

Forces and counter-forces

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A report “Measuring the relative efficiency of schools – a model analysis based upon resources and result”¹ was presented in September 2005 by the Swedish National Agency for Education. The main aim was to identify meaningful indicators for measuring school effectiveness within certain given pre-conditions: What relation is there between resources and results or more specifically, which resources and what result could be used in order to say something about school effectiveness?

In order to measure schools’ relative effectiveness a quantitative method called Data Envelopment Analysis was used. The method could be described as a method for evaluating production in the public sector, e.g. evaluating the efficiency in activities using a number of inputs and outputs where costs are not taken into consideration.

In short, the variables used are pupil/teacher ratios and factors like gender, ethnic origin, and parent education level in order to describe pupil background. Teacher competency and experience, turnover of teachers, private or public schools, pupils’ freedom of choice, and school size are used to further discriminate amongst the resources. To describe school results, given grades in relation to learning objectives are used.

The Swedish media debate after the publishing of the report showed a total lack of interest in discussing issues like: What about differences on a

¹ Skolverket (2005) Att mäta skolors relativa effektivitet. Skolverkets rapport 2004:1464.

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personal level like socio-economical capital and motivation? What about differences on an organisational level like access to textbooks and computers, access to health and counselling support, and access to rich and useful environments outside the schoolyard?

Instead there are two major issues. The first is higher grades in private schools than in public schools, so private schools for that reason are considered more effective. The second issue is on teacher qualifications, whereby there is a positive relation between teaching experience (amount of working as a teacher) and effectiveness but no positive relation between formal education (university studies) and effectiveness.

This is of course not at all surprising. Instead it is just another sign of the neo-liberal offensive that was initiated by Thatcherism and Reaganism which today has become taken-for-granted in the restructuring of schooling and education systems across the world. In this offensive there are two things that matter: markets in education and minimising of costs.

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Why is it so hard to find critical discussions about how marketization of education has exacerbated existing inequalities by making poor schools poorer and rich schools richer (in terms of both economy and result)? Why is nothing said about research results showing that increasing possibilities for parents to choose schools for their children also increases school choice of parents and their children?² Why is nothing said about how the opening of education to a free market will also open it to transnational companies to run education in their own interests and therefore creating education that is far from free?³

Is the absence of reflection upon issues like these in the official debate a sign of how neo-liberal ideas force themselves into our way of thinking and of how successful the neo-liberals have been in minimizing the scope for critical thoughts in higher education, as Dave Hill puts it?⁴

² Whitty, G., Power, S and Halpin, D. (1998) *Devolution and Choice in Education: The school, the state and the market*. Buckingham, Open University Press.

³ Mc Murtry, J. (1999) *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism*. London, Pluto Press.

⁴ Hill, D. (1994) Labour- Teacher Education and Training: a Tale of Three Policies. *Education for Today and Tomorrow*, 48(3) pp20-22

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School effectiveness research has been on the agenda for a long time. In the 1960s social class was pointed out as the dominant factor in educational achievement in the USA. Since then, many studies have focused on the relations between school factors and student achievement. Results from this research have led to the development of all kinds of checklists for measuring effectiveness. Even if these have been criticised over the years by critical educators, an emphasis on developing effective measures of educational outcomes is still on the agenda, maybe now more than ever.

There are of course examples of research that analyses formal schooling in more sophisticated ways. This research highlights elements like teaching styles, collaboration, parental involvement, amount of teaching, and group sizes. Results from this kind of research are however seldom found in neo-liberal debates on schooling as they might point to other reasons for differences between school achievement levels. Instead the main focus is on research that tries to develop “new” and more effective measures of educational outcome, for instance by adding affective factors like student satisfaction to the checklists.

One of the more important problems facing research on effectiveness is the narrow focus on cognitive achievement as the primary measure. A focus like this can only capture a fragment of what is important in schooling. Therefore it can only be of use for those who look upon schooling from an economical perspective and for policy makers who assume that schooling is merely a means for the state to select people in directions that will benefit political intentions. Schools cannot be seen as places in which passive objects (be they teachers or students) are to be adjusted to agreed goals and visions. Instead schools should be looked upon as sites where teachers and students with agency will be offered opportunities to create alternative worlds and to support or oppose aspects of the official state agenda.

The “liberal virus” has infected all education systems these days. Effectiveness research and connected thoughts about education have found their ways to developing countries through the neo-liberal glorification of globalisation. Ideas about cost sharing, free choice of schools, learning through centralised television broadcasted lessons, outcome-based grading systems, and so on, have become important factors in each and every developing country without any further consideration of the context specific

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socio-political situation or the multi-lingual classroom settings, and without considering cultural aspects connected to values, beliefs and attitudes. We do not have to think twice to realise the problems this creates in countries where parents do not have any money to share, where choice of school is more a question of whether or not you can send your children to school, where the mother tongue is not the medium of instruction, and where the grading system is based upon “academic achievement” instead of peace, democracy and health. Unfortunately this is the situation in Ethiopia today.

