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Blaming the victim: assessment, examinations, and the responsabilisation of students and teachers in neo-liberal governance

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ABSTRACT

Historically, for a period of a hundred years or more from the 1860s to the 1960s, assessment developed as an educational technology for selecting and certificating small numbers of individual students. This process was largely focused on excluding the majority. Over the last 30–40 years, the focus and purpose of assessment has changed. The emphasis is now on education for all and the development of a fit-for-purpose assessment system *as a system*, that is, as part of an integrated approach to national human resource development. These changes have been both driven by, and contributed to, the development of the knowledge economy and neo-liberalism. Students and teachers have been ‘responsibilised’ for the quality and outcomes of education, with assessment and examinations providing the quintessential vehicle for individualising and responsabilising success and failure in relation to achievement and social mobility.

KEYWORDS

Neoliberalism;
responsibilisation;
assessment; accountability;
school-reform

Introduction

This paper explores the role of assessment in relation to issues of social and political governance. The paper draws largely on evidence from the UK (especially, and more recently, England) but with obvious resonances with experience elsewhere. Examinations are intended, in principle, to measure and report the outcomes of education, but have always exerted a controlling influence over the school curriculum and, through processes of selection and certification, operated as a key intermediary mechanism between school, tertiary education, and employment, that is, between education and the economy (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Broadfoot, 1979, 1984). Assessment and examinations have always been with us, or at least since the origins of what we might term modern schooling in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But the argument in this paper is that their role, reach and discursive influence have expanded as education systems have expanded, and vastly increased numbers of students are exposed to the processes and consequences of assessment. The paper brings together the normally fairly hermetically sealed literature of educational assessment, including empirical studies of assessment processes

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and practices, with discussions of the knowledge economy and Foucauldian governance. In some respects key elements of the argument can be traced back to *Discipline and Punish* itself (Foucault, 1977, pp. 186–192). But they are extended here in the context of a much more widespread and voluntaristic use of assessment and examinations in modern education systems. Students submit willingly, if reluctantly, to taking examinations, and they are not simply imposed upon them in direct disciplinary fashion. Thus the argument is that empirical experience of both the cognitive and affective impacts of assessment is as important, if not more so, as the ideological impact.

Historically, perhaps for a period of 100 years or more from the 1860s to the 1960s, assessment developed as an educational technology for selecting and certificating individual students. This process was largely focused on small minorities of students. Assessment, particularly in the form of selection tests and school examinations, was used to identify and select small numbers of students for elite education and subsequently to record their academic achievements. Different forms of assessment, sometimes known as mental measurement or intelligence tests, were used to identify and direct small numbers of the supposedly ‘feeble minded’ to special institutional provision. Such tests were also developed and used more widely in the selection and allocation processes noted above, but still their use was limited. Education was a scarce good, access to educational opportunities was restricted, and educational assessment was largely concerned with selecting individuals for those restricted opportunities: for access to an elite secondary education and access to university (Broadfoot, 1984, 1996; Sutherland, 1984). So the focus of assessment was on identifying individual achievement, and selecting and certificating individuals. In so doing, this process functioned to identify, and legitimate on grounds of educational merit, the identification of the next cohort of suitably qualified and socialised personnel for economic and social leadership roles in society.

Thus assessment systems in general, school leaving examinations in particular, have always constituted a key mediation point in the articulation of schooling with the economy. At one and the same time, key individual identities of being an educational ‘success’ or ‘failure’ were constructed and used to legitimate the distribution of economic and social advantage. Success was individually merited and failure was individually inscribed – most students were designated as simply not clever enough to succeed. Responsibility for educational outcomes was produced by particular institutional arrangements underpinned by a particular psychological theory of innate intelligence distributed across a population. Assessment developed as a *technology of exclusion*.

