

# **IF THE SCHOOL BECOMES PART OF THE PROBLEM, WHERE CAN WE (STILL) GO?**

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**Many thanks for the invitation!**

**reflections on school and society in an ‘age of performance’**



**I will focus on the school  
but my reflections are relevant for education more generally**

**I will make a case for education as a public concern  
and point out that the focus on performance puts this under threat**

## **IF THE SCHOOL BECOMES PART OF THE PROBLEM . . .**

**the modern school, social democracy and the welfare state**



**here the school is part of ‘the solution’**

individual progress, social inclusion, democratisation, prosperity and wealth

**but: the modern school is increasingly under the pressure to ‘perform’  
a pressure on schools, teachers and students and on national education systems**



**a discourse of ‘panic’ and an insatiable need for ‘improvement’ – until when?  
geared towards increasingly ‘narrow’ definitions of educational quality**

**the school is increasingly itself becoming a problem**

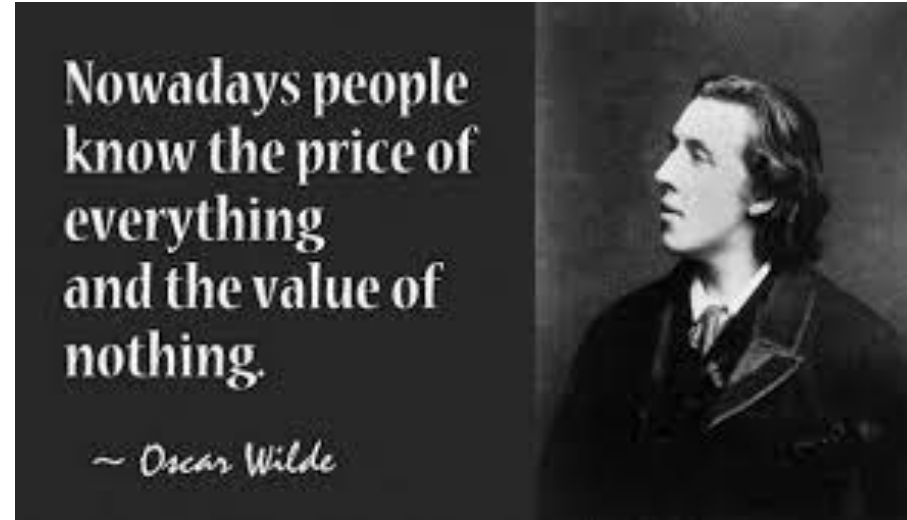
dissatisfied teachers, dissatisfied students, dissatisfied politicians, a dissatisfied public

**Should we give up on the (modern) school?**

**Should we give up on its (modern) promise (and hand it over to google or Pearsons or ‘Hattie’)?**

**Or should we try again? And if so, how?**

## A LIVELY DISCOURSE ABOUT THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION, BUT . . .



**an ‘age of measurement’  
in which the question what good education is,  
and how we decide and judge, is easily forgotten**

**Are we measuring what we value,  
or valuing what is/can be measured?**

# THE QUESTION OF QUALITY

quality is a 'non-objectionable'  
*no one is against quality*



but competing definitions of what quality is  
competing views about what counts as quality  
competing underlying values



quality is a judgement: whether we consider something to be good

which means that the question of the quality of education is not a technical question  
but a deeply political one – which shouldn't surprise us!

What should surprise us, is the ambition to find technical solutions!  
such as evidence about 'what works'

What is the 'something' that our judgements should focus on?

What are the criteria that should come into play?

And who should decide?

## THREE COMMON MISUNDERSTANDINGS

**THAT QUALITY IS ABOUT EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY** (e.g., school effectiveness)



**process values**

**but processes that are effective and efficient are not automatically good**

ineffective and effective torturing

**THAT QUALITY IS ABOUT DOING WHAT CUSTOMERS WANT** (student satisfaction surveys)

**ISO 9000 quality management principles**

**the first principle: to meet customer requirements**

but what if customers want something immoral?

### **THE PROBLEM OF PERFORMATIVITY**

**when indicators of quality become / are taken as definitions of quality**

e.g., league-table positions (the aim of being in the top 10)

e.g., performing above average

**THE REAL QUESTION IS *WHAT EDUCATION IS FOR***

## [1] A QUESTION OF THE AIMS OF EDUCATION



but: the risk of instrumental thinking (achieving the aims)  
and an exclusive focus on 'outcomes'

in education we always also need to be concerned about the quality of processes



(all) outcomes can be 'produced,' but at a price

## [2] A QUESTION OF THE WIDER PURPOSE OF EDUCATION



what we find important about/for education,  
irrespective of the impact on outcomes, or even when the impact is 'negative'  
e.g., segregated or comprehensive education – e.g., decent buildings

not just an 'outcomes' argument (performance), but also a civilisation argument



things we value *per se*, as a civilised society  
e.g., parks, health care, city planning  
e.g., not handing over schools to the market or the private sphere

# THE PECULIAR SITUATION OF THE MODERN SCHOOL



## A 'DOUBLE HISTORY'

↓  
the modern school as a servant of two masters



### [1] a function of and for society

which emerges when society loses its educative power (modernisation)

