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Perfect Education, but not for Everyone

On Society's Need for Inequality and the Rise of Surrogate Education

1. Introduction: The Return of Perfectionism

A case could be made that for a relatively long period in the history of the West, education was a luxury. The idea of *paideia*, which in ancient Greece stood for a process of broad cultivation of the human individual towards virtue (*ἀρετή*) and, more specifically, towards civic virtue, was, after all, only available to free men in order to further their freedom as citizens. It was very different from the training of manual labourers and artisans, the *banausoi* (*βάνανσοι*), and was not available to women and slaves, not even to the pedagogue, the slave who was tasked with bringing children to school. *Paideia* was a kind of education that needed free time or *scholē* (*σχολή*) rather than that it was connected to the domain of work and production. It was, therefore, education for the few who had time to spare and not education for the many.

The first cracks in this set up probably appeared with the Reformation, when reading the bible became a possibility for everyone. As a consequence, literacy, first and foremost understood as the ability to read, became increasingly, though slowly, a necessity rather than a privilege. Yet perhaps the biggest shift with regard to the relationship between education and freedom occurred with the Enlightenment when, again slowly, education ceased to be seen as something for those who were *already* free, and increasingly became understood as a 'project' of liberation, a project aimed at setting people free. This change of orientation was acutely captured in Kant's description of Enlightenment as "man's release from his self-incurred tutelage through the exercise of his own understanding" (Kant 1992, p. 90), and in his articulation of the 'motto' of the Enlightenment in terms of courage: "Have the courage to use your own understanding." (Kant 1992, p. 90)

The shift from education as cultivation to education as liberation – which could well be seen as an educational paradigm shift – also changed the educational 'code word.' If under education as cultivation the key orientation was *perfection*, under education as liberation the key orientation became that of *emancipation*. Over time the latter orientation became an integral part of the practice of education, for example through the expansion of publicly funded compulsory education and the increase of the school leaving age, the development of popular adult and community education, the rise of progressive education and critical education and, more recently, the declaration of education as a basic human right. It remains an open question to what extent the rise of education as liberation has coincided with a decline of the idea of education as cultivation. Yet what is clear is that in our times there is less certainty, to put it mildly, about the kind

of perfect human being that educational cultivation should promote or bring about, also because we have historical examples of where such an ambition has led to disastrous consequences.

Although the tendency to enact education as cultivation towards individual perfection does re-emerge from time to time – think, for example, of recent calls for character education or for education that promotes resilience, self-regulation or mindfulness – what is remarkable about more recent developments in policy and practice is that the ambition towards perfection has shifted from individuals to educational *systems* or, if the thesis about the convergence of global educational reform is correct (Ball, 2012), to the perfection of *the* education system. The code word for this development, so I wish to suggest, is ‘effectiveness,’ and the double ‘move’ that has taken place in many countries over the past two decades or so, has been to make the operation of education more effective with regard to the production of a rather small set of measurable ‘learning outcomes.’ It is, in other words, the combined result of the rise of the school effectiveness movement and the development of what nowadays can best be characterised as the global education measurement ‘industry’ (see Biesta, 2015; D’Agnese, 2017).

It is important to acknowledge that the ambition to create a perfect education system stems from laudable intentions, particularly the social justice argument that every child and young person, irrespective of *who* they are, *where* they are or where they are *from*, should have access to good education, or, to be more precise, should have *equal* access to good education – the argument for equal educational opportunities.¹ There are, however, two problems with this ambition, one of *implementation* and one of *ambition*.

2. The Implementation Problem: A Slippery Slope

With regard to implementation, the laudable ambition to ensure good education for everyone has, through an accumulation of small steps, resulted in a rather problematic educational reality. The question how to ensure that education is everywhere of sufficient quality, raised the question how one can judge the quality of education. One decisive step was taken when the question of *judgement* about educational quality became ‘translated’ into the question how one can *measure* the quality of education. A second decisive step was taken when the question of measuring the quality of education turned into the question how one can measure the quality of educational *outcomes* (see, for example, Spady, 1994; and for an early critique Jansen, 1998). The question which outcomes *should* be measured, soon turned into the question which outcomes *can* be measured,