Over the last 30–40 years, the focus and purpose of assessment has changed, particularly to involve far larger numbers of the school population. We now live in a world of intense global economic competition and mass movements of capital and labour. Unskilled mass production and employment opportunities have virtually vanished from the UK and other similar economies, and the emphasis now is on education for the so-called knowledge economy and as a form of investment in human capital (Brown & Lauder, 1992; Lauder, Brown, Dillabough, & Halsey, 2006; Lauder, Brown, & Tholen, 2012). Both the technological development of assessment and the policy context of educational standards and qualifications now assume that all, or at least the overwhelming majority of the population, can and should be educated to the highest level possible. The focus is now on education for all and the development of a fit-for-purpose assessment system *as a system*, that is, as part of an integrated approach to national human resource

development. Instead of needing a legitimate reason to dispense with the intellectual capabilities of most of the population, governments now need to cultivate these capabilities. The imperative is to treat education as an economic investment, both on the part of the individual student, and on the part of government, and in turn to develop assessment as a *technology of inclusion*.

There is not a single determining driver of this change. Rather, such change reflects developments in the social and economic aspirations which we hold for education systems, and what it is that assessment is designed to accomplish. Changes in assessment reflect a combination of socio-economic and educational factors. These factors are clearly influenced by, and are responsive to, the neo-liberal analysis of the role of schooling in a knowledge economy (Lauder et al., 2012; Torrance, 2011). But change has also derived from debates about:

- criterion referencing, clarity of outcomes and the development of ‘curriculum content standards’ – the ‘standards’ agenda;
- social justice and educational inclusion – making objectives and assessment criteria explicit for all students in order to render the system fairer; and
- the role of summative and formative assessment – providing feedback to students on criteria, objectives and the ways in which they might improve their achievement.

There is not space here to review all these factors in more detail and to rehearse their interaction (see Torrance, 2011, for a longer exploration) though I will return to some aspects later in the paper. One element that is of particular interest at this point, however, is the social justice agenda and how it dovetails with neo-liberal arguments about human resource development. Advocates argue that the majority of the school population should not be abandoned to comparative, selective, norm-referenced, failure. Rather, we need our assessment systems to identify and report what students can do, rather than what they cannot. Thus curriculum objectives and assessment criteria should be made as explicit as possible so that they are accessible for all students (Broadfoot, Nuttall, James, & Stierer, 1988; Butterfield, 1995; Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) Hargreaves Report, 1984). The inclusion agenda also argues that these objectives should embrace the many social and attitudinal outcomes of education which are just as important as academic outcomes: we should value achievements in other domains, including social and political understanding, and ensure that students can contribute to civil society (Pole, 1993). In tandem with such general arguments about widening the scope and inclusiveness of assessment, have come specific technical developments incorporating the modularisation of the curriculum, the development of graded modular tests, and the possibility of accumulating better final results through the assessment of coursework and even re-sits of examination modules to improve grades (Hayward & McNicholl, 2007; Murphy & Torrance, 1988; Torrance, 1995). Thus neo-liberal economic arguments about changing and extending educational provision overlap with social justice arguments about expanding educational inclusion, and call forth specific technical and procedural innovations in assessment theory and practice.

In turn, these developments carry profound implications for the way in which assessment articulates not just with the economy, and the allocation of opportunity, but with neo-liberal governance and the ways in which students (and indeed teachers and

parents) come to think about themselves. Previously, educational 'failure' was the assumed norm, and the limited progression of the majority of the school population was the default position of the system. Now however the opportunity to progress through the school system and onto university is claimed to be available to all and for all. All that is required to access these opportunities is hard work – from both students and teachers.

The knowledge economy, neo-liberalism and responsabilisation

As noted above, the terms of trade have changed very significantly for Western industrial societies over recent decades. The argument of economists and policy-makers is now that innovation, creativity and flexibility will drive economic growth through the provision of intellectual and personal goods and services, rather than large-scale manufacturing. Knowledge is the new capital that nation-states and individuals need to pursue and accumulate – being both the raw material and the product of a knowledge-based economy – rather than the mass unskilled production processes of primary extraction and manufacture (Drucker, 1993; Friedman, 2006). In turn, the school system must produce higher and broader educational standards for far larger cohorts of students than hitherto. Higher standards in basic academic subjects are demanded – maths, science, languages and so forth – but also the capacity to put them to good use. Thus problem-solving, data analysis, report writing, teamwork, etc. are similarly demanded. Whether or not such skills and capacities are fostered by narrow testing regimes is a matter to which we will return. The key point to note for the moment is that higher standards of education are being demanded for all.

