

The reproduction of mediocrity

A critical review of educational and organizational failure

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Introduction

Despite the fact that educational conferences and seminars of all kinds are held with regularity, education is crackling at the seams. People are dashing off in many directions with all kinds of illustrious plans as if 'innovative' education could be the solution to all (contemporary) ailments, problems and issues. In that respect, these approaches differ little from technocratic artifices that have become commonplace in public administration for some time. Are these valuable developments to be followed unreservedly, or is this haggling with goals and means as fleeting as it is pointless?

What do we really want from learning kids, adolescents and students during their education? That is the key question that rises above all considerations and arguments about technological and managerial progress. And what do we expect of their teachers and educators? Is it just about supplying free tickets for the labor market and to model abiturients into 'flexible (pliable) subjects,' or do we set the bar higher and wider?

For all the euphoria about modern learning skills and their 'gadgets', these remain issues that cannot be ignored but are mainly ignored in education (because, after all, 'self-evident'...). We will elaborate in short why against the background of educational and social developments in recent decades complacency with regard to educational outcomes is exaggerated – not to say misplaced – and where things have gone wrong, if not derailed.

Tinkering with dreams and perspectives

Education, as an institution, is linked to socialization and cultural reproduction. Philosophers knew this long ago and in particular the ones of *critical theory* such as Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas, Offe, Brunkhorst and others. They believed that the overall *process of modernity* is disrupted by capitalist structures and mechanisms such as «commodification», «reification» and «alienation» which Marx addressed in his economic analysis. Now this may all seem 'irrelevant' in the digital age, but it is precisely these considerations that continue to matter unabated. Especially with all the moralistic patronizing and modeling that now, despite denial, is pervasive. To flatly ignore such relevance, however, is a blatant underestimation of the (ideological) mechanisms that keep education diminutive, but in which nevertheless is persisted against better judgment. After all, 'we nurture talent and encourage passions,' it is then said and widely echoed. 'The world is open to anyone who wants to move forward and knows how to use one's capabilities.' 'So make your dreams come true.' And so on.

Well, if only it were that simple.

Theoretical knowledge has long been outweighed by utilitarian 'skills' which are continually being disconnected from such knowledge as if it were possible to separate them, but Humboldt already declared long time ago that this is a great aberration.^{i ii} «*Bildung*» – or *broad intellectual education* – has long since ceased to be a priority and has largely been stripped to the bone, while pupils (*élèves*) and students need direction and *élévation* (to become true '*esprits éclairés*') but are largely abandoned in this regard. Education fails to accommodate them in their rightful intellectual aspirations. These are considered of secondary importance (if they are recognized at all).

Social-scientific perspectives, as well as historical contexts, philosophical questions and political-economic approaches, have long been marginalized or flatly ignored in curricula in favour of marketing and management views in which all kinds of 'political correctness' are leading and dominant. What does all this do with the current and new generations? Without sound (basic) knowledge, one can do absolutely nothing with internet 'wisdom'. Then one continues to wander directionlessly.

Similarly with regard to the many misconceptions around 'citizenship' in which societies have become entangled not only in terms of policy, but also in terms of goals, means and rights. 'Duties' have replaced (civic) rights as citizens are no longer seen as *political entities*, but as *subjects* who can be modeled and adjusted to desired images and who must fit into the proclaimed totality of 'togetherness'. Nevertheless, blunt *individualism* reigns supreme and citizens are confronted with a hybrid, ambiguous and antagonistic (market) morality. Yet administrative elites who meanwhile sacrifice the continuity of the quality of education to all kinds of (political) prestige projects, often appear to demonstrate a rather narrow-minded and borne attitude toward such criticism.

If views are passed on through educational socialization, the main issue, of course, is *which* dominant views these are subsequently. In the current political-social constellation, these appear to be primarily *neoliberal-meritocratic* concepts and views. This will have to be taken into account in all educational reflection. For example, the idea of a virtually 'egalitarian' society in which the traditional classification of ranks and classes would be 'irrelevant' leads to a misplaced awareness of the social reality that is still characterized by significant differences in cultural backgrounds and, consequently, significant differences in opportunities. The 'equal opportunities' that are ascribed to the population turn out to be rather 'diverse' in practice. And this manifests itself at an early age when social selection through education is initiated. The *reproduction of social inequality* therefore continues unmistakably through socialization, even if one assumes that upward mobility is open to everyone. A 'just do-it-yourself culture' or a strong *identification* with 'successful' role models does not alter this. That is only cosmetic appearance.

