

EDUCATION, MEASUREMENT AND THE POLITICS OF FEAR: RECLAIMING A DEMOCRATIC SPACE FOR THE EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONAL

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“Nowadays people know the price of everything but the value of nothing.”

Oscar Wilde

an ‘age of measurement’

huge amount of information about performance of students, groups, schools, districts, national systems, and what teachers are allegedly ‘adding’ to this

Is this bringing us any closer to answering the question what makes education good (rather than excellent or effective)?

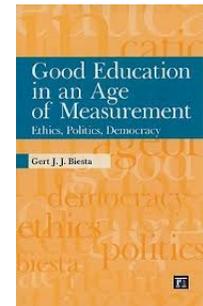
not only a question of *technical* validity
but also of *normative* validity



Are we measuring what we value?

Or have we reached the situation where we are valuing what is being measured?

see performativity: where the indicator of quality becomes the definition of quality
see the problem with ‘Finland’



HOW HAS THIS HAPPENED? How has it been possible for this to happen?

(1) the sheer size of the global measurement industry

plus

the emergence of a network of a wide variety of actors with very different interests
(including researchers, governments, commercial publishers, supra-national organisations, parents, students, activists)



resulting in a strong asymmetry within the field (Latour 1987)
making it increasingly difficult to interrupt and oppose with meaningful alternatives



creating the illusion that ‘there is no alternative’

(2) the rhetorical dimensions



a complex and conflicting rationale
accountability, control, transparency, evidence, choice, social justice
allowing for a ‘quick switch’ between discourses
making effective criticism more difficult



(3) the 'social psychology' of the measurement regime

What is the attraction? Why do people fall for it?
And how does it impact on what people do and don't do?



the question of fear and of what people are afraid of (or being made afraid of)

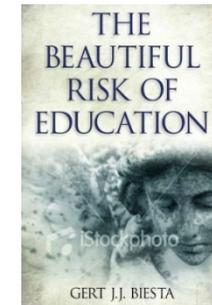
the (pseudo) **security of numbers**
measurement is ultimately a comparison of one thing with another,
and the standard is fundamentally 'arbitrary'
(Dewey on weighing pigs)

desire for control ↔ **fear of risk** & a culture of risk-aversion
(but if you take all the risk out of education,
then you ultimately take education out of education)

the **fear of being left behind**



without asking the question why it would be good to be like those 'ahead'
and what the criteria are on which some are positioned as being 'ahead'
[why would one want to become like Finland or like Singapore?]
one remarkable exception: Scotland



THE WIDER CONTEXT



the rise of the culture of measurement is part of the wider transformation of professional fields such as education

4 questions

How can we characterise this transformation?

[pre-democratic – democratic – post-democratic]

Where and how is the culture of measurement ‘inscribed’ in these changes?

How has this contributed to post-democratic distortions?

Is there a way out? An exit-pedagogy?

A way to reclaim a democratic space for the educational professional?

(Or perhaps: a space for the democratic educational professional?)

THE TRANSFORMATION OF FIELDS OF PROFESSIONAL ACTION

the classic case for professional autonomy



focus on human well-being (not instrumental, but normative)
(highly) specialised knowledge and expertise
professional authority & professional responsibility

from pre-democratic to democratic (from the 1960s onwards)

two challenges to 'absolute' professional autonomy



client emancipation: challenges the abuses of power
welfare state accountability: focus on the common good

both 'forces' are democratising,
and reposition professionals (as individuals and groups) within a wider
environment of democratic responsibilities and democratic accountabilities

BUT . . .

three distortions (that put the democratic impetus at risk)

- [a] the client/patient/students turns into a **customer**
- [2] democratic accountability turns into **technical-managerial accountability**
- [3] the question of professional knowledge turns into the question of **evidence**

background

(1) transformation of the welfare state



from a collective project for social justice and the common good,
via the 'issue' of affordability versus solidarity,
to the government as the deliverer of public services

(2) rise of neo-liberal modes of governance



the state as a regulator of (public service) markets

the key-words: 'quality' and 'choice'
'putting the customer first'

from democratic to economic relationships – value for money

standards – inspection

[a] from client to customer



this looks like an empowering move, and hence a democratising move
'giving customers what they want'



but one key element of many (all?) professional practices
is that the clients do not (entirely) know what they want

professionals do not just service needs,
they also engage in (collaborative/dialogical) **needs definition**



which is why a client/patient/student is not a customer

which raises the issue of the difficult difference between power and authority
and hence the role of risk and trust in professional relationships

also: choice is not democracy

“We want democracy, Mr Blair, not choice!”

choosing from a set menu, or having a voice in what goes onto the menu
(see, for example, school choice)

hence: an erosion of the democratic dimension

[b] from democratic to technical-managerial accountability

the transformation of accountability

from direct relationships with democratic potential
(collective orientation towards the common good)
to indirect relationships

e.g., in education

state provides schools as 'public services' (services for the public, not of the public)
is responsible for its 'quality' (who defines? OECD?)
hence a system of inspection and quality insurance
often (e.g., in England) done by quango's
parents have limited choice (from a set menu at most)
can complain about procedures and 'standards'
but have no say in what is provided (other than via elections)

driving a wedge between 'stakeholders' and 'providers'
from a substantive to a formal relationship

plus the perverse consequences of the logic of accountability



In theory the new culture of accountability and audit makes professionals and institutions more accountable **to the public**. This is supposedly done by publishing targets and levels of attainment in league tables, and by establishing complaint procedures by which members of the public can seek redress for any professional or institutional failures.