1 In the UNs Millennium Development Goals, to be reached by 2015, goal number 2 was that of achieving universal primary education. In the Sustainable Development Goals, set in 2015 and to be achieved by 2030, the educational goal has become that of ‘quality education,’ operationalised as the goal of ensuring “inclusive and equitable quality education” and promoting “lifelong learning opportunities for all” ([https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20\(July%201\).pdf](https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20(July%201).pdf) [27. 08. 2019]).

and so the good intentions of the social justice argument eventually turned into the current ‘age of measurement’ (Biesta, 2010), in which the key question is whether we are (still) measuring what is being valued, or whether we have reached a situation where many just value what is being measured and take the latter simply as a valid indicator of the quality of education – something where the global education measurement industry is continuing to play a prominent and problematic role (see e. g., Hopmann, 2008).

The result of these developments is not confined to the current obsession with measurement and with the widespread comparison of educational systems in order to indicate which system is better and which system is best, but has actually affected almost all dimensions of education. In many countries, and also at a global scale, it has contributed to a very narrow definition of what apparently counts *in* education, namely achievement in a small number of curricular areas. At the same time, it has influenced perceptions about what counts *as* education, not just in shifting the focus from the quality of provision and processes to the quality of outcomes, but also in reconceptualising the dynamics of education in terms of interventions and effects, that is, in terms of an input-output logic that quickly turns education into a matter of production – poiesis, not praxis in Aristotelean terms (see Böhm, 1995).

Perhaps the most problematic outcome of the ambition to push the education system towards perfection – that is, towards perfect operation – has been the rise of a culture of performativity in which *indicators* of quality become redefined as *definitions* of quality, so that, for example, the position on a league table is no longer just interesting information but becomes a strategic target for educational institutions or national education systems. This is not just worrying because of its impact on the overall orientation of education systems – the question of educational purpose – but also because it has contributed to what we might call an ‘inner erosion’ of education itself, making the actors in education increasingly *cynical* about what really matters as long as performance indicators are met – a development documented in chilling detail by Dianne Ravitch (see Ravitch, 2011).

3. The Ambition Problem: A Need for Inequality?

If the foregoing shows how the ambition to create a perfect education system is not just fraught with difficulties but has, over time, resulted in a system that may be more perfect in terms of its operation but that, in doing so, seems to have lost its sense of direction – or at least seems to have changed direction (see below) – there is also the question whether the underlying ambition of equal educational opportunities for all is as simple and straightforward as it seems. Two brief anecdotes from England reveal rather quickly what the problem may be.

The first is an ambition expressed by an education minister in England a couple of years ago who, in response to ongoing concerns about the quality of secondary education, stated that he wanted all secondary schools in the country to be so good that all pupils would have the chance to go to Oxford or Cambridge. While, at first sight, this

ambition may sound laudable and even plausible in terms of the social justice argument for equal educational opportunities, it is hard to imagine what actually would happen if this ambition turned out to be successful. What if indeed all young people who graduate from secondary schools would do so with the highest marks? What if indeed all young people who graduate from secondary schools would be perfectly ‘ready’ for Oxford and Cambridge? And what if all of them would therefore be knocking on the doors of Oxford and Cambridge demanding to be let in? Would, in that situation, the government close all other universities and expand Oxford and Cambridge so that it can take on all students? That seems unlikely.

The second, more recent, anecdote concerns a proposal from the secretary of state for education that universities should be fined for handing out too many ‘top’ awards.² While the issue is expressed as a concern for ‘grade inflation’ – that over the years students obtain higher marks for the same quality of work – it is remarkable that a situation in which all students would achieve well in equal measure is simply not accepted as a possibility.

What both anecdotes reveal, is that at a rhetorical level everyone seems to agree about the importance of equal educational opportunities and the need for an education system that can ‘deliver’ on this ambition, but that in practice society is at least not ‘ready’ for the success of such an ambition. One could even say that society, at least in its contemporary ‘form’, actually *needs* inequality and would break down when equal opportunities would be taken up ‘perfectly’, so to speak, that is, when they would result in equal educational *outcomes*. At the very least one may wonder who will keep the streets clean if everyone in the country has a first class degree from Oxford or Cambridge, but the real concern is perhaps not a practical one but first and foremost a need and desire for ‘distinction’ – a distinction that would disappear if Oxford and Cambridge were to become ‘the only game in town’ (see Ross, 1991; see also Rancière, 1991; Biesta, 2017).