In short, there is *overestimation* (of possibilities) and *underestimation* (of less fortunate circumstances, mechanisms and perspectives) at the same time, which cannot simply be

cancelled out. The idea of 'seizing opportunities' that is so lavishly espoused puts citizens on a false track, giving 'falling behind' the misplaced connotation of 'personal failure'.ⁱⁱⁱ

Contextual changes

Against the backdrop of many education cuts and rigid cost calculations, how does one dare to complain about (i) *teacher shortages* and (ii) a *lack of skilled people*, or about (iii) *mediocre learning performance* and (iv) a *lack of basic knowledge*, or (v) a *failing arc of concentration* on the part of (young) students? Such selective indignation is extremely hypocritical and does not demonstrate realism. For anyone who has followed developments in this area (and has experienced them from nearby) knows that such matters are taken considerably out of context. For the sake of understanding, let's take a closer look at these issues.

(Ad i)

There are not so much 'teacher shortages', but many have been cut away or systematically prevented from doing their jobs. After all, teachers had to become (cheap) 'process facilitators' and were no longer expected to be responsible for educational processes themselves. The former 'solipsistic autocrats in their separate kingdoms' had to conform collectively to new management standards that would make independent action 'redundant'. And they experienced firsthand what this meant. Dissatisfaction with this outlook was attributed to 'personal factors,' so one had to 'choose' between conforming unconditionally to the new managerial morals, or abandon ship. Many gave up or made cosmetic adjustments. New starting teachers who were employed exclusively on temporary contracts, however, knew what they had to do: they threw themselves into every possible educational novelty, as if these offered the 'new salvation' that the old guard had neglected. The workshops led by (self-proclaimed) 'education specialists' that were considered progressive and which turned out to be highly lucrative, tumbled over one another. After all, all noses had to be pointed in the same direction. Anyone who was not unconditionally 'on board' was considered an obstructionist. The remaining experienced cohorts of teachers who had remained in their posts despite all the repression acquiesced, but they foresaw and knew even then that their collective exodus would eventually not be adequately compensated by new well-qualified teachers. Their warnings, however, proved to fall on deaf ears. Welcome in the 'modern world'. (Thank you and 'goodbye mr. Chips').

(Ad ii)

In parallel, the assembled educational technocrats believed that the existing (categorical) vocational colleges should 'better' (because 'more efficient') be merged into new administrative wholes. Thus, in the 1990s and beyond, large (community) colleges emerged in which the focus was no longer the development of knowledge-based expertise, but the mere mastery of 'computer skills' (ICT). After all, that was what the rapidly developing digital society needed and what would lead to bright (personal) prospects. The carpenter, mechanic and electrician were no longer needed. Learning *to program* and 'being able to *evaluate* your own learning' was what it was all about. The 'toolkits' needed to be shaken up and were in dire need of replacement, it was argued. This did not only apply to students, teachers also had to

go along with this *neue Welle*. Personal development plans, accountability for achieving personal development goals, output evaluations — *bureaucratic formalism* advanced and intervened as never before. Professionalism gave way however, just as many disappointed students made the move to more developmental (further) education. They no longer wanted to be 'parked' behind their PCs and laptops for days at a time and be 'kept busy' pointlessly. Many made a meaningful switch and still managed to educate themselves, at least as far as there were still enough opportunities to do so. For even in the more theoretical courses, *similar* processes had now become manifest. In extreme cases, one could 'secure' a desired diploma through (commercial) private education. All in all, the responsible policymakers did not realize the social effects of this navel-gazing. They thought they were 'sacrosanct' because they considered themselves cut from the right (educational) cloth. These fallacies, however, would undeniably turn against themselves, but nevertheless proved no reason to change course whatsoever.

(Ad iii, iv and v)