**this is why society has legitimate expectations about the school  
and where the demand to perform comes from**

[2] a place in between 'home' and 'the street' – a place for practising, not work or production

↓  
**hence a place shielded off from the demands of society**  
schole: free time as time not (yet) determined by societal demands

**there is therefore a tension at the very heart of the modern school  
which is reflected in discussions about (what counts as) quality**

**MANY EDUCATORS KNOW THIS TENSION AND KNOW HOW TO HANDLE IT**

**but nowadays the voice of one 'master' has become  
many times louder than the voice of the other**



**the school is called to perform – to be functional – to produce  
and is called to do so in very particular ways ('measurable learning outcomes')  
which makes it far more difficult for the school to be *schole***

**How has this disbalance emerged?**



# WHERE DID IT ALL START? AND WHERE DID IT GO WRONG?

the social justice argument



every child and young person, irrespective of where they are or where they are from, should have access to good education

the slippery slope towards a culture of performance



How do we make sure that education is everywhere of the same quality?

How do we assess the quality of education?

How do we measure the quality of education?

How do we measure the quality of educational outcomes?

Which outcomes should be measured?

Which outcomes can be measured?



“measuring what we value, or valuing what is being measured”

in the background: a rhetorical reference to ‘the basics’

and in the ‘not-so’ background



# **GEMI: THE GLOBAL EDUCATIONAL MEASUREMENT INDUSTRY**

(Biesta 2015: Resisting the seduction of the GEMI)

**the problematic impact of systems such as PISA**

that try to create / manage to create a particular 'common sense'

**promoting a questionable definition of good education**

narrowly defined – narrowly measured – focusing on outcomes

**using a questionable methodology**

**a focus on countries and systems**

What if Finland is compared to a slice of London?

**based on a questionable logic of competition**

the distribution of league-table positions



relative positioning that easily forgets that the position at the bottom can also be good

**a system driven by fear – the fear of being left behind**

## WHERE DID WE END UP?

a narrow definition of what counts in education  
a shift from provision and process to outcomes  
an input-output/production view of education  
the teacher as a 'factor' in the production of outcomes, not a thoughtful professional  
and an obsession with performance

**THE LOGIC OF  
PIG FARMING!**



**WHICH IS NOT WHERE WE SHOULD HAVE ENDED UP  
for the sake of education, teachers, students and society**

**Is there a way 'out'? With a role for the school?**

## CHANGING THE QUESTION

from **‘What kind of school does society need?’**

and how can we keep improving education so that it meets these needs?

**which will constantly ‘return’ to the question of performance**

to **‘What kind of society does the school actually need?’**

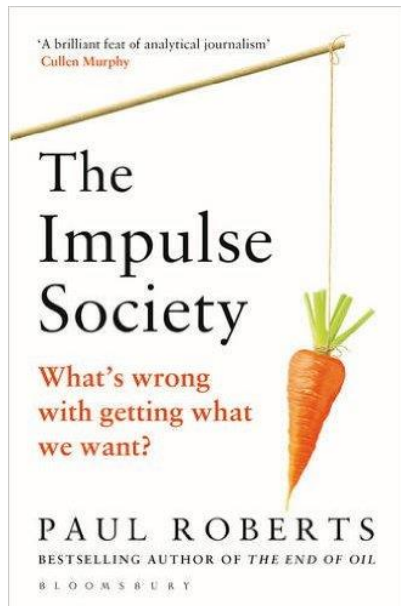
so that it can (still) be a school, and not just a ‘performing function’

**part of the problem is that modern society has become an ‘impulse society’**

**‘What is wrong with getting what we want?’**

**e.g., an economic system that wants us to desire more,  
rather than asking whether what we desire  
is what we should be desiring**

**e.g., a political system where politicians promise voters  
to give them everything they desire,  
rather than saying that they will ‘filter’ their desires  
through a particular set of political values**



## **WHICH SHOWS THAT THE 'ISSUE' OF PERFORMANCE ULTIMATELY BRINGS US TO THE QUESTION OF DEMOCRACY**

**because democracy is not about getting what you want,  
but entails the transformation of 'individual desires' into 'collective desirables'**

**whether what is desired by individuals and groups, can be 'carried' by society as whole**

**which means that in a democracy "you can't always get what you want"**

### **CAN EDUCATION STILL BE A PUBLIC CONCERN?**



**not (just) meeting the needs of society,  
also not handing it over to the market or to the private sphere**

**but the school as the time that society gives to the next generation  
in order to encounter the world and encounter itself in relation to the world**

**ARE WE STILL WILLING TO GIVE THIS TIME?**

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

**the problem with 'performance' is that it turns the school into a 'pure function'  
an ongoing demand to be useful for external purposes and desires  
(irrespective of whether such desires are 'narrow' or 'broad' – PISA or Bildung)**

**but the school is not (just) a function but (also) a place in between 'home' and 'the street'  
where we can try, fail, try again ... and fail better (Samuel Beckett)  
which needs time and patience**

**the school as the time society gives to the next generation  
precisely in order not to have to be productive, not to perform**

**an impulse society just wants the school to deliver and perform  
a democratic society understands that not all desires should be pursued**



**which is what it means to think of the school as a public concern**

**whether this school is still possible  
is therefore ultimately a test of the democratic quality of a society**

**THANKS FOR YOUR TIME**

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