021, Jaffe 2021, Lewis and Stronge 2021, Hester and Srnicek 2023).

O'Neil has discussed the issue of value, commensurability, and incommensurability in relation to the commodification of the environment, as he discusses a tension between the 'value monism' (in Spash 2017, pp.227-236) of market economics and the 'plural and incommensurable' (in Spash 2017, p.234) values of nature. Douai suggests that the relationship between commodification and environmental destruction raises the question of the 'ethical limits of commodification' (in Spash 2017, p.61). This study of neoliberal primary education's antagonism to play raises similar questions that could be conceived around the 'ethical limits of commensurability' as it relates to both the developmental and economic needs of children and young people. This allows the contradictory nature of neoliberal education's antagonism to play to be considered alongside similar processes that define capitalist modernity's relationship to the natural environment; as progress and growth are attained, quantitatively, abstractly and contradictorily, in-against-and-beyond, the organic foundations of human life.

Chapter 8: Appendix

8.1 Consent Email Sent to all Parents/Guardians

Re: [External] Letter for parents

PP

Parry, Paul (Student) <p.parry@lancaster.ac.uk>

To: [redacted]

Thursday, 26 November 2020 at 16:08

Dear Parent/Guardian

I'm writing to inform you that a researcher from Lancaster University will be observing for a number of hours in [redacted] from January 15th 2021. The researcher, Mr Paul Parry, is looking to examine how play is used within learning in order to broaden debate about the role of play in primary schools.

All observations will be completely anonymous. The names of staff, pupils and the school itself **will not** be included within the final written work.

If, however, you do not want your child to be observed within the study please respond to this email.

Yours sincerely

8.2 Handwritten Note Taken from Year Two Observation

8.3 Handwritten Note Taken from Reception Two Observation

8.4 Guide Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

1. Do you think play is undervalued in education? If yes, can you give some examples?
2. Do you think play is undervalued within primary schooling? If yes, can you think of any examples of this?
3. Do you think there is a tension between play and education? If yes, can you give some examples?
4. In what ways do you think there is a tension between play and learning?
5. Do you think there is a tension between the demands of the curriculum and the children's need for play?
6. What do you think is the relationship between work and play? If so, what do you think it is?
7. Do you think the pupil's instinct to play gets in the way of teaching the curriculum?
8. Do you think there is a need for more play in the primary curriculum?
9. Why do you think that play deprivation is becoming more common in schools?
10. Are there things that you personally would like to do in the classroom that you don't have the chance to do?
11. Do you ever feel there are tensions between your role as a teacher and your own needs as a person? For instance, do you feel the demands of the job ever rub against your own needs such through tiredness, family commitments and/or your broader interests?
12. In what sense do you think it's the teacher's role to understand the needs of the pupils?
13. Do you feel you have the chance and/or time as a teacher to get to know the student's needs well? Would you like to get to know them better?
14. How much of an issue is time for you as a teaching professional? Do you have enough? Would you like more?
15. If there was more time, would you allow more play in the classroom?
16. In what sense do you think standards are important in schooling and how do you think this is related to play?
17. What do you think a successful pupil in school looks like?
18. What do you think are the separate roles of the TA and teacher in the classroom?
19. I was wondering what you think the role of 'Golden Time' is within the school?

Chapter 9: References

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