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In an attempt to create some kind of counterweight to neo-liberal aspirations, a Master’s degree course was developed in 2003 by the Department of Education at Umeå University in cooperation with the UNESCO institute IICBA (International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa) in Addis Ababa. The course – Critical Practitioner Inquiry for Educators – which started in 2003 and ended in May 2005, was offered to teacher educators at universities, colleges and institutes in Ethiopia as a pedagogical in-service and upgrading course. At the end of the day, and as yet another sign of neo-liberal influences, the government determined that only educators from universities were able to participate.

The general aim of the course is to conceptualise pedagogy as a field that deals with questions about how, why and what values, knowledge and skills are created, sustained, and transformed amongst and between generations, groups and individuals. More specifically the course aimed to develop students’ competence to reflect systematically and critically on their own practice and to gain a wider understanding of this through contextual analysis, which actually is the core of Critical Practitioner Inquiry (CPI).⁵

The idea behind CPI is best described in Dahlström’s position paper for the course.⁶ According to Dahlström there is a displacement of critical pedagogical ideas in the international academic discourse of education. Academics have given themselves the preferential right of interpretation

⁵ Department of Education (2003) Master’s Degree in Critical Practitioner Inquiry for Educators, 40 SWE credits, Curriculum (Feb 2003), Department of Education, Umeå University.

⁶ Dahlström, Lars (2003) Master’s Degree: Critical Practitioner Inquiry for Educators (Position paper), Department of Education, Umeå University.

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over educational practice and by so doing have left practitioners outside the interpretive arena. Practical knowledge is looked upon as an application of theoretical knowledge and not as a form of knowledge in its own right. Practitioners do not have the power to define the meaning of their practice. Therefore, under present circumstances with

... overwhelming international influences on education from neo-liberal thinking and the recent illusion created by information technology symbolically represented by expressions like 'the global village'...⁷

there is a need to restore a critical agenda based upon practitioners' critical and extended know-how beyond the classroom. Critical Practitioner Inquiry is an attempt to regain a critical empowerment by practitioners and restore their right to interpret their practice.

CPI was first introduced as an alternative research approach in the new teacher education program for basic education in Namibia after independence in 1990. Teacher educators at the colleges became important practitioners in developing CPI by applying the approach in staff development courses. Integrated ideas from scholars like Ken Zeichner and Staf Callewaert further refined the CPI concept.

During 1996 – 2000, the CPI approach was used in a Higher Diploma course in Namibia. Findings from the course evaluation indicate that CPI must be considered as an important approach for the restoration of a critical practitioner-based agenda. The final reports from the course show a move away from hypothesis testing towards a concern about development issues, from explanation through theoretical filters towards contextual analysis, from reliance on external wisdom towards building on internal wisdom, and from writing for a tutor towards writing for community and a knowledge base.⁸

Based upon these experiences the specific aims for the Master's degree course in Ethiopia can be described as follows:

- to move the preferential right of interpretation over education practice closer to practitioners,

⁷ *ibid* p. 1.

⁸ *ibid* p. 6.

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- to do this through the development of situational knowledge amongst practitioners as a combination of critical contextual analysis and reflective practice under the concept Critical Practitioner Inquiry,
- to develop a written knowledge base of education from documented critical practitioner inquiry studies as a way to foster a culture of solidarity and social justice,
- to create a balance between knowledge of practice as developed from critical practitioner inquiry and traditional academic knowledge where these types of knowledge are given the necessary degrees of freedom to exercise their preferential right of interpretation in their respective domains, and
- to multiply meeting places such as the present Master's course where different types of knowledge and their attached discourses can develop beyond the present scholarly divide.⁹

In line with the ideas from the Master's course, a seminar was held at Umeå University in May 2004. The seminar took place during a weekend with participants from different departments at the university and invited guests from abroad. All national as well as international tutors from the Master's program in Ethiopia were present. The seminar consisted of traditional paper presentations with follow-up discussions, but also possibilities for more profound discussions on certain issues. In this publication all papers presented at the seminar are included. The book is divided into three parts followed by a postscript.

Points of Departure

The first part of the book consists of two articles. Luiza Cortesão talks in her article - *Is there an epistemological place for a possible social educational agency?*- about the complex and tense situation which exists between structure and agency. Analysis of the decision-making phenomenon shows that neither the will to act, nor the capacity to make decisions, nor even the

⁹ *ibid* pp. 8-9.

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ideological orientation of the agents is enough to explain the actions developed. There is a “complex set of situations which interact and which depend not only on the social actors and their hybrid nature (which reveals itself differently in different situations), but also on a combination of events that take place during the development of the action”. To decode, interpret and denounce are important ways of acting and being committed, and because we, as teachers and researchers, are more trained, it is of great importance that we use our full capacity to analyse at all times.

Cortese is concerned about the production of “committed knowledge” as an extension of Bourdieu’s thinking. Besides Bourdieu’s proposal, “scholarship with commitment”, she argues that there is a need for agency in the framework of a demanding process of critical action research, here conceptually described as Critical Practitioner Inquiry.