Complaining about mediocre or lagging learning performance is certainly not reserved for the present age. But that does not alter the fact that this is unfortunately the case, especially in the area of *coherent and contextual understanding*. However, this appears to be a socio-cultural phenomenon *in a broad sense* and certainly cannot be primarily – or exclusively – attributed or blamed on the current generation of pupils and students. Learning performance is directly related to the *educational input* provided, as any straightforward teacher knows. The 'sixes *culture*' is a direct result of (meager) 'sixes *policies*'. When curricula are forcibly eroded in content, one should not be surprised that 'lacunae' emerge. One may be convinced that this is not the case with all the 'modern' business-oriented optimization of established learning objectives (involving mainly marketing, management, corporate communications, public relations, customer service, and so on), but all these 'psychologically' and 'behaviorally' oriented approaches do have a major impact on (the knowledge and understanding of) human and societal perceptions and understandings. Consequently, these are often of a poor level and quality (because, after all, they are said to be 'just opinions'). Under no circumstances is the *social order* to be questioned; the *status quo* is virtually 'canonized' and one has but to conform to it, as is also the case for citizens in general. These codes of conduct have become so coercive that society almost distrusts any form of critical reflection and does not (or no longer) want to appeal to it. On penalty of 'excommunication', one places oneself outside the order of the (educational) community if one dares to distance oneself from it or to question these mores at all. Such repression, however, is counterproductive. When one then also considers the *marginalization of literary education* and the paltry way of thinking about the importance of teaching relevant *historical knowledge* ('interchangeable narratives'), the confusion is complete. Current teaching methods are drenched in popularizing approaches from which virtually all political and historical 'sensitivity' has been removed. Above all, education must be 'fun' and certainly not too 'confrontational' (just imagine that parents might complain...).

Necessary basic knowledge that is lacking, however, avenges itself not only in (further) studies, but also in societal terms. One does not 'compensate' for this with encyclopedic 'look-up knowledge' via the internet, as many often conveniently, albeit wrongly, assume. However, the overestimation of 'social media' [sic] knows no bounds. *Smartphones* in the classroom? Nice indeed, at least then *factchecking* can prove its unsurpassed usefulness. No advanced 'moving with the times' without *digiboards* and engaging *powerpoints*, is there? *A library*? Well, for those who really need it ..., but the limited ability of young people to 'concentrate' should certainly not be 'violated' too much, just as the use of language should preferably be 'streetwise'. (Beware of the 'vulnerable experiential world' of pupils...). Exit the elaborate syllabi with collected pluralistic knowledge from all corners of the (academic) world on which one used to be able to lean on and 'chew'. Exit also one's own (pioneering) work that can be appealed to. The 'formats' are so compelling that one no longer even dares to start, let alone work on it. People 'google' and juggle the (usually rather non-committal) 'insights' together. Yes, even down to dissertations.

Another outlook?

A rather 'bleak' picture one might think, were it not for the fact that this reality can appear to be many times more unruly and harrowing. Unfortunately, the aforementioned developments have been commonplace as many educators can personally confirm. Many burnouts bear witness to this. Not to mention the legal proceedings and lawsuits that not infrequently have to be undertaken against managerial boards in order to assert any justice. But their voices are overshadowed (and over-shouted) by protagonists of '*the new learning*' with which populations are supposed to be propelled forward. This minimalist technocratic approach to educational processes and their organisation is the axe to the grindstone of all the 'progressive' assumed fervour with which one wishes to make such a good show. The democratic and truly pluralistic nature of societies is thus seriously jeopardised. For how do people think they can properly equip current and future generations intellectually and professionally if they persist in an educational orientation as a playground for managers and their convenient educational gurus?

Such structural shortcomings and derailments do not particularly indicate a 'healthy' educational culture. Much was unnecessary and certainly not desirable, but was nevertheless pushed through against all odds as if such changes were 'inevitable'. Instead, they turned out to be deliberate choices made against the backdrop of *unbridled market idealism* and also spawned from it. However, the 'customer' turned out to be less 'king' than pretended and societies now harvest the bitter fruits of this in many respects. As already mentioned, this also results in an illusory clinging to assumed *equality concepts* to which education would make an effective contribution by offering equal opportunities and possibilities. However numerous studies have shown that this is less the case than assumed. Especially since *meritocratic orientations* that promise individuals all kinds of 'success' are negated by structural social inequalities. All the obsessive focus on '*winning and losing*' does not just let this reality vanish into thin air. In this context, one may well wonder where all the disruptive stress in young

people who are constantly being urged to meet rigid *efficiency targets* comes from anyway. If one should not be overexposed to (excessive) 'stimuli' as is said, then the consequences in the face of such uncomplementary demands seem literally *self affirming* (to say the least). And isn't that now what all educational philosophy is about?

Reviewing some four decades of educational reform, one cannot help but conclude that countless adjustments and experiments have not done education any good. All things considered, little progress has been made, as much of what was presented as 'progress(ive)' turned out to amount to demolition. Many a policy maker and their advisers thought they had to reinvent the (educational) wheel over and over again, but did not realise that this amounted to putting the cart before the horse and that therefore education was saddled with an unnecessary burden.