But underlying this ostensible aim of accountability to the public **the real requirements are for accountability to regulators, to departments of government, to funders, to legal standards**. The new forms of accountability impose forms of central control – quite often indeed a range of different and mutually inconsistent forms of central control. (O’Neill 2002)



taking the real stakeholders out of the ‘accountability loop’

In theory again the new culture of accountability and audit makes professionals and institutions more accountable *for good performance*. This is manifest in the rhetoric of improvement and raising standards, of efficiency gains and best practice, of respect for patients and pupils and employees.

But beneath this admirable rhetoric the real focus is on **performance indicators chosen for ease of measurement and control rather than because they measure accurately what the quality of performance is**. (O’Neill 2002)

hence: an erosion of the democratic dimension

[c] from knowledge-based to evidence-based

replacing professional judgement with protocols based on scientific knowledge about 'what works'

what works for what? → the question of purpose

what works for whom? → from general and abstract to concrete and unique

what works for one dimension may work against another

the means of professional action are not neutral with regard to the ends

professional action 'operates' in the domain of the variable, not the eternal (Aristotle)

[art, not science]

relationships between actions and consequences

not objective knowledge of a static universe or machine 'out there'

research provides (technical) possibilities, not certainties;

hence it requires judgement about the concrete and the unique

and judgement about what is desirable



evidence cannot replace such judgements, and when it does there is positivism (where the means decide the ends)

hence: an erosion of the democratic dimension

FROM PRE-DEMOCRATIC TO DEMOCRATIC TO POST-DEMOCRATIC



a triple or three-fold distortion
customer – accountability – evidence

**in each case measurement plays an important role
and does so in two directions**

[1] it requires data/information/measurement

- (a) to give customers what they want and to give them choice and value for money, they need data about the quality of the ‘product’
- (b) to hold actors accountable, we need data about their performance
- (c) to create evidence about what works we need to measure correlations between inputs and outcomes

[2] the availability of data etc. reinforces these distortions

- (a) once we have performance data, it’s difficult not to look at them
- (b) once we have performance data, it’s difficult to keep them outside of accountability
- (c) once we have ‘evidence,’ it’s difficult to ignore it



another dimension of the ‘social psychology’ of the culture of measurement
as it reinforces ways of being and doing that contribute to the democratic erosion c
professional fields such as education

RECLAIMING A DEMOCRATIC SPACE FOR THE PROFESSIONAL [OR RECLAIMING A SPACE FOR THE DEMOCRATIC PROFESSIONAL]

challenging, interrupting and resisting the three ‘redefinitions’



client/student/patient ↔ customer
democratic accountability ↔ technical-managerial accountability
knowledge ↔ evidence

exposing the democratic deficit of these shifts and

reclaiming the democratic and progressive potential of the original notions

see, e.g., ‘Giving teaching back to education.’
‘From evidence-based to value-based education.’
‘Good education in an age of measurement.’
‘The beautiful risk of education.’

**which is connected to
the ongoing attempt to re-define teaching as a technical profession
of ‘effective implementation and production’
and reveals the the way the measurement industry contributes to this**

TEACHING AS A NORMATIVE PROFESSION

(Harry Kunneman)

3 normative dimensions of teaching: telos, needs-definition and authority

(a) orientation towards the telos of the practice

a critique of the 'learnification' of educational discourse and practice
students: learners; schools: learning environments; teachers: facilitators

the point of education is not that students learn, but that they learn something,
from someone, and for particular reasons/purposes
content – relationships – purpose(s)

[the language of learning blocks access to these questions]

the (normative) question of purpose is the fundamental question



What is education for? [qualification – socialisation – subjectification]



the educational question: What is educationally desirable?
(with an eye on what we seek to achieve in the three domains)

orientation towards the purpose (telos) of the practice

(b) 'needs-definition'



(b) introducing a distinction between what is desired and what is desirable

"Toute la pédagogie est un travail compliqué ... pour aider l'enfant
à se dégager de la logique du caprice." (Meirieu, 2008)

to interrupt the 'original' egocentrism
'a pedagogy of interruption' (Biesta 2006)

(c) transforming power into authority (the alchemy of teaching)

'authority is relational' (Bingham 2008)

the distinction between 'learning from' and 'being taught by'



receiving the gift of teaching

this feeds into a progressive argument for teaching and the teacher
(and a progressive argument for the student as student):
not teaching as control, but teaching so that the experience
of 'being taught' might happen

WHICH, INTERESTINGLY, ARE ALSO KEY DIMENSIONS OF DEMOCRACY

a historical intervention, neither natural nor rational
hence a normative definition



commitment to the political values of equality, freedom and solidarity
ongoing discussion about their interpretation (Mouffe)
the democratic paradox: freedom – equality (Mouffe)
the status of solidarity?

democracy is not about choice;
democracy is not about majority rule, but implies a concern for the minorities;
democracy is about the transformation of individual ‘wants’ into collective ‘needs’



transformation of what is individually desired into
what can collective be deemed desirable (an interruption of individual ‘wants’)



so that we can decide what we want to give authority in our collective lives
transforming power into authority: the alchemy of democracy

again: telos – needs definition – authority

IN CONCLUSION

an ‘age of measurement’ with a global measurement industry
the problem: measuring what we value, or valuing what is measured?



size & asymmetry– rhetorics & critique – social psychology & fear

how this is part of the wider transformation of professional fields
pre-democratic – democratic – post-democratic
the role of measurement in the step from democratic to post-democratic
in three domains: customer – accountability – evidence

this post-democratic transformation not only needs data and measurement
data and measurement also reinforce post-democratic practices and identities

the redefinition of teaching and the teacher in technical terms

reclaiming teaching as a normative profession
intimately connected with the ongoing challenge of democracy

**if there is a role for data/measurement/evidence it needs to contribute to the
democratisation of education, not to its distortions**

THANK YOU

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