In the second article - *Language, education and (dis)empowerment?- The important role of local languages in educational development* - Carol Benson discusses some of the linguistic myths that are in play in the area of educational development. She considers these myths to be “detrimental to educational development and beneficial only to the elite, whose positions in low-income countries are best secured by maintaining the status quo”. Benson dispels these myths by describing the pedagogical success and other benefits of schooling programs that develop learners’ own languages and cultures by giving examples from bilingual programs in four different developing countries. These programs do not only have implications for more relevant and higher quality basic education but also for social development in terms of more democratic and equitable participation of girls and women as well as other traditionally marginalized social groups.

Contradictions

The second part of the book begins with an article by Lars Dahlström - *Critical Practitioner Inquiry – Creating voice amongst subaltern professionals*. Here Dahlström discusses what he sees as important in order to change the distribution of the preferential right of interpretation to the benefit of the subaltern professionals. The answer to this question could be CPI. The article is a thorough survey into the field of CPI starting with a

basic scholastic positioning of CPI and concluding by unpacking the concepts on which CPI is built.



Dahlström's text is followed by Brook Lemma's article - *Plasma television teachers – When a different reality takes over African education*. This article is an example from Ethiopia on an analysis carried out under the framework of CPI. Lemma, one of the national tutors in the earlier mentioned Master's course, has looked into a new approach adopted by the Ethiopian government of offering lessons in high schools (senior secondary education) all over the country via plasma televisions. From Lemma's analysis you can see that the lessons distributed through TV are not relevant to the Ethiopian educational context. The transmissions come directly from the Republic of South Africa or rather are prepared in the Republic of South Africa and transported on CDs to a central station in Addis Ababa. Lemma argues that this so-called "cross-cultural cloning" might end up "expanding the Anglo-American education system deep into the Ethiopian society that vehemently continues to erode the national and regional ethical values, leaving no chance for young Ethiopians to uphold and build on their cultural values". He also discusses other negative consequences of the use of plasma TV: how it scales down the involvement of teachers in curriculum development and implementation, their place in the community, and the ethical values they should represent and guide in their respective communities.

National perspectives

The third part of the book starts with an article by Jette Steensen - *Global Trends on Local Grounds – The case of teacher education in Denmark and Sweden* - where she does a comparative analysis of teacher education in Sweden and Denmark. Steensen's analysis shows big differences between the two countries' programs, differences that are explained more by local factors than by global trends. She concludes her article by stating that the intention has nothing to do with persuading Ethiopians or others to adopt any of the Scandinavian systems. Instead the message is that "any educational system will have to lie firmly on local grounds, that international trends must be analysed strategically as well as critically, and

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that such analysis, for example through Critical Practitioner Inquiries, might create room for local actors and counter-hegemonic efforts”.



Steensen’s text is followed by two articles that take an Ethiopian perspective. In the first of these - *Reflections on the Rationale for the Ethiopian* - Temechegn Engida analyses and discusses problems in connection with educational reforms and their implementation in Ethiopia. Of special interest is the new Teacher Education System Overhaul (TESO). Engida reflects upon the rational and underlying assumptions behind the TESO document. Even if, as he puts it, a more thorough study is needed, Engida manages to point to several contradictory statements that are sure to create problems in the implementation process. Engida’s reflections are based upon a literature review and some relevant statistics.



Nigussie Kassahun studies the same TESO document in his article - *Practitioner Opinions on Teacher Education Reform and Its Implementation in Ethiopia* - from a different perspective. He aims at getting to know more about educators’ opinions by asking 107 teacher educators at a faculty of education about issues related to the connection between different policy documents and the implementation process. Kassahun investigates teachers’ opinions through questions about teacher involvement and difficulties concerning necessary equipment and premises. The result shows that despite positive outcomes such as allocation of more time to the practicum, continuous assessment and active learning, practitioners are of the opinion that curriculum materials, class size and classroom situations do not favour the implementation of the mandated learner-centred approach.

Postscript

Staf Callewaert addresses possible merits and problems with counter-hegemonic efforts such as CPI in his postscript – *Looking back, but not in anger*. Callewaert starts his reflection by referring to the complex experiences of wonder and pain associated with doing educational work in Ethiopia. He points to what he calls “the tragedy of our time: the radical change from education by educationalist to education by neo-liberal management”. Further on, Callewaert reflects on the new situation that the

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CPI course created for the course tutors, being faculty lecturers themselves and facing the situation of encouraging other faculty lecturers, i.e. the course participants, to start a critical analysis that implicitly meant they had to engage in questioning their own stance as “pure researchers”.

Callewaert emphasises that CPI is a constructive opportunity that has managed against all odds has managed to balance between the many dangers of action research thanks to its political and scientific platform. The political platform of CPI means that it is not just another smart management devise. The scientific platform means that CPI attempts to protect itself from the antagonistic division between qualitative and quantitative methods as action researchers commonly do, without reducing itself to relativism or the fashions of best practice. Callewaert concludes that “since it is the last tradition that has been strong in education in Ethiopia up till now, and since it is the first that people may propose as an alternative to positivism, Critical Practitioner Inquiry, which is different from both, can make an important contribution”.

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