Obsessive *change management* turned out to be the big culprit with which the general disruption (and distress to the grief of many certainly not unwilling parties involved) was also deployed in education. No smaller classes or 'tailor-made education', but 'flexibility', 'synergy', 'co-creation', 'self-management' and 'time-managament' became the magic words with which the desired 'manufacturability' (or employed social engineering) was supposed to gain control over and shape the many (OECD, *Lisbon* and *bEUcitizen*) agendas.^{iv} In spite of all the beautifully rigged vistas and carefully considered dilemmas and obstacles, virtual realities turned out to be merely optical illusions that did not help education, but rather sacrificed it without pardon on the altar of (corroborating) self-indulgence, although the OECD declares that:

"Education policy implementation is a complex, evolving process that involves many stakeholders and can result in failure if not well targeted. In fact, a range of reasons can prevent implementation from being effective, such as a lack of focus on the implementation processes when defining policies at the system level; a lack of recognition that the core of change processes require engaging people; and the fact that implementation processes need to be revised to adapt to new complex governance systems. It is therefore crucial to understand it, clarify its determinants and explore ways in which it can be more transparent and effective."^v

Surely, 'challenges' have to be met. But *what* challenges and *to what ends*? Implementation processes may be 'complex' because they involve 'many stakeholders', but this does not mean that every 'change process' proposed is inherently necessarily or useful. Set targets are a result of (agenda-setting and lobbying through) political processes and, as we know all too well, (the outcomes of) such processes are often highly debatable. Before one can proceed to 'involve people' it must first be clear what is expected of them, above all, *on what* (assumptions) governing bodies believe they can base and legitimate their *political priority setting and choices*. Merely focusing on 'transparency' [sic] is not sufficient to answer such questions. Also leaving this to (the very whims of) 'street level bureaucrats' as some suggest (and others rightly criticize) is foolish.

Meanwhile, the complacency of education managers continues to rage unchecked. What's more, it is preferred to add a few more shovels to the mix as one talks about 'academies' and 'students' as if they were no longer 'ordinary' educational institutions and pupils, but 'gems of knowledge and (innovative) ingenuity' from which the real academies, colleges and

universities could learn a thing or two. The old (individual) 'kingdoms' may be a thing of the past, but the new ones are shining bright and shiny in a wry sunshine and welcoming you (do close at the back, as there are countless more waiting for you). Well, there we are with all our dreams and 'insights'. Just another new 'roadmap'? (As the saying went: 'think before you leap', but this tile wisdom has long since been consigned to the scrap heap. After all, in many eyes learning is not about looking back, but just about looking ahead and embracing everything new - or what passes for it - as a panacea). However everything stands or falls with *genuine artistry and skills*, just as all epigonism and dilettantism always meet themselves in the end.

Can this foolish madness be stopped, or do we just have to accept these 'aberrations of modernity'? Education is subject not only to political arbitrariness, but above all to *disruptive market mechanisms and business models*. A fully commercialized attitude toward learning outcomes is an ill-fated approach to basic socio-cultural principles that should not be sacrificed to fashionable whims of presumptuous individuals trying to create an appearance of 'decisiveness' under false and illusory pretenses of 'dynamic progress'. Such principles should always be maintained uncorrupted. Placing this in the hands of 'managers' who primarily - or exclusively - have their own position and interests in mind is, by definition, asking for trouble. It can - and must - be done differently. But since politics also appears to be permeated by such orientations, one can wait a long time for this. The maddening consulting and counseling business has proved too tempting and too lucrative to expect otherwise. Consequently, *minimalism* will not be halted any time soon. So it looks like 'doing-it-yourself' - paradoxical though it may be - remains the only option. But with that, we are back to square one and the entire (education) system completely screws itself.

Concluding remarks

Is that to say that everything in former times was 'better'? Of course not. But just as the nostalgic desire to cherish the old is unproductive, so too the indiscriminate embrace of all that is new offers no solace. Incidentally, one 'past' is not the other. The 19th century was stifling in many respects – certainly as far as education was concerned – but by contrast, the many post-World War II educational improvements were definitely worthwhile. *Educational opportunities and chances* (thanks to energetic and wise politicians) increased exponentially for many, not only in Western (institutionalized welfare) countries but also elsewhere. *Anti-authoritarianism*, however, struck at an early stage afterwards, while there was nothing wrong with democratization in itself. Little of that has remained, however. The new egalitarian morality of 'anything goes' is just as misleading as quite a few earlier (selective) notions of development and deployment that benefited only a few. Preserving the good and adjusting, or letting go of the inferior, that is what it is all about. But to this end, a clear distinction between the two is inevitable as a precondition.