In parallel with such demands, however, which are located in the relatively narrow arena of education policy, the way policy can and should have an impact on practice has also been reconfigured over recent years. Increased investment in education and the expansion of educational provision could have continued to be undertaken through well-established social democratic state processes. In the UK, for example, the expansion of educational provision and opportunity was achieved by moving to a comprehensive, rather than a selective, system of secondary education (beginning in 1964) and raising the school leaving age from 15 to 16 years in 1974. This process of providing a single system of comprehensive education for the whole school cohort, rather than a selective academic education for a few, could be said to have been finally completed with the implementation of a single system of secondary school examinations and the introduction of a national curriculum in 1988. Almost as soon as this process was complete, however, arguments about how public provision needed to become more efficient and effective, through mechanisms of differentiation and competition, were gaining traction – and not just in the education sector. The argument became one which was much more fundamentally about the nature of state provision and the role of competition in promoting innovation, quality and efficiency.

Classical political liberalism arose out of a critique of absolutist states, so that the 'liberal' social democratic state comes to justify and legitimate itself through guaranteeing fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of the individual, the rule of law, regulation of markets and so forth. Neo-liberalism reverses this process of legitimation. Rather than subjecting the market to regulation by what it argues is an overbearing and inefficient state, neo-liberalism subjects the state to the regulation of the market:

The state no longer defines and supervises the freedom of the market; rather the market itself represents the organising and regulatory principle of the state. (Lemke, 2012, p. 16)

As Lemke further notes, Foucault was particularly insightful in pointing out that under neo-liberalism the market 'is a sort of permanent economic tribunal confronting government' (quoted in Lemke, 2012, p. 16).

Some recent manifestations of neo-liberalism have involved a greater role for government than others. In the UK, for example, under successive governments since the 1980s, policy assumed that government still had a role to play in creating and supporting markets, to make them 'work' properly. Nevertheless markets are still thought to be the most efficient way of producing and supplying high-quality goods and services, including public services, such as education. Creating and supporting markets has included producing appropriately skilled and socialised personnel to operate them (i.e. school leavers and graduates). Thus 'raising standards in education' not only responds to the direct call for a skilled workforce to compete globally, but also creates the idea of a skilled workforce, and what constitutes such an entity, in the first place – including the 'soft skills' of flexibility, creativity and so forth, in addition to straightforward academic achievement. As Lemke (1999) reminds us, following Marx and Foucault, 'labour power must first be constituted as labour power before it can be exploited' (p. 59).

In tandem with such developments, and indeed deeply implicated in them, are arguments about the management of social and economic risk in advanced and post-industrial societies. Historically, during much of the twentieth century and particularly during the 50 years after the Second World War, risk was largely socialised in many industrial and manufacturing economies. Various forms of social security – public health provision, pensions, unemployment pay and so forth – were introduced to manage job transitioning in the labour market and the threats to a healthy and productive workforce. Education was developed as one of these socialised investments to benefit not only the individual but also, more particularly, the needs of the nation-state for an educated workforce. Neo-liberalism sees such investment both as too expensive for nation-states to sustain, let alone develop further, and as corrosive of personal responsibility. Again, the argument is that it will be far more efficient and effective for individuals to choose what investment to make in themselves, and for markets to provide such personal and public services. Equally, however, individuals are not simply left to their own devices, governments still seek to shape the objects of and desire for their choices. As Peeters (2013) notes, such new forms of governance involve 'the view that citizens have their own responsibility in preventing social harms' (p. 584). Thus a key characteristic of what he terms 'new welfare' is the state's role in enabling, persuading, enticing or nudging citizens to 'take responsibility' for their lives and communities (p. 584).

Similarly Lemke (2001) observes:

The strategy of rendering individual subjects 'responsible' ... entails shifting the responsibility for social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty etc. ... into the domain ... of 'self care' ... [achieving] congruence ... between a responsible and moral individual and an economic-rational actor ... wage labourers [become] ... autonomous entrepreneurs with full responsibility for their own [human capital] investment decisions ... they are the entrepreneurs of themselves. (Lemke, 2001, pp. 199, 201)

As with wage labourers, so it is with so-called 'at risk' youth (Kelly, 2001), parents of young children (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2013), recipients of health care (Liebenberg, Ungar, & Ikeda, 2013), and indeed school and university students, particularly as manifested through the pursuit of test results and examination passes. We are all now responsible for the management of our own economic welfare and career trajectories. Nor is this simply as it was always so. The idea of personal responsibility has become both more significant and more pre-emptively conceived. As Peeters (2013) further observes:

This conceptual leap transforms 'individual responsibility' from its traditional liberal understanding as *ex post* accountability for one's actions [i.e. after the fact] ... into an *ex ante* virtue, which emphasises acting in the present and preventing undesirable situations and events. (p. 588)

Assessment and examinations in an age of responsibilisation

Governments around the world are now looking to produce integrated curriculum and assessment systems to drive up educational standards for all. Content, including knowledge and skills, is defined, subject by subject, and assessment methods are then aligned with such content. Teaching the content is policed by the assessment system and, in turn, the effectiveness of the teaching is measured. Individual students pursue their individual interests with respect to examination passes and career opportunities, while schools and teachers are held to account by the same mechanism at the aggregate level – percentages of students passing certain national targets or benchmarks of expected achievement and progression through the system. Similarly such systems produce quasi-markets for schools via league tables reporting to what extent schools meet, do not meet, or indeed exceed, the targets.

Perhaps the two most visible examples of such changes are the National Curriculum and Assessment system in England (Dearing, 1993; Department of Education and Science (DES), 1987; Department for Education (DfE), 2015), and the No Child Left Behind legislation in the United States (NCLB, 2001). This has more recently been developed into the standards-oriented 'Race to the Top' programme and the State-level Common Core Standards Initiative (Common Core Standards (CCS), 2015; Obama, 2009). Other countries are adopting similar programmes, including New Zealand, which has been developing national standards linked to a testing system since 2002 (New Zealand Qualification Authority (NZQA), 2011), and Australia (cf. Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski, & Gunn, 2010). The choice of 'Race to the Top' as the brand name of the US government's most recent manifestation of these policy pressures seems particularly illuminating as to how the pressures are perceived and understood by policy-makers:

America will not succeed in the twenty-first century unless we do a far better job of educating our sons and daughters ... And the race starts today. I am issuing a challenge to our nation's governors and school boards, principals and teachers ... if you set and enforce rigorous and challenging standards and assessments ... if you turn around failing schools – your state can win a Race to the Top grant. (Obama, 2009)

In England, results at the national level have certainly improved significantly over the last 30–40 years. Around 70% of the school cohort now pass at least five GCSEs at grades A* – C (considered passing grades) compared to 20% in the mid-1970s¹ (Torrance,

2011). Thus the apparent productivity and effectiveness of the system has been transformed, in exactly the way that advocates of the move to a knowledge economy would argue is necessary. But whether or not this has resulted from a 'genuine' rise in educational standards, or grade inflation, or some combination of the two, is highly contested. There is considerable debate about whether rising test scores might actually mean that educational standards are falling rather than rising, as teachers and students simply focus on passing tests (Sykes Review, 2010; Torrance, 2011). Such arguments can also be observed internationally (Hamilton et al., 2007).

Of equal concern in England, if not more so, is that a significant minority of students (approximately 30%) do not achieve even this minimally acceptable level of secondary school achievement, and only around 40% of the cohort eventually progress to university-level higher education. Furthermore, and not surprisingly, given all we know about the relationship of educational achievement with economic status, it is still working-class children that do least well at school, and white working-class boys that do least well of all (Cassen & Kingdon, 2007; Perry & Francis, 2010). Yet the policy rhetoric of the system is that everyone *can* succeed, so responsibility for failure now lies with the students themselves, in combination with poor parenting and poor teaching. Working-class children may no longer be categorised as incapable, but they (and their parents and teachers) are categorised as disorganised and lacking in endeavour and ambition. (Lack of) responsibility has replaced (lack of) intelligence as the key explanatory variable in educational success and failure.