4. Surrogate Education?

There are, therefore, two problems with the current drive at making the operation of the education system more perfect. One is that the increased perfection of the operation of the system seems to go hand in hand with a decrease in educational significance – the focus on the effective production of a narrow set of learning outcomes and, ultimately, the cynical pursuit of quality indicators. The other is that contemporary society is at least not ready and perhaps not even interested in the perfect conversion of equal opportunities into equal outcomes. It bets, in other words, on the possibility that a perfect education system will *not* work perfectly for everyone. The latter is, of course, a rather disturbing conclusion, but it may help to explain why there seems to be so little progress with regard to educational equality – not because there is no increase in edu-

² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/universities-damian-hinds-top-degrees-grade-inflation-office-for-students-fines-a8836681.html> [27.08.2019].

cational *opportunity* but because the capacity of society to ‘cope’ with equality of outcomes is limited.

The question this raises is whether there is a way out of this predicament, or whether there is at least a meaningful way forward. One option, which continues to be important, is to push back against those instances where an increase in perfection brings about a decrease in educational significance. This is the ongoing struggle for a broad conception of what counts *in* education – not just the narrow set of measurable learning outcomes – and a humane approach to what counts *as* education – well beyond the idea of education as a technical intervention aimed at the effective production of such outcomes. It is important to acknowledge, however, that this is neither the only *possible* response to the predicament outlined above, nor the only *actual* response. Rather than lamenting the decrease in educational significance brought about by the ambition to create a perfectly operating education system, it seems that some have drawn the conclusion that such a decrease is actually not a problem at all or, perhaps more accurately, that it is a price worth paying in order to bring about a perfect education system.³

While it has been known for a long time that pushing education towards perfection requires a significant reduction of the degree of freedom teachers have to make up their own professional minds and decide on their own professional course of action, a perfectly operating educational system not just needs to control what teachers do, but can ultimately only become perfect if it also controls what students do. The remarkable but not really surprising thing is that when both teachers and students do exactly what is needed so that the system can operate perfectly, it will indeed generate the predicted outcomes, and will do so in equal measure for all students – or at least for all students who are willing to subject themselves to the ‘regime’ of the perfectly operating system. Whereas the struggle for a broad and balanced education will remain messy and to a certain extent unpredictable in its outcomes, a school in which both teachers and students hand over their agency in exchange for educational success, seems to provide a real way out of the predicament that has hampered modern education for a long time. The emphasis, however, has to lie on the word ‘seems,’ because a situation in which teachers and students hand over their agency can at most count as a form of pseudo or surrogate education, but not as the real thing.

Why is this nonetheless a tempting prospect, or at least an option that some seem to be attracted to? This has to do with an interesting delay effect in the distribution of educational advantage – which, by the way, is also a delay effect in the distribution of educational *disadvantage*. The quickest way to explain what is going on here, is in terms of the theory of capitals, such as cultural capital, social capital and even financial capital. Whereas the theory of capitals provides insightful explanations of educational and

3 The particular ‘case’ I have in mind is the Michaela Community School in London. I leave it to the readers of this paper to make up their own minds about this initiative and about my particular interpretation of what is going on here. The Wikipedia entry on this school is perhaps a good starting point for such an exploration: see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michaela_Community_School [27.08.2019].

societal inequality – it can show that those who possess cultural, social or financial capital have advantage over those who don't possess such capital or possess less of it – such explanations can never be fully turned into strategies that would overcome the difference in advantage. The reason for this lies in the simple fact that as soon as everyone has the same amount of cultural, social or financial capital, such capital has lost its power to help some to stay ahead of others. It has lost, in other ways, its currency. This means that surrogate education can work as long as it stays ahead of those who are behind, to put it bluntly. It can deliver success, as long as it doesn't try to deliver success for everyone, as long as it makes sure, in other words, that success remains a luxury.

5. Conclusion: The Return of Perfectionism

My conclusion will be brief. Yes, it is possible to create a perfectly operating educational system, but we have to bear in mind that achieving such perfection and the 'success' it can produce, requires that we abandon the paradigm of emancipation and, in a strange sense, return to the paradigm of individual perfection: perfect teachers and perfect students being perfectly successful.

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