Now one may consider these reflections 'overly political', but education is never completely isolated and does not take place in a (political, social or cultural) *vacuum*. Nonetheless it has allowed itself to be reduced to a rather docile extension of (mainstream) politics which often manages to impose its unilateral will on a variety of issues and topics by appealing to 'public opinion'. Needless to say that this seriously erodes the indispensable *independence* of education.

It is not only *what* is propagated and communicated, but especially *what is not* being said and is omitted or concealed. This is too little seen and acknowledged anymore. As a result, debates become flattened and degenerate into technocratic platitudes that do not address pressing issues, but dismiss them short-sightedly with reference to ever new 'perspectives' of all sorts of dubious kinds.^{vi} This may not be a pleasant message, but it is still important to point it out. Pupils, students and their educational inspirators are more than worth it and undeniably deserve better than continuing on an unholy path of patronization, no matter how much it is packaged as 'egalitarian' and 'empathic involvement'. For one is not mistaken: the eye of the pupil sees through everything. In other words: one will never raise new generations by 'keeping them small', as pedagogue Dasberg declared long ago^{vii}, but neither will one raise them by limitless overestimation of individual possibilities. Yes indeed, one might say that some are wise (or *other-wise*) and that others are truly *un-wise* when they get a free hand of doing things. That does not mean that valuable freedoms have to be restricted, but it does mean that arrogant administrative wilfulness should be drastically curtailed, just as pedagogical-didactic 'wisdoms' and the teaching methods used should be subjected to a more critical examination than is often the case nowadays, as they certainly do not always stand the test of criticism. Change, just for the sake of change serves no purpose, just as without a (sensible) sense of direction there is no progress at all.

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Notes

ⁱ Wilhelm Freiherr von Humboldt, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Albert Leizmann et al. (eds), Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin [B. Behr, 1908] (digitalised ed. Harvard Univ. 2007)

ⁱⁱ According to Von Humboldt (1767-1835), education should aim first and foremost at the formation of the 'complete human being'. In letters to Friedrich (Von) Schiller, Von Humboldt outlines his preference for a liberal-humanistic *Bildung*. General development is important for everyone, regardless of origin. He rejects a division between 'higher' and 'lower' (technical) education. «*Menschenbildung*» should be paramount in all forms of education. General education, and not preparation for a concrete profession, is the goal. 'Inner growth' makes it possible to shape the world in political-social intercourse. Although this may sound very modern and familiar, it should be kept in mind that in this vision a pupil – *élève* – is someone who is 'lifted up', and should not be squeezed into a conformist mold. Incidentally, the *acculturation dilemma* Arendt points out is already here. The question of (Jewish) integration and assimilation also played out in 19th century Prussia, from which Humboldt (albeit with good emancipatory intentions) ambiguously tried to distance himself

(Arendt, H. *The origins of totalitarianism*, 1973: 23, 30). This constitutes the dubious flipside of the 'desire for (inner) purity' and casts its shadow ahead of contemporary (recurring) debates about 'formation', 'assimilation' and 'citizenship'.

- iii This has serious consequences for the treatment of 'social weaker' cohorts (as it is called by numerous politicians and educators. (See Van der Kooij, H. *The 'inevitability' of a hi-tech utopia in question*, ISSR 2023)
- iv OECD countries adopted no fewer than 450 education reforms between 2008 and 2014 (OECD 2017)
- v Viennet, R. and B. Pont, *Education Policy Implementation: A Literature Review and Proposed Framework*, OECD Education Working Paper 162, 2017: 6
- vi In this regard, it is advisable to review the work of (former) educationalists such as Erikson, Freire, Chomsky and others and to consider the scope of their educational criticism. (See Erikson, E. *Dialogue with Erik Erikson* [1967], Jason Aronson Inc. 1995 (reprint); Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press 1970; and *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Bloomsbury 2014; Chomsky, N. *On miseducation*. New York/London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000; also: *On democracy and experience*. New York/London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003 (C. P. Otero ed.); and Herman, E. S. and N. Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books 1988).
- vii Dasberg, L. *Grootbrengen door kleinhouden als historisch verschijnsel. Kritische beschouwingen over de geschiedenis van de Westerse opvoedingstheorieën van circa 1250 tot 1975*. Amsterdam: Boom, 1975 (in Dutch) [Growing up by keeping small as a historical phenomenon. Critical reflections on the history of Western parenting theories from circa 1250 to 1975]