Moreover, even supposedly successful students who do indeed progress to higher education and graduation do not necessarily progress to the 'graduate level' professional jobs that the move to a knowledge economy might assume and indeed promise. By 2011, 31% of the UK adult workforce had a degree (Lindley & Machin, 2012, p. 269). Yet, while employers might support the general rhetoric of needing a large highly educated workforce for the knowledge economy, including many of the soft skills and new courses in design, media, computing and so forth, what they actually seek in practice are applicants with straightforward academic qualifications from the most prestigious global universities (Lauder et al., 2012). Similarly, given the growth in qualified applicants, universities now seek higher and higher entrance grades. Thus employers seek the 'best' graduates from the supposedly 'better' universities (i.e. students with good degrees from those universities which are the hardest to get into in the first place). In turn, students seek places in precisely these universities – making them even harder to get into. The gradient of the 'Race to the Top' is getting steeper and disappointment is often as real for those who succeed as those who do not. Lauder et al. (2012) further note that this is producing an increasingly differentiated version of the globalised knowledge economy. High-speed, high-volume information and communications technology (ICT) not only renders manufacturing jobs obsolete, but also previously high-quality professional jobs. Many forms of professional analysis and judgement are now ensconced in computer programmes and require little in the way of human interpretation and intervention. The creation and management of knowledge systems is increasingly separated from their operational execution, through a process which Lauder et al. (2012) term 'digital taylorism':

Digital Taylorism ... [translates] knowledge work into working knowledge ... codified and routinised ... making it generally available to the company rather than the 'property' of the

individual worker... creative work... has been separated from... routine 'analytics'... (pp. 46–47)

Thus while elite graduates might be recruited from elite universities to work in elite, globalised management roles, the vast majority of graduates are recruited to routine processing and administration, or 'grunt work' as the employers themselves put it (p. 47), if indeed they even get recruited to this level of organisational activity. Lindley and Machin (2012) further report that differentiation at the graduate level is now increasingly at the level of a Master's degree rather than an undergraduate degree.

Subjectification and responsabilisation

Passing and failing examinations not only defines individuals as educational successes and failures, but also establishes the legitimacy of the idea of being an educational success or an educational failure and all that flows from this in terms of life chances. Examinations render legitimate the idea that there are extant bodies of knowledge that must be mastered and that such knowledge is external to the knower. Examinations define both the 'subject' (history, geography, etc.) and the 'knowing subject' (the certified individual). Examinations organise and legitimate knowledge *qua* knowledge, in testable form, and at one and the same time produce/endorse the fact that knowledge can be and should be tested. Furthermore, examinations also legitimate the idea of subjecting oneself to scrutiny – to examination by others who are more powerful than oneself. As Foucault (1977) notes, 'The success of disciplinary power derives ... from the use of hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination' (p. 170). In this Foucault was not just restricting himself to educational examinations, medical examinations and indeed other forms of professional scrutiny would also fit within this analysis, but it is clear that measurement and comparison are crucial to the effectiveness of the process:

The art of punishing, in the regime of disciplinary power, is aimed [not] ... at repression ... it refers to a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation ... the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved ... (Foucault, 1977, pp. 182–183)

And with respect to schooling in particular, the power of such processes will be especially formative of subjectivities when they are encountered as probably the first proceduralised experience we have of the power of the generalised other:

The school became a sort of apparatus of uninterrupted examination ... it is the examination which, by combining hierarchical surveillance and normalising judgement, assumes the great disciplinary functions of distribution and classification ... (Foucault, 1977, pp. 186, 192)

However, as discussed previously, while examinations may manifest and realise the idea of educational success and failure and the legitimacy of being subject to examination, the actuality has only been directly experienced by the majority of the school population relatively recently – over the last 30 years or so. At one and the same time this experience has been amplified in intensity, as the consequences of passing and failing examinations has become ever more severe. Subjectification is now produced through much wider empirical experience of examinations as well as general exposure to their ideological role and

status. This is now combined with responsabilisation through the emphasis on social mobility achieved through personal endeavour.

There is more to this process of subjectification and responsabilisation than simply the encounter with tests and examinations however. Tests and examinations have themselves also changed over recent years, partly in response to calls for new and different skills and knowledge to be included in the curriculum (problem-solving, data analysis, report writing and so forth), partly as a result of different views about the role of assessment in promoting learning (formative assessment). Thus, there is more coursework, practical work and extended project work included in assessment systems than once was the case – ‘authentic assessment’ as it is sometimes known (Torrance, 1995); and there is far more feedback about progress to students from teachers, and far more discussion of assessment criteria and how they can be met, including via peer assessment. As such, the detail of the examination process is insinuated into the day-to-day relationship between teachers and students, and students and students, such that ‘surveillance and normalising judgement’ are absolutely central to the educational process. Such developments have been accommodated within traditional examination grading systems but have also included the development of ‘portfolio assessment’ or the reporting of profiles of achievement. Such developments can also be seen as part of the move towards ‘lifelong learning’ and the accumulation of a changing portfolio of skills and capabilities, as each stage of one’s educational and employment career demands it (cf. O’Brien, Osbaldiston, & Kendall, 2014). Thus we can see these developments as both making visible the detailed criteria for educational success and inserting discussion of them into the curriculum, and in so doing making their appropriation in the pursuit of the entrepreneurial self ever more available. Elsewhere I have termed such appropriation the replacement of learning by ‘criteria compliance’ (Torrance, 2007) and noted that it may be one explanation for why, as test scores rise, educational standards and the quality of learning do not necessarily seem to improve. Rather teachers are simply ‘teaching to the test’, or indeed the portfolio criteria, and most students are content to accumulate grades in this way. Equally however, if such criteria and grades are not duly appropriated and accumulated, responsibility either lies with the reluctant learner – it has all been laid out in great detail for them – or the teacher – they have not laid it out in enough detail.

Even for the successful, however, responsibility for achieving and sustaining that success is similarly located in their willingness to comply with the process and compete for the rewards. In the ‘Race to the Top’, or even to the relatively secure middle, all are victims of the increasing intensity of the competition. What is intriguing is that this process of responsabilisation has been produced precisely because it is understood as necessary and even desirable. Examinations are not ‘imposed’ on schools or teachers or students, though some versions of particular testing regimes are more specifically designed and imposed by government than others. But examinations in general are engaged with voluntarily. People (teachers, examiners) create them and other people (students/candidates) submit to them because of the rewards they may bring. Equally, the moves towards a more inclusive mass system of education, and to the use of more coursework, more formative feedback, and more transparency of educational objectives and assessment criteria are located in developments in psychology and pedagogy (Torrance, 2012), not governmentality, yet the congruence with governmentality is clear. Similarly, designing and administering examinations is a multi-million dollar

international business – many (vested) material interests have developed from the social necessity of certifying practical competence and educational achievement.

A key fulcrum in this articulation of examinations, governmentality and responsabilisation is the possibility of getting left behind in the race. Lemke (2012) alights upon the Foucault's notion of the 'fear of fear ... [being] one of the preconditions of the working of a security state' (quoted on p. 48). He then expands on this in the context of neo-liberal governmentality:

The vision of an enterprising self promises manifold options and opportunities ... but it also necessitates the permanent calculation and estimation of risks, thus establishing a fear of failure. (Lemke, 2012, p. 49)

This fear of failure is nowhere more apparent than in students' fears about failing exams – along with the fears of their parents, their teachers, and even of governments themselves as they strive to keep ahead in the global race for a 'knowledge-ready' workforce. Lemke continues:

Fear fulfils an important moral function in neo-liberal government. The constant threat of unemployment and poverty, and anxiety about the future ... stimulates a consciousness of economic risks and uncertainties that accompany the ... expected entrepreneurship. (p. 49)

We are all implicated/co-opted in this endeavour. We all, from different positions within the educational system, have an 'interest' in examinations continuing to exist in one form or another – teachers for purposes of student motivation and classroom control; students and parents for purposes of credentialism and social mobility; governments to measure educational performance and control teachers.

Thus examinations are produced to mediate and manage the effects of social and economic competition while, at one and the same time, contributing to the legitimacy of such competition. Their use underwrites the legitimacy of the process of measurement, comparison and individual responsibility for success and failure. The very fact that we allow ourselves to be subjected to examinations, or subject others to them, validates and endorses the power relationships inherent in such practices, and the construction of identity through discourses of 'passing and failing', 'knowing and not knowing', defining who becomes one sort of person and who another. Recent developments have further intensified the process of competition and the further individualisation of responsibility for educational success and failure, rendering individual students and teachers ever more liable for their own abject subjectivity and alienation, pursuing the indicators of educational quality and achievement – grades, grades and more grades – rather than educational quality itself. Thus assessment processes and examinations provide the quintessential vehicle for individualising and responsabilising success and failure for both students and teachers – with respect to achievement, social mobility and school accountability.

Could assessment be organised differently?

We seem to have moved from using assessment to identify and certify the actual practical skills, competences and educational achievements of (a minority of) individual students, to a mass system of assessment and testing which focuses on the indicators of achievement (grades and test scores) rather than achievement itself. Moreover this movement has been

accompanied by an increasing emphasis on the personal responsibility to engage with the system and maximise outcomes. One issue is the scale of the endeavour – the larger the student cohorts included in the system the simpler the assessments are likely to have to be and thus the narrower the educational experience is likely to be. Another issue is the intensity of the consequences – as more students are included in the possibility of succeeding, the more the bar must be raised with respect to what counts as success – since ultimately assessment does not just identify achievement in any absolute sense, it also regulates social and economic competition through validating selection processes. Higher grades must be continuously pursued.

Yet neo-liberalism does also require higher educational standards in the most general sense of the phrase. Narrow testing regimes, reliant on coaching and practice to produce higher and higher grades, which actually signify less and less in terms of educational achievement, are unlikely to produce flexible and creative individuals over the longer term. Currently the broader educational outcomes of investigation, data analysis, report writing and so forth are being pursued in the context of grade accumulation which is as likely to detract from their development as ensure it. Meanwhile the ‘soft skills’ of collaboration, teamwork and creativity, which so often feature in employers’ lists of ‘twenty-first century skills’ (Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills (ATCS), 2010) are hardly addressed at all in current testing regimes. So, neo-liberalism produces responsabilisation, but not necessarily higher educational standards. It is apparent that a broader range of knowledge, skills and competencies must be included in accountability systems if they are to develop in tandem with improving educational standards. Considerable international interest is focused on such possibilities, including developing broader approaches to assessment to support knowledge development (Scardamalia, Bransford, Kozma, & Quellmalz, 2012) and culturally responsive forms of evaluation (Hopson, 2009; Hopson, Kirkhart, & Bledsoe, 2012). Elements of such discussions hark back to the development of records of achievement in the 1980s in the UK (Broadfoot et al., 1988; Pole, 1993) and portfolio assessment in the 1990s in the USA (Koretz, 1998), both of which sought to broaden the reporting of a wider range of educational outcomes. It may be that with the widespread use of hand-held personal devices, and the almost ubiquitous use of interactive media by young people, creating and posting one’s own ‘record of achievement’ online may be one way of countering the narrowing impact of system accountability measures.

However, this would not necessarily address the issue of responsabilisation, indeed, it may further exacerbate it. Thus it is also necessary to re-think responsabilisation at the level of the collective, rather than the individual (cf. Stiegler, 2003, 2015). Educational encounters have always involved collaborative and reciprocal responsibility. Understanding the idea of responsibility and obligation and becoming a responsible citizen are not inappropriate goals for an education system to pursue. But such understandings must be recognised as collective responsibilities. Neo-liberal processes of responsabilisation, far over-emphasise the individual nature of responsibility and far underplay the collective element, thereby producing a very inefficient and ineffective form of social and educational investment in the future.

Much research tells us that learning is a social process and that achievement is co-produced in context even as it is attributed to individuals (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991; Filer, 2000). If these insights were to be taken seriously in the organisation of curriculum, teaching and assessment, it might be possible to produce a system that really did pursue teamwork and

the co-production of collaborative outcomes. While subjectification and responsabilisation are hardly avoidable in the operation of governmentality, the focus of this process could be significantly different, with much more emphasis being placed on the collective responsibility of teachers, students and their peers to understand that educational encounters are a collaborative endeavour which should produce outcomes that benefit communities as well as individuals. And outcomes, moreover, which must self-consciously look to the sustenance and long-term development of collective knowledge and culture, not simply to short-term utility and market advantage. What might assessment involve if it focused on the development and identification of collective understanding, collaboratively produced through educational experiences? If it valued difference, the need to identify and report a variety of complex, contingent and uncertain outcomes, and acknowledged that success and failure are inherently unstable and equally required for the development of curiosity, flexibility and resilience? Responsibilisation at the level of the individual will not be easily reversed, but education, and its attendant assessment processes and procedures, must be seen as a collective responsibility, maximising success and minimising failure, but above all recognising that both are co-produced as part of a collaborative process in context, and may change over time as circumstances and the nature of the educational encounter change.

Note

1. General Certificate of Secondary Education – a subject-based examination generally taken at 16 years